

THE COLLECTION: INTEGRATING ATTACHMENT THEORY AND THEORIES OF
INTERGENERATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO WRITE A WOMAN'S LIFE

by

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PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The Collection tells the story of Barbara, a fifty-something, Christian, teacher, wife, and mother, as she is forced to return home after her estranged father's death. Named executrix of his estate, Barbara navigates family secrets, repressed childhood trauma, and her mentally ill father's legacy. Using Attachment Theory and Intergenerational Theories of Personal Development, this research discusses the development and relationships of the characters in *The Collection* to demonstrate the connections between their child and adult selves—specifically, the role of Barbara's parents and childhood in her suppressed anger. Framed within the context of Carolyn G. Heilbrun's feminist critique of women writers and women characters, this paper connects socio-psychological theories to investigate how the patriarchal gender norms Barbara's mother instilled in her daughter result in Barbara's suppressed anger, strained interpersonal relationships and adult religiosity. The relationship between adult Barbara and her aging mother is discussed in context of these theories and compared against women characters in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*. Finally, the paper calls for further research into and understanding of the causes and effects of women's anger, as well as an essential shift in how both men and women are permitted to express emotions.

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LIST OF DEFINITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APA: American Psychiatric Association (also the American Psychological Association)

Attachment Theory: Psychological theory focused on the nature of a person's childhood attachment to their mother, created by John Bowlby

BPD: Borderline Personality Disorder is a condition marked by "A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more)" features outlined by the DSM-IV (qtd. by Krawitz and Jackson 38; see also Lawson xi)

DSM-IV: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (APA)

Hermit, Waif, Queen, and Witch BPD Profiles: Christine Anne Lawson characterizes mothers with BPD into four distinct profiles based on the dominant expression of their BPD and named after fairytale tropes (Lawson xvi)

Hoarding: "Compulsive hoarding is a syndrome characterized by excessive collecting and saving behavior that results in a cluttered living space and significant distress or impairment" (Grisham and Norberg 233)

Interpersonal Theories of Personal Development: Psychoanalytic models for psychotherapy treatment and prediction that include an individual's complete array of social influences, but center on the idea that a person's family is the single most important factor in a person's development (Harvey and Bray 298-299)

Mental Health Disorder, Mental Health Challenge, Mental Health Condition, and Mental Illness: These phrases will be used interchangeably, per APA's

recommended terms for writing accurately about mental health conditions
("Words Matter")

THE COLLECTION: A NOVEL

Hoarding
Mick Wood

This is the ache of autumn

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

March 30, 1958

Dear Tony,

The respite is over. Barbara Marie is back to screaming all day. But, she is sleeping for a couple of hours at a time during the night. That's something, at least. She wants to be picked up as soon as she wakes up, though, and starts to cry again if I set her down. So, I sleep when she does (which never seems to be enough). Dr. Spock says to follow my instincts. All I want to do is whatever will keep Barbara Marie from crying. I just need some peace and quiet!

I am tired all the time and the headaches are back. I suppose that is to be expected with Barbara Marie's teething and this unpredictable sleeping schedule. Of course this is only a phase and it will pass, but I find it difficult to do much about the house. It would be so helpful to have a maid. The Cross's (you remember them—the family two doors down) have just hired one and Mrs. Cross tells me the woman has been a life-saver. Do you think we could afford one? I don't think I would need a full-time maid, perhaps only 3 or 4 days a week.

The ladies at church did give me recommendations to help with her teething, like freezing pieces of fruit for her to suck on. One lady told me about 'Steedman's Soothing Powder' that she used when her children were small, but she is a grandmother now and I don't think they make it anymore. At any rate, I couldn't find it in May's or any of the smaller shops at Lakewood Center and I did ask around. Do you know they've added another junior department store since you've been in Texas? I hardly know what's in the Center anymore—it's so large!

Agatha Jones is doing really good with Avon. I think will have managed to save a little of my spending money again this month. In just a few months, when

Barbara Marie is done teething, I should have enough to buy my kit. Agatha showed me hers last week and even gave me a catalog to look through and start to familiarize myself with. She says the catalogs change a few times a year, but this way I can get a head start on the basic products that they always carry. They make so many wonderful things – perfumes and makeup, and such lovely gifts and bric-a-brac for the home. Avon ladies are so glamorous, don't you think?

Did you hear that we had a little earthquake here last week? It was nothing major, but big enough that we felt it and I had to straighten all the pictures. Thankfully I wasn't cooking or washing the dishes! I hope the ground is more solid in Texas. Quakes always do give me such a fright, even the small ones.

I read all the entries I could find in the Encyclopedia about oil, petroleum and drilling. I think I understand a little of how they work now. It's really incredible how we can take something that took nature so long to make and use it to run our cars. Perhaps you can teach me more about your job and the rigs the next time you are home with us?

I thought our expenses would be a little lower this month now that it's such a nice temperature, but Dr. Steele's bill was more than I expected. Thankfully, his rates are very reasonable so we are only a little over budget. Would you send a little extra in June to cover the difference? I copied the March register over for you on the next page. Everything makes a little more sense to me each month. Thank you for being so patient with me.

Affectionately,

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$63.60	+\$1.40
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$97.00	-\$97.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$9.81	+19¢
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$17.34	+\$2.66
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$18.12	-\$3.12
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$35.22	+\$4.78
Toys	\$5.00	-\$3.76	+\$1.24
Spending Money	\$10.00	-\$8.53	+\$1.47
Tithes & Offerings	\$25.00	-\$25.00	\$0
Postage	50¢	-36¢	+14¢
Doctor	---	-\$17.00	-\$17.00
TOTAL	\$287.50	-\$295.74	-\$8.24

Unlike most teachers, Barbara did not long for summer vacation. The chaos of free time held no appeal for her. The only real benefits of summer were that she could spend more time at church, which she enjoyed greatly, and she could clean the house from top to bottom. Energized by her morning workout and shower, Barbara made a mental list of all the tediously satisfying tasks with which she could fill the first full summer day, starting with the morning's dirty breakfast dishes patiently awaiting her in the sink.

Rick plopped onto the couch, humming loudly to himself, off-key. Barbara sighed and rolled her eyes, but he carried on humming, punctuated with slurps from his mug. Focused on her irritation, the phone startled her and she lost her grip on the dish she was rinsing. It clattered into the sink, splashing dirty dishwater on her shirt. She gritted her teeth and held the wet fabric away from her skin, snatching the cordless phone from its cradle on the counter before it could ring again. A splotch of brown caught her eye. Rick had spilled coffee. Again.

'Hello?' She hated talking on the phone. She always assumed it was a telemarketer, so she inevitably sounded exasperated when she answered the phone, something her daughter never failed to point out to her. No matter how many times Barbara registered the house number on the 'Do Not Call' list, salespeople still jangled the phone all day.

'Yes, hello, may I speak with Ms. Chase?' a professional female voice asked.

'You must have the wrong number.' After thirty-two years of marriage, if they wouldn't take her off their lists, they could at least get her name right. The phone was already away from her ear, but she didn't hang up fast enough.

‘Wait—I’m looking for Ms. Barbara Chase?’ Her confidence wavered, ‘This is the contact number her father, Anthony Victor Chase, listed for her...um, you. Ma’am?’

The breath Barbara had sucked in wouldn’t leave her chest. Rick was whistling now. She couldn’t imagine how he hadn’t seen the spill. The tiled counter was cream.

‘This is Barbara—Barbara *Sterling*.’ Her voice sounded unfamiliar, far away.

The caller sighed her relief into the phone. ‘Yes, Barbara, thank you. My name is Mary, and I am calling from the Seaview Assisted Living Facility in Garden Grove, California. Just to confirm, I am speaking with the daughter of Anthony Victor Chase, is that correct?’

A nervous throat cleared in her ear.

‘Speaking.’

Mary paused before speaking in a flat rehearsed voice: ‘Barbara, I am sorry to have to relay this to you over the phone, but your father, Anthony, suffered a heart attack last night, and, despite efforts to revive him, he passed away at four a.m. Pacific. I am so sorry for your loss.’

Another pause.

Barbara stared at the puddle of coffee, certain it would stain the white grout.

Mary continued, ‘Anthony listed you as his only family contact. He did file a Will with the aid of his social worker, and our records indicate that he wished for you to be the one to manage his affairs in the event of his passing.’

Maybe it was time to redo the kitchen. It had been almost fifteen years since they bought the house.

'I, uh, gather that Anthony included very specific instructions regarding his belongings.'

This time the pause was judgmental. Barbara looked around for something to write on. 'Oh, yes, I see.' Her hand poised a pen over the back of a church bulletin. 'Seaview Assisted Living in Garden Grove. Address and phone number? Is there anyone I should ask for?'

Mary sounded relieved as she rattled off the information. Barbara could hear her acrylic nails on a keyboard. The ping of a text message over the thousands of miles of telephone line was loud in her ear. Mary was a multi-tasker.

'Thank you.' She ended the call and gently set the phone back in its cradle, her attention drawn back to the brown spot on the counter. Rick had been in the kitchen at least a dozen times since he made the coffee. The sponge was in the sink, inches away.

She made sure to slam the cabinet after she retrieved the bleach to clean up his mess. Rick's whistling didn't miss a note.

Teaching had trained Barbara to schedule every moment of her day, starting with her four-thirty a.m. school day alarm and ending with her ten p.m. bedtime. During the school year, she made herself leave Wednesday and Sunday night church services promptly when they ended. Her alarm went off too early to allow for the luxury of late nights. She had perfected her morning routine down to the minute: outfit laid out the night before, hair and makeup never changing. During the summer she could linger at services, stay at the altar to pray or in the pew to digest in peace.

Barbara smiled as she double-checked the backs of her pearl earrings. She scooped her keys off the kitchen counter on her way to the garage, her Bible snuggled neatly against her left breast. She slid her purse strap over her shoulder, cell phone tucked inside, its ringer already set to silent. A flutter of white followed her hand as her fingers found the unlock button on the remote.

She frowned and released the car key. She bent at the knees, lady-like, pinched the free-flying paper between her fingers and stood. The escapee was last week's church bulletin, outlining a message about purity and setting a moral example. Colossians 4:5-6 ⁵Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Her smile stopped as she flipped the half-sheet of paper over, the soft edges of black ink contrasting sharply with the crisp blue of the previous week's offering and attendance numbers.

Oh.

'Rick?'

She waited.

'Rick.'

No answer.

She didn't have time to look for him if she wanted to claim her third-row seat in the far left pew. She folded the offending paper into her Bible and marched into the garage.

Rick's car was already gone.

She wondered what the scripture would be for this week's sermon as the engine grumbled to life and Hillsong filled the Hyundai. She didn't hum along, but she smiled.

June 10, 1958

Dear Tony,

Of course I understand that your job is difficult and stressful. My birthday isn't anything to fuss about, now that I am a married woman. You are right. Don't mind silly 'old' me! And I don't mean to burden you with talk of my headaches. I am sorry. You don't need to hear about my every little 'womanly' trouble. As always, you are right. Of course I don't really need a maid. I don't want you to think we aren't managing alright here. Your girls are just swell. I never would have mentioned it if I'd known how expensive a maid would be. I had no idea. (I wonder how the Cross's manage to have one!)

Thank you for sending the extra money. I will be more careful in the future. I did use the money I had put aside for Avon to make up the difference before using what you sent. It was silly of me to think I could sell products door-to-door. You are absolutely right—I don't know what I was thinking. I have no experience with sales and Barbara Marie still needs me. It was thoughtless of me not to use that money to begin with. Thank you for sending the money to your foolish wife anyhow. I do try.

I marked down your new address from your letter. Is Plano a big city? There wasn't anything about it in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Let me know if you need me to send you anything from home. Mr. Jones says Texas is still a bit 'wild west' outside of Dallas and Houston, all oil and cattle everywhere else. Is it really like that? Have you seen any cowboys? We are so quiet and civilized here in Lakewood, it's hard to believe that some people might still live like one of those John Wayne Westerns (that's what I imagine 'wild west' to be). I hope you enjoy Plano more than Kermit.

Did I tell you that I'm in charge of co-ordinating the desserts for the Ladies Group's potluck dinner at the end of the month? Agatha Jones volunteered me, telling all the ladies that I would be perfect for the job, so they wouldn't let me say 'no.' I do hope I don't let the ladies down. It's such a big responsibility.

Take Care,

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie

P.S. Here are the adjusted accounts with the Avon money added back in.

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$63.60	+\$1.40
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$97.00	-\$97.00	+\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$9.81	+19¢
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$17.34	+\$2.66
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$18.12	-\$3.12
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$35.22	+\$4.78
Toys	\$5.00	-\$3.76	+\$1.24
Spending Money	\$10.00	-\$8.53	+\$1.47
Tithes & Offerings	\$25.00	-\$25.00	\$0
Postage	\$0.50	-\$0.36	+14¢
Doctor	---	-\$17.00	-\$17.00
Avon Savings	---	+\$3.75	+\$3.75
TOTAL	\$287.50	-\$291.99	-\$4.49

‘What do you mean, “Tony is dead?”’

She hadn’t done it on purpose. It just sort of slipped her mind. She found the church bulletin folded into her Bible during her morning devotions on Tuesday. She was pretty sure the phone call had come on Thursday, but it could have been Wednesday...

In any case, she had to deal with it now. And dealing with it meant first telling Rick that Anthony—Tony—was dead.

Even the name sounded unfamiliar: *Anthony*. Perhaps that was why she was so disconnected. She had only known him as Tony. Once it must have been ‘dad,’ but for longer than she remembered, it had just been Tony. And he was an aging stranger she had long forgotten to include in her life. She had never even met Anthony.

Rick was staring at her, waiting for her to answer.

‘Well, the assisted living facility he was in called. Apparently he had a cardiac-something and he died.’ She waved her hand vaguely. The details weren’t important.

Rick leaned against the bar, his paunch indenting as the edge of the counter cut into him. Barbara didn’t look up from the pot of rice she was stirring. He had been very fit when they first met, in great shape from years of playing college football. He gave up running the second year they were married.

She could feel his dark walnut eyes on her. She remembered a much younger Barbara thinking that they must have been made of melted chocolates. That was thirty-three years ago, when he ever so romantically hand-delivered candies and

flowers and delicate bottles of perfume to her at school. Thirty-three years ago, when she was young, pretty, and dumb, so dumb.

The steam from the rice rose to tickle her face. Rick was talking.

‘What?’

‘I *said*, what are you planning to do about it? Has anyone announced a funeral or anything?’ He raised his eyebrows. They were still dark, despite the salt in his beard and hair.

She set the lid back onto the pot. The rice was still a bit crunchy. Five more minutes. She was careful not to let the lid clash against the pot and laid the bamboo spoon very carefully onto its matching spoon rest. It really was so easy not to make a mess.

She turned. ‘He apparently listed me as his only family contact. I’m not sure anyone else knows. I might also be the executor of his will.’

Rick’s eyes widened and he whistled through his teeth. The sound made Barbara’s jaw hurt.

‘You mean you haven’t even told your mom or Dave?’ He furrowed his brow.

‘David.’ Thirty-three years—plenty of time to get her younger brother’s name right. Rick didn’t react.

‘Why should I have to be responsible for this? I haven’t spoken to him for at least ten years!’ She crossed her arms and scowled.

Rick sighed, tired, and pushed back from the bar, his eyes softer. He had never been able to stand up to her when she needed something.

‘I’ll book a ticket for you. Maybe you can even get out there tomorrow. Lucky this happened during the summer break, at least.’

But Barbara couldn't leave tomorrow. She would miss church and Wednesday evening services were always so powerful. She couldn't say that to Rick, though. He wouldn't understand.

On one level, dealing with Tony's death was her duty. As a daughter, as a Christian, she should go put Tony to rest. Her father. Barbara had stopped thinking of Tony as her family years ago. The reminder brought a strange twist low in her gut.

'After dinner. It should be ready now.' She gestured toward the rice, swallowing her protests and frustration.

Rick watched her carefully. 'Okay.'

A few minutes later it was all on the table. She bowed her head to bless the food. Rick already had his hand on a serving spoon as she started to pray.

Thirty-three years ago. So young and dumb.

After she'd set the dishwasher to run, Barbara parked herself in the spare room that doubled as her office. The phone calls had been easier than she'd expected.

Although when she thought about it, Barbara wasn't sure why she had expected them to be difficult at all. It wasn't as if anyone really cared about Tony anymore.

She'd called her eldest first.

Nat spent some time with Tony while he was still a toddler. Before she finished teaching school. Before she met Rick. Before she understood that she didn't have to spend time with Tony anymore.

Nat was just leaving his office when she called.

'Hi mom. What's up?'

She pictured his beautiful copper baby curls. He hadn't kept them; sadly, he had outgrown them. His hair was short and business professional now, rusty iron where the gray had started to sneak in. He had started to go gray early. He worked too much, too hard. She couldn't remember the last time he'd talked about dating anyone. Barbara wondered absently if his father was gray now, or just bald.

'Mom?'

'Sorry Nat! I have some, ah, some news for you. It's about your Grandpa Tony.'

Nat made a noise. She couldn't tell if he had cleared his throat or snorted.

'Well, he passed away last week. From heart failure. In a nursing home. He'd been there awhile. So.' She noticed a crack in the tile to the right of the dresser. She would have to tell Rick to fix it.

A beat passed.

'I'm sorry to hear that, mom. Are you okay?'

Barbara wasn't sure why he was asking. 'Oh, I'm fine sweetie. I just wanted you to know.'

'Okay mom. Thanks for letting me know.' He took a breath to speak, seemed to change his mind, then changed it back again. 'Have you told Grams or Deedee yet?'

She crinkled her nose at the nickname. She had given her daughter a strong, beautiful name: Deirdre. Not Deedee. But she didn't correct him.

'Not yet, sweetheart. I wanted to call you first. I'm going to call them now.'

Someone laid on his horn beyond Nat's Audi.

‘Okay, well I gotta go, mom. Some moron is trying to pull across four lanes of traffic.’

‘I love you, Nat.’ But she was already listening to the repetitive honk of a dial tone.

She called her mother next, saving Deirdre for last.

Elizabeth was reliably unconcerned when Barbara matter-of-factly announced why she was calling. Barbara always treated her mother as something of an imbecile. Conveniently, Elizabeth usually acted the part. Tonight was not an exception.

Elizabeth had probably never been a very bright woman, had little education, and didn’t seem to be bothered by either of those facts. Barbara had long since held her mother in something approaching contempt. She’d stopped encouraging Elizabeth to take bookkeeping, or computer, or office management courses at the community college years ago. For the last two decades, Elizabeth had seemed content to volunteer here and there, and otherwise to stay at home, crocheting or knitting to the background noise of the Cooking channel.

And now Elizabeth seemed to be going senile.

‘Mom, do you understand? Tony, your ex-husband, died last week. I’m responsible for managing his will and funeral and things.’ Decades of teaching third graders had prepared Barbara for dealing with her mother, she noted wryly.

‘Yes, yes, dear. I heard you.’ Elizabeth sounded distant and distracted.

‘Ok mom. Will you put Jonah on?’

Elizabeth didn’t answer, but Barbara heard the clunk of the phone being set down on something hard.

A rustling noise, wheezing, then, 'Barbara?' too loudly. Jonah was going deaf but refused to wear his hearing aids. Privately, and a little unkindly, Barbara thought this might be a belated attempt on her stepfather's part to ignore her mother's constant prattling. In his defense, the prattling only grew worse as Elizabeth got older.

Barbara forced a deep breath. 'Hi Jonah. I've just told mom that Tony died last week. I'll be out there for a few days to arrange his funeral and take care of his things, all that.'

'Oh! Sorry to hear that, Barbara. You'll stay with us while you're here, of course. I'll let Elizabeth know. She'll be so happy to see you, you know!'

Barbara frowned at the notion that anyone would be sorry to hear that Tony was dead. It occurred to her that she would have to sort out who still cared. Her stomach did an uncomfortable flip.

'Right, Jonah. Well, I've got to call Deirdre, too. Would you do me a favor and ask mom if she might know any of Tony's old friends who would want to go to his funeral, or anything like that?—Thanks. Bye now.'

She didn't give him a chance to respond. She still had one more call to make: Deirdre. She looked at the handset for a minute, then slid it onto the coffee table and stood up to make a cup of chamomile tea. Dinner didn't seem to be settling well.

Deirdre picked up in the middle of the third ring. 'Hi.' Barbara mentally girded her loins. Conversations with her daughter never seemed to go smoothly, especially not lately, since she had shackled up with that what's-his-name Egyptian.

She took a sip of tea. Not now, she told herself. She was calling about Tony.

'Mom?' Deirdre's voice dragged her out of her attempts to remember the boyfriend's name. Something with an M.

'Hi Deirdre. How are you?' Barbara didn't want this to turn into an argument. She hoped it wouldn't. After all, this call was just about Tony, just about the news. There couldn't possibly be space for an argument, she decided.

'Good ma. What's going on? We just sat down to eat.' Deirdre was perpetually impatient.

Barbara glanced at her watch. 8:13 p.m., late to be eating dinner. 'I'll try to be quick, then. I just have some news. News about Tony. Your Grandpa Tony? Remember him?'

Deirdre talked around the food in her mouth, still managing to sound bored. 'Yeah, ma. Your dad. What about him? I don't even remember the last time I saw him. I must have been really little.'

'Of course. Well, he passed away last week. It seems—' But Deirdre cut her off, mouth suddenly clear.

'What do you mean "last week?" Why are you just now telling me?'

Barbara listened carefully, but didn't hear anger. Confusion, maybe?

'I guess it's kind of an odd story, Deirdre. Basically, I found out and was just...well, dealing with other things, and now I'm letting everyone know. You know, before I go out there to deal with his funeral and all that.' She wasn't handling this very well. She knew she sounded defensive. Deirdre always could make her defensive.

'Mhmm. Okay. So, you're going out there? Staying with Grams?' Barbara heard a muddled clink as Deirdre's glass bumped the phone.

‘Ah, yes. Daddy is booking my ticket tonight. I’ll leave tomorrow, I think. I don’t know what all I need to do. I think I may have to meet with a lawyer when I get there.’

‘Okay mom. Sorry he’s gone. Lemme know if you need the contact for an attorney in Cali. Masud and I have a few friends out there and he should know who’s good. I won’t be able to travel out there for a funeral, though. I have some major projects, deadlines in the next few weeks. Lucky it’s summer break for you, though, huh.’

Barbara didn't see what luck had to do with anything. She was going to miss church and who knew what else while she was gone, taking care of Tony's death. Maybe she could go to a church in California so she wouldn't miss any services, at least. Or maybe she could get everything done by Saturday and take a red-eye home to be at church on Sunday morning. The thought gave her hope.

‘Ok then, mom. Masud says hi. I’m letting you go now so we can eat. Bye.’

And there was the dial tone again.

Barbara stared at the phone, wondering how her children had turned out so differently before picking up a pen to start her packing list.

July 1, 1958

Dear Tony,

You gave us quite a surprise with your visit, but Barbara Marie was very happy to see her daddy (and so was I). I think she is still looking for you. She keeps asking 'Dada?' and pointing to the spare room. It's so sweet. I hardly know how to explain to her that you're all the way in Texas. She's too young to understand. But I am thrilled that you were here to see her take her first steps. Wasn't that exciting! Now that she is walking, I'll have to check the whole house to make sure there isn't anything she can reach to hold onto or pull on. I'd hate to see her get hurt or break something. At least I have trusty Dr. Spock to guide me, once again! (I don't know what I would do without that book).

It took me a few days, but I've made it through the instructions you left me for everything you brought home and bought while you were here. The spare room is getting a bit crowded, so some things are tucked away under the bed in there, and I had to rearrange the closet. Thank goodness you labeled everything so carefully, or I would never have gotten it all put away. I was as careful as can be with each box and crate. It's a good thing I'm already in the habit of keeping the door closed so little Miss Curious doesn't get her tiny hands into anything.

I'm glad I hadn't sent you our accounts for June yet – that was lucky. Thank you for going over everything with me again. I have been careful, but of course you are so much better at balancing everything. I did not set aside the tithing money for this month. I still can't believe I didn't think to check with you that you weren't already tithing for us in Texas. At least it went to a good cause, but that little extra will certainly help.

I do wish I hadn't had such bad headaches while you were here. They are a little better now—the Bayer's Aspirin seems to help a bit, as long as I take it as soon as I feel a headache coming on. Barbara Marie has been very good the last few days, which helps loads.

Well, I am off to take Barbara Marie to a play date with one of the new ladies at church—Susan Bellow. I met her a couple of weeks ago and we seem to get on well. Her husband is in telephones or something. I did not really talk to him, but Susan is very nice and she has two older daughters and a boy just a little older than Barbara Marie. Agatha liked her, too.

I hope all is well in Plano. We miss you.

Our Love,

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie

Barbara was only a few miles from the assisted living center when she made her last call. Her annoyance that Rick had only bought her a one-way ticket had distracted her for most of the trip. It wasn't until she started writing a list of Tony's family members during the leg from Houston to L.A. that Barbara realized she had forgotten to call her younger brother.

'Hello?'

'David?'

'Hi...Barbara?'

'Yes. How are you?'

'Fine. Mom called me yesterday.' Judgment filled the silence.

Barbara cleared her throat, but was interrupted by her rental GPS. 'Ah. Right. Sorry I wasn't able to call you sooner. I really didn't know how to tell you.' God forgives white lies, she thought.

'Mhm.'

If he already knew, Barbara didn't know why David was dragging out the conversation, but she decided to end the back-and-forth. 'So, you know that Tony passed away, then? I'm on my way to his nursing home now. I need to sort out what needs to be done.'

'Right.'

The accusation in his voice frustrated and infuriated her all at once.

'Look—'

'Turn. Left. Now.' The GPS insisted. Barbara had never realized until that moment how much she missed good old-fashioned maps.

'Look David. I didn't ask for this.' She couldn't help but raise her voice.

She could hear only David's breathing in response, his deviated septum whistling.

'But since you already know...I'll let you go.'

'Fine.'

'Fine.' She fumbled with the earpiece, trying to hang up.

Seaview Assisted Living Center was clean. It smelled distinctly of old people, and there was no body of water, ocean or otherwise that Barbara could see, but it was sanitary. She eyed the plastic pamphlet displays, coffee table covered in outdated magazines, and beat-up children's blocks and toys tossed haphazardly into a bin on the floor, and kept her hands folded in her lap. She'd taught third graders long enough to know how many germs lurked.

All in all, Barbara approved of what she had seen so far: no nonsense, no frills. Pale yellow walls, accented by floral wallpaper beneath ubiquitous handrails, bright lighting, and muted faux marble linoleum floors added up to everything a nursing home should be in Barbara's mind.

She checked her watch: eleven forty-seven. Her appointment was at eleven forty-five.

She exhaled her frustration and looked back to the pamphlets. *Coping with Loss, What Now? Planning a Funeral, Losing a Loved One*. They all seemed largely irrelevant in Barbara's case. Still, she delicately pulled a copy of *Planning a Funeral* from the middle of its stack, reasoning that the brochures in the middle might be less likely to have been fingered by someone already. Morbid thought.

She was reading through an offensively common-sense checklist when the door opened to a room labeled 'Family Advisement.' A white file box entered, gripped by chubby male hands, followed by a belly, pleated navy pants, a thread-bare brown oxford, and a thin, stained tie that might once have been forest green. Two freckled chins—weak chins—red cheeks, watery blue eyes, and thick fiery red hair topped off the ensemble.

Barbara pursed her lips and glanced pointedly at her watch. It was eleven fifty-one.

'Hi! Good morning. You're Mrs. Chase—wait, no, Sterling? Isn't it?'

'Yes.' She didn't stand, watching as he struggled to close the door with his foot before dropping the box onto the Ikea coffee table. She tried to remember the verses from Paul about sloth and gluttony, but all she could come up with was 'So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.' She made a mental note to add the epistles to her morning Bible study schedule.

He flashed an unimpressive coffee-stained smile at her, remnants of breakfast in his teeth. 'Great. Well, er, not so great, given the circumstances.' He extended a chubby hand. 'I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Sterling.'

Barbara ignored the hand, thinking it was probably sweaty and likely not washed since the last time he'd gone to the bathroom. Third graders served as an excellent reminder of how disgusting people could be. 'Thank you.'

Flustered, he dragged his hand across his bushy hair. 'Right, well. I suppose we ought to get on to the business part of all this.'

She raised her eyebrows.

A nervous smile. 'Uh, yes. I'm Allen Michaels, I'm the facility's Resident Liaison.'

Barbara waited.

'Ah, right. So this box has your father's—'

'Tony's.' Barbara interjected, a small polite smile arranged carefully on her lips.

Coffee stains again. 'Yes, of course: Tony. These are Tony's things. I also have all of his legal documents and paperwork, medical forms, et cetera.' This last accompanied by an awkward effeminate flourish of one small chubby hand.

'I see.'

'So, ah, first I'll need to have you sign a release form, consenting to take responsibility for all of your fa—Tony's—belongings.' He dug into the depths of the pockets hiding beneath his pleats.

Barbara quietly extracted a pen from her purse, ready.

'And let me find a pen...' Small white sausages groped his breast pocket.

'I have one.' She raised it higher, in case he needed proof.

'Right then,' papers rustling. 'Here is the release form. If you'll sign here, here, and here.' Michaels pointed with surprisingly well-manicured fingernails atop his sausages.

Barbara didn't move. 'I'd like to read through everything first, thank you.'

A nervous flash of teeth as the fingers withdrew. 'Yes, of course.'

She bent her head to read through the document, noting that it only released belongings, medical and input documents to the 'Designated Resident Representative.'

Barbara raised her head at the sound of Michaels tapping the file box. She indicated the release form with her pen. ‘This doesn’t include anything regarding Tony’s legal or financial affairs. This only applies to his physical belongings, facility and medical records—but not invoices or debts—nor anything regarding a will. Is that correct?’ She waited. She never signed anything without understanding exactly what it entailed. God helped the prudent, in her experience.

Michaels nodded. ‘Yes, this is just releasing any property of which the facility had direct possession following Tony’s death.’ More rustling. Pointing: ‘This releases his other affairs—legal, financial, et cetera—for which the facility is not directly responsible. He indicated you as his family contact. While we don’t keep copies of residents’ wills, we do know that he specifically asked that you be the one to manage his affairs.’

She accepted the proffered document and read it thoroughly before signing both papers. She dated them and extended them to Michaels. ‘I’d like photocopies.’

He accepted the papers while mopping his forehead with a handkerchief he’d produced as she read. He checked the signatures and added his own, ‘Yes, yes, of course. I’ll need to make a copy of your photo ID to keep with the file, as well.’

Barbara silently handed over her driver’s license.

‘I’ll be right back, then. You are welcome to look through Tony’s things now. It’s all yours.’

Barbara made no move toward the box after the door shut. She unfolded the brochure and scanned over it again, deciding that it might be useful after all. She slipped it into her purse, retrieved the rental car keys, and checked her watch:

twelve ten. Her mental Tony to-do list was growing rapidly and she wanted nothing more than to be on a plane back to Charlotte as soon as possible.

Her stomach made a small noise, but she ignored it.

Michaels re-entered, photocopies in hand. 'Here you are, Mrs. Sterling. The facility doesn't have a morgue on site, I'm afraid, but I've included the information for the funeral home we use—and the one Tony designated. They will arrange everything with the county morgue for you once you contact them. They will also be able to provide you with the death certificate.'

'Thank you.' The thought of more phone calls and unnecessarily long meetings made her want to scream.

Michaels shifted his weight nervously. 'Ah, if there's anything else I can help you with, my card is also there.'

So it was. 'Thank you, Mr. Michaels. I think that's all I need.'

'Great. Careful with the box...it's a tad cumbersome.'

A thin smile, 'I'm sure I'll be fine.'

'Right. Of course. I'm sorry again for your loss, Mrs. Sterling. Have a good day.'

She noted the interesting juxtaposition. 'Thank you.'

She waited until he finally left the room before turning to the box. She slipped the business card into her purse beside the pamphlet and set the copies on the lid. Rental keys in hand, purse on, she bent to pick up the box.

Cumbersome didn't quite describe it. Heavy was more accurate. Barbara hated to think what Tony might have kept—fishing weights, maybe rocks. The file box must have weighed close to thirty pounds.

She adjusted the box and made for the door, thankfully still open. Her stomach made another impatient sound. She remembered passing a Kroger's after she got off the freeway. A salad would be nice. And water – a big water.

The phone calls to the funeral home and City had taken the better part of the afternoon. She lost count of the number of people she'd spoken to and times she'd been transferred after she asked the Garden Grove city operator whom she needed to talk to about any official paperwork regarding Tony's death. She hadn't even gotten through to Tony's social worker, but it was already after five o'clock.

Barbara hadn't stopped at Kroger's after all. She'd seen a quiet-looking café when she turned out of Garden Grove's parking lot. It seemed like a good place to make calls and the tattooed, rainbow-haired barista had happily handed her the local yellow pages with her order. Her other options had been the rental car or her mother's. But Elizabeth was retired and Jonah only worked part-time at their community center in the mornings. They would both be home.

She held the phone away from her ear as it rang. She'd forgone the earpiece in the car.

'Hello?'

'Hi Jonah. It's Barbara.'

'Hiya Barbara! Where are ya? Need me to come getcha?' Her stepfather's voice was just a little too bright.

She didn't try to match his enthusiasm. 'I'm just getting back on the road now. I rented a car. I was making all the arrangements I could over the phone.' That was true. No need to clarify that she'd also made them at a café to avoid her moody

mother and her too-cheerful husband. She thought she heard barking in the background. 'Is that a dog?'

'Oh, that's Rupert. We just got back from a walk, so he's a little wound up. You're coming straight here?'

'I should be there in an hour or so, if traffic isn't too bad.' Barbara pictured Rupert as small, hairy, and yippy. She wondered if it was too late to stay at a hotel.

'Great! I'll tell Elizabeth and get dinner started. You're probably starvin' aren't ya!'

Barbara ignored the half-eaten grilled chicken salad on the table. 'I'll see you soon. Bye.'

'Drive careful, now. Bye!'

Barbara hadn't realized how much funerary arrangements would dampen her appetite. It was only Tony. She wouldn't have thought his death would affect her at all.

She thought she'd adjusted the volume on the earpiece, but Rick's 'How's it going?' was deafening. Flinching, Barbara growled out, 'Hang on' as she fingered the barely noticeable minus button. Thankfully, she hadn't left her parking space yet.

'That should be better – sorry, the volume was messed up.' She shifted into reverse as she spoke. 'Anyway, I'm not sure how it's going yet, to be honest. I made it to the nursing home and made some phone calls. I'm not sure what I expected, but I feel like there's a lot that I have to do: funeral home, morgue, social worker, paperwork with the city, follow up with Tony's old company, and who knows what else.'

'Well, you made it there safely, anyhow.'

Barbara rolled her eyes. 'What a victory.'

'Talk to Dave yet?'

She frowned under her sunglasses, 'If you can call it that. Apparently mom had already told him Tony died. I guess I'm grateful that she told him, but he's all bent out of shape that he didn't hear it from me.'

'Just give him time. I'm sure he's not thinking real clearly. Tony was his dad, too, you know.'

Rick's tendency to side with the offending person, instead of supporting her, never failed to pique Barbara. 'Not my problem.'

'So have you seen your mom and Jonah yet?'

She decided to let the obvious subject-change slide. 'On my way there now. There's not much else I can do now that it's after 5.'

'Mm, right.' He cleared his throat in her ear. 'I had a thought this morning.'

'Stop the press.'

Rick ignored her dig, 'It's been years since the kids have been out to see your mom. I was thinking you should see if there's anything they want you to bring back for them from Elizabeth. Especially if they can't make it out there for Tony's funeral.'

Barbara didn't immediately respond, partly out of surprise at Rick's sentiment. He was usually more empirical.

'Barbara? Hon, you still there?'

'I'm here. Driving on the 5 and needed to focus.' She apologized mentally to God. 'But, yes, I suppose that's a nice idea.'

'Great. Well, I'll let you go so you can call the kids now, before it gets too late. You know Deirdre does those early morning training runs on Thursdays. Let me know if you need any help.'

Barbara wasn't sure why it bothered her that Rick felt the need to insert minute details about their daughter's life into conversation, but he did it so consistently that she'd stopped thinking it wasn't intentional. She grit her teeth. 'Yes, thanks. Bye.'

'Drive safely. Love you. Bye.'

She made certain Rick had ended the call before she let out a growl. 'Why? God, just why? Every time Deirdre comes up, he feels the need to remind me that she talks to him, not me. It's infuriating, unnecessary. Ridiculous!' She scowled at the barely-moving traffic through the windshield. 'I'll just text her.'

She fumbled with the phone until she felt safe glancing down to open her Favorites and tap Nat's name. She got his voicemail.

July 30, 1958

Dear Tony,

Barbara Marie's birthday party was perfect! I know you were concerned that I would be extravagant and spend too much, but it really was a sweet little fête with a few people. Agatha and I made paper chains for decorations (I saved them to re-use at Christmas), Mother brought tuna noodle casserole and one of her heavenly ambrosias, Agatha Jones made chicken n' dumplings – Barbara Marie's favorite, and Susan Bellow made these scrumptious wrapped asparagus bites she calls 'hors d'oeuvres' (she had to teach me how to spell that). I made pineapple upside down cake from a new recipe I'd copied off Susan. Everyone said it was the best they'd had, but I think they were only being polite. Everything was really elegant.

Barbara Marie was a perfect angel, too. She never cried at all and even shared BunBun with Georgie. I was so proud of our little two-year-old. We nearly had to baptize both her and Georgie in the bathtub by the end of the party—both of them were covered in food! Thank goodness I thought to hold the party in the back yard. Mr. Jones came armed with his new Kodak, as promised, and snapped an entire roll of film. He even said he'll have them developed – his gift for Barbara Marie. Isn't that thoughtful? Agatha said it was all his idea. I wonder, sometimes, if they wish they had children of their own, but Agatha always says they'd rather spoil everyone else's.

My head has been behaving these last few days, but I think I might be coming down with a stomach flu. I've been so queasy, I've hardly been able to eat anything. I saved some of the food from the party, but I haven't managed to taste anything, yet. I will have to be very careful that Barbara Marie does not catch this bug from me.

Take Care,

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie

P.S. I called the bank like you said, and they did receive the mortgage payment on-time. I included it in the balance sheet for this month. I was talking to Agatha about keeping track of payment dates and she promised to show me how she budgets, balances and writes out everything the next time she comes over. I'm curious to see what she does differently.

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$68.12	-\$3.12
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$97.00	-\$97.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$9.89	+11¢
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$22.02	-\$2.02
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$17.12	-\$2.12
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$35.22	+\$4.78
Toys	\$5.00	-\$4.98	+2¢
Spending Money	\$15.00	-\$14.87	+13¢
Postage	\$0.50	-\$0.24	+26¢
Doctor & Medicine	\$15.00	-\$3.50	+\$11.50
TOTAL	\$282.50	-\$272.96	+\$9.54

4

Jonah winked at Barbara as he plunked his Coke onto the cloth placemat. 'Aaaaah, that hits the spot.'

She ignored him, carefully speared two soggy once-canned green beans, sliced them into bites and slipped them into her mouth, never so much as cracking her lips again until she had swallowed. She regretted not finishing her over-priced salad at the café.

Elizabeth pushed kernels of creamed corn around her picked-over plate like a willful child. Rupert the Biewer sat panting and hairy in her lap, waiting for a chance at her food. 'The people at the old folks home were nice to you, then?' She didn't look up as she spoke.

'Assisted Living Facility, mom.' Barbara had already corrected her mother twice since dinner started. She tried to ignore the dog. It's long multi-colored hair made it look uncomfortably like a teddy bear with a Fu Manchu, and she could smell its hot doggy breath from her seat.

Jonah looked through the unkempt snow of his eyebrows at his wife, then to Barbara. 'Picked a service date, then, have you?'

'Well, I wanted to talk to mom, first...and David.' She would be nice to her brother, even if he wouldn't be reasonable.

'Oh?' Elizabeth's eyes didn't leave her plate.

'Yes.' Barbara was deliberate, 'Is there a day that would work better for you, mom?'

Elizabeth's fork scratched across the ceramic. Rupert started to whine, pushing his head under her arm.

'Mom?'

'Oh, me? No, honey, don't you worry about me.' She patted Rupert's head absently.

Barbara looked to Jonah, but he was busy forking Elizabeth's uneaten, too-dry chicken onto his own plate. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Rupert wriggled out of her mother's arms and ran to Jonah, jumping to try to reach his lap, whimpering pathetically. Jonah patted his head and ignored him.

'Alright, mom. I'll check with David, then pick a date. I was hoping we could do it on Saturday, assuming I can get everything together quickly enough.' She paused to impale another bite of green beans.

Elizabeth tilted her head. 'Well, you should probably talk to Shirley's boys. I don't know that they were really that close with their dad—Tony—but he was their dad, after all.'

Barbara sighed at the mention of her younger half-brothers. More strangers. 'I honestly hadn't even thought about them. Do you have their numbers? Todd and Tim, right?'

Elizabeth had resumed her play. 'Hmm? Oh, somewhere, sure.'

Barbara sliced off a dainty bite of the tasteless chicken, assuming her mother was done contributing to the conversation.

'What about the kids? Will Deirdre or Nat come?'

She stopped chewing and stared at Elizabeth, forcing herself to swallow before she responded. 'I'm sorry?'

Rupert yipped at Jonah, who obliged by dropping a bite of chicken, his eyes trained on the women.

'Will they come to the funeral? I'd like to see them. It's been so long.' She smiled.

'Mom? Why on earth would they care about Tony's funeral? Besides, they're busy. Even if they did want to come –and I can't think why they would – they wouldn't be able to make it on such short notice. I did ask if either of them wanted me to bring anything back from you, though.'

Elizabeth's smile faded. 'Oh that's nice. I just thought it would be good to see them. Deirdre told me her hair has red in it now. I bet it looks very pretty. She is such a beautiful girl—makes such a nice couple with that Egyptian boy.'

Barbara blinked at the mention of her daughter's boyfriend. 'We don't know anything about that man.'

Elizabeth shrugged, 'She sends me pictures. He's handsome.'

Jonah cleared his throat, 'Ah, eh, I'll just clear the dishes, then.'

Barbara didn't look at him. 'I'm not finished.' She fought to keep her voice steady. 'Mom, that is just not an opinion for you to have.'

Jonah's eyes bounced between his wife and step-daughter, 'Ah, right.'

Elizabeth didn't move as Jonah shoved back from the table and collected his and Elizabeth's dishes and flatware before heading to the kitchen. Rupert followed, bouncing between Jonah's feet dangerously.

Barbara tried to change the subject. 'I can't believe you let that dog sit at the table with you.'

She didn't answer Barbara. 'He seems nice enough to me. He's always polite. And he did give her the most beautiful pendant for her birthday. Diamond and white gold.'

'What do you mean he's always polite? How could you possibly know that?' Barbara abandoned her efforts to finish her bland chicken. Rupert's grating yips were audible even from the kitchen. 'And what pendant?'

Elizabeth was naked without the fork to play with and her hands twisted on the placemat. 'Well, I've talked to him a couple of times, on the phone, you know, when I talk to Deirdre. She emailed me a picture.'

This was all news to Barbara. 'You talk to Deirdre? When? And since when do you use email? Never mind. The point is: she has no business living with him. They aren't married.' She sat back. Her mother couldn't argue with that.

'Well, no. But he's a good man, I think. He is good for Deirdre. Did you know he shaves his head for a charity every year to raise money? I told Deirdre I'd love to meet him.'

Some thug's bass invaded the quiet space of the dining nook. Barbara realized she was holding her breath and exhaled, praying for strength. 'Even if he is, it's not right. The Bible says to be equally yoked, after all. They wouldn't be good together long-term, certainly couldn't be married, have children.'

Elizabeth mumbled something, but Barbara couldn't hear over the bass.

'What?'

Elizabeth finally looked up at her, but didn't speak. She looked confused.

It wasn't bass. She could feel her pulse throbbing, pushing hot in her ears. Heat grew and spread down into her neck. Barbara tried to count to four as she inhaled and exhaled, holding each breath for two beats in between.

Jonah re-entered balancing three bowls, stepping carefully to avoid the energetic Biewer. 'Looky-here ladies—apple pie! Á la mode! Now, here's new spoons. Barbara, I remember how you always liked to eat your pie with a spoon.'

Barbara shook her head at the interruption, immediately regretting the motion. 'I'm sorry, Jonah. Now is probably—'

Jonah plunked down the bowls and dropped the spoons in a clatter. Barbara winced.

'Ah, I was saying that this is probably not a good time, Jonah.' She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to focus on breathing, resisting the headache. Rupert was dancing around under the table, barking happily.

Jonah folded himself back into his chair, still pushed out, and scraped back to the table. Barbara's eyes fluttered in pain at the noise.

'Jonah...' She tried to frame a silent prayer for the headache to go away, but it barely coalesced into a mental moan.

He excavated a mound of pie and ice cream with his spoon. 'Well, now, Barbara, it seems your mother is a little tuckered out. And a little dessert never hurt no one's talking. Isn't that right, dear?' He spoke through his mouthful as he reached across the table to squeeze Elizabeth's hand. 'Down, Rupert.'

Barbara shook her head against the sparks floating into her vision. 'I, ah. I...' This time the moan wasn't inside her head.

Jonah looked away from his wife, brown furrowed in concern. 'Barbara, honey, you alright?'

Barbara could hear the stainless steel spoon scraping against her mother's bowl, acrylic nails clicking on the metal. Jonah's chewing was a thunderstorm, accented by cracks of lightning as he attacked the pie with a spoon, mashing it together. Rupert's incessant yips punctuated the thunder, the cymbals to its drums. The buzzing of the power lines outside visualized as a swarm of nearly tangible insects crawling inside her skull, scratching her brain with their hairy legs.

She screwed her eyes shut against the flashes of light screaming across her vision. The sound didn't dim. The light didn't mute. Something scraped against her thigh. She opened her eyes to find Rupert scrabbling to reach her lap and pushed the dog away.

'Barbara?' Jonah's voice echoed, bouncing around her head, loud, reverberating.

She pressed the heels of her hands into her temples, willing the sounds to stop. She prayed incoherently, unsure if she was thinking or speaking.

God answered. 'Barbara? Honey? Here—drink some water.'

Barbara lurched, startled at the hand on her arm.

Jonah's face blurred before her, the room too bright. The lights sparked louder, more insistently. She balled her fists into her eyes to block out the sounds.

'I'm...I'm not feeling well. I need to lie down. Her voice was far away and unbearably loud all at once, echoing against the sound of her breathing and heartbeat inside her skull. She stood and wobbled, catching herself on the table.

'Hang on there, Barbara. Lemme help ya. Elizabeth, why don't you put Rupert out back for a spell.'

She let Jonah wrap an arm around her and lead her into the guest room. The lights crackled even in the dark, her heartbeat a hammer. He helped her into the bed and something cool and wet, but impossibly heavy, covered her eyes. Thunder boomed around her in violent bursts of red and yellow.

A small, vile-tasting pill was pushed through her lips, followed by plastic. Panicking, Barbara tried to inhale and sputtered.

God spoke through the thunder. 'Barbara, take a sip of water. It's just a migraine pill. Take a drink. It'll all be alright now. Just take a sip and swallow it. That's it.'

She obeyed, choking down the bitter pastiness of the tablet with the water. The thunderstorm resumed. As Barbara prayed for it to end, she had the oddest thought:

God was from Oklahoma.

Barbara sat up in a panic, her heartbeat frenzied as she grabbed for the clock on the nightstand. It flashed 12:00 in useless red.

She swung her feet down to the floor, only recognizing where she was when her socks sank into the soft carpet. Cringing at the thought of what she was breathing in from the allergen zoo on the floor, she pulled the blinds open, squinting against the sudden burst of daylight. She surveyed the room and found her purse on a small familiar desk in the corner.

She pulled her phone from its pocket, trying to ignore the nudge of a memory just out of reach. She shook her head in exasperation. When the phone lit up, the exasperation escalated to anger. It was four fifteen in the afternoon. She had so much to do and now she was nearly an entire day behind. A notification told her Rick had texted to ask how things were going. Barbara deleted it.

Fuzzy thoughts of bass drums, laser lights, and darkness bounced around her head, but she couldn't make any sense of them. Moving back toward the nightstand, she cracked her shin against the wheels of her suitcase. She inhaled sharply and resisted the urge to punt the case across the room.

She realized then that she had slept in her clothes. She stepped around the roll-a-board to set down her phone and straighten the sheets and pillows. Only when the bed was neatly made did she heft the bag onto it.

Extracting a neat roll of fabric, undergarments, a plastic baggie and her makeup case, she closed the bag. Armed with her toiletries and clean clothes, she stepped into the hall, pulling the door closed behind her.

'Well, good mornin' sleepy head!' Jonah's grin met her in the hall.

She couldn't even fake a smile. 'Hi. I really need to get showered and ready to go. I've already lost most of today as it is.'

His smile drooped. 'How are ya feelin', then?'

Her confusion mirrored his. 'Feeling? I'm fine. I just slept too much. Must have been the jet lag.'

A lost look took over Jonah's face before he looked down and focused on his feet. 'Right, then. Well, I'll leave ya to it.'

She showered and dressed quickly, opening the bathroom door to discover Jonah moving away from the guest room. She frowned and scooped up her dirty clothes.

Jonah had left the door ajar. She nudged it open with the ball of clothes in her hands and saw it: Tony's file box sat in the middle of the comforter.

She slid the dirty clothes into the laundry bag she'd brought and perched gingerly on the edge of the bed. She stared at the container. In silly, bubbly handwriting, the white box was labeled 'Anthony Chase, Room 114,' and underneath, in sloppy red capital letters: 'DECEASED.'

She didn't dwell on why the box affected her. It was, after all, only Tony. She took a slow, deep breath—probably full of dust and Rupert's dander—and lifted the lid from the box. The medicinal odor of the assisted living center wafted out and wrapped around her head, cloying and mixing poorly with the fake coconut scent of the guest bathroom shampoo. She set the lid aside and examined the top layer.

Lip curled in distaste, Barbara lifted out a clear plastic bag full of neatly folded socks, underwear, pants, sleeveless undershirt, and a polo shirt. Why the facility had bothered to include these was a mystery. She didn't need to open the bag to see that they were threadbare and faded. They could hardly be donated. She dropped the bagged outfit on the floor in a newly designated trash pile. A second bag contained a flattened pair of grey Velcro tennis shoes and blue hospital slippers. Trash.

Next came a jar of change, followed by another jar of change, then a third. They explained the box's weight, and at least they weren't something completely useless. Barbara pushed them down into the bedspread near the pillows so they

wouldn't try to roll off the bed. They would go straight into the offering plate at church. Tony could do some good in death, at least.

She unearthed a roll of receipts, bound together by a rubber band. A quick glance through told her that the receipts dated back nearly three years. Probably the entire time he lived in Garden Grove. She launched the bundle toward the trash pile.

Another bundle of papers in a rubber band came out sticky. The ink rubbed off the topmost layer, dying Barbara's fingertips green and black, bruise-like. The knot in her stomach pulled a little tighter, her teeth clenching to match. She flipped through to find coupons, most of them expired, to restaurants, stores, barbershops – also trash.

A little digging through loose papers brought up a cheap black address book, the type drug stores used to give to customers at Christmas. The plastic cover was dried and cracked down the middle, the gold letters of the drugstore illegible and peeling off. Pieces of it flecked off onto her hands as Barbara slid a finger under the cover to open it. Curious, she paged through to S, then C. Her name wasn't under either.

She sighed and flipped through to B. Hers was the first entry: 'Barbara, 37 N. 15th Ave., Charlotte, NC.' Tension gripped her neck. She and Rick had lived there for the first five years after they got married. Tony probably only had it because it was the return address on the family Christmas cards she'd sent him in the beginning, the same cards that clearly wished 'A Very Merry Christmas from the Sterling Family.' And yet, he still hadn't managed to include her married name. She'd stopped sending the cards after they built the new house.

She aimed the cheap book at the pillows, cringing when some of the pages fluttered out with its landing. Todd's and Tim's addresses or numbers might have been in there, she thought belatedly. It was a long shot, since Tony clearly hadn't updated his contacts very often, but it would help if she didn't have to track down all of the man's offspring manually. Barbara inhaled deeply, holding the breath in her cheeks for a few moments before exhaling loudly. She would deal with the box first, then sort out the funeral.

She dug back in, closing her hands around a pile of loose papers and a file folder. The folder had a patient intake and exit form affixed to it, with DECEASED stamped in red across it. Barbara set the folder beside the jars and address book.

She frowned as she shuffled through the miscellaneous papers, unsure why they'd all been kept. Some were bills or personal loan offers, others official-looking letters. The logos were different, but they all looked to be some sort of storage units. Units—plural.

Barbara groaned and squeezed her temples. In her gut, she'd known Tony must have more stuff, more junk, somewhere—hoped, though, that there wasn't. Her vague memories of her childhood with Tony were full of boxes and stacks. She tapped the papers into a neat pile atop the file folder, dreading the complication of more of Tony's trash.

She fished out a ring full of keys next. She recognized the key to an old Chevy in the midst of the brass and steel, but most of the keys were generic or stamped with padlock brands. Her vision swam a little as tears of frustration filled her eyes at the thought of sorting through storage lockers full of Tony's stuff, blindly matching keys to locks.

'It's not fair, God. I've moved on, I live a good life. I'm a good Christian. I should not have to face this all over again.' One childhood of hell was enough, for anyone.

A timid rap on the door made her look up and dab her eyes with a finger, 'Yes?'

Elizabeth's pale face peeked around the frame, feeble underneath the thin tufts of her white hair. Barbara hoped she wouldn't go bald like her mother.

Rupert pushed his way past Elizabeth into the room, carefully sniffing at Barbara's luggage. She watched him, leery. She had never liked dogs of any size. She particularly disliked the small yipping variety.

'Come here, Rupert. Let Barbara's things alone.' He ignored her.

'Mom, where is your wig?' It came out harsher than she meant it. She was always uncomfortable around her mom's uncovered balding. It was distinctly unfeminine and felt too intimate when Elizabeth exposed herself like this.

Pointy red nails absently combed through the white wisps. 'Oh, I just hadn't gotten around to it. Haven't gone out today.' She took in the room, the bed covered in Tony's things, the growing discard pile on the floor, and Barbara surrounded by it all. She seemed to have forgotten what she'd come to say.

'Mom? Did you want to tell me something?' She was careful to ask gently. It wasn't Elizabeth's fault that she was balding – or going senile.

Elizabeth's eyes fixed on the window above Barbara's head. 'Oh, yes. I wanted to tell you that I talked to David this morning. He says any day is fine for the funeral.'

Barbara was happy she'd avoided that confrontation, at least. 'Thanks. I haven't even had a chance to call the funeral home to confirm the date and time yet. They just penciled him in for a time they had free. It doesn't look like Saturday is even possible now.' She gestured vaguely at the flotsam and jetsam around her, 'I was going through the box of Tony's things that the facility gave me. I still need to call his social worker, too. She has his will.'

Elizabeth's vapid expression didn't waiver. 'Don't get too buried in Tony's things, dear. He always was a packrat, you know.' She turned to leave, but seemed to remember something important, concern wrinkling her forehead. 'How is your head feeling? Jonah and I were worried about you. Quite a migraine.'

The little nudge she'd been ignoring coalesced into images of a pill, Jonah and apple pie twisted up with flashing lights and pain. Barbara blinked against the memory, 'I must have slept it off.'

Elizabeth's smile was small, amused. 'Imitrex will do that if you're not used to it.'

'Imitrex!' Barbara was appalled. She hardly took so much as an aspirin.

Her face must have shown her horror, but Elizabeth just chuckled. 'Oh, Barbara, there's no need to be a martyr. Your pride won't save you from a migraine.'

Barbara was indignant. It wasn't prideful to care for one's body.

But Jonah's bushy white head poked into the room before Barbara could answer. 'She's right, ya know! You could barely sit up by the time we got you in bed and got the meds in ya. Poor thing.' He tsked and shook his head in sympathy.

Barbara was mortified. Her small headaches, every once in a while, she attributed to dehydration, a particularly rowdy class, or too much sugar. Usually,

she powered through them, prayed, and drank some more water. If they were too bad, an aspirin or acetaminophen was a last resort until she could get into bed and sleep. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a true migraine.

Jonah was still talking. 'And anyhow, it helped ya to sleep. Been a whole day! 'Magine ya musta needed the rest. Long way from North Carolina to Cali.' He grinned, the too straight teeth of his bridge showing all the way to the gums. 'Welp, I'm off to the store. Want anythin' special, Barbara?'

'Ah, no. Thank you.' She arranged what she hoped was a polite smile.

Jonah gave Elizabeth a peck on the cheek and disappeared down the hallway, followed by Elizabeth's silent ghost.

Rupert sprinted out after them when realized he'd been deserted and Barbara was left alone her father's keepsakes. She resolved to make it through the box before anything else distracted her.

Two neat stacks of papers seemed to fill the rest of the nearly empty container. She used a finger to ruffle through the stack on the right before pulling it out. She flipped through to see the logos of what looked like banks and set the bundle aside. The second sheath also looked to be bank statements, and Barbara stacked it with the others. As she stood the papers up and tapped them on her knee to even them out, an envelope escaped.

She dropped the stack onto the other papers before collecting the wayward envelope. She turned it over, frowning at the addressee on the front. It was just one word: Barba.

Her chest tightened around the air she'd sucked in, but she couldn't remember how to let it out again. Sparklers danced around the edge of her sight

until a whoosh of air escaped her. She fingered the envelope, still crisp and white, sealed. 'What...'

She picked up the keys and ripped open the top. 'I've come this far. How bad could it be?' She turned it over and let the contents drop to the bed. It was a single sheet of white notepad paper with the Garden Grove logo at the top.

Barba –

I wanted you to do my will and take care of my things. The other kids are useless or want money and their mothers are all idiots. You're the only one I can trust. I been thinking on it a lot. I know we ain't talked much lately, but you were always a good kid. Never did want kids nor animals. Always hated your cat. Take care of my things.

-Dad

Barbara set the trembling sheet down and stared out the window. Her thoughts were sprinting so quickly she couldn't hold on to one long enough to make sense of anything. Finally she was realized she was angry. A flame bloomed in her stomach, blazing up her torso until she could feel the heat around her eyes. She stood and snatched up the letter before nearly running down the hallway to find her mother.

August 9, 1958

Dearest Tony,

Have I got exciting news for you! It turns out that I did not have a stomach flu at all—but there is something growing inside me. Can you guess what it is? (Dr. Steele positively laughed at me when I tried to explain to him that I had the stomach flu.) We will have a new addition to the Chase family sometime around March next year. Barbara Marie will have a little brother or sister—oh, I do hope he is a boy!

I've just told the ladies at church and they are so thrilled for us. Susan is even talking of throwing me a 'baby shower' in the Fall. She really is just lovely. I told her I'd never been to one. She told me it's a little celebration of the mother and it's just for ladies. They all bring gifts and baby things to lend to the mother for the new baby. Doesn't that sound wonderful? It makes me a little sad that I didn't have one for Barbara Marie, but I'm sure this will make up for it.

We will have to talk about names. I just get so excited when I think about all the possibilities! Of course all my friends at church had suggestions. If it's a boy, we could name him after one of our fathers, and if baby is a girl, we could name her after one of our mothers. Or we could choose a name from the Bible. I've always loved Matthew and David, or Ruth or Abigail for a girl. What do you think?

I'm off to a social at church now. I just couldn't wait to share! I hope you are well and this news finds you well - daddy.

Our Love,

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie (& Baby Chase!)

P.S.

I feel badly about keeping Dr. Spock from Sally Dean at church, and with another baby on the way, I think it makes sense to buy my own copy. I hope that's alright with you. It shouldn't cost too much. I'll use my spending money.

Barbara found Elizabeth daydreaming at the kitchen table, empty mug in hand, Rupert snoring on her lap. Her voice was sharp, 'Mom. Let's go sit in the den. Tony wrote me a note.'

Elizabeth's head drooped, her shoulders sagging beneath her dressing robe as she stood, displacing the dog, and shuffled dutifully down the hall. Even as Barbara followed her mother's slow steps, she couldn't find sympathy for the woman in front of her. She was too overwhelmed with all that she didn't know, too angry about what she did.

She was lowering herself onto the too-firm seat of the sectional when Barbara realized she was clutching Tony's keys in her hand. She dropped them and waved the letter at Elizabeth.

'Tony wrote me a letter—a note, really—explaining why he wanted me to deal with all of this stuff about his death.'

Elizabeth yawned, 'Well?'

Barbara rolled her shoulders, squeezing her neck with the empty hand, 'Mom. He just wanted me to take care of his junk. He pretty much didn't trust anyone else.'

'That makes sense, I suppose.' She patted her lap as Rupert jumped onto the couch. He curled up on her lap and went back to sleep.

'How? How on earth does that make sense? He even says: "Never did like kids nor animals." I feel like I'm in some twilight zone—he mentioned my old cat, the one that got run over by a car. Am I missing something?' She pushed the note toward her mother.

Elizabeth searched for her readers, first on the sofa, then on the side table, before noticing them on the coffee table by her legs. She left Barbara holding out the note until she'd perched them on her face.

Barbara watched as her mother read the note, but Elizabeth's expression didn't change. 'So?'

'What do you mean, "So?"'

She shrugged, her shoulders odd angles under her housecoat.

Barbara rolled her eyes, 'Mom, he dropped this whole mess on me because—for whatever reason—he thinks I'm the only one who isn't an idiot or looking for money. And what's the point of bringing up Kitty? It's just surreal.'

Elizabeth dropped the paper on the table and leaned back into the cushions at the mention of the cat. She pulled her feet up on the couch beside her, smoothing her robe over her legs, mumbling an apology to Rupert.

'Mom?'

She sighed, 'I'm sorry Barbara. I don't think you ever figured that out. To be honest, I never wanted you to know.'

She shook her head in confusion, 'Know what, mom? I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Well, your Kitty.'

Barbara waited. 'What about Kitty?'

Elizabeth traced the floral pattern of the housecoat with one finger. 'It was just such an awful thing, and I didn't really know what to do about it.' She met her daughter's eyes, 'Your father ran over Kitty.'

'Wait, what? Why?'

'I think he did it on purpose. He was glad it happened, he said. "Damn cat smelled like piss."'

Barbara counted slowly to ten. 'Mom. You're telling me that Tony killed Kitty? He made me get newspapers and a bag and clean her off the street! He wouldn't even let me bury her – made me throw her in the garbage like a piece of trash.' She was surprised to feel tears fill her eyes. 'It was awful.'

'I know, dear. I told him it was cruel, but he wouldn't hear me. He never did like that cat. He yelled at me the first time he came home after we got Kitty – you must have been two or three. I think you were eight, maybe, when Kitty died?' She played with one of Rupert's ears, rolling it between her fingers.

'You wouldn't let me get another cat. I remember I wanted to, after a few months.'

Elizabeth's smile was sad, 'He said he would drown it if we got another one.'

'He...mom, that's sick.'

'I know, dear.' She massaged Rupert's head. 'I couldn't see how it would help to try and get another after that.'

Barbara watched her, deciding what to say, but Elizabeth beat her to it.

'He could be really cruel, you know. Not all the time, and I don't know that he thought about it ahead of time, planned it out or anything, but he could be. He had a habit of telling me I couldn't do something with friends for no reason at all. That was all so long ago now, but I remember thinking that it seemed like the more excited I was, the less likely he was to give me permission to go. And he'd always wait until the last minute, so I was embarrassed on top of it.'

'Give you permission, mom?' Barbara had never heard her mother talk about her marriage to Tony.

Elizabeth nodded, 'Times were different then, although I did know a number of women whose husbands weren't so controlling. I must have thought them wonderfully modern creatures.' She chuckled, 'This notion that 50's wives were these perfect domestic goddesses is ridiculous, you know. Even my friends whose husbands weren't like Tony didn't have it all together every day. Susan told me once she'd let her kids eat a can of pineapple apiece for lunch – she was too tired to cook!'

Barbara smiled when Elizabeth caught her eye.

'Pineapple was still sort of a treat back then for us, and a dessert in any case. I don't know if I was more shocked that Susan wasn't perfect or that she'd sacrificed three whole cans of pineapple.' She smoothed her housecoat. 'I never really talked to my friends about Tony, though. Maybe I knew deep down that it wasn't right...who knows.'

'What wasn't right, mom?'

Elizabeth's shoulders rose and fell with her sigh, causing Rupert to look up at her expectantly. 'Everything.'

The conversation about Tony had worn on both of them, but Barbara imagined her mother's eyes looked more distant than they had before they sat down. Jonah came home just at the end, but focused his energies on stowing away groceries and making dinner. Even Rupert seemed affected, jumping from Elizabeth's lap as soon as he heard the garage door, eager to escape.

As if sensing the women's distress, Jonah's unruly white head peeked around the corner during a lull, led by a tray with mugs and a teapot. For once, Jonah's good intentions were matched by appropriate action.

'Tea, gals? It's herbal, so no caffeine to keep ya up.' Jonah's smile, artificial though she found it, affected Barbara and she managed a small grimace in return.

'Yes, thank you.'

Elizabeth murmured something ambivalent, but Jonah handed her a mug anyway. 'Two sugars, no milk. Just how my girl likes it. Watch Rupert doesn't knock the mug, now.' He smoothed down her wisps of white and gently kissed her forehead, his other hand clasped around hers, making sure she had a firm grip on the mug before he let go and filled it with steaming water.

Barbara watched the tender exchange, an unbidden image of Rick bringing her tea one day when her morning sickness had been so unrelenting she couldn't make it out of bed to be miserable on the bathroom floor. It had been during her pregnancy with Deirdre – a difficult child from the start. So unlike Nat, who had been an easy baby from his very unintentional conception. She wondered, not for the first time, how her children could be so wildly different in every way. Neither had been planned, yet it was only Deirdre who had seemed to resent this fact from the beginning. She shook her head to clear the irrelevant thoughts. Now was not the time to be sentimental.

Jonah noticed the keys beside her on the couch as he held the teapot over Barbara's mug. 'Gee, that's a lot of keys. Know what any of 'em are for?'

Barbara frowned down on the collection of metal teeth, 'I'm afraid I do. I think they're all for storage lockers.'

Elizabeth mumbled something into her tea.

Barbara looked up sharply, 'What was that, mom?'

Jonah watched them both carefully, ready to intervene. Ready to protect Elizabeth. Barbara wondered what from.

Elizabeth cleared her throat softly, 'I said you're probably right. Tony never could let go of his things.'

Barbara had the fleeting thought that her mother wasn't talking about inanimate objects. Rupert tried to nose his way into her lap, distracting her with a soggy chew toy. She blocked his way with her arm.

Jonah spoke to Barbara, but his eyes were on his wife, 'How're ya gonna find out where they are and which keys go where?'

Barbara let out a loud sigh. 'It looks like he kept his bills, so I'll look at those first—to see if they give his locker numbers—and I guess I'll just have to see how many keys are left over.' Saying it aloud only gave more weight to the overwhelming sense of frustration she'd been fighting since arriving in California.

Jonah's chin dipped in approval, eyes finally on his step-daughter again. 'Sounds like a smart plan. Guess you just gotta hope he didn't keep all his old keys, too.' He winked and set the pot on the coffee table. 'C'mere Rupert, you old fluffball. Barbara doesn't want you.'

Barbara felt a wave of anxiety at the thought of random mystery keys. She could see the Chevy key sticking out, longer than the others on the ring.

'Oh, and dinner'll be ready in 'bout half an hour, ladies. There's more water if you need a warm-up.' Jonah smiled over his shoulder as he disappeared around the corner again with the empty tray, Rupert at his heels.

Barbara checked her watch and decided it was worth the effort to try calling the storage companies on the bills. She might get lucky if they had someone on property twenty-four hours. She stood slowly, opening her mouth to announce her intention to her mother, but Elizabeth was busy staring into the steam rising from her tea.

Barbara had found bills for six different companies in the box. Five had answered the phone. One of those had auctioned off the contents of Tony's unit two years earlier, when he'd failed to pay its rent for six months. She wasn't in the least surprised to hear that; he'd probably lost track of or forgotten about it. She counted it as good fortune. Unfortunately for Barbara, he had still been paying rent for three 8 x 10 units and three lockers at the other four facilities when he died.

She sighed, fingers massaging her forehead as she mentally adjusted her plan. The funeral home had allowed her to tentatively reserve a service time for Tony already when she'd spoken to them on Wednesday. She couldn't remember what time or date she'd reserved, though. She sighed in exasperation as she dropped her hands to her planner, flipping through to her notes from yesterday: Monday, ten a.m. Apparently she hadn't been that optimistic about a Saturday funeral even before the migraine.

But this only gave her Friday and Saturday to clean up Tony's mess, track down his social worker, and contact everyone who needed to know about the funeral. Barbara closed her eyes and groaned, wishing with every part of her being that someone would pinch her and she'd find this was all a nightmare.

She folded the bills from the four storage sites together, and after a moment, included the one that hadn't answered the phone, too. She fought off the growing sense of overwhelm and tried to focus on the tasks at hand: call Tony's family, see the social worker, go out to the storage units. Maybe she could persuade David to actually be useful and meet her at the storage sites. He still drove a truck. That would be helpful.

She glanced at the clock, face up again on the nightstand. Eleven oh one. She squeezed her eyes shut against the fatigue and her distaste for the whole ordeal. She picked her cell off the coverlet and called Rick.

The canned digital ring echoed in her ear as she waited for him to pick up. She held the phone near her thigh so she wouldn't have to listen to the ringing. Glancing around the room, Barbara mentally put together her outfit for the next day before standing to pull the necessary pieces out of her suitcase.

'Hello?' She'd already forgotten the phone. She moved her cell up to her ear.

'Rick—it's me. Barbara'

His voice softened. 'Hey honey, how're you doing?'

She shifted focus from her suitcase. 'Alright. I think the funeral will be Monday. I have to call everyone in the morning.'

He made a noise that sounded sympathetic. 'How're your mom and Jonah doing? Have you seen Dave?'

'Mom is mom. Jonah is trying to be helpful, but he's still Jonah. And, ah, no...I haven't seen David yet.' She couldn't help but accent the second syllable of his name. Even if she was annoyed at his attitude, he still had a right to his name.

'Gotcha.'

Something nagged at Barbara, but she ignored it. 'I found bills for a bunch of storage units in Tony's stuff—looks like he has a few of them full of junk I get to go through now.'

'Well, get David to help. You can always call that what's-it company that hauls away junk—1-800-Trash or something if there's nothing valuable in them.'

'Thanks, that's a good idea. Everything in there is probably going to the dump or Goodwill anyway. I still haven't managed to get his social worker on the phone. From what I can tell from the paperwork the assisted living center gave me, she's the one who has his legal documents, will and whatnot.' Something still niggled at her.

'Getting ready for bed, then?'

She glanced down at the outfit folded on top of her suitcase, pajamas lain out on the bed, and planner snuggled safely under her purse. She had organized it all while they spoke. 'Yes...it's late. Just wanted to let you know what was going on. I wasn't thinking when I called you – I guess you're in bed, too. Sorry.' She paused. 'Ah, maybe I can even fly back on Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning?'

Rick seemed distracted. 'Oh, yeah. I guess it depends on what you find in those storage units, hey?'

Tony's junk was not going to control her life like it had controlled Elizabeth's. 'Sure. Well, good night, then.'

'Good night, Barbara. Love you.'

'Love you.' She tapped around the screen until the call ended, plugged the phone in to charge, and left it on the nightstand, screen side down.

Five minutes later, she was in bed, teeth brushed, face washed, pajamas on. But something still tickled at the back of her mind, something she should have mentioned. Barbara brushed the thought off and nestled down into the soft bed. A good night's sleep was going to be essential if she was going to tackle Tony's mess.

But she tossed and turned, her sleep tormented by nightmares of suffocation beneath thousands of receipts and burial under sharp keys.

September 10, 1958

Dear Tony,

I am sorry to have burdened you with my every ailment and complaint. You work so hard. It really is unfair of me to trouble you with these little things. I know you have plenty of more important problems to occupy your mind. Thank you for sending the extra money for the Bayer's and ginger root (I couldn't find it at the grocer's, but Dr. Steele had already told me where I could get it at a Chinese store a little farther away – it was the oddest place I've ever been, but the sweet little old Chinese woman who ran the place was very helpful and got me the ginger straightaway, although she barely spoke a word of English). Dr. Steele also says the pregnancy is going smoothly, as well, now that the morning sickness is over. The ginger did wonders!

Mother has been coming over whenever father can spare the truck so she can watch Barbara Marie and cook. The refrigerator is always full of things for me to put in the oven when she leaves, which I do appreciate – especially now that I can eat again.

Barbara Marie is nearly always running now. Thank goodness we have such a sturdy little girl – she falls down and bumps and bruises herself on everything, it seems. If I don't see her fall, she rarely even cries. Sometimes I think she cries just for the attention. Mother had to help me make sure everything was high enough that her chubby little hands cannot reach. If I take my eyes off her even for a moment, she finds something new to get into. Mother says all children are like this—at least I will be ready for our next little one. I would see what Dr. Spock says, but I have already returned Sally's copy to her and haven't yet purchased my own. I

asked at the library, but their only copy is checked out and on-hold for months. The librarian told me they're building a new library with more books, but it won't be finished until next year.

I can't stop wondering who our little stranger will be – a boy or a girl. How delightful would it be for you to have a little son to teach all about mechanics and cars? Oh, I just love the thought! What a lovely little family we are building—next we shall have to get a puppy or kitten for the children. Speaking of puppies, did you hear that the Russians sent dogs into space? I can't decide if that's a miracle or just plain ridiculous.

The Ladies Group at church has just chosen our next project—a missionary barrel. Agatha Jones has a friend whose cousin (I think) is married to a missionary in a village in Africa and I guess they just need all kinds of things out there. There are no stores there—can you imagine! So we are doing a 'drive' to collect clothes, soap, shampoos, and all the other odds and ends civilized folks need. It's all so exciting. I love the idea of helping people who are doing good deeds around the world.

I hope they aren't working you too hard.

Your girls (and unknown!),

Elizabeth & Barbara Marie

P.S. I am still so amazed that we are sending rockets to space now. Imagine where NASA will go when Barbara Marie and Baby are our age. They might even vacation on the moon, haha. (A silly thought, I know, but still—!)

Barbara jerked awake, irritated by the repetitive screech of the alarm, but grateful that the dream from which she'd been woken—a bearded fire engine was running her down—was over. She fumbled around the nightstand with one hand until she found the alarm clock, hitting every button until the screeching stopped.

Her phone rang. Inhaling deeply, eyes pressed closed, she fought the frustration bubbling up. She wasn't even out of bed and already her patience was thin. She squinted to look at the caller ID screen: David Chase. She exhaled hard.

'Hello?' She would try to be nice.

'Barbara, it's me.' Despite never having smoked, her brother had inherited Tony's gravelly voice, making him sound perpetually groggy.

'Good morning, David. Mom said you can make a funeral whenever?'

Something hissed and splashed in the background. 'Yeah. I make my own schedule, so it doesn't matter. I'd like to know ahead of time, though...makes it a bit easier to actually make that schedule.'

Barbara didn't miss the reproach, but she did ignore it. 'Well, I'll let you know as soon as I do. I'm calling the funeral home today to see if we can't have the memorial on Monday morning. It was free when I called the other day.'

He slurped, 'Yeah, ok. I'll plan on Monday then—unless you tell me otherwise.'

'Monday morning,' she confirmed.

'Right. Monday morning.'

At first the pause was natural, but quickly grew to an awkward chasm.

Barbara briefly imagined the metaphorical scuffle in which one of them would have

to find a way across, then throw a rope back. She shook her head against the image, clearly the product of reading too many third grade adventure stories over the years.

‘Did you know that he still had storage units?’ She didn’t particularly want to invoke Tony’s name so early in the morning. He would give her enough of a headache by the end of the day, even from the grave.

‘Storage units?’ David echoed.

‘Yes, plural. At least three units and three lockers—at four different places.’ She waited. Barbara preferred to allow other people the opportunity to offer their help before she asked them. She thought it only fair that others be given a chance to demonstrate their good will and charitable spirit.

‘That sounds like a lot of stuff.’ No offer of help there.

‘I was planning to try to go by all of them today. Do you still have the truck?’ She knew he did. If at first someone didn’t volunteer to help, Barbara had a way of helping him into volunteering. The tactic rarely failed.

‘Uh, yeah. Yeah. Still runs like new.’

He sensed the trap, but despite fifty-plus years as Barbara’s little brother, still didn’t have the wherewithal to escape. The thought made Barbara’s smile a bit smug.

‘Oh, great. So you’ll help me go through them today? Rick suggested we should maybe called 1-800-Junk, but I’m sure a bunch of stuff could go to charities, too.’ Trap sprung. Although Barbara never thought of it as trapping—she was merely nudging David into doing the right thing. It was for his own good.

'Uh, sure. Yeah. Yeah, what time?' He sounded deflated over the background noise of clinking and slurping. It dawned on Barbara that he was calling her from a coffee shop.

'Well...' she glanced quickly at the alarm clock: six forty-five a.m. 'I'll be ready in about an hour and a half. Why don't you pick me up at 8:30?'

'Right. See you then.' She heard the resentment again.

'See you then!' she quipped.

She stretched, welcoming the pleasant strain of her muscles as she entwined her fingers and pushed her arms up. She released her hands and swung her legs to the carpet. She'd set out her clothes and tennis shoes for walking the night before, so she changed quickly, smiling as she sat on the edge of the bed to tie her laces. Rick had loaded a Bible study audiobook onto her phone before she left. She thought it would be nice to walk and meditate at once.

Barbara emerged to the grumble of male voices and clanking of dishes. Inhaling deeply, reminding herself of her intention to be civil, so she found a smile before entering the kitchen.

David was perched on a bar stool, steaming mug in hand, while Jonah supervised a pan on the stove, Rupert begging at his feet. David waggled the mug at her by way of greeting, continuing a story about wires and radios that may as well have been in a foreign language Barbara understood so little.

She stepped around Jonah and stood between the men, warning Rupert with her eyes that she wanted nothing to do with his doggy-ness. David paused his story.

'Well, good morning again.'

'I thought we were going to leave at 8:30.' It was a judgment, not a question. Belatedly, Barbara recalled her intention to be patient. The audio Bible study she'd listened to was on the significance of grace. 2 Peter 1:2 "Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."

David slurped from his mug, 'Yeah, well, I can't ever turn down a good meal and Jonah offered breakfast.' The two exchanged smiles.

She summoned a small, tight smile of her own. 'Oh, I see. We'll just go when you're done, then.' She turned to leave the kitchen. She could try to reach the still-unresponsive storage company or the social worker while David inhaled his breakfast.

Jonah turned, spatula in hand. Barbara hadn't noticed the white, frilled apron when she came in. Now it struck her as distinctly feminine and out of place on the retired car salesman. 'Aw, now, ya aren't skippin' breakfast are ya? Most important meal of the day!'

In sudden mutiny, Barbara's stomach gargled loudly. David snickered into his coffee cup and Jonah's grin widened so that Barbara could see the exact line between his gums and his dentures.

'See? Yer hungry. Sit! Coffee?'

He was already pouring another mug before she had a chance to explain how much she still needed to do. The coffee did smell good.

'Most important meal of the day, Barbara,' David added dryly.

'Oh, all right then. But David will have to work hard to make up for this!' She smiled again to make sure they knew she was joking. But he would have to work harder, and so would she.

It was nearly nine-thirty by the time Barbara detached David from his seat in the kitchen. After stops at both the hardware store and a coffee drive-thru—Barbara was starting to notice a trend in David's behavior—they finally pulled in to the first storage lot at ten thirty-seven.

David waited in his truck in the 'U-Store-It' parking lot while Barbara entered the cement-block building labeled 'Main Office' accompanied by the clanking bell on the door handle. Half of the small room was filled with questionably stacked moving boxes, the other with a small desk and a large man who looked suspiciously like he was dozing. A desk sign indicated 'Manager.'

Barbara cleared her throat. The man didn't move. She coughed again, louder, followed by, 'Good morning!'

The shaggy, greasy brown head snapped up with a snort.

Barbara stepped back, although she wasn't sure if she was startled, or disgusted. She tried not to focus on the cascade of flesh folded over on itself and down the man's chest. 'Good morning—I called you about Anthony Chase's units?'

The man rubbed a grubby hand into his eyes while he felt around his desk with the other, emerging with a pair of smudged glasses—the sort with a double nose bridge and clear plastic frames. He finally looked up at her, 'Uh, er, yeah. I looked 'em up—units 251 and 253. Got the keys?'

Momentarily distracted by the cross-eyed effect the thick lenses were having on his eyes, Barbara answered a little too slowly. 'Oh, yes—yes, I have the keys. Although I'm not entirely sure which one belongs to which unit.'

He grunted, shoving himself back from the desk, his metal chair scraping across the concrete floor with a shriek. Barbara enforced a strict 'No Scooting' rule in her classroom; students who failed to move their chairs quietly were rewarded with chair-stacking duty at the end of the day—one day's chair duty for each scooting infraction.

Lips pursed, she backed into the stacked boxes to allow the man's stained white t-shirt-covered girth to pass her. Up close, he smelled of sweat and sticky sweet energy drink. Barbara held her breath.

The brass bell managed a short jingle before it crashed into the glass. She stepped quickly to slip through the door—which he hadn't held—before the bell had a chance to assault the door again. She waved for David to follow them as she trailed the manager. The property had no gate and the units were all housed in two-story, aluminum siding-covered structures with three narrow windows on the second floors. Mini accordion-style garage doors were spread evenly across the façades of the buildings she could see.

They walked to the end of the first building and stopped at a metal door with a small, square window just at Barbara's eye level. The manager swung the door open to reveal stairs. Images of the siblings lugging boxes and bags of Tony's junk down a flight of stairs made Barbara's stomach tense nauseatingly. Breakfast really had been a terrible idea.

The manager waved a large paw toward David. 'He can park that wherever—you just gotta move if another owner comes and wants to get into these units on the ground.'

Barbara couldn't fake the smile. 'Fine.'

The paw ending in thick black-stained fingers, swept around to indicate the stairs. '251 and 253's up there. If it's junk, you're welcome to open a window and just toss the crap down. Dumpster's 'round back.'

The manager let the door swing back to slam shut and walked back toward his office. Barbara let out a hiss of frustration, jumping when she realized that David had pulled the truck up right next to her.

'He said you can park anywhere. Tony's units are on the second floor though, so you might want to move it so we can throw junk into the bed from the window.'

David jerked his head and scrunched his forehead, 'You are not just going to throw dad's stuff. And besides that, you are absolutely not throwing anything down onto my truck – she may be twenty-three years old, but my baby still purrs like the day I bought her. If there's trash, we can bag it and throw it down into the 1-800-Junk dumpster you insisted we get.'

The 'dumpster' was a reinforced tarp shaped into a collapsible open box that could handle 3,000 pounds of junk and would be collected by the hauling company. Barbara had read the label carefully and found no catches or hidden fees. And she was anticipating junk, lots of junk.

'Well, no use putting it off. Bring the garbage bags and some boxes and let's take a look.'

Barbara had to try every key on the ring before the last one finally fit into the lock on unit 251. David drank his coffee and watched without comment. A pile of unbuilt boxes, topped with an industrial-sized container of 42-gallon trash bags and a tape

gun, sat in a pile to one side. Luckily, the unit was directly across from one of the windows, so Barbara could see what she was doing. The hallway had no other lights.

She paused before pulling off the lock. The click of the tumblers as the shackle pulled out of the padlock body echoed dramatically in the dim space. She handed the lock to David before removing the key from the ring and giving it to him as well.

Their eyes met for a moment, but Barbara looked back to the door. 'You do it.'

David focused on the lock in his hand, fitting the key to it so they wouldn't lose either. 'C'mon, Barbara. It's just a door.'

She closed her eyes for the briefest of moments before bending down to grasp the pull on the door and yank. The accordion clattered as the door slid up its track, but Barbara was too distracted by what was inside to notice.

Stacks and stacks of boxes, bags, piles of indeterminate stuff, furniture, and what might have been clothing filled the unit to the ceiling.

David let a low whistle escape and pulled out his flashlight. Barbara shuddered as he shined it into the mess. They stood together looking at the jigsaw mounds before them.

Finally David broke the silence, 'May as well open the other one.'

Barbara nodded, moving around the pile of flat boxes to unit 253. This time, the first key matched. She turned the key, pulling the shackle down quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Unit 253 looked much as 251 did, only with more stacks of paper in between and on top of boxes, bags, and furniture.

Barbara shook her head and turned to face David, handing him the second lock and key. She slipped her cross-body purse off and pulled out the hardy leather gloves and dust mask she'd bought at the hardware store. She hung the purse from the lock of unit 255 and opened the case of garbage bags, silently handing one to David and extracting one for herself.

She indicated 251 with one glove, 'Why don't you start on that one. Anything old, broken, or useless goes in the trash. Any clothes or furniture that are still in good shape can go to Goodwill. I don't really think we'll find anything we want to keep, but I guess say something if you think there is.'

She didn't wait for David's to respond, a little afraid that she might run screaming down the stairs if she dwelt too much on the task ahead of them. She covered her mouth with the mask and stepped into the unit. She pulled on the topmost box in the stack nearest the front of 253 and tugged until it tumbled to her feet. The flaps came unfolded and old, moth-eaten, disintegrating magazines spilled out. A *Life* cover boasted its publication date as August 1985. Barbara turned the box upright and pushed it across the floor to the window before snapping open a trash bag and collecting the spilt magazines.

David looked over at the noise. 'I'll go down and set up the dumpster bag.'

Barbara didn't feel the usual satisfaction of knowing she was right. She turned back to the unit and glanced at her watch, discouraged to see that it was already eleven o' seven. She grabbed the next box and pulled until it fell. The flaps held, but opened to show her it was packed full of newspapers. She scooted the box to the window.

She reached for the next box in the stack, opening it quickly and methodically: Magazines. More trash. Scoot box.

Another box. Magazines. Trash. Scoot.

Open box. Note contents. Trash. Scoot. Repeat.

Barbara had a cluster of seven boxes of newspapers and magazines under the window before David returned. The dates of the publications on top ranged from 1979 to 1990, and Barbara didn't doubt that the missing years were stacked somewhere in the depths of the 8 x 10.

David eyed the boxes and opened the window to drop them out. Barbara felt the significant thunks of the magazine and newspaper-filled boxes as much as she heard them. She ignored the noise and was already opening another box when David started in on 251.

They worked in silence for a while, each in a rhythm. When the collection under the window started to encroach on the units themselves, David spent a few minutes hefting boxes through the window again. They still hadn't found anything worth keeping—just boxes and boxes full of decades old *The Los Angeles Times*, *TV Guide*, *Life*, and what looked like community newsletters and bulletins. Neither of them had made it past the first row of boxes.

Barbara reached for a box, but sneezed as some of the dust that carpeted everything in both units puffed up under her mask. She sighed as she dragged a forearm across her forehead, smudging grime and dust into the sweat balancing on her brow.

She unfolded the flaps, but it took her a moment to digest what she was seeing: Cracker Jack boxes. Images of cockroaches and ants made her skin crawl, but

she realized as soon as she lifted the box that it was too light. She shook it, but it barely rustled. The Cracker Jack boxes were empty. She launched it toward the window, satisfied to see it actually soar through, although the sad little thump it made when it hit the ground wasn't fulfilling.

The next box held more Cracker Jack boxes. She shoved the box toward the window, frustrated, despite the fact that this was exactly what she had feared. She thought of all the years Tony had paid to keep his junk, this trash, stored. She wondered how much money he had wasted as she opened another box. Then another.

Barbara lost track of boxes and time, mechanically unfolding, briefly perusing, and shoving or kicking the cartons to the window. She had wrested her way past the first few rows of boxes and faced a Jenga stack of furniture, boxes, papers, and indeterminate stuff. She propped her hands on her hips and stared.

David made a noise. Grateful for a distraction, Barbara backed out of the unit and pulled down her mask. 'Find something?'

His face was covered in swirls and smears of dust and Barbara had a quick flash back to Halloween when they were children. Elizabeth wouldn't let David cut holes in a sheet to be a ghost, so Barbara had helped him to make a paste of flour and water and painted his face, neck, hair, and arms with it. Her lip quirked as she remembered their panic when they realized the stuff wouldn't simply wash off. Every third grade teacher knew the recipe for papier-mâché. Nine and seven-year-olds Barbara and David hadn't known any better and it had taken days of soaking

David to get all of it off. Elizabeth had been furious at first, but finally laughed when she realized how ridiculous it was. Tony hadn't been around.

'Do you remember how much trouble we got in when we—' Barbara started, but stopped when she saw the gravity in David's eyes. 'What? What did you find?'

He handed her a shoebox.

Finally curious about something in the units, Barbara took the box and moved into the light from the window so she could see. It was full of old, moldy envelopes. Assuming Tony had kept more old bills or junk mail, Barbara tried to hand the box back.

David shook his head. 'Look at them.'

She pulled one out at random and frowned. She recognized the neat, girlish handwriting of the return address. Turning it over, Barbara saw the addressee: Anthony Chase, c/o The Texas Company, Spindletop Fields, Jefferson County, Texas. She looked at David, lost.

'Just open it.'

She took off a glove and used her finger to lift the flap of the envelope, which had re-sealed itself at some damp point in its life. The stationery inside was faded and mold stamped out an uneven pattern across the once-pink paper. Cross-stitch-style flowers that might have been purple and red graced the upper right corner, above the date:

December 2, 1958

Dear Tony,

Agatha Jones is such a dear! She organized a 'baby shower' for me last Friday evening. I felt so cared-for. She invited all of the ladies from the Group

at church, as well as Mother, and hosted the party at her home. (I finally saw the drapes and they are to die for!) Mother's friend Ms. Barston drove her. I don't know if you remember her, but she came to our wedding.

She looked up to her brother. 'This is about you—well, about your baby shower. December of 1958.'

'Yeah, well the one I pulled out was about you.'

They stared at each other for several heartbeats, neither sure what the other was thinking. Barbara finally managed, 'Why did he keep them?'

His face filled with sudden exhaustion. 'Who fucking knows? It's not like he ever had any good reason.'

'David!' Her shock at the obscenity overrode her surprise.

He snatched the box from her, an edge to his voice. 'It's shit. I knew it would be. You knew it would be or you wouldn't have bought that damn dumpster. All dad ever did was collect shit.' He waved the box at her. 'These letters are buried in here under boxes of junk that's no good to anybody. You know what that means? Don't you get it? These are junk too.'

'But mom was writing to him about us, maybe he kept these—' Barbara was startled to hear herself defending Tony, but David cut her off before she could complete the thought—if she could have.

He scoffed, 'What—you think he kept them because they were somehow special? C'mon Barbara, look around.' He kicked a box full of *TV Guide*. 'All of this shit was "special" to dad. Those letters are just more junk he collected.'

Barbara winced, 'But, they're from mom. I mean, he kept them for over fifty years. That has to mean something, right?'

David barked out a laugh. 'That's rich, Barbara. Look at you defending dear old dad. Where the hell do you get off trying to humanize the guy? You've been gone years, weren't around much before that, neither. You don't have a fucking clue.'

Beyond surprised, Barbara stepped away from her brother, stuttering in her efforts to find footing. 'What are you— Why are— I don't—' She paused to take a breath in the hallway that was suddenly much smaller, darker, and airless. 'David, I—'

He brought up his hand so fast Barbara flinched, anticipating the strike. He slapped the shoebox, pushing it back into her unready hands. 'Don't you get it? We were no more important to him than any of the rest of this—the magazines, newsletters, goddamned *TV Guide*!'

David's shoulders shook and for a moment, she thought her brother might be crying. He laughed, 'It's ridiculous, when you think about it. Just fucking dumb. Pathetic.'

She smiled weakly, 'I guess it really is.'

They stood in silence for a while before Barbara offered, 'I found a few boxes of empty Cracker Jacks boxes in this unit, too.'

He turned to drop another box into the dumpster below.

She kept talking when he didn't respond. 'They're just empty boxes, how crazy does someone have to be to keep something like that? I threw them down already.'

He spun around, face red. 'What would you know? You wouldn't have the first clue why he kept them.'

'I – no, I didn't mean anything – I was just trying to—' Barbara scrambled, aware that she'd lost any control she might have had of the situation.

'Trying to what? Act like you know anything about all this shit?' He gestured wildly, 'You don't belong here. You hate dust and junk and *stuff*. You never could handle any clutter, so what are you doing here anyway? Why did you come all the way here from North Carolina, huh? Little Miss Perfect Daughter, here to bury daddy so you can tell your friends back home what a good Christian you are?'

Her mouth hung open at her brother's attack. 'Tony put my name down. That's why I came. He just thought I'd be thorough, maybe. I don't know. It's not fair for you to turn this on me.' She forgave herself the slight edit of her father's note. She didn't want to say anything to fuel her brother's anger.

'He thought you'd be thorough...right. How the hell could you be "thorough" with this? Look at you with your gloves and mask, your hardware store bags and dumpster gimmick. You think this is thorough? Dad would kill you if he saw you just throwing all his stuff away like this.' He smacked the side of a box, 'Sure, we know it's shit, but to him, this was everything.'

He stopped short and Barbara saw tears on his cheeks. 'David?'

He waved her off, 'Leave me the hell alone. I'm fine. Just go dig through some more boxes, alright? I'll work on this one.'

He turned to open another box, leaving Barbara staring at his back, but before she could pull on her gloves, David stepped back and kicked a hole in the side of the box.

'Goddammit!'

She took a step back, 'David...I don't know what to do for you right now...'

He dropped into a crouch, face in hands.

She tried to comfort him, her hands on his shoulders as she knelt, although the touch felt awkward. 'David, it's going to be alright. We just need to get through this stuff and move on, that's all.'

He dropped his hands, his eyes dark. 'Move on?' He shrugged her hands off, 'I suppose you already know all about moving on, don't you.'

'David?'

He stood over her, 'Sorry it's so much more difficult for me, Barbara, but I've actually been around for the last couple of decades. Not everyone gets to just "move on" when their father dies. Some of us aren't that cold.'

'Wait, no, that's not what I mean, David. I just mean—well, haven't we wasted enough on Tony? We should be able to clean him out, like all this junk. That's all. You know, move on.' Barbara shrugged, hoping to placate him.

David's voice was quiet, 'Get out.'

She wasn't expecting this. 'What?'

He held his fists against his hips as he growled, 'Get out. Get the fuck out. Now!'

The control of his muted anger frightened Barbara more than the shouting. She stood and snatched for her purse and the box of letters and spun toward the exit, nearly running to the stairs in her rush to get away. She still had one glove on.

October 18, 1958

Dear Tony,

It's been a few weeks since your last letter. I hope you are doing well. Has it started to cool down in Texas yet? We are knitting a new batch of baby caps in the Ladies' Group—and I'm working on crocheting a blanket for our newest Chase addition. Susan lent me a pattern that isn't too complicated, so I think it should turn out wonderfully. I found some pale purple and green yarn for next to nothing, so it will be perfect either for a little boy or girl. (Have you thought any more about names for baby?)

I'm so glad I kept most of Barbara Marie's baby things—some will still need to be replaced. She was so hard on clothes and toys. Most of her old duds have already gone into my rag pail, so I will have to sew some new ones. I kept all the patterns I used, though, so that is something. Susan has some old clothes and patterns she has said she'll lend me, too. I think this baby will be so much easier than Barbara Marie—it must be, anyway, since practice makes perfect (I hope!).

Speaking of our little blonde girl, she has discovered Shirley Temple and now insists on having me wrap her hair up in rags every night so she has curls like little miss Curly Top! She is still obsessing over crayons, but she will actually sit or stand still for a while now and color, so I'm certainly not going to complain. Nearly every paper grocery bag is covered in rainbows of scribble—I've even given up ripping them to make them flat because I ran out of bags to use for other things. Now she just gets to 'decorate' mommy's bags. She's very proud of her artwork.

I'm off to Susan's now with Miss Curly Barbara Marie (she does look absolutely precious in curls, or I wouldn't indulge her so). I've started to go to

Susan's once a week to let Barbara Marie play with Georgie. They both love it so much and it's the only way to tire her out enough that she will sleep through the night. It's so nice to have some time to socialize with Susan outside of church, too. Of course, all of this must sound so boring to you! We talk about the children—she has two older, both girls, so she is awfully helpful. And we talk about cooking, recipes, all that lady-stuff that would just bore you to tears, I'm sure. I wonder what you men do for fun in Texas? Surely you don't work all the time. What is there to do nearby? Have you found a church in Plano? I hope to hear from you soon.

Our Love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Little Stranger

Barbara was shaking despite the heat as she stood outside the manager's crummy office and yanked her glove off to dig through her purse for her phone, not in its usual pocket. Her cross-body bag was always neat and organized, but this morning it felt like a labyrinth.

When she finally fished it out, she stared at it, uncertain whom to call.

She jumped when the phone rang, vibrating violently in her hand. She caught the inside of her cheek in her teeth while she deliberated whether to answer.

Finally, 'Hi Rick.'

'Barbara—I'm not interrupting? I know you were planning to go through storage units with Dave today.' His words were punctuated with a slurp and Barbara could picture Rick sitting on the couch with his late morning coffee. He would leave little brown rings on the side table. He never used a coaster.

'No. David isn't helping me anymore.' She caught herself before her anger spit out nastier thoughts. 'I'm stuck at one of the storage units without a car now.'

Rick slurped and swallowed again, 'Why don't you just call Jonah?' Rick had never understood Barbara's antagonism toward her mother's husband—or why she still would not refer to him as her stepfather. He thought Jonah was friendly and honest and funny, and that was all the thought Rick had put into the matter, Barbara was certain.

'I'm not sure I want to. David is still here, actually. He overreacted to something and it sort of escalated.' She paused, but Rick seemed to have engrossed himself in his coffee.

‘Rick? Any helpful ideas?’ Her tone was sharp, the dry heat adding edge to her irritation.

He cleared his throat into her ear, ‘Call Jonah. You could take a taxi, but it seems silly to spend the money when you know Jonah is just sitting at home and would be thrilled to be useful.’

Barbara knew the last part was true. ‘Not helpful. I just said that I don’t want to involve Jonah. Why don’t you listen? I’ll talk to you later, after I’ve sorted out this new mess.’ She hung up, fuming—mostly because she knew he was right.

She tried to gather her thoughts and come to a different solution. She couldn’t, so trudged toward the main road and forced her finger to tap ‘Jonah Conrad’ in her Contacts.

‘Hiya Barbara! How goes the treasure hunt?’

She squeezed her eyes shut and shot off a one-word prayer for patience.

On the one hand, Barbara was grateful that Jonah hadn’t stopped talking long enough to expect an answer for why she needed a ride in the first place. On the other hand, it had been a very long twenty minutes and now her jaw hurt from clenching her teeth.

She had managed to tune Jonah out enough to decide that she would still follow her plan for the day: sort through the storage units, order and purchase a coffin, and find phone numbers for the list of people she needed to invite to the funeral.

Having collected the rental car and liberated herself from Jonah, Barbara had entered the second storage facility into her GPS and found it was only a few blocks

from Golden Grove. Thankfully, mid-morning traffic wasn't miserable and it took her less than forty minutes to reach it. The storage units themselves looked identical to the ones she'd just left, but the owners of this lot clearly didn't concern themselves about the management office itself: it was a trailer. Barbara parked and checked her notes.

She'd written 'Store 4 Less: 8x10 + locker, mgr = Matt, paid through month.' She had also stopped at the hardware store again. She bought another collapsible dumpster and more trash bags. She still carried the gloves and dust mask in her purse, confident she would need them.

Matt was exactly as young as he had sounded on the phone, all zits and long hair above his TOOL t-shirt. Barbara had no idea what or who TOOL was, but from the disturbing image on Matt's shirt, she was positive she wouldn't like them.

He looked up from his laptop as soon as she opened the door. 'Good morning. Welcome to Cheap N Easy storage. How can I help?' The grin was genuine, if crooked. Matt's parents didn't appear to have considered braces worth the expense.

Barbara mirrored his smile, 'I'm Barbara Sterling. We spoke on the phone about Anthony Chase's unit? I'm here to clean it out and close the account.'

Matt's head bobbed, 'Right-o. I told you it's paid through the end of the month, right? I won't be able to refund you for the extra days...' Concern creased his brow, like he expected her to argue.

She waved a hand, 'That's fine. I need to get this done today anyway. As long as he doesn't owe anything.'

'Nope! The account's in the clear. You got the key?' He towered over her when he stood.

'Yes—well, I have all of his keys, but it should be on the keyring.' An awful thought struck her, 'But, if it's not—can you cut the lock?'

Matt's sharp shoulders shot toward his ears, 'Yeah, we do charge for it, though. I could probably waive the fee, given that you're eating the cost of the rest of the month's rent, but I would definitely need to make sure you have the rights to the unit.'

'That's fair. Hopefully we don't have to worry about it.' Something about the teen's laid-back confidence made Barbara comfortable.

'Right-o. Well I'll show you where the units are—one eight-by-ten and one locker. They're not next to each other, but they are in the same building. The eight-er is on the first floor – easy to get to.' He held the door over her head so she could exit. 'Go on and follow me in your car. I'll show you where the dumpster is, too. Hopefully you don't have to pitch too much—it's on the far side of the lot.' His smile was rueful, 'Sorry.'

'No need to apologize. It's not your junk and you probably didn't put that dumpster all the way over there just to make my life difficult.' Barbara was surprised to find herself teasing him.

His eyes brightened, 'Nope! That I sure didn't.'

His long legs ate up the distance to the gate before Barbara had even turned the Prius back on, but he waited to open the gate until she had pulled the car up. Tony's units were in the second row of white aluminum-paneled barns.

She stopped in front of the door Matt pointed to and rolled down the window, 'Where should I park?'

'You're fine right here. He jerked his head up, 'You'll have to take the stairs for his locker, though.'

'And the dumpster?'

'Straight down this aisle and make a right. You can go right to the gate from there, or if you need to take a couple loads, just loop back around here. The gate opens automatically when you pull up to it. But you'll need to come see me when you're all done so I can give you all the paperwork to sign.' He smiled again and turned to walk back to the trailer.

She started to roll the window up, 'Oh! Matt?'

'Yes'm?' The boy had manners.

'What time does your shift end? I don't know how long this will take me...I just don't want to have to re-explain everything to someone else.' She smiled her apology.

Matt laughed, 'Oh, don't worry. I'll be here.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes ma'am. I'm the owner—I live right here on property. Good luck.'

She swallowed her surprise, 'Oh! Well, thanks.'

Barbara's phone rang as she was loading the rental car full of more trash for her second trip to the dumpster. She'd opted not to use the collapsible dumpster this time. She wouldn't normally answer an unknown number, but nothing about this trip was normal. She stripped the glove off her right hand and hit 'Accept Call.'

'Hello?'

'Good afternoon, may I please speak with Barbara Sterling?'

‘This is she.’ Her fingers tapped a box full of TV guides from the 1970s in the back seat, impatient. She’d set aside two boxes full of new socks, undershirts, and underwear—still in their packages—to donate. The rest appeared to hold more magazines.

‘Wonderful. This is Carl Wilson, Director here at Wilson Brothers Funeral Home and Crematorium. I’m calling to confirm your reservation for a memorial service for Anthony Chase on Monday.’ He paused, ‘I understand Anthony was your father. First, I am so sorry for your loss.’

Barbara’s eyes wandered across the stacks of boxes and piles of trash bags spilling out of the storage unit. All the accumulated junk around her felt nothing like loss. ‘Thank you.’

She could hear him inhale especially loudly before speaking again. She held the phone a little farther away, thankful she wasn’t wearing the earpiece.

‘Second, as I said, I wanted to confirm the time for Monday’s service. You had requested ten a.m., including an officiant, is that correct?’

There were still several rows of boxes and bins in the back of the unit. Suddenly Barbara felt drained. ‘Yes, ten a.m.’ Monday was approaching too quickly, and she still hadn’t called anyone. She wondered for a brief moment how bad it would be if she didn’t call anyone at all. Or hold a funeral. If only.

She could hear a pen scratching. ‘And did you have a preference for a religious service or a particular denomination? Any specific requests from the departed?’

The thought of Tony asking for a religious funeral made Barbara laugh, short and harsh. ‘No. Just a simple, short service. Amazing Grace, maybe, and a prayer for

the family and friends, but nothing else.’ She wondered what Director Wilson must think about a woman who laughed when asked about her father’s funeral preferences. If the Director had known Tony, he’d have laughed, too. She was past caring.

‘Oh-okay. I’ll assign one of our staff chaplains to you, then.’ His voice wavered, but he cleared his throat to cover his unease. ‘Now then, the last reason I called is the deposit for the mourning parlor. I see that you indicated to our liaison at Garden Grove when you came that you’d like the small parlor. The total basic cost for the small room is \$2,100. This includes storage of the deceased until the funeral service and reserves the room for your use from ten to eleven-thirty a.m. The chaplain will cost an additional \$100 for the twenty minute service, although that does not include a graveside service, should you desire one.’

Dollar signs floated around Barbara’s head, but the director was still speaking.

‘I can give you prices for a graveside package, as well, should you like. It also says here that Anthony had already purchased a burial plot in the—ah, here it is—in the Garden Grove Memorial Grounds. Is that right?’

She remembered the man at the assisted living facility mentioning Tony’s specific instructions, but couldn’t remember if this was one of them. ‘I believe so.’

‘Mhm. Alright, we have a good relationship with Garden Grove. Their plots do include a very plain grave marker, but most people opt to upgrade to a larger headstone or memorial. I can tell you that the basic fee for the actual interment there is \$1,000 without a graveside service or additional adornment. It goes up from

there. We would be happy to communicate your wishes to the Grounds and can combine the bills into one invoice for your convenience—'

'That's fine. No graveside service. Just the basics for everything—what's the total?' Barbara cut him off.

'Oh, let's see...that comes to three thousand and two hundred dollars, before taxes. Have you already purchased a coffin?'

She sighed, 'No. But I just need the most basic option.' Hopefully Tony's life insurance would at least cover the funeral and burial costs—he had taken enough of her life already. She couldn't bear the thought of Tony taking her and Rick's hard-earned money, too.

'Right. We have a very simple composite coffin for \$300. That is the least expensive option.' A printer's repetitive scratchings worked in the background.

'Perfect.' She was ready to be done with this call.

He cleared his throat again. 'Right, so we will just need a deposit of \$1,000 for the parlor, \$1,000 for the interment – it's due upfront – and then the entire amount of the coffin cost is also necessary upfront, I'm afraid. So that's...\$2,300 plus taxes...\$2,380 total for the deposit.'

She closed her eyes and focused on breathing. Over the must of the boxes, she could smell exhaust and a dead animal nearby. With her luck, she'd find it in Tony's unit.

'Would, eh, would you like to give me a credit card number? The balance of \$1,200 plus tax will be due on Monday morning prior to the service.' He paused, 'Although we do have financing options available, should you need.'

Barbara leaned into the car to retrieve her wallet, impatient. 'Fine. It's a Visa card.' Numbers floated in her head, piling up like Tony's junk.

Seven trips to the dumpster, an aching back, and lungs full of dust later, Barbara could see the floor and all three walls of the unit. A quick glance at her watch told her it was already five thirty, although the summer sun was still high and hot. She hadn't even made it up the stairs to find the key for the locker yet.

She pulled the accordion door down to close the empty 8X10, guiding it to the floor so it wouldn't hit hard and rattle.

'Mrs. Sterling?'

She jumped at the voice, spinning to find the young man smiling at her. 'Oh! Oh, Matt, you startled me.'

His face fell, 'So sorry ma'am. I didn't mean to give you a fright.'

She dredged up a small smile, 'Oh, it's alright. I was a little focused and I suppose I zoned out.'

He flashed a toothy grin at her, 'Of course—looks like you're nearly done?' His eyes swept over the bags tied up behind the car, the two boxes stacked by the unit door, three mattresses leaning against the building, cushioning several bedframes and what appeared to be a number of cheap mismatched shelves.

The untouched locker loomed large in her mind and came out as a sigh, 'With this one, yes. I haven't even made it up to look at the locker yet.'

'Great timing! I was going to see if I could lend you a hand. I usually close up shop about now and I've got nothing else going today.' He jutted his chin at the bags, 'Looks like you're dealing with a lot.'

Barbara tried to tell him she was fine, that she didn't need any help, but she found it hard to speak around the lump in her throat. She managed a small smile, 'Thank you—I would really, genuinely appreciate that.'

'Groovy. Are these bags trash? I can run them to the dumpster while you head upstairs.'

'Everything except for those two boxes by the door can go—thank you.' She watched as he picked up three bags with each hand, effortlessly, then sauntered down the building toward the dumpster. His cheerful whistling wafted back to her.

She shook her head, but smiled despite herself, grateful for the help—even if it did come from a straggly-haired metalhead. God certainly did work in mysterious ways.

The locker was by far the most organized of the four of Tony's units Barbara had seen. It was crammed full, like the rest, but its contents were packed into uniform moving boxes, labeled neatly in a handwriting Barbara didn't recognize.

'Cassette Tapes: Music A, Cassette Tapes: Music A, Cassette Tapes: Music B, Cassette Tapes: Music B, Books on Tape: A-B, Books on Tape: B-C'

The entire wall of box faces she could see all indicated some type of tape or another. She wasn't sure what to do. If she had David's truck, they could load all the boxes to donate to Goodwill, but the hatchback rental car wouldn't be able to handle more than a handful of boxes, at best, and she'd already set aside two boxes full of unopened socks and underwear packages to donate. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, contemplating the boxes before turning back toward the stairs.

Matt returned empty-handed from another trip to the dumpster. 'Mrs. Sterling, you sure you want me to throw away those bedframes? The mattresses look rough, but the frames are probably all still fine.'

She looked where his finger pointed, 'Well, I don't have a way to transport them – I don't think they'll fit in the car. And actually, I wanted to ask your opinion about something.' She smiled sheepishly.

'Sure, Mrs. Sterling. Happy to opine on whatever you need.' He winked.

'Well, it's the locker. I think it's full of tapes—you know, cassette tapes. I have no idea how many, but they're all boxed up and labeled, not like this junk. Does anyone actually use cassette tapes anymore? My car doesn't even have a tape deck.'

Matt's eyes widened, 'Are you kidding? Tapes have made a huge comeback! They've got that audio quality, like authenticity, CD's and mp3's just don't have. They're totally retro now – you know, like vinyl is cool again?'

Barbara's eyebrows pushed up, 'You're joking. People are honestly listening to tapes again? I never would have thought.'

'Yes ma'am, they sure are. I have to say I'm more into vinyl, personally, but I know a ton of people my age getting back into tape decks and all that.'

'Well then! It's funny how things go from "outdated" to "retro."' She chuckled, 'What should I do with them? I could take them to a thrift shop, although it would take me a few trips – the locker is jam-packed. What do you think?'

Matt shrugged, 'You could definitely do that, or sell them on eBay or something, if you have the time.' Seeing Barbara shake her head, he grinned, 'Well, then you can give them away, or I'd even be happy to take them off your hands, if you don't want to deal with them, that is.' He looked a little bashful as he spoke.

'Would you, really? I don't care what you do with them, you know. I just want to be done with these storage units.' Relief washed over Barbara.

'Sure! Let's go take a look, though, first. I'd hate to see you miss something else in there hiding behind the tape boxes, you know.'

She followed him to the stairs, 'I doubt there's anything else in there, but I suppose you're right.' The bedframes pushed into her thoughts. 'Would you want to take those frames, too, then? I just want to make sure all this stuff gets sorted out and the units are closed. I don't much care what happens to it after that.'

She could hear the grin in his voice, 'Yes ma'am!'

'Perfect! Thank you, Matt.' Barbara realized she was grinning, genuinely smiling, too.

November 14, 1958

Dear Tony,

We have a television set!!! As it turns out, Mr. Jones not only knows everything about televisions, but he also has a good friend in the TV department at May Co. Mr. Calhoun—his friend—gave me a special price on a nice big 21-inch black and white model from 1957. It only cost \$199.99 with Mr. Calhoun's discount. He said that not much has changed since last year and the picture is excellent! It's in the most beautiful oak cabinet, too. It's so nice to be able to actually talk to people about The Donna Reed Show and The Ed Sullivan Show. I never used to know what on earth they were talking about. Mr. Calhoun also made sure that I bought a copy of TV Guide so I know when all the shows are on – I wouldn't have thought to get one on my own.

Oh! Agatha watches Alfred Hitchcock Presents. I tried to watch one night, but I had such nightmares. And the Joneses have a color television set. I was frightened of it in black and white! I don't know how she does it. I know it's silly, but I certainly won't be watching again. Have you seen it? It seems like a show a man might like to watch.

Barbara Marie is fascinated by the set, and I've circled all the times Shirley Temple films are showing in pink in the TV Guide so I can be sure to turn them on for her. She's such an angel with the television on. It's been a relief for me these past few days to know that I can set her down and do something around the house without needing to check on her every single second. She's still obsessed with her crayons, only now she will color and watch the set at the same time. Thank heavens.

I think I'll ask Agatha if she'd like to come watch a film at home with me one day this week. I've circled several in the TV Guide that I think we would like. It's so delicious to be able to invite people to watch the television here!

Oh dear—Barbara Marie just took a spill. Tears and tears! I'll write more later.

Barbara Marie will have quite the goose egg on her head. She was running and tripped – she went head-first into the kitchen cabinets, poor dear. I put a bag of Bird's Eye frozen peas on the bump and gave her a lolly to suck on. She's calmed down now and is coloring quietly in front of the television. Do they have frozen vegetables down in Texas? I knew nothing about them until recently, but Susan Bellows told me they practically saved her life after her second baby. They are so easy to cook up and take no time at all. I think they are possibly my new favorite thing (and, of course, they double as boo-boo bags for little Miss Terror!).

I think I will make some chicken and dumplings while she is quiet. They are still her favorite food and I think she deserves a little extra spoiling after that spill. I hope you are well. We miss you.

Our Love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby

The alarm and her phone rang in unison, jerking Barbara out of an exhausted, but dreamless sleep. She swatted at the alarm clock, managing to whack the snooze button on the first try before grabbing her phone. She remembered it was plugged in only after she had brought it close enough to see who was calling at 6 a.m. and felt the charger thump against the bed.

'Dear Jesus, give me patience.' She cleared her throat and flipped the phone open, 'Hello.'

'Barbara, it's me: David.'

She kept her voice even, 'I know. Hi David.'

'Right, ah, good morning. I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. It was a bit rough, kind of a shock, right? I didn't handle it all very well, I know.' He stuttered and stopped.

Barbara didn't answer, waiting to see if he would actually say the words.

'I, uh, got a little more work done, threw a bunch of trash out. I found some of my old baseball cards...I didn't see nothing else in there anyone would want, so I told the guy at the desk, you know, the fat guy? I told him I'd call him and tell him for sure today, but if it was okay with you, the rest could just be trashed, or auctioned, or whatever.'

She could hear static and a crackling voice near her brother. His words were still fresh in her ears. She wouldn't make this easy for him.

'So, yeah, I mean – I'm sorry I was such a jerk.'

'You were out of line.' Barbara sat up in the bed, pulling the chain of the nightstand lamp.

'Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Barbara, that's all I can say. Sorry.'

A high-pitched whine made her wince, 'What is that noise?'

'Oh, hang on.'

She heard rustling and clicks, then empty space where the noise had been.

She made up her mind. 'Thanks. I accept your apology, and I think it's probably fine to call the manager and tell him everything else can be trashed. I don't see how there could be much more of anything useful in those units.' She thought of all the boxes she'd left with Matt. She saw no reason to tell David about them.

'Okay, yeah, alright I'll call him a little later. I got the number before I left.'

Barbara waited, but David didn't seem to have anything else to say. 'Well, if that's it David, I'll talk to you later.'

'Wait! I mean – well, I wanted to see if you wanted to come over, maybe have a cup of coffee and talk.' He sounded unsure, 'I mean, if you want to.'

She stared into the gray shadows on the wall at the foot of the bed, exaggerated by the lamplight. She'd accepted his apology, but Barbara wasn't quite ready to forgive him.

'Barbara?'

'When were you thinking? I still have a lot to do.'

She could hear the relief in his voice as he spoke. 'Great. Whenever you want. I'm not working today. Wanna come over this morning? I can't promise you breakfast, but I've got coffee – think I may even have some tea around here. I'm still in the same house. Remember how to get here?' His words tumbled over each other.

'I should be fine. I'll see you in a couple hours. Bye.' She didn't wait to hear him respond, ending the call as she reached for her Bible. She needed more than an

audiobook this morning. Her notecard told her today's devotion was Galatians chapter 1.

Barbara lingered over verse 10, although she knew the greater focus of the chapter was Paul's conversion and qualifications to the church of Galatia. '10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.'

The words stayed with her as she got out of bed and started to organize herself for the day. It couldn't be a coincidence.

The two-bedroom duplex David called home looked the same as it ever had from the outside. Barbara tried to remember how long he had lived there as she parked on the curb and walked up to the faded yellow house. Fifteen years, at least. His red Toyota truck was in the driveway, another permanent fixture of her younger brother's life.

She was smiling, remembering how proud David had been of the truck when he bought it, his first car, when the door opened. Her hand already poised to knock, Barbara quickly spread her fist into a wave. 'Good morning.'

David grinned nervously, 'Sorry, didn't mean to catch you off-guard. Heard you pull up.'

The siblings watched each other awkwardly. Barbara began to regret coming.

David recovered first, 'Well, come on in. I cleaned up a little, but I've got some projects I'm working on. Sorry about that.'

Barbara followed him into the house, her eyes adjusting slowly from the already bright California morning sun to the dim half-light inside. She frowned at the dark material thumbtacked over the window facing the driveway. The hallway was clean, from what she could see, but an assortment of boots, tennis shoes, and flip-flops lined the edges in neat pairs.

David stopped in the middle of his kitchen, scuffing the linoleum with his bare foot, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his cargo shorts. 'So can I get you some coffee? I do have tea – I checked. I have some herbal tea, no caffeine, and Lipton. No lemon, but I got milk and creamer, sugar, that stuff.'

'Oh, I'll have coffee, if that's ok. Milk and just a little sugar – I can do that part.' She hoped her smile was believable. She wasn't trying to make him nervous.

'Yup. Hang on a sec.' He turned to the laminate counter where he'd set out two mismatched mugs and a recycled coffee can full of assorted sugar packets.

She took in the small kitchen as David worked on the coffee. The lights were all on, so she could see that the grey marble-patterned linoleum floor was mopped and beige laminate counters were all wiped clean under the assortment of gadgets and appliances covering them. She counted an espresso maker, a Keurig, the carafe-style coffee maker David was using, a toaster, a toaster oven, a food processor, a blender, a single-serve blender, and several other electronics she didn't recognize.

David didn't seem to notice her scrutiny as he handed her the mug, offering a spoon and gesturing toward the sugars and milk. 'Here. I'll let you fix the rest.'

She accepted and moved to the counter. When she turned around, David was gone. She set the milk back onto a spotless shelf in the fridge, otherwise full of neatly organized condiments in plastic containers, pre-made meals, bags of chopped

fruits and vegetables, beers and sodas organized by brand and apparently alphabetized. A small queasy feeling took root in her gut as she closed the fridge and lifted her mug to find her brother.

'David?' She stopped at the edge of the bar, abruptly uncomfortable wandering around her brother's home without him. She couldn't remember the last time the two of them had spent any length of time alone as adults and the spat at the storage units didn't bode well.

'Yeah, in here – the living room. Come straight back.'

She took a sip of coffee to ensure she wouldn't spill before walking toward his voice. Lamps lit the room, despite the faint outlines of the windows Barbara could see behind more dark fabric. A massive flat-screen TV took up an entire wall, the others covered with shelves almost to the low ceiling. Barbara recognized the muted program as one of the antique restoration reality shows that Rick liked to watch.

'Here, come have a seat.' David looked up at her, 'You can set that down on the table – there's coasters.'

Barbara obeyed silently, lowering herself into a simple brown leather armchair identical to David's. A side table was centered between the two, a tall silver multi-armed lamp hovering above them, only half its bulbs lit. She found an empty cork coaster awaiting her and set her cup down to look around, hoping she wasn't too obvious.

'You've been here how long now?' She focused on keeping her voice even, ignoring the déjà vu creeping over her.

David shrugged and lifted his long legs onto the matching leather ottoman at his feet, 'Oh, must be twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight years?' He looked around, 'Mike actually died a few years back – do you remember him?'

He paused for Barbara's nod before continuing. 'Yeah, so when Mike died, his little brother José got the place, but he didn't want it, so I bought it from him. I rent the other side to a young couple. No kids, cat that yowls every now and again, otherwise they're alright, pretty quiet folks.'

She eyed the room around her while he talked. Like the kitchen, it was clean, free of dust, but it was full. The shelves were filled with stacks of little containers and bins with drawers, or hooks and dowels. She could see wires, cables, small electronic pieces she couldn't name, and what looked like screens and speakers in tidy piles. In addition to the two chairs, end table and ottoman, folding plastic banquet tables lined the edges of the room. Sets of stacked plastic drawers and bins filled the space beneath the tables, the tops mostly clear except for work lamps and small tools Barbara didn't recognize. Everything seemed to be labeled.

David caught her staring. 'I'm doing more commissioned work now – you know, building things for people. I built this really cool custom laptop: a mobile radio workstation last month for a guy who works search and rescue up in the mountains. He wanted something for inside his SUV, but that worked with all his radio equipment and pulled in GPS data. Really fun project. Had to teach myself a few new things. I always like that.' He smiled, remembering.

The sick feeling in Barbara's stomach wound itself into a tight cramp. She picked up her mug and took a sip of coffee to distract herself. 'So, is that what you're doing now?'

He crossed his ankles. 'Building custom laptops? Well, sort of. I still do appliance repairs for the most part, but I been taking more and more jobs like that lately. People got all these electronics now and they don't know how to make 'em work together. Or, they get an idea, but don't know how to do it themselves. I love it – every project is like a new puzzle.'

He slurped some coffee and waved his mug toward the TV on the wall. 'See that? Guy gave it to me because it's supposed to work with Windows products, like PCs and Xbox, but he uses all Apple products. I got all his stuff set up so it works together and talks to his new, much cheaper TV, so he just gave me this one.'

David winked, 'Soon as I got it home, I started tinkering and now I have it connected to everything – Apple and Microsoft. He just wanted the easy fix, you know?'

Barbara nodded, although she had lost track of what he was saying. The coffee tasted good, but it wasn't helping the twist in her gut. A memory scratched for her attention.

'What about you?' David shifted to look at her, 'Still teaching, right? Thinking about retiring or anything?'

She blinked against the sudden nausea, 'Sorry? Oh, yes, I'm still teaching.' She took another sip of coffee, 'I haven't really thought about retiring, though. I suppose I could in a couple years, but I don't know what I would do with myself if I did.'

David laughed, 'You never could relax, Barbara. Retirement would definitely be a challenge for you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' His tone made her defensive.

He shrugged and talked into his mug as he drank, 'Just that. You never could just chill out, relax. Don't much imagine that's changed much.'

Barbara turned to face him, irritated. 'Oh, what – like you? So relaxed, content to do what with your life, exactly?' She sniffed, 'Just because I *like* to work, to do something productive, that's not a bad thing.'

David opened his mouth to reply, but Barbara's squeak stopped him. 'Something just bumped into my foot. What just touched my foot!'

David chuckled and dropped his legs from the ottoman to lean down, straightening back up with something cradled in his hands. 'Barbara, meet Maya the tortoise – Maya, this is your Aunt Barbara.'

She gaped at her brother and the shell in his hands. 'Why on earth do you have a tortoise? And you just let it wander around the house?' She shook off chills, 'That can't be good for it.'

He pulled a face, 'Aw, don't call Maya "it." She's a very well-mannered little lady...except for when she shits in the hall, right Maya?' Maya stretched her neck out as David scratched under her chin, looking for all the world as though she were smiling.

'David, that's inappropriate.'

He rolled his eyes, 'Sometimes you just need to get over yourself, you know that, Barbara? We aren't all as special as you.' He stood, 'C'mon Maya, let's get you a treat. Sensitive Auntie Barbara is doesn't like to hear about your shit.'

Barbara sat rigid in the soft chair, uncomfortable in her brother's crowded world, but unable to convince herself to leave. The feeling of déjà vu hung over her,

just hazy enough that she couldn't identify its source. She mentally recited Galatians 1:10 to ward off her unease.

'How's that carrot, Maya? Organic and expensive as hell. Hope you appreciate the difference, spoiled terp.' He set her gently on the floor in front of a pile of diced carrot and looked back to Barbara. 'She's hypoallergenic, you know.'

She stared at him, incredulous.

'C'mon Barbara, that was a joke.' He rolled his eyes, 'She keeps me company and doesn't make a lot of noise or fuss. We get along well. Don't we?' Maya was absorbed in her meal.

'That's good.' She couldn't think of anything else to say. She'd forgotten the second half of the Bible verse, stuck at 'Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?', making her only more anxious.

'So, you set a time for the funeral?'

'Monday at 10.' She took a deep breath, focusing on her brother.

'Works for me.' He sat back against the counter, watching Maya crunch, 'You call everyone yet?'

'No. I made a list and I think I have everyone's numbers. I'll do that when I leave here.'

'Cool. I shot a Facebook message to Tim and Todd so they'd at least know dad died.' His voice was even.

'You talk to them?' Surprised, she turned in the chair to look at him.

David shrugged, 'Yeah, I mean, not often. We're Facebook friends. Makes it easy to get in touch if we need to. We're not close or nothing. Todd lives in Santa

Monica now and Tim and his family are up in Thousand Oaks. Their mom is in Long Beach still, though.'

Barbara saw the opportunity, 'Can you tell them about the funeral, then?'

'Sure.' He swirled his coffee and took a gulp. 'Oh hey, there's something I wanted to show you.'

Praying against unpleasant surprises, Barbara stood, leaving her coffee. 'Ok?'

He led her into the garage. 'Remember this?'

'Oh wow—Tony's old truck. How'd you end up with it?' She focused on the old green Chevrolet pick-up surrounded by pegboard walls covered in tools, wires, cables and more gadgets.

David grinned and ran a dust rag over the hood. 'Dad asked me to store it for him a while back. He hadn't driven it in a long time. 1961 C-10 Fleetside – she wouldn't even start and they wouldn't let him keep it at the nursing home. I've been working on her for the last few months to restore her in my free time.'

'So it's working now?'

He pulled open the driver's door, 'Yeah. I rebuilt the engine first. That was a lot of work – nothing like working on my Toyota. I'd actually forgotten how much dad taught me about cars until I started pulling this beast apart.' He snorted, 'Not that he was a great teacher. The few times he actually let me do something usually ended in him telling me I was doing it wrong and he'd do it himself. Apparently I picked up a lot just from watching him. He did like to have an audience.'

'I can't believe we used to ride around in the bed when we were kids. Talk about dangerous.' Barbara walked to the tailgate, 'So what all did you do?'

He pointed, 'Fresh paint, new tires, new brakes and suspension, muffler, all the stuff that you'd expect to be worn out after fifty years.' He motioned inside, 'Found a guy who specializes in restoring old cars to redo the seats. That probably cost more than anything else, but they look amazing. Come look.'

She came to stand beside him, 'That's incredible! Looks brand new.'

'Yeah, guy was really damn good. Look at the dash? That's the last part. I'm trying to maintain the original look of everything, but I'm also adding in a CD player, AUX input, Bluetooth connection and new radio. I thought about putting in a touch screen, but I thought that was too big a change from the original. Dad put in a tape deck at some point, so there was already a hole for everything. She should be done in a few weeks.' He beamed with pride.

'That's incredible, David, really.' She smiled back at her younger brother. 'What will you do with it when you've finished?'

He crossed his arms and leaned against the truck, 'I think I'll just keep it. I mean, I already had a guy offer to buy it off me, but I want to enjoy it for a while first. I even put a custom bedliner in the back so I can actually use it. Already applied for the antique registration and 1960s legacy plates, so I shouldn't have any problems with emissions. Of course it only gets about 10 miles to the gallon, so it's not exactly environmentally friendly.'

'No, I don't suppose it is.' She stepped back, 'It really does look great, David. That's quite a project you took on—so detailed.'

'Yeah. I think I wanted to show it off to dad when I first started, kind of a "screw-you" for all those times he yelled at me and told me I was useless when we

worked on it while I was a kid.' He shrugged and pushed the door closed. 'It's beside the point now, but I'm over that anyway. I think I deserve this truck, in a way.'

Barbara didn't answer, the incident at the storage units still fresh in her memory. She didn't understand what had triggered David, but she was wary of accidentally upsetting him again.

'Anyways, thought you'd like to see it.' David held the door to the house open for her.

Something clicked, 'You know what? I think I may have one of the keys for it. There was a Chevy key on Tony's key ring. It's in my purse – I'll check.'

'That would be rad! I had a second key made, but it doesn't fit as well.'

'Of course.' Barbara smiled, 'I'll go look now while I'm thinking of it.'

'Thanks, I—' Loud static, followed by a digital tone and a series of beeps, interrupted him.

Barbara flinched. 'What *is* that?'

David pushed past her into the hall and talked loudly over the noise, 'Some idiot newb, probably, hasn't figured out yet there's no need to kerchunk the damn repeater.'

'What?' She followed him, hands over her ears. 'I have no idea what any of that means.'

'It's a radio.' He led her into a room full of dials, switches and knobs and fiddled with a few of them until the racket stopped. 'Someone just kerchunked the repeater.'

'I still don't –' The sick feeling gripped her stomach again and she stepped back into the hall. 'David, what is all this?'

Black and chrome electronic boxes were stacked high on a table along one wall. Zip-tied cables and wires taped in a neat black line across the floor led to a computer desk. Three flat screen monitors mounted above it displayed a rainbow of charts and squiggly lines. A microphone sat in the middle of the desk, a pair of monstrous black headphones perched atop it. One table was mostly empty, small plastic drawers lining its edge against the wall. Sets of clear plastic bins and drawers sat side by side underneath the tables, full of brightly colored wire and gray tools. Printed labels on each container identified fuses, solder, cables, oscilloscope, power supplies, adaptors, terminators, clips, wire crimpers and more items whose names Barbara didn't recognize.

'Radios. This is my office.' David fiddled with a box until the lights blinked green, his back to Barbara.

'But...' She leaned into the doorframe. 'I don't understand.' She forced herself to count to three as she inhaled, hold the breath for three counts, and exhale for three.

He didn't look up. 'I got into HAM stuff when I was a kid. Dad brought home a box of radios once and never did anything with them, so I snuck the whole thing into my room and taught myself how to use them. Got my license when I was thirteen. Didn't have anyone else to talk to, so I started making friends on the radio. Been talking to some of these guys for almost forty years now.'

He shrugged, 'I collected a lot of this from garage sales and second-hand stores, but some of it's my own homebrew. Hang on a sec.'

The rolling desk chair squeaked as he sat and pushed a button on the microphone. 'This is David, nevada sixer x-ray delta charlie. Whoever is making all

that racket, please remember that you should at least ID yourself if you're going to transmit. Try to avoid kerchunking. Thanks and I'll talk to everyone tonight for our usual nineteen hundred net.'

Barbara fixated on her brother's back. 'I think I need to sit down.'

He didn't turn around, 'I'll just be a minute.'

She walked back to the living room and sank into the chair on top of her purse, disturbed. Maya had finished her carrot and was out of sight, a change that Barbara didn't find comforting. She took a drink of her cold coffee to have something to hold and tried not to think about why her brother's house felt so sickeningly familiar.

She remembered the Chevy and pulled the keys from her purse, grateful for a distraction. She twisted the truck key free just as David returned.

'Sorry about that. Some of the younger guys have to be reminded of their manners.' He noticed the key in her hand. 'That it?'

She nodded as he took it from her, her throat too tight to speak.

'It's probably the right key, but I want to make sure. You never know with dad – could be another Chevy somewhere.' He winked.

Barbara slid her purse over her shoulder and picked up her mug, trying to think of an excuse to leave.

David had stopped in the kitchen. 'Want a soda or something while I'm in here?'

Barbara was right behind him. 'Actually, I think it's time for me to go. Thank you for the coffee.' She emptied the mug into the sink.

He spoke into the open fridge, Maya on the floor behind him. 'Sure, Barbara. Not like we needed to talk about anything important.'

She looked down at the reptile and grimaced, 'What's there to talk about?'

'Barbara, our father is dead. You're stuck with his shit and we're all stuck dealing with each other for now. I'd say that warrants some conversation.' He popped the tab on a beer and set a handful of lettuce on the floor.

Suddenly she knew exactly why David's house made her itch and she couldn't escape quickly enough. 'What exactly are we supposed to talk about, David? No one's going to mourn Tony. You're right: I just want to get through his junk and this funeral and be done with it.'

'See? That's my point.' He took a gulp of beer and aimed a finger at his sister. 'You just want to be done with it, run away back to North Carolina and escape. But, there's more at stake here than just your issues with dad.'

'My issues?' Barbara narrowed her eyes, 'I don't have *issues* Tony. I've moved on. If anything, I pity him. I realized a long time ago that I didn't need him in my life, that it wasn't healthy to be around him. It's not my problem that you kept hanging around, letting him drain you. If anyone has issues – well, it's certainly not me.'

'Oh, right, because it was somehow my choice to be raised by the bastard?' He rolled his eyes and took another swig. 'You know, you can be really a cold bitch sometimes.'

Barbara's jaw dropped as he walked past her. Fuming, she followed him. 'You're just jealous because you're still here, stuck in the past. You didn't have the guts to make a life for yourself. Don't lay that at my feet.'

'Right, okay.' He opened the door to the garage, 'Don't step on Maya on your way out.'

His calm was too much. 'Don't walk away from me, David. You started this. You wanted to talk? Alright, let's talk. Let's talk about how you stole Tony's truck for yourself. Or how you cursed at me, called me names and left me stranded when you were supposed to be helping me.' She stopped in the doorway. 'Is that the conversation you want to have?'

'Key works.'

She shook her head at his nonchalance, 'That's all you have to say? Talking was your idea, but I guess it's just in your nature not to follow through. Just like Tony.' She crossed her arms. 'Coward.'

He turned, 'No, Barbara, that's not all I have to say.' He set the key down and leaned against a workbench. 'Truth is, I'm pissed the hell off. I thought I wanted you to come over so I could apologize, because I felt bad about what happened the other day, but now I think someone just needs to tell you what a stuck-up, selfish bitch you are.'

'How dare you!' Barbara was shaking, her voice rising. 'I came out here to do all of this on my own, that's not selfish. You are the selfish one. You only helped because I made you, and you caused more problems than anything. You've always caused problems.'

David drained his beer and crushed the can before launching it toward a blue bin. 'Oh c'mon now—don't stop there. You're on a roll, big sis. Tell me more about how selfish I am, the problems I cause. Compare me to dad some more. Keep telling me how you're the perfect child. Ignore the fact that I've been here for the last thirty

years taking care of both of our parents on my own. Never mind that I was the only one who visited dad.'

'How have you been taking care of them, David? You didn't stop dad from wasting his money storing that garbage all these years. If anything, you enabled him. He still died alone in a nursing home. He didn't even have you down as an emergency contact – not even as a family member. And mom's fine. She's got Jonah. So what, exactly, did you take care of?'

He cocked his head, 'Mom's fine? God, you really are out of touch.'

'Don't turn this around on me, David.'

He blanched, 'Do you know what it's been like for me? Did you ever think about that? Or are you so goddamned high up on your Jesus horse that you don't stoop to think about the rest of us?'

David stepped toward her, 'You got out. You left. You and mom both. But me? I was stuck there with dad.'

'You know I had nothing to do with that. I was just a kid, too. Don't try to manipulate me and turn this into something it isn't.'

'There's nothing to manipulate. You know where all dad's crap was before he moved it to the storage units? It was in our house. That's right. You and mom lived this perfect fucking life while I grew up trying not to drown in dad's stuff, trying to understand what was so important to him about this shit, make some sense of why he kept it, figure out what not to throw away so I wouldn't get beat. So he just wouldn't be mad. So he'd be...a dad.'

He seemed to deflate a little, hands falling empty to his sides. 'Those years alone with him, then seeing how you and mom and Jonah lived when I got to come

over on the weekends...And hearing you complain! God, how I wanted to slap you every time you bitched to me about Jonah or your curfew or going to church.

'There was only one rule with dad: don't touch his stuff. He never took me anywhere. He gave up on me pretty quickly, decided I wasn't "manly" enough. I was just an inconvenience—his sissy kid. So, yeah, I took his truck off his hands. Why not?'

Defensive, Barbara managed to interject, 'Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you ask to come live with us?'

David leveled his gaze at her and Barbara saw something cold she hadn't noticed in her brother's blue eyes before. 'He wouldn't let me go. Mom left and she took you. I was the only thing he could keep—mom's precious baby boy.'

She remembered Elizabeth's odd comment, "'Tony never could let go of his things.'"

'Exactly.'

'But, it's been years, David. You're not a kid anymore. Why are you still wallowing in this?'

David clenched his hands into fists. 'Jesus, you just don't get it. I still don't even know why you're fucking here! You ran away the first chance you could, moved as far across the goddamn country as you could with the first man who would marry you. But I was the one stuck here to deal with Tony's shit, to live with him—at first because I was too young to go anywhere, then to make sure he wasn't completely alone. It was hell. Worse. But even after all that, I'm the disappointment and you're still his favorite. You're the one he chooses to bury him. For fuck's sake,

why? I mean, Christ – you're happy he's dead. You're just pissed you have to deal with all of this, with "Tony's trash."

Barbara exploded. 'Of course he listed me, David – I'm the only one in this family who has my life together! You're absolutely right that I don't want to be involved. And yes, I'm glad he's finally dead and out of my life. Yes, I am angry that I have to be here—this is the last place on earth I want to be!

'I don't want to be here with you, here with mom's senile mumblings, or Jonah's constant cheerfulness! Why on earth would I? And I certainly don't want to be here surrounded by Tony's trash. I have put as much distance between this family and myself as I could so that I could have a normal life, so my kids could have a normal life—a life without all this craziness, messed up family, and storage units full of crap!' She spit the last word before taking a long, shaky breath.

'Look around you, David. Don't you see it? You're turning into him.' She could see his knuckles turning white, the vein in the center of his forehead pulsing, but she couldn't stop herself. 'You're too blinded by your own unresolved issues and bitterness against Tony to see how much you're like him. You're taking it out on me, but you know I'm not the one you're really mad at.

'Maybe he didn't trust you, did you ever think of that? Huh? Maybe, as messed up and crazy as Tony was, he still had enough sense left not to trust you to actually follow through even on something like his last wishes. You're irresponsible, unpredictable, and impossible to rely on. He clearly couldn't trust you just to store his truck like he asked, why would he trust his body to you?' All the resentment she had held against her little brother for decades hissed out of her, refined venom.

He stepped close and leaned in to glower down at her, his voice low. 'Maybe not, but where were you when he had his first heart attack? His second?'

She shrank from him as he patted her shoulder condescendingly.

'What's the view like up on that high horse? You got no right to judge. You're so convinced that you're the good child and I'm the bad egg. You have no idea what's happening in this family, Barbara. Did you even bother to read those letters you took?'

That surprised her. 'I, what? What does that have to do with anything?'

'Yeah, didn't think so.' He turned back to the truck, 'See you at the funeral.'

She seethed, but didn't say anything else as she walked back to the front door, slamming it as she stepped out of the house, into the heat and glare of the sun, where she finally felt she could breathe again.

January 20, 1959

Dear Tony,

I've just arrived home from Susan's and found a large package from May Co. on the front porch. I'm opening it now... A brand new sewing machine – what a surprise, Tony! Thank you so very much! My old one has certainly seen better days and it's been a struggle to sew anything delicate or too thick. A Singer 403a Slant-O-Matic - oh my word. How ever did you know I've been dying for one? I cannot wait to start using it. It's the latest model - thank you! Let me know if you have any requests, dear husband. I can't wait to shop for new patterns and material. (Within my budget, of course!)

Barbara Marie was watching Shirley Temple while we were over at Susan's, The Little Princess. I'm sure I could make her the party dress from the film, even if I can't find a pattern. Wouldn't that be sweet? I could certainly stand to let out some of my own dresses until Baby comes, too – and make new ones for after. I may just sew all day until Baby arrives. Oh, I will stop prattling on about sewing and clothes, but I am so very grateful for my Singer!

I'm sorry I've been lax on my letters this month. Did you do anything special to ring in the New Year? Barbara Marie and I went to the Jones', although we were home and snug in bed by ten p.m. She was an angel and she wasn't even cranky – I was surprised we were able to stay up as late as we did. Agatha is such a wonderful host, and Mr. Jones is just perfect at talking to everyone, always has something pleasant and thoughtful to say. Susan was there, too, so her older girl Joan played with Barbara Marie for a while and gave me a break and a chance to chat with everyone.

Some of Agatha's Avon lady friends were there and oh! I still think they are so glamorous. Now, don't get upset—I have certainly let go of the idea that I might become an Avon lady. With Baby on the way, I'm sure I don't know how I will manage to ever leave the house again. But they are such a pleasure to be around – they were all wearing the latest Avon jewelry and perfumes. They smelled simply divine. Can you just imagine?

I hope you are staying warm and work is going smoothly. Perhaps you'll be able to come home for another visit soon? Baby will be making an appearance sometime in March, Dr. Steel thinks. It would be so nice for you to be home around then.

Our Love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie & Baby

Barbara rolled her head from side to side and massaged her neck in preparation for the shoebox on the bed. She hadn't wanted to admit to David how much the letters unsettled her. She sighed and lifted the lid from the box. The letter she had opened and read at the storage unit sat on top, flung hastily back in. She set it aside and pulled a handful of envelopes out from one end.

Some of the envelopes had re-sealed themselves with time, so she retrieved a pen from her purse. She wiggled the first open and bit her lower lip as she unfolded the letter and began to read:

May 7, 1959

Dear Tony,

Little Miss Chatterbox never seems to stop talking now! She is such a contrast from Baby David. He has been sleeping through the night after only a week and hardly ever cries, and then only until he's been fed or changed. He's such a good baby. I can't imagine how I got so lucky. The headaches are starting to come back, but the doctor gave me some new medicine that really seems to help.

I am only to take it in the morning—and I sure learned why last Tuesday. I couldn't sleep a wink after taking it at suppertime! I only take it with breakfast now and it really helps me to get through the day so I can keep both Baby David and Barbara happy and out of trouble (so that's all I have to say on the subject). Now that Barbara can walk and run and is starting to climb, I have to watch her like a hawk. I even found her on top of the kitchen table trying to scribble with her crayons on the wall yesterday.

Thankfully, I caught her before she could do any real damage. I don't know what has gotten into her lately.

I couldn't make it to church this past Sunday. Baby had a bit of a fever and Barbara was being very naughty. Agatha Jones and Susan Bellows both telephoned that afternoon to check that I was alright. Wasn't that thoughtful? I was so touched. I think Susan will bring her Georgie to play with Barbara again later this week after David's fever has broken. She always bakes something when she visits. It will be nice to visit with another adult, so I really do look forward to her coming over.

With love,

Elizabeth, Barbara, and Baby David

P.S. I've been so busy with the children that I was late balancing the register for April. I included all of my purchases under 'Spending Money' and 'Sundries &c.' as you asked. It did take me some time, but you were right – it's much easier to see where I'm spending this way.

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$64.53	+47¢
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$99.00	-\$99.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$8.76	+\$1.24
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$24.70	-\$4.70
		Short spring coat - \$9.88	
		Face powder - \$2.50	
		Feminine products - \$3.50	
		Toothpaste & brushes - \$2.79	

		Hairspray & shampoo - \$2.38	
		Bath soap - 29¢	
		Fabric - \$3.36	
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$14.89	+11¢
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$35.02	+\$4.98
Toys	\$5.00	-\$6.12	-\$1.12
Spending Money	\$15.00	-\$16.32	-\$1.32
		New stockings - \$1	
		McCall's patterns - \$3.25	
		Happy-Time camera - \$1.59	
		127 film - \$2.50	
		Doris Day record - \$4.85	
		Good Housekeeping - 35¢	
		Stationery - 75¢	
Postage	\$0.50	-\$0.16	+34¢
Doctor & Medicine	\$15.00	-\$14.70	+30¢
TOTAL	\$284.50	-\$284.20	+30¢

Barbara folded the stationary neatly into the envelope and started a pile mentally marked 'Boring.' She opened another.

April 29, 1959

Dear Tony,

I have started to use my spare moments to crochet again. Now that Baby David takes such regular naps and Barbara can be trusted to play quietly without me having to run after her every second (as long as the

television set is on, or she has a coloring book in front of her), I can take the time to sit down. Mother is a wiz at crochet and taught me when I was quite young. I haven't had time to really do anything since my school days. I'm working on that blanket for Baby David at present. It's nearly done. I think I shall have to make one for Barbara next. She keeps pestering me about Baby David's, always asking if it is hers! I don't think I shall have any peace from her until she has a blankie of her own.

Pastor Kerwin announced this Sunday that he is leaving at the end of the month. I'm really quite sad about it. His wife is such a lovely, elegant woman, and they are so good to everyone at the church. It seems that the elders have already started a search for his replacement, although the congregation just learned of the whole thing on Sunday. The Kerwins are off to Washington State. Mrs. Kerwin's family is from up there and her parents are ailing. Pastor said he already has a new church awaiting his arrival. They will be very blessed to have him, I am sure, but we will miss them dearly.

Barbara has grown very stubborn lately. Her favorite word is, NO. It's exasperating, but Susan tells me the parenting experts call this the 'terrible twos.' It really is awful. She never does anything the first time I ask her to, and if she doesn't say 'No,' she asks 'Why?' It's driving me up a wall. I hope she passes through this phase quickly. I will have to locate my trusty Dr. Spock to see what he advises. Thank goodness Baby David is a perfect angel. Without my medicine, I don't know how I could handle it all.

I hope Texas is treating you well. Do you know when you'll be back again? Baby David would love to meet his daddy, and Barbara Marie and I would like to see him, too.

With love,

Elizabeth, Baby David and Barbara

P.S. Will include April's register in my next letter.

Barbara pinched the top of a random envelope in the middle of the box and slid it out. She used a pen to open the resealed flap.

May 30, 1959

Dear Tony,

First, I don't want you to worry. The doctor at the hospital wanted to call you in Texas, but I told him to do no such thing—we don't need a long distance charge on the bill! It was just a little thing, but I guess I took too much of the medicine Dr. Steele prescribed me. I had a little fit, but managed to call the doctor and Susan, so it was all alright in the end. Nothing for you to worry about. They've said I must stay for a couple more days to rest. I haven't been awake very much since I got here, which is why I'm just now writing to you.

I shall certainly be more careful now. But both the doctor here and Dr. Steele say I don't need to stop taking the medicine. It's clearly done wonders for me. Dr. Steele was very pleased to hear about my newfound energy and the daily walks I take with the children. Susan has been such a dear and has even taken the children for me while I recover. I shall have to pay her back

with something wonderful when I am up on my feet again! That woman really is a saint.

I did call mother to tell her what happened, but she can't come to stay with me as father can't spare the truck or the time to drive her. Her friend Ms. Barstell isn't able to bring her, either. It will turn out alright in the end. I just need some rest. Although my stomach is very tender, I don't feel much. I think they're giving me something for the pain and to sleep. They told me the tenderness is from pumping my stomach out and it's normal – I don't know anything about it, but they said I shouldn't have too big of a scar. I wouldn't know as I'm all bandaged up – a practical mummy! I'll have to go see Dr. Steele in a couple of weeks to have the stitches taken out. The doctors have been very gentle and kind. They said I should be okay and back home soon, a little sore, but no worse for the wear.

Take care,

Elizabeth (and Barbara Marie and Baby David, if they were here)

Barbara frowned and reread the letter, but the words stayed the same. She couldn't imagine what Elizabeth could have taken to land in the hospital. Her mother didn't so much as drink. Barbara tucked the page back into the envelope and set it aside before plucking out another.

April 6, 1959

Dear Tony,

I went to see the doctor yesterday. He says I have 'exhaustion' and it's common among women after childbirth. It seems like such a simple

explanation, but I suppose he must know. He prescribed me some medicine to take whenever I have trouble getting out of bed in the mornings. I haven't tried it yet, though. I felt fine this morning, and since mother was already planning to come over to help me with Baby David and Barbara Marie, I really didn't think I would need any extra help.

We made your favorite while she was here: orange ambrosia. Barbara Marie didn't like it one bit, but baby David would have eaten himself sick if we had let him! Mother also made her chicken n' dumplings with plenty for leftovers. Bless her. I know her recipe by heart, but mine still never seems to turn out exactly like hers.

Mother is still having trouble with her eyes, even with the glasses she's just gotten, so I don't know how often she will be able to visit anymore. Her doctor said that she absolutely must have someone drive for her. And of course you know father has health concerns of his own, and two hours is a long drive. She broke the rules this time – she can be ever so stubborn. (I'm certain that's where Barbara Marie gets it from. Obstinate child.) She will stay here tonight and leave again in the morning. (I had to move some of the boxes in the spare room out to the carport so she wouldn't stumble over them. We really must do something more permanent with them the next time you're here.

The house feels so empty after Mother leaves. Oh, I put on a record now and then if it gets too quiet, but the baby and Barbara Marie usually make enough noise that I can't bear to add any more.

With love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby David

Barbara could feel her wrinkles pulling tight on her forehead. It was surreal to read about herself as a toddler, but even stranger to read about Elizabeth as a young wife and mother—like reading someone's secret diary. She stared at the missive in her hand, contemplating what to do.

Elizabeth was sitting on the couch in the living room, a muted cooking show playing on the television. She stared at a tangle of yarn wrapped around the crochet hook in her lap, unmoving. She had dressed in a rumpled cotton skirt and matching t-shirt, but hadn't bothered to put on her wig or makeup. Rupert lay beside her on his back, twitching paws up in the air, snoring.

'Mom.'

Elizabeth didn't react. Barbara felt an irrational moment of panic. 'Mom!' She raised her voice, 'Mom—I need to talk to you. Now.'

Elizabeth looked up from the yarn, eyes fuzzy and unfocused. 'Barbara? Did you say something?' Rupert rolled over, startled. She reached out absently to comfort him.

Barbara folded into an armchair beside the sofa. 'Mom, I found something in one of Tony's storage units, and I really need to talk to you about it. It's important.'

Elizabeth nodded slowly, blinking. 'What did you find?'

Barbara held up the handful of envelopes, 'Letters, mom. Letters that you wrote to Tony while you were married, when he worked in Texas. Do you remember?'

‘Letters?’

Barbara reminded herself to be patient. ‘Yes, you wrote letters to Tony for several years while he was gone. And he kept them.’

She waved the paper under Elizabeth’s nose. ‘Mom, look. You wrote these. There’s a whole box of them from 1957 to 1960. You wrote these letters to Tony while you were married. Do you remember? These are your letters.’

Elizabeth’s thin, wrinkled fingers slipped the envelope from Barbara’s. She turned it over in her hands before slipping an acrylic nail beneath the flap.

She pulled out the faded stationery, unfolded the letter and stared at it.

‘Mom? Can you tell me about some of these letters? I want to know what it was like when David and I were little. Please tell me.’ Barbara used her upset-child voice, soft and encouraging.

Jonah walked in, face plastered with the ever-present grin. ‘Tell you what Barbara? Whatcha got there Elizabeth?’

Rupert jumped down to bark at Jonah, who ignored him.

Barbara gritted her teeth, ‘We are just talking about something I found in Tony’s storage units.’

Jonah walked past her to plop down on the couch next to his wife, taking the paper from her hand. His smile fell deep into his laugh lines until his furrowed brow told Barbara that he was reading. Rupert whined when no one paid him attention.

Jonah’s look to Barbara was sharp, ‘I don’t see why this is so important just now. I’d say it can wait awhile. The dead can’t hurt nobody.’

The way Jonah said it bothered her. ‘These are part of my life, too. I need to understand what happened and why Tony kept these. He couldn’t be bothered to be

involved or stay in touch with his children, but he kept these letters. Why? And why did he want me to go through all of his stuff to begin with? I feel like there has to be some connection.'

Jonah didn't back down, 'Barbara, I said to let it alone. Now let it.'

Barbara stared him down as she counted to ten in her head, 'I have a right to know the truth about my father.' Her voice was calm and quiet.

Jonah stood, but Elizabeth reached a hand up to grab his wrist. Surprised, he looked down.

'It's fine, Jonah. She's right. She needs to know. I've kept it all to myself for long enough. It's best this is all out in the open.'

Jonah sighed and looked back to his step-daughter, 'Well alright, but I'm staying right here.' Rupert yipped in support, springing back onto the sofa to curl up on Elizabeth's lap.

She nodded and patted Jonah's arm as he sat. She looked to Barbara, suddenly clear-headed, sharp, and ready to talk. 'Now, what about these letters?'

Barbara couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother like this. She offered the rest of the handful she'd brought, 'These are just some of the ones I thought said the most...I guess, well, just tell me what you want, as much as you want, from the beginning.'

When Elizabeth's scarlet-manicured fingers grasped the envelopes, Barbara crossed her ankles and folded her hands together in her lap, back straight.

Elizabeth looked directly into her daughter's eyes, something Barbara realized she rarely did. Even as an old woman, her mother's blue eyes were a striking pale blue.

‘I loved your father once, but it was desperate and he was cruel. I didn’t exactly marry him for love, but once we were married, I didn’t think I had any other choice. All my life, the women around me had talked about our duties as wives, mothers. That was all I knew: duty.’

She looked down to the yellowing envelopes and stationery in her lap. ‘Tony was not a good man. I’m sure there are worse men out there, but that’s hardly comfort for all the pain he inflicted on us.’ Her eyes met Barbara’s, ‘I’ve never said that out loud before.’

Elizabeth paused when Jonah reached calloused fingers toward her. She let him take her hand, offering him a small, sad smile. ‘You knew it was bad, but I’ve never told anyone this—not even you.’

She smoothed the open letter with her free hand, ‘1959—that’s the year your brother was born. He was such a happy baby, all fingers and toes and smiles. He was a perfect boy. You were two years old then, having a hard time adjusting to being a big sister instead of an only child. I’m not sure you were entirely to blame. I did dote on him.’ She paused to scan the letter.

‘Oh,’ she murmured, ‘I see.’ Elizabeth looked up, ‘You have to understand that this was the 50’s. We were told to be wives, mothers, perfect housekeepers, go to church, help with fundraisers and charities, and have dinner ready and hot on the table at the same time every night. We went to church to socialize, to stay sane, no matter how much we lied to ourselves about being good Christians. We were stuck at home with babies and housework all day—it was the only time we saw other women. God didn’t have much to do with us and we didn’t much have time for Him.’

Barbara winced, but her mother kept talking.

‘We didn’t have anything else, most of us. Occasionally you would see another woman you knew in the shops, but if you had young children, you saw the kids, your husband, and that was it. I didn’t even have that. We’d hardly been married six months when Tony went off to work in the oil fields in Texas. And there was never enough money for me to go out like some of the other women I knew. If they didn’t have children, or their children were older, women went to the cinema, had weekly beauty salon appointments, went shopping. I couldn’t do any of that between you kids and Tony checking up on every penny I spent...’

Her cheek twitched up into a tired, wry grin, ‘Tony never wanted to be married. Never wanted to be a husband, father, none of it. He was a lover—well, at first—anyhow, it caught up with him. I doubt he’d ever have married otherwise.

‘I wouldn’t have stayed if it hadn’t been for you and David, but I finally left because of you, too. There was no sympathy in those days for wives who left their husbands. And legally, I don’t know if I would have been able to fight for the two of you. Even in 1968, when I finally did leave, there wasn’t really any place for women like me to go. We stayed with your grandparents—my parents—for a few weeks, but I had no money, no job, and you and David were still too young to be left on your own with my blind mother. My father wouldn’t speak to me the whole time we stayed there, he was so ashamed of me leaving my husband, and I never told him any of the reasons why I did. I was too ashamed myself. My father died later that year. I couldn’t even go to the funeral. I’m not sure I ever forgave myself for disappointing him like that. I know my mother never did.’

Barbara could sense her mother starting to ramble.

Elizabeth realized, too. 'Oh, I'm sorry. So much to relive...But in the end, it was my mother who sent us back to Tony. Said it was my "Christian duty" to stay with my husband, that children needed a father. I never blamed her for that, for sending me away. How could I? I never told her the truth. She did what she thought was right.'

Barbara was losing patience. She tried to be gentle, 'Mom, I don't understand.'

Jonah draped an arm around his wife's shoulders. 'It's alright, hon. It wasn't your fault. Nothing to be ashamed of.' He caught Barbara's eye, 'You just take yer time.'

Elizabeth opened another of the envelopes without answering. 'It was a disaster from the very start. I never should have gone that night...' She spoke without looking up, 'I worked in an office as a typist when I was 16. Did I ever tell you that? I started out just part-time in the afternoons, and when I finished high school at 17, they took me on full-time. I could type 56 words per minute—even came in second in a typing contest just before I finished high school. My parents couldn't afford to send me to a college and I didn't have a boyfriend waiting to marry me, so I went to work. It's just what you did back then – if you could.'

'My parents went to church on Sundays, prayed at meals, didn't drink and wouldn't let me go anywhere with a man unless we had a chaperone. I suppose it was only a matter of time before I rebelled. But I was so sheltered and naïve, I had no idea what the world was really like.'

Elizabeth's right pinkie finger had found a coil of the forgotten yarn and twisted as she talked. Her voice grew distant. 'I had this friend at the office, Doris.'

She was eighteen already and had an older, steady boyfriend. Her parents weren't strict like mine. I don't think they even went to church, except maybe on Easter or Christmas. She was always trying to get me to come out with her and her friends—drive-ins, sock hops, things like that. I knew my parents wouldn't approve, so I always said no.

'One day she said her boyfriend had a friend in town and Doris had been telling him about me. She said he was handsome, had his own car, and wanted to meet me, so we should all go on a double date together.'

Her eyes were rimmed with red. 'I went on that date. "Just once," I thought, "I'll do something fun, maybe meet a nice boy." And that "once" changed my life.'

Bright flashes, like sparklers, filled Barbara's eyes. She closed her them against the sparkles of light squeezing until she could feel the pressure in her temples. She willed the aura away, although she could still see it with her eyes shut.

A cool hand on her knee startled her. 'Barbara, Jonah is making some tea. I think...well, this will take a while.' Concern darkened Elizabeth's eyes, filling the space around her eyes with deep and fine wrinkles, 'Are you alright? You look like you might be coming down with another migraine?'

Barbara could feel her pulse in her temples but gritted her teeth against the throbbing. 'No, I'm not alright, but I want to keep hearing this. Please—keep talking.'

Elizabeth's hand remained on Barbara's knee. She could see the blue lines of veins under her mother's paper-thin wrinkled skin, like delicate dry tissue paper. Barbara willed the pounding to fade, to lose step in its cadence, but it marched on, stomping through her skull.

She didn't realize she'd closed her eyes again until Barbara heard her mother say something about medicine. She tried to protest, but her knee was empty again and Barbara missed the weight of her mother's translucent fingers.

Two Excedrin, a pitcher of water, and a pot of peppermint tea later, Barbara thought the migraine might have been preferable to Elizabeth's story. At one point, she had been the only one not crying. Jonah, honking his nose into a handful of tissues, had drowned out Elizabeth's quiet voice, calm and even despite the tears sliding down her cheeks. It wasn't that Barbara didn't feel sympathy for the woman in Elizabeth's story—she did—but she couldn't quite reconcile the frail, balding woman before her with the girl in the story.

'Tony never would hit me. He threatened to, would tell me I was making him want to hit me, but that he was raised better than to hit a woman. "See what you do to me?" He'd scream at me, "You make me like this."'

Elizabeth looked down to the wet tissue she was shredding. 'Everything was always my fault. And maybe that's part of why it took me so long to get out. I was young and didn't know how the world worked. I didn't know that my life, my marriage wasn't normal, or at least that it wasn't healthy. Everywhere I looked, magazines and tv programs told me how to be the perfect wife, how to please my husband. None of them talked about what husbands were supposed to do. For all I knew, my marriage was perfectly normal. And no one I knew talked about their marriage. It just wasn't done.'

Her blue eyes were bright against the swelling red. 'My own mother told me that no good woman left her husband. Every day since, I have wondered if I am a "good" woman.'

Jonah moved to interrupt, but Elizabeth waved him off.

'No. I know I did the right thing, made the right choice. But it haunts me still that I had to leave David.' Her eyes were pleading, spilling emotion so powerful Barbara had to look away.

'You did the best you could, mom.' Barbara wasn't sure where the sentiment came from. She'd certainly never thought that about her mother before.

Elizabeth's shook her head, 'That's a lie and we both know it.'

'Mom?'

This time Elizabeth let Jonah wrap his arm around her shoulders again. 'I don't think I ever got over the shock of being married—of having children. I spent the first few years of our marriage in a daze.'

Jonah cut her off, 'Elizabeth, that's just what people did back then. You got married if you were pregnant. Weren't nothin' you could've done more about that. You've never thought twice about loving your children and that's what makes you a good mother.'

Barbara opened her mouth, confused. Somehow an out of wedlock pregnancy had come into the conversation and Barbara wasn't sure what to do with it. She closed her mouth and let Elizabeth continue.

Her mother shook her head at Jonah's words. 'Still, it was my own fault. I shouldn't have gone out with Tony that night. I was naïve. And all of a sudden I was 17, pregnant, unwed. I was lucky Tony didn't just leave.'

'Mom, wait. You were pregnant when you married Tony?' She tried to pause the story before it moved on.

'It was the first date.' Elizabeth's eyes were dry as she looked at her daughter, but Barbara could see pain in them. 'Tony always was a handsome man, and smooth with women. I hardly knew what hit me.'

'So, I was—?'

Elizabeth shook her head violently, 'No! No, Barbara, that wasn't you. I lost that first baby. No, honey, you weren't from that first night.'

'Oh mom. I'm so sorry. I had no idea.' Barbara's voice was low, 'What, I mean—you miscarried? It's okay if you don't want to talk about it.'

Her smile was sad, 'I think now my fear, probably the stress caused it. I certainly wasn't eating enough. I was so terrified of getting too fat while I was pregnant. I had heard of women whose husbands no longer wanted them after they had children because they stayed fat. I couldn't bear the thought of failing as a wife so early on...I ate like a bird.

"I hate to see a woman eat," Tony would tell me. So I didn't. I pushed bits around my plate if we ate a meal together, then would pick at leftovers standing over the kitchen sink while I cleaned.'

'You can get as big as a house now, if it makes you happy, sugar.' Jonah joked, pulling her close to peck her forehead.

Elizabeth patted his hand to quiet him. 'One day I just collapsed. I was making dinner—pork chops and corn, I still remember—I woke up on the floor and there was blood everywhere. It was dark and Tony wasn't home from work. He hadn't gone to Texas yet. I managed to crawl to the bathroom and climb into the tub.

All I could think was that I needed to clean myself up, finish dinner so Tony wouldn't be mad. Scrub up the blood I'd gotten on the floor.'

A soft smile curved the corners of her lips, 'You know, that was one of the few times Tony was really gentle with me, kind to me. He found me there, in cold, bloody water, barely conscious. He didn't yell about dinner, although I think I kept trying to apologize for the mess and that supper wasn't ready.'

She picked up the hopelessly tangled knitting and began weaving her fingers through the yarn, the knots tightening around them. 'He bathed me and cleaned up the blood—I had made a mess all the way across the house on the floor where I'd crawled. He must have known then that I'd lost the baby, but he never said a word about it. He made some broth and brought me some saltines and then put me to bed.'

The smile hardened, 'I think he felt a little sorry for me, then. A little sorry for what he'd done to me. But I think he was also relieved that I'd lost the baby. Babies are so...inconvenient for men. And Tony was very much a man.'

Barbara's head and heart ached. 'This is the first you've told me—I mean, I never.' Sympathy squelched the contempt and pity she'd felt for Elizabeth for so long. 'I never knew, mom. I'm so sorry you went through all that. I'm so sorry you lost a child. And I'm so sorry that even when you finally could escape, you had to leave one of us behind...it's—unthinkable.'

Elizabeth's thin shoulders rose and dropped quickly beneath the pastel pink cotton. 'I'm sure I wasn't the only one. Tony kept David after the divorce started out of sheer spite. He never wanted children, but he never did anything to prevent them – well, not then, anyway. I shudder to think what your brother went through

because I left, because I took you. Tony wanted to punish me, so he took my baby boy.'

Her eyes were full, eyebrows so tightly wound they nearly touched. 'I thought maybe it would be alright. Tony was always trying to teach him, show him how to fix cars. But he ended up just another thing, to Tony. My poor David, my poor baby boy.' She buried her face in the useless ball of yarn and sobbed while Jonah rubbed her back and made soothing sounds and Rupert licked the salt from her face.

Jonah excused himself to 'rustle up some supper,' calling Rupert to come with him, and left the women alone in the dimming living room. Barbara was so overwhelmed with the tempest of half-formed thoughts and straggling migraine in her head that she couldn't absorb any of the important ones. She stared out the window, framed by heavy brocade drapes, and all she could think was what a strange contrast the dark, old-world curtains made against the very modern track of Californian houses beyond the glass.

Elizabeth broke the silence, 'I guess I've ruined this skein.' She lifted her hand, tangled in the yarn, 'It's not worth saving.' She laughed quietly, 'Oh well. It's not as though I was making much progress. I only make baby hats anymore, occasionally a baby blanket, for the younger ladies at church. I haven't had anyone close to crochet for in such a long while. I don't think anyone really uses anything I make anyhow.'

She looked up at Barbara, 'I never taught you, did I?' She didn't wait for an answer as she started to extricate her fingers from the tangle. 'Another mistake to add to the list.'

'No, mom—don't say that.' Barbara stopped, realizing she didn't have anything comforting to add.

Elizabeth's smile was sad, 'It's true though. It may not be the most important thing—teaching you how to crochet—but it's something. A symbol, maybe, of my mothering.' She sniffled, 'I couldn't handle being a mother. I was okay, for a while, with one of you at a time. I never could manage both of you, though. I guess maybe it was alright that I never had any others after David.'

An uncomfortable silence fell in the darkening room.

Elizabeth's guffaw startled Barbara, 'At least I never taught you to make those awful ambrosias I was so proud of back then!'

Barbara's eyebrows lifted, 'Gross. People still bring them to potlucks in Charlotte. They're awful.'

She made a face and stuck out her tongue. 'Oh good heavens, why? To think: Jell-O and Cool-Whip and canned fruit and nuts. Nuts! Ugh! How on earth we ever thought that was a good idea is beyond me—and yet, we gobbled it up as though there was nothing better. Back then ready-made and canned foods were all the rage. Now it's "organic" and home-made.' Elizabeth shook her head, 'It's funny how times have changed.'

Barbara barely caught the wink. She wasn't sure she had ever seen her mother wink before. This Elizabeth was very different than the woman Barbara knew.

Elizabeth pulled the yarn into a ball and tossed it into a basket beside the couch. 'Well, I'm sure there's more you want to know. Jonah will be busy in the

kitchen a while.' Her eyes were clear and earnest, although Barbara could barely see them. 'You do have a right to know.'

Elizabeth stood, 'Let me go use the little old lady's room—and I think I have something you might like to see. Maybe bring the rest of those letters, too.'

'Uh—yes, sure. I'll get them.' Barbara watched her mother's back, wondering what new secrets she had yet to unearth. Surely nothing could be worse than the story Elizabeth had already shared.

She gathered the letters spread across the bedspread and picked up the box to return to the living room.

Elizabeth was already settled back into her spot on the sofa, the lamp above her illuminating a photo album open on her lap. She didn't look up, 'Here, come sit next to me so you can see. Set that on the coffee table.'

Barbara obeyed.

'I don't think you've ever seen these—well, at least not since you were so small you probably didn't remember. Here.' Elizabeth pointed to a sepia photo of a chubby blond toddler with curly hair, a scowl on her face and a doll clutched under one arm. 'That's you. Tony got you that doll for Christmas when you were two years old and I could never separate you from it. I'm fairly certain the reason you're mad at me in this photo is because I tried to get you to take just *one* photo without dollie.'

Barbara stared unrecognizing at the child in the photo. 'I had curly hair?'

Elizabeth laughed, 'Oh, good lord, no. That must have been after you'd discovered Shirley Temple. You just *had* to be like Little Curly Top, so I tied your hair up in rags every night. You must have been five or six by the time I stopped

doing it, and you were so upset when you finally understood that your hair wasn't naturally curly!

Barbara had to laugh with her. 'You did that for three years? Mom! That is some commitment!'

Elizabeth looked at her slyly, 'Well it kept you happy, and I have to admit that I loved how much attention people paid you. "Oh! Isn't she adorable—just like Little Curly Top!"' She mimicked, 'I couldn't help myself.'

'But for three *years*!' Barbara had a difficult time identifying with the vain, glossy child in the photo. Her own hair had been mousey and straight for as long as she could remember.

Elizabeth was talking again. 'Sorry, what?' Barbara interrupted.

'Oh, I was just saying that it makes me laugh sometimes how caught up this generation's parents are, trying to make sure their children are perfect. All the experts are so worried how they'll turn out, but those same experts weren't raised so different!'

She flipped a page and tapped a black and white portrait of a beautiful tall, slim woman in a demure light-colored floor-length dress. 'Recognize her?'

Barbara shook her head, 'Should I?'

Elizabeth held her hand to her breast in mock insult. 'I was in a friend's wedding – Julia. She got married the day after we graduated high school. We went to church and school together and neither of our families would let us go to the school formals and we were just dying to have fancy gowns, so she let me pick out a formal dress to be her attendant—you should have seen her wedding gown. She probably regrets that now.'

'Oh, here's one of you and your brother on Easter Sunday.' A still curly-haired, round-cheeked Barbara smiled through the plastic photo protector, this time clutching a toddler David by the hand as he stood open-mouthed. Little Barbara's dress was all ribbons and ruffles, and David looked smart in a tiny sailor suit, although his hair stuck up in stubborn cowlicks and he looked somewhere to the left of the photographer.

'We made a cute pair then.'

'Oh, of course you did. You and David always were photogenic, and I had nothing better to do than to make cute clothes for you and show you off.' Elizabeth laughed, but it rang hollow. She motioned to the shoe box, 'I can only imagine how very *thrilling* those letters are to read now.'

The bite in her mother's voice caught Barbara off-guard. 'Like you said—it was a different time.'

'Oh, it certainly was.' Elizabeth flipped through several more pages. 'Here, this is what I wanted to show you.' A tall, handsome man smirked in faded sepia, a laughing blonde girl perched on his shoulders, and a little boy Barbara recognized as David stretched out like Superman in the man's arms.

'That's us? I mean, Tony, with me and David?' A lump formed in Barbara's throat.

'He wasn't always all that bad.' Elizabeth's face was thoughtful, 'That was taken a couple of months before I left him the first time. That was right before...do you remember breaking your arm?'

Barbara flinched, 'I don't remember, not really – just that it was my left arm.'

Elizabeth's voice was quiet. 'That was my final straw. Tony could bully and hurt me, but as soon as he did something to hurt one of my babies, that was it. I didn't connect it all back then, but that was also the only time he ever hit me. I think even he must have known he'd crossed a line. He hit me out of his own fear and anger – not that I'm excusing what he did, but he knew.'

She laid a cool hand on Barbara's arm. 'It happened after I met Jonah, but long before I fell in love with him. Although nothing had happened between us yet, his support did make it easier for me to leave. I still thought I loved Tony, even after everything. I remember thinking that I didn't want to take everything from him, didn't want to leave him alone.'

Barbara covered her mother's hand with her own, horrified at what she was hearing. 'Mom, he was abusive, a sick man, a hoarder. You can't blame yourself for any of that—any of this.'

Elizabeth's fine hairs waved as she shook them in disagreement. 'There is no excuse for putting my children in danger. You don't remember anything at all about your arm?'

Barbara shrugged.

'Mmm. Well, we told the hospital that you were playing and some furniture fell and knocked you over and you must have fallen on your arm wrong. Truth is, it was a little like that, but much, much worse.' She looked past Barbara to the drapes. 'You and David were playing in the backyard. You were about nine. Tony had stuff everywhere in the house by then. Boxes up to the ceiling in the carport, against the walls, under the kitchen table, under the beds...and he'd bought all these desks. You cried one time after you'd just finished writing your first essay—.'

She chuckled. 'This is part of the story, you know. You were *so* proud of that essay. I couldn't even tell you now what it was about. But you wanted to read it to us, so you brought it to the table to read during dinner and David spilled spaghetti all over it. You were so upset and Tony got it in his head that if you had your own desk to do your homework, somehow that would fix it.

'He found a school auction that weekend and bought an entire classroom set of desks for \$15. *Twenty* desks. You got one, David got one, and the rest all got stacked wherever there was space, and there wasn't much, so most wound up in the backyard. He kept saying he'd sell them for a profit, but that never happened. He never got rid of anything.

'So the two of you kids were playing and – well, I don't know exactly what happened. I was inside. All I heard was the crashing of all those desks falling down and David came in terrified, crying and screaming your name. When I got out there...those desks were so heavy, and they were just everywhere. I panicked. You were screaming and crying and David was crying and in the midst of it all, I just froze. I don't know how long it was before I managed to think to call someone to come help. David and I moved as many desks as we could by ourselves, but he was so little and I was terrified I would make another one fall down and hurt you worse.'

Tears slipped down Barbara's cheeks, claustrophobia hovering heavy in her mind. She reached out for her mother and found she was holding her left arm protectively against her ribs. She squeezed Elizabeth's hand. Her mother's face was also wet.

'We eventually pulled you out. You'd fainted by then, thank god. One of the neighbors drove us to the hospital in his car. Tony came home late that night, had no

idea anything happened.' She paused, 'I suppose it could have been worse, but it never should have happened at all.'

She pulled her hand away and wiped her eyes. 'What all did you find in those letters?'

Barbara had forgotten the reason she'd come storming in to confront her mother in the first place. 'Oh...' She pulled the box off the table and set it on the seat beside her. 'Mom, I don't know if it's a good idea to go back through these—I'm not sure you want to dredge this back up.' A thought struck her, 'Jonah may be right, after all.'

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow high, 'I know I'm old, but my hearing hasn't gone quite yet—did you just say Jonah was right?'

Barbara rolled her eyes, 'Don't tell him I said so, or he'll be impossible.' She looked down at the box, 'But just the same, tell me if you don't want to go down this road.'

Elizabeth shrugged. 'The dead can't hurt us, Barbara. Ask me what you want to know.'

She watched her mother for a long moment, wondering if the ghosts were really as important as she'd thought a few hours earlier. 'Well, at one point you write about having to go to the hospital for taking too much medicine. It was after you had David. What—what happened?'

Elizabeth turned another page of the album, carefully smoothing down a loose edge of the page protector with her nail. 'This isn't a pretty story either, Barbara. I lied to myself about it for years. Jonah doesn't even really know, and I've told him more than anyone else.' She flipped again. 'Back in those days, they didn't

call it "post-partum depression," and doctors didn't take it very seriously. Women were frail, delicate creatures, we were told, so of course something as intense as childbirth was likely to "upset" us.'

Her smile was rueful, 'Did you know we didn't have a choice back then? Now, mothers have all these options: natural birth, painkillers, c-section, water birth—what does that even mean? But we didn't have any choice at all.' Her eyes stormed gray. 'They put us under, kept us anesthetized, asleep for the whole process. We went into the hospital big as a house, a life in our belly, and then we woke up, confused, a baby screaming in a bassinette across the room. Like it was some magical thing: the stork really did drop off babies to happy new parents.'

She closed the album, 'If I knew anything about psychology, I might be tempted to say that the shock of it all is what caused it. But who knows? They say depression is genetic, too—nothing we can do about it.'

She met Barbara's eyes, 'It wasn't as bad after you, but I could barely function after David was born. Your grandmother stayed with me for a long time, but she wasn't the most sympathetic woman, and anyway, she was from a different time. She couldn't understand if I tried to explain to her that my bones hurt too much to get out of bed. She just told me to get up, fix my hair and makeup, and be a good mother and wife.'

She focused on her mother's words, aware that this was as honest as Elizabeth had ever been with her daughter, possibly anyone. Barbara was all too familiar with the black hole of post-partum to question her mother's story. The first year after Deirdre was born was still a vague blur.

'I managed, for a little, after she left, then a couple things happened that scared me...' Elizabeth sighed, 'I can't tell you about that part, I'm sorry. I'm not sure I really remember anymore. But it scared me enough to go to the doctor. He told me not to worry, said it was perfectly normal, and he prescribed me a pill. I don't think he even told me what it was.'

'And you took it anyway?'

Her face darkened and she scowled at the window. 'He called it "Mother's Little Helper" and it did *wonders* for me. This was before antidepressants, at least, before what I think they are now. And once I realized how good it made me feel, how energetic, how alive, I started to take a little more, and a little more, and a little more.

'After a while, I wasn't getting that same burst of energy, the same push, and I started to get depressed again. I couldn't cope. I didn't take you kids anywhere or go out of the house for days—it might have been a week, maybe more, I couldn't tell you for certain. We ate cold food straight out of cans until there wasn't anything left in the house to eat. I was finally so desperate that I took all the pills left in my bottle.'

A chill crept over Barbara. Elizabeth's voice had gone flat, eyes fixed on something outside.

'I don't know what I was thinking. I know the doctors at the hospital whispered "suicide" when they thought I couldn't hear, but I honestly don't know if that was what I meant to do when I swallowed all those pills. Maybe I just wanted to have enough life in me to take care of my children, or maybe I couldn't find enough in me to go on doing anything at all. I don't know.'

Her shoulders lifted in a small shrug, 'I convinced the doctors I was just a foolish young housewife who had taken too many pills by accident, I think I may have even told one doctor I thought I was taking aspirin and took the others by mistake.

'At any rate, they believed me. Once I was stable, they discharged me—with a full refill of my "little helpers" and a warning not to take more than the recommended dose and to make sure I read the labels more carefully in the future. One even reprimanded me: "What would your husband do without you?" he asked. Little did he know.'

Elizabeth shrugged again, 'I read somewhere that they give it to kids now for that ADD nonsense. I kept taking it for a couple of years after that happened, but was always very careful never to take more than my doctor recommended.'

She looked at Barbara, 'And that, my dear daughter, is the story of how your mother over-dosed on amphetamines, or tried to commit suicide while her two children were under the age of four—whichever you prefer.'

Before Barbara had a chance to digest or respond, Jonah's wide cheerful face floated into the doorframe. 'Supper's ready!'

Rupert bounced onto the sofa between them, barking enthusiastically. Elizabeth's smile was instantaneous, 'Oh, thank you, dear. I'm famished!' She slid the photo album under a throw pillow and stood to follow her husband. 'Come along Rupert, you old bother. Barbara, let's eat. I don't like to stay up too late on Saturdays.'

Barbara rose and followed the trio out of the room, numb at her mother's confession. She was too shocked at the revelation to process it all, but one thought

echoed clearly in her mind: Tony hadn't been the only dangerous part of her childhood.

Elizabeth insisted on having lunch at her favorite Mexican restaurant after church. To Barbara's surprise, David was waiting for them at Tapatío and ordered a beer with his huevos rancheros. He hadn't attended the service and both Elizabeth and Jonah had left their cell phones at the house. It was apparently a weekly tradition.

Barbara made up her mind to be civil in front of her mother and stepfather. David helped by focusing on Elizabeth and ignoring his sister.

'How are you feeling today, mom? Did you get up in time for a full Jonah breakfast?' David crunched into a tortilla chip as he spoke, spraying salsa and chip flecks.

Elizabeth smiled, 'Don't be silly. I had a banana. Had to leave room for guacamole!' She giggled at her joke and scooped a mountain of creamy green onto a chip.

'You know I'm usually on my own for breakfast on Sundays.' Jonah winked at David, 'Too early for yer mother. Besides, woe to the man who comes between Elizabeth and her guacamole!'

Barbara sat back in her chair, occasionally sipping her room temperature water, nodding, smiling or shaking her head when the conversation called for it, but otherwise not participating. The pastor's sermon on strength in the face of adversary wasn't exactly a punch in the gut, but close enough.

On top of everything, she hadn't slept well. The letters, Elizabeth's story, and the refreshed memory of breaking her arm had shaken her. She stayed up late

reading more of Elizabeth's letters, her mind refusing to fall quiet, and awoke twice in the midst of nightmares. In the one she remembered, she was being buried alive atop Tony's coffin. Instead of handfuls of dirt, the mourners hurled desks into the grave. The last face she saw was Tony's, laughing at her as the desk he dropped blocked out the light. She woke in a cold sweat at five a.m. and went out for a two-hour walk around the neighborhood before she felt calm enough to shower and dress for church. She skipped breakfast altogether.

'Hey Barbara?' Jonah's grinning face turned toward her expectantly.

Barbara could see cilantro between his teeth. 'Sorry?'

'We heard ya met Maya. I think Rupert would have fun with her. What d'ya think?' Jonah winked broadly.

David's eyes flicked from Jonah to Barbara and back to his plate. 'Not happening.'

Elizabeth giggled, pulling a forkful of melted cheese up to make long strings. 'You know he's only teasing, David.'

Barbara smiled thinly, 'I'm sure Maya would prefer to be left alone.'

David looked up at her, face a mask. 'Exactly.'

Jonah sensed the joke was over and changed the subject. 'Got everything sorted out for tomorrow, then Barbara?'

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin, 'I think so, yes. I called everyone on my list yesterday. I mostly left messages, but I don't think that will make much of a difference either way.'

Elizabeth spoke around the bite in her mouth, 'Plan anything special?'

Barbara raised her eyebrows at her mother, who shrugged and took another bite. 'Just a simple service.'

'Let us know if you need anything brought over.' Jonah gave her a nod.

'Thanks, Jonah. There shouldn't be anything, though.' Barbara had made sure there wouldn't be.

'Get ahold of the social worker?'

Barbara speared her last forkful of taco salad, 'Actually, no. I'm hoping to get a call from her office tomorrow. I don't know what she'll have to tell me that's new, anyway.'

'Hopefully, nothing.' David dropped his silverware on the plate and drained his pint.

He pulled her aside in the parking lot. 'Let's just get through tomorrow, alright? For mom's sake?'

She narrowed her eyes, but agreed. 'Fine. For mom.'

'Good. She doesn't need any stress.' He walked away without giving her a chance to answer.

Barbara watched as he climbed into Tony's Chevy, verses from the morning's sermon repeating in her head. James 1:2-4 ²"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." She hoped her perseverance would be enough.

February 7, 1959

Dear Tony,

I hope you don't mind, but I did let Barbara Marie pick out one of Susan's kittens. Oh, but it is an ugly little thing. It's small and fuzzy and they are only a few weeks old, but I swear that kitten has patches of every possible color fur on it! Its face is a mishmash of calico in the oddest pattern. It has blue eyes now, but who knows how they will turn out. I think cats are like people—the eyes change color when they're a little older. I hope Kitty grows into a prettier cat! Oh, and heaven help me, but that's what Barbara Marie's named it - Kitty. I know it's silly, but even when I offered her some other suggestions, but she refused to call it anything but Kitty, cradling it in her chubby little arms. They make such an adorable pair. Susan says she thinks the kittens still need another 3-4 weeks with their mother before we can bring Kitty home. Perhaps I'll be able to persuade Barbara Marie that there are better names for a cat than 'Kitty' in the meantime.

I mentioned the kitten to the other mothers at church and they all agreed that it will be good for Barbara Marie to have a pet to love after Baby is born. This way she won't feel replaced. Carol Smith read all about how awful first-borns can be after the second child is born before they had their Donny. She thinks she still has the magazine the article was in, and said she'll lend it to me when she finds it. I had no idea that parenting might be more complicated because of a second baby! Doctors today seem to know absolutely everything and have children down to a science. Who am I to argue?

The weather has been cool here. 'Sweater weather' Agatha calls it. It's perfect for walking. Barbara Marie is grown used to our daily jaunts around the block—not

very long ones, though, as I do tire easily—she will pitch a fit if we haven't gone by 3 p.m.! I must say they have done wonders for her naptimes, so I have tried very hard to make sure we do go.

I can eat almost normally again. Baby certainly made it difficult those first couple of months. I've started to exchange recipes with the Ladies' group at church. They are a God-send. I make something new at least once a week, and I really do find myself looking forward to the challenge of a new recipe. Sometimes they call for ingredients I've never used before. I'm always learning. One of the ladies explained to me how to freeze casseroles so all I have to do is pull them out of the icebox and pop them in the oven. I think I will make two of everything for a little while so that Barbara Marie and I have plenty of meals ready to go after Baby comes.

I overheard some men at the grocer this week saying that the oil is almost all gone in Texas. Is it? I sure hope not.

Affectionately,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby

P.S. January's register –

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$66.03	-\$1.03
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$99.00	-\$99.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$7.34	+\$2.66
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$16.75	+\$3.25
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$14.22	+78¢
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$36.12	+\$3.88
Toys	\$5.00	-\$6.12	-\$1.12
Spending Money	\$15.00	-\$13.79	+\$1.21
Postage	50¢	-30¢	+20¢
Doctor & Medicine	\$15.00	-\$5.71	+\$9.29
TOTAL	\$284.50	-\$265.38	+\$19.12

Barbara smoothed the skirt of her conservative black dress and surveyed the room. Soft, sad instrumental music played in the background. Rows of chairs faced a small stage with a plain podium, the open casket beside it facing the room at an angle. Nearly everyone was dressed in black—or at least a dark shade—except for one woman in a bright halter sundress.

The space between her eyebrows creased into a frown and Barbara forced herself to unwrinkle her face into something more akin to mourning and less like the disdain she was fighting. She turned away from the flowery print and counted Tony's mourners—all fifteen of them. Barbara was surprised even that many showed up. She'd spent hours combing through phone books and Tony's belongings to find phone numbers for his assorted friends, family, and acquaintances on Saturday night after dinner. She'd laughed at the funeral home 'liaison' when he asked if she wasn't 'Sure she didn't want to upgrade to the larger mourning parlor?' as she paid the balance.

The more she learned about Tony, the more Barbara expected to spend this morning in a largely empty room. Of course David would make an appearance, and Jonah had assured Barbara that he and Elizabeth would come—one hand protectively on her mother's shoulder as he spoke for Elizabeth. Jonah seemed to speak for her mother more and more often. Barbara resented Jonah's new habit of hovering over the women whenever Barbara tried to sit down alone with her mother. Perhaps he was merely overprotective, but Barbara suspected he was worried that she would ask her mother to tell her more about Tony.

He was right. She would.

She didn't notice her brother until he spoke.

'What?'

She frowned, 'What-what?'

'You shook your head,' David shrugged. 'I just wondered if something was wrong.'

They hadn't spoken other than their terse agreement to get through the funeral, but Barbara had the distinct impression that she was being treated as an unexploded bomb—handled carefully, at a distance, and with a certainty that when she did blow up, he didn't want to be anywhere nearby.

She arranged what she hoped was a funeral appropriate smile, 'It's nothing.'

He looked past her, 'Open casket, huh?'

'Oh, that. Yes.' Barbara had told Carl Wilson she didn't think anyone wanted to see the dead man. Carl had more tactfully suggested that she let him decide based on how Tony looked after the mortician had finished. She hadn't cared enough to argue.

'Have you seen him?' David's eyes were transfixed on the grey composite coffin.

'No...Do you want me to go with you?'

'I mean, if you don't mind.' Suddenly David was sheepish, 'I know he's dead, but—well, you know.'

He met Barbara's eyes and she nodded. 'Let's do this.'

The pair approached the casket shoulder-to-shoulder, careful not to touch. A chill danced down Barbara's neck as they stopped at the head of the coffin. Tony's face was pale and waxy, wrinkled under the layers of the makeup, his lips a little too

pink, the blush on his cheeks too rosy. His thick snowy hair was parted and combed, hairsprayed in place like he'd worn it every day of his life. Seaview Assisted Living had sent a suit along with his body. Despite the clever tucks and pins, Barbara could see that the suit was too large. Tony's hands, so large and capable in life, lay posed politely atop one another across his stomach, pale and still. A gold Seiko watch ticked on his right wrist. The mortician had tucked a single white carnation into his breast pocket, along with a neatly folded white handkerchief embroidered with the initials AVC in faded navy blue script.

Surrounded by white satin, dressed in the oversized suit, Tony looked small. Barbara could almost imagine this corpse belonged to a man she would mourn. 'He looks so peaceful.'

'Is he smiling?' David frowned down on their father. 'Look – he's smiling.'

Barbara looked closer, 'Stop it. It's just the light.'

'No it's not. The prick is smiling at us.' He looked sideways at his sister, 'I hope you didn't get dinged extra for the makeup job.'

Barbara bit back a genuine smile, 'Shh! Don't make me laugh.'

He winked, 'Okay, are we done here?'

'Yes...he looks so small, though. He was always so big and tall in my head.'

David had already turned away, 'I'll be happier when he's nothing but dust.'

Barbara nodded and turned to face the chairs with him. She took in his crisp charcoal slacks and black polo, 'You look nice.'

He stared at her for a beat too long, deciding if she was being sarcastic.

'Better than summer Barbie over there?' He jerked his head toward the sundressed mourner.

The corners of Barbara's mouth pulled down. 'Who is that?'

Barbara studied the woman, noting that she was at least a few years older than Barbara. Sunspots on skin turning to leather told a story of many hours in the sun without appropriate SPF.

David smirked, 'I have no idea. You're the host.'

'Fine. Let's go introduce ourselves.' She savored a brief moment of satisfaction when David belatedly realized she was dragging him into the fray.

Barbara steered him toward the tan woman, the dark roots of her bottle-bleached hair more obvious as they approached. She was talking to a handsome brunette man in his late thirties who looked vaguely familiar to Barbara, although she couldn't immediately place him. Before she could decide what to say, the peroxide blond saw the siblings and flashed a smile.

'Oh! You must be Barbara—and David?' She extended each a weathered hand ending in long, flamingo pink stick-on nails.

Barbara accepted the hand limply, but didn't return the smile.

David was quick, for once. 'Guilty, but I don't know that we've met?'

She squeezed Barbara's hand tight, simpering. 'I'm Jean.'

David returned a shadow of her grin, 'Hi Jean, nice to meet you. So sorry it's under these circumstances.'

She grasped David's hand with her free one and shook both. 'Thank you, dear. Of course it wasn't unexpected, but I'm still sad that dad's gone now.'

David's smile faded. 'What?'

Barbara tilted her head and liberated her hand, talking over her brother. 'I'm sorry. Who?'

Jean lifted her eyebrows and looked back and forth between them. 'You know, Tony. He's my—well, was—my dad.' She raised her voice to call over her shoulder, 'June! Mom. Come here.' Two thicker women in shades of brown looked up and moved toward them.

David's mouth hung open.

Barbara gathered her strength and breath and elbowed him. Her faint smile stopped at her lips, 'I'm sorry Jean. I feel like there's some misunderstanding here. Shall we start again?' She motioned, 'This is my younger brother David. Tony was our father and—' she motioned vaguely to Jonah and Elizabeth, 'That is our mother, Elizabeth, Tony's first wife.' She managed the patronizing smile again, but didn't bother to keep the condescension from her voice. 'I'm not sure I see how Tony could be your father. He did marry again, Shirley, but she's not arrived yet.'

The younger man Jean had been talking to cleared his throat, 'Ah, Barbara?'

'Yes?' Her no-nonsense teacher voice had taken over.

He grimaced nervously, 'I'm Tim, Shirley's oldest.' He glanced at Jean, 'Mom had a cruise planned with friends this week, so she couldn't make it. Todd should be on his way here, though.' Tim smiled again at Barbara, 'I think it's been a couple of decades since you saw me last. Nice to see you.'

'Tim. Right. You look well. I'm glad you could come. I'm not sure what that all has to do with Jean, though.' Her eyes flicked back.

He cut her off, 'Barbara, that's what I'm trying to say. Jean found Todd and me online a couple of years ago. She's our half-sister—your half-sister.' He paused, clearly uncomfortable. 'Tony was married before he met Elizabeth.'

Sparks swam through her eyes, 'What?'

'What the hell are you talking about, Tim?' David found his voice. 'I've never heard mom or Tony talk about him being married before. They were just kids when they met. You never mentioned anything, neither.'

Tim shrugged and stepped back, contrite. 'I didn't...it wasn't my place. Sorry.'

Jean smirked and gestured to the larger woman in an auburn wig beside her, 'Barbara, David, this is my mom, Janet. She and Tony were high school sweethearts.' She squeezed Janet's arm. 'Mom, these are Tony's other kids, David and Barbara.'

Janet extended a limp hand between them, 'Glad to meet you. Condolences.'

No one took the hand.

'Um, I'm sorry. I just don't see how this makes any sense.' David shook his head.

Barbara raised her voice, 'Mom? Jonah? Could you come here, please? I think there's something we need to sort out.' She looked to Tim, belatedly thinking that she hadn't meant to insult her half-brother. 'Tim, you do look well. I'm glad you could make it. I'm sorry Shirley couldn't be here.'

He blinked, 'Thanks Barbara.'

Elizabeth and Jonah joined the circle of Tony's growing family. 'Who're these folks, Barbara?' Jonah asked.

Barbara locked her eyes onto Jean. 'Jonah, this is Tim, one of Shirley's sons, my half-brother from Tony's last marriage. You've heard of him. This.' she dipped her head toward Jean, 'This, apparently, is our half-sister from Tony's marriage to her—' she nodded toward Janet, 'and they were high school sweethearts.'

Apparently, Tony had already been married once before he met mom.'

A flute fluttered mournfully.

The third woman showed a chipped front tooth as she grinned and waved, 'And I'm June. Jean's big sis. Tony was my dad too. Obviously.' She giggled.

Barbara stared her down until she too was quiet.

'Ah, um. Well, Barbara, frankly I'm at a loss.' Jonah turned to Elizabeth, 'Elizabeth, honey? Can you shed some light?'

Elizabeth was examining her nails. She'd had them filled and painted a deep burgundy.

'Barbara, David. Tim's right: these are your half-sisters.' Her voice was quiet, but she looked each of them in the eye.

Barbara stiffened. 'You can't be serious.'

Jean gloated, her voice syrup. 'It's *so* nice to finally meet the rest of our family.'

Barbara narrowed her eyes. 'I wouldn't get too excited. I—'

David exploded beside her. 'For fuck's sake. How do we not know about this? What the hell else don't we know?' He shook his head and glowered at the coffin, 'Goddammit. Does the fuckery never end with him?'

Elizabeth shrank from her son, eyes downcast as she moved back to Jonah's protection. 'It's true...'

'David!' Barbara reached for her brother's hands, shocked, but gratified to hear someone finally say aloud what she had thought since she first learned of Tony's death. 'Not now.'

David wasn't done. Cheeks flush, he jerked his hands away. 'How many more secrets are there? How many more bombshells do we have to deal with?' He threw up his hands, 'I mean, secret families? That's movie stuff, not real life. Christ.'

Barbara clasped her hands and forced herself to keep still. She knew exactly how David felt, but she no longer had the energy to create the mirage of normalcy for Tony's ever-growing circus. This was beyond her responsibility or control. If David needed to vent, she wouldn't be the one to stop him.

David glared around the room. 'You people all know what a shitty person Tony was. That's no secret. So why the hell are you here? What the hell are we even doing here? The man doesn't deserve shit—let alone our time, a fucking funeral.' The fury disintegrated and he closed his eyes against tears. 'I'm sorry. Mom—Barbara, I'm sorry. I tried. I'm done. I'm just so goddamn done.'

For the first time since learning of her father's death, Barbara knew exactly what to do. She observed the huddle of assorted half-siblings and ex-wives. Janet stood with her arms wrapped around June, who'd started to cry at David's shouting. Jean watched David's tirade with her arms crossed, a faint smile on her bright lips. Tim was fixated on his shoes, hands deep in his pockets.

Barbara muttered, 'This is not going to be pretty.' She marched into the middle of the room, stopped in the center aisle, and drew a deep breath.

She raised her arms. 'Excuse me.' A few people outside of the immediate circle turned to her, but others carried on with their conversations. Barbara drew upon her thirty years of teaching and used the give-me-your-attention-now voice that silenced roomfuls of elementary students with a word. 'Excuse me!' Every head swiveled toward her. David had followed and stood behind her, and Barbara noted a sharply dressed blonde man bearing a strong resemblance to Tim who had just arrived: Todd.

Barbara caught as many eyes as she could. 'Good morning. For those who don't know me, I'm Barbara Sterling, the daughter of Anthony and Elizabeth Chase. Tony chose me to organize this funeral and arrange his affairs after his death, and I think it's high time we did just that. This is more than a little unorthodox, but Tony left a disaster behind—and I am sick of dealing with it. This was meant to be the funeral of Anthony Victor Chase, but I think we can all agree that his body isn't the only thing that needs burying.'

She gestured to the casket on its skirted stand. 'This is also supposed to be a viewing—well, I think it's time we view Tony for the man he really was. We've all been taught not to speak ill of the dead, but I also believe that we are meant to speak and know the truth. If we don't bring the truth out into the open now, it dies with him.'

A couple of people gawked, a few shook their heads, while others nodded in agreement. A few merely looked too shocked or sad to react. Jean was outright smirking. Jonah shook his head meaningfully at Barbara, but Elizabeth nodded her head under his arm.

Barbara took the nods as her cue, 'Good. I think anyone who has something to say should introduce themselves and explain their relationship to Anthony—Tony. As I've said, he was my father. My mother is Elizabeth, but she divorced him when I was eleven and I lived with her after that. The last time I saw Tony was probably twenty years ago, and I don't think I've spoken to him in close to fifteen years.'

She paused, wondering how much she should say. 'There are a thousand and one awful, but true, things I could say about Tony. He ran over my cat on purpose

when I was eight. Three years later, his hoarding nearly killed me when a bunch of desks he bought fell over on me...I think that's probably all I need to say.'

She took a small step aside to indicate that someone else should speak, and was shocked when a wavering voice broke the tense silence.

Elizabeth stepped away from Jonah and his protective arm. 'My name is Elizabeth Rose Stone Thomas. I married Tony in 1956 and I'm Barbara and David's mother.' She met Barbara's eyes for a brief moment before she continued, 'I was scared every minute Tony was home while I was married to him. I was so grateful every time he left to go work someplace else, anyplace else. For a long time I didn't know how to leave, so I thought it was safer just to stay.'

She shook her head sadly and Barbara thought of the letters. 'So I did—at least, until his obsession landed my daughter in the hospital with a concussion and a broken arm. He was a sick man, Tony. When I finally did leave, he kept my baby boy to punish me. Not because he wanted him, just to get at me for leaving. That's the type of man Tony Chase was.'

A young-looking Asian man in a cheap black suit and skinny tie walked in and stood just inside the doors. Horrified, Barbara recognized the minister and tried to stop her mother. 'Mom—'

Elizabeth ignored her and turned to regard the coffin. 'Tony was the scum of the earth, a psychotic and an abuser. And I hope he rots.' She was shaking, her finger stretched out toward the coffin. David barely managed to catch her when she collapsed.

Barbara heard a cry and watched in slow motion as Jonah flung himself toward her mother, but she stood rooted to the floor. David shouted that Elizabeth had fainted and the newly arrived minister announced he was calling 911.

'I have the dispatcher – who knows this woman?' The minister's voice was calm and collected as he joined them.

Jonah was kneeling beside Elizabeth. 'I'm her husband. Give it here.' He took the minister's cell phone, 'Yeah, she fainted. She's still unconscious. She's got cancer, but it's been six months since her last chemo. It's metastasized, but the doctors said she'd have another year. She's been doing good, even ate a full breakfast this mornin.'

'Cancer?' Barbara sank into a chair, dazed as words and people rustled around her. Someone pressed a plastic cup of water into her hand, but it slipped through her fingers. She barely registered the cold splash against her pantyhose.

Once the excitement of Elizabeth's collapse and the arrival of the ambulance passed, Tony's assorted relatives turned restless. The minister escorted the EMTs out of the room and Barbara had been torn between riding to the hospital with her mother and staying for the funeral service. David solved her dilemma: 'Jonah is with mom and the EMT said she'll be fine. You're the executor of Tony's will. You need to be here.' The crisis had calmed his earlier fury.

That settled it. Rather than stay with the parent for whom she still cared, whom she'd just learned was dying of cancer, Barbara was to endure the funeral of a man she not only didn't love, but for whom she held nothing but disgust. Her eyes bounced around at the group, reeling from the discoveries. Jean, in her bright

summer dress, chatted with her sister and mother as though nothing had happened. They all shared the same tired, worn-out air. At least the two of them had managed to wear dark clothes. Barbara was surprised to find the thought came with only a hint of animosity. Apathy was a blessing.

Across the small room, as far as they could distance themselves from Jean, stood Todd and Tim. A woman Barbara assumed to be one of their wives leaned against the wall behind the brothers, talking to a clean-cut Latino man in a dark gray suit. A darkly made-up pre-teen slouched beside the woman, broadcasting her boredom as loudly as she could with eye rolls, crossed arms, and dramatic foot tapping.

'Do you think we can ask the chaplain to get started now? May as well get it over with. I can't take much more of this.'

Barbara flinched at David's voice. 'Right. Do you think we bother? Should we finish what mom and I started? Just call it a day and leave?'

'Air the asshole's dirty laundry,' Janet had walked up behind them.

Suppressing her disgust at the coarseness, Barbara nodded. 'I think you're right.' She looked at David and shrugged, 'Otherwise we'll never know.' Her watch said it was ten thirty-five. Her toes squelched in the water pooling in her right pump.

'Excuse me everyone. I know we've had a fright, but I think my mother will be fine. Shall we continue what we've begun? We have this room for a while yet.' She motioned to Janet, 'Would you like to speak?'

The older woman glanced around the faces. 'Yeah, sure. I'm Janet. I knew Tony since we were just kids. His folks and mine were friends and our houses

shared a wall. He's two years older'n me. Guess it was bound to happen with me'n him. We started fooling around when we were pretty young. He always was a charmer, easy on the eyes. He'd sneak over to my room at night cuz our dads both worked graveyard shifts down at the old factory. Our moms were either too drunk or drugged up on sleeper pills to notice or care.

'I was sixteen when I realized I was pregnant with June here, but he said we'd get hitched. I thought he loved me, then.' She looked toward her daughters, 'Never did though, I don't think. As soon as Jean was born, he said he'd found a job working out of state. He didn't come back much after that. He sent money, sometimes presents for the girls, but no address or nothing.'

She shrugged, 'There ain't much more to it. Tony sure was a cold bastard, but he made sure I had enough money to take care of the girls, feed 'em and such. Never left us wanting. So long as I didn't ask him nothing else, he weren't mean and didn't bother me much.

'He'd bring things around, now and again. Maybe that was the worst part – having all that stuff of his, magazines, records, books – newspapers, even. I couldn't throw nothing out, though. He didn't care about much, but he sure carried on about his magazines and tapes and things, go into a rage if the girls so much as touched a record.'

She sighed, 'I found out later he knocked a girl up a few towns over and got hitched, shotgun wedding.' She looked at Barbara with sad eyes, 'The girls were already in school when he left me. Said we'd never been proper married anyhow. Didn't hear nothing from him for a bit after that, 'cept for money he'd send. Wasn't til a few years later that I thought to find out about his new wife. By then I just

wanted him and his junk out of the house. My girls were better off without a daddy like that. '

Janet shrugged again and walked to a chair at the end of the row to sit.

Barbara realized she was done. 'Anyone else?'

Tim and Todd exchanged a look, but didn't speak.

June looked confused by the whole ordeal and Jean still smiled smugly.

Barbara got the uncomfortable feeling that Jean thought she knew something no one else did, but David started to speak before she could wonder what that could be.

'I'm David, Barbara's younger brother. My mom's Elizabeth.' He looked toward their half-brothers, 'I'm the only one of us sorry Chase bastards who had to live alone with Tony. He only hit me sometimes, but he didn't want me there and told me so often as he could.'

He massaged his neck with one hand, 'He wouldn't never take me anywhere, just left me at home while he collected more and more shit. I was maybe eleven when he got into baseball cards. He'd bring home these giant lots of 'em. He'd buy boxes of them at rummage sales, who knows where. He'd make me go through hundreds and hundreds of cards and organize them. Then he got obsessed with Cracker Jacks. There were weeks at a time when that's all we had in the house to eat. He hated the stuff, just wanted to get the cards out, so I had to open every box, each bag, pull out the prize for him. It was like *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, looking for the Golden Ticket, except I wouldn't have won nothing if I had.

'He had me looking for certain players, cards, whatever. And even if I didn't find any of the really valuable, rare ones, he still made me organize them into teams by year.' His head drooped, 'It probably doesn't sound as bad as it was. But I found

boxes of the cards in one of his damn storage units – and all those empty Cracker Jack boxes when Barbara and me went through 'em the other day. I can't figure why he wanted Barbara to do it, but it was awful, like flashbacks. So, yeah. That's it.'

Barbara was horrified. David had just told brand-new Tony relatives about the storage units and Jean's smile was far too bright. A sharp pang in her gut made her question her knee-jerk decision to leave so much of Tony's things with Matt. No one else knew which storage units Tony had left, she thought, hoping that would save her from having to explain to anyone why she had let a perfect stranger keep almost everything from their father's locker.

June was smiling, too, as she went to stand in the middle of the room. Barbara couldn't help but notice that June didn't look like she was all there. Her half-sister physically resembled Janet and Jean, but her small eyes were farther apart, her forehead noticeably too long, her nose too short, and her features softer than her bronzed older sister. She was already talking when it dawned on Barbara that June showed all the signs of someone with fetal alcohol syndrome. Barbara had taught a student the year prior, Kyle, with the same facial features. Barbara's face softened in sympathy for her half-sister.

'I just want to say that I didn't get to spend a lot of time with daddy, but he always had a present for me whenever I saw him. He got me a pair of purple roller skates once when I was little and I loved them so much. It's so nice we're all together here today for daddy.' She smiled her cracked-toothed grin and pushed her mousey hair out of her face before plopping into a seat.

The minister came back as June sat. He cleared his throat, 'Excuse me. I'm Chaplain Kevin Wong. I know this has been somewhat hectic, but I want to make

sure we're all in here for the Chase funeral.' He looked around the room, trying to catch the eye of someone.

David's elbow into her arm told Barbara that the someone Chaplain Wong was looking for was her. 'This is Anthony Chase's funeral.'

'Or something.' Barbara couldn't tell who had muttered.

The chaplain's relief was painfully obvious, 'Well, if everyone is settled, shall we proceed with the service as planned? I will shorten it to accommodate the time, of course.'

She flicked a look to her brother, but David shrugged uselessly. None of the rest of the assortment of Tony's children seemed inclined to share their paternal horror stories, so Barbara nodded to the chaplain. 'That's fine. Anyone who doesn't want to stay can leave now, if they want.'

She and David took seats in the second row without waiting for anyone else to sit. Barbara didn't look back, but from the noise, it sounded like almost everyone had opted to stay. Preoccupied with thoughts of Jean's greedy Cheshire grin, Barbara scarcely registered the chaplain's voice.

'Anthony has gone from this life and it's only natural that we should grieve because he is no longer part of our lives in a practical sense. The comfort of having Anthony as a father, a grandfather, a brother and a friend may indeed be lost, but the comfort of having had that friend is never lost. To match the grief of losing him, we have the joy of having known him—a joy of which we become especially aware of at this moment as we spend a few minutes in silence and remember Anthony in a time of good health and picture his living image in our minds and recall the special, personal qualities that made him unique and loved.'

Someone near the back let out a choked laugh. Barbara's shoulders tensed, but she resisted the urge to look. Instinct told her the chortle had come from Jean, and the last thing Barbara wanted was to antagonize her newfound half-sister. Tony may have been a dark shared memory for everyone in the room, but if they could just get through this service, she hoped they could just move on. At the very least, she'd have met her obligation. The rest weren't her responsibility. She turned her eyes down to focus on her hands, clasped in her lap. She prayed earnestly that everyone would have the decency to stay quiet, if only for the next twenty minutes. Then they could all leave Tony behind for good. And if they didn't, it wouldn't matter: she'd be safely back home in North Carolina.

February 28, 1959

Dear Tony,

We have a new member of the Chase family. Kitty came home with us yesterday. She is still tiny, but Susan says she's old enough to leave the mother and eat real food now. Barbara Marie is positively beside herself with excitement. She pushes Kitty around in her baby carriage and watches her every move. It's precious. Kitty seems to love Barbara Marie every bit as much as our little Curly Top loves her. They even snuggle up together to take naps!

For now, Kitty is so little I think we can get away with feeding her scraps of leftover meat and milk. I did put a box with newspaper out for her to do her business, just as Susan did. Kitty is a clever little thing—already uses the box without any accidents. She did make Barbara Marie cry yesterday when she caught one of her little claws on her hand. It was a tiny scratch. I think it will help Barbara Marie to learn that Kitty is a live creature, not a toy. A good lesson for her at this age – she'll have to learn that with Baby, too.

The Valentine's social at church was lovely. All the ladies complimented my fudge and Jell-O. I put red cherry hearts inside the pink strawberry. No one had ever seen anyone put shapes into Jell-O. I know pride is a sin, but it felt so wonderful to hear their praise. Susan teased me that I must be careful, or I will be expected to invent something new for every church event. To be honest, I don't think I'd mind! I do love to cook and bake, and it's such a nice feeling to know that my food makes other people happy.

On a sad note, did you hear that Buddy Holly died? Susan called me just as soon as she heard. I cried when Susan told me. Thank heavens it was only a phone

call, but I still felt a bit ridiculous. I read a magazine article on how we women are more emotional while we're pregnant – that would explain a lot! He was only 22—barely a year and a half older than me. He was so talented. Such a tragic thing to die in a plane crash, and those other two boys with him. I don't think I ever want to go zooming about like a bird.

Anyhow, Susan's having a listening party tonight in remembrance of Buddy and the others. Some of her and Agatha's Avon lady friends and neighbors will be there. Isn't it nice that no one will be alone in their sadness? We can remember him together.

Do you know when will you be home next? I have a special meal in mind I'd like to make you that I think you will just love. Don't forget that Baby should be here very soon!

Our love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby

P.S. I've done as you said and kept all the TV Guide issues. I subscribed so we could save a few pennies – it's cheaper to have a subscription than to buy a new one each week at the store.

P.P.S. I finished February's register this morning before I posted this letter. I'm afraid I've overspent more than usual. You must forgive me - it's all things for Baby.

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$64.12	+88¢
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$99.00	-\$99.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$8.12	+\$1.88
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$25.12	-\$5.12
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$30.96	-\$15.96
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$38.04	+\$1.96
Toys	\$5.00	-\$15.41	-\$10.41
Spending Money	\$15.00	-\$16.11	-\$1.11
Postage	\$0.50	-\$0.44	+6¢
Doctor & Medicine	\$15.00	-\$6.32	+\$8.68
TOTAL	\$284.50	-\$303.64	-\$19.14

Having survived the confessional, the funeral and the strained niceties that followed, Barbara was relieved when her phone rang and the bored voice on the other end informed her that Mr. Anthony Chase's social worker would be in the office until 5 p.m. today if she would like to come by. She said she would and now found herself, still dressed in her funeral clothes, waiting for said social worker.

The entire trip had been a series of cheap, poorly decorated offices. She pursed her lips against the harsh chartreuse of the linoleum in the Social Services waiting room, worsened by walls painted what might once have been a cheerful goldenrod, now worn into a grungy mustard. Mustard was charitable. Barbara had cleaned up vomit that color from her fourth graders more than once.

Her nose wrinkled at the memory of the stench, but she would still rather be back in North Carolina cleaning up a child's bile than sitting in this office. She breathed a prayer for the meeting with Tony's social worker to go smoothly, quickly.

She was scribbling the list of people who had attended the funeral on the back of a pamphlet when someone who smoked far too many cigarettes a day called her name, 'Mrs. Sterling—Barbara Sterling.'

Barbara slipped 'What to Do When You Lose a Loved One' into her purse, but kept the pen in her hand. She moved toward the skinny woman in an ill-fitting pantsuit who had called her name. 'I'm Barbara Sterling.'

'Great. Follow me. I'm Greta Harburg.' Greta pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose, the frame so large it covered the tops of her cheeks and her

penciled-on eyebrows. A mannishly short haircut served only to emphasize the glasses.

Barbara trailed silently behind as Greta pushed through a windowless door into a hallway painted the same ill-fated mustard, following squares of the avocado linoleum around a series of corners until she paused to usher Barbara into a tiny office. It reeked of stale cigarettes, burned coffee and onions. Barbara briefly contemplated holding her breath, but dying while wallowing through the aftermath of Tony's death seemed unfairly likely to make him happy, even if she was now positive he was in hell.

Greta was telling her to sit down. She tried to let as little of the gray plastic touch her.

Greta shoved aside some papers on her desk and plunked down the green file folder Barbara hadn't noticed her carrying. It matched the floors. 'First, I'm very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Sterling.'

Nothing in her voice indicated either bereavement or misfortune. Barbara nodded, approving of the woman's matter-of-fact attitude. Certainly no one else thought Tony's death sad or a loss.

Taking her nod as a cue to continue, Greta bent her dark head over the open folder. 'Now then: Anthony Chase was your father, correct?'

Barbara liked this no-nonsense attitude. 'Yes.'

She shoved her glasses back up her nose, 'Right. So Anthony listed you as executrix of his last will and testament, which I'm sure you've learned by now.'

Another nod. This would be quick.

‘Well, there isn’t much to execute, to be frank. I do need your signature to hand over his file. Essentially, I’m turning over responsibility for his remains and effects from the state of California to you.’

Barbara started to nod again, moving forward with her pen ready, but Greta held up a thin, thick-knuckled hand to stop her. ‘Mrs. Sterling, you should know that Anthony was not...mentally stable when he died. He was judged to be "of a sound mind" when he signed and approved this will several months prior to his death, but his actions and state of mind preceding or following its creation cannot be ignored.’

Barbara watched her hopes of a quick meeting scatter across the linoleum like so many grains of rice. ‘I’m not sure I understand.’

Greta sighed and nodded—to herself, Barbara thought.

‘May I call you Barbara?’ She didn’t wait for the nod to continue, ‘Barbara, your father suffered from severe mental illness. We think he probably did his entire life, but only during the time he came under the care of the state was anyone really cognizant to how bad it was.’

‘Okay?’ Barbara was fairly certain she knew where this was going.

‘I’m sure you have some idea that Anthony was a hoarder. Officially, he had severe Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. In his later adulthood, this disorder manifested itself in his hoarding of receipts, newspapers, magazines and the like. I’m not sure how his OCD affected him in his younger years, or when he had children in the house. He refused to talk about it.’

Barbara saw a flash of metal legs and wooden desktops, Cracker Jack boxes, and *TV Guide*. She shuddered as she tried to focus on what the social worker was saying.

‘He met every two weeks with a state-appointed mental health professional, but he was not a compliant patient, and I must say that I doubt those sessions helped him at all. He refused either to talk in therapy or to take medication to treat his disorder.’ Greta tilted her head as she looked at Barbara, grim. ‘I’m sorry—you look pale. Are you okay? This type of news is sometimes rather a shock for family members.’

Barbara blinked, ‘What? Oh, I’m fine. Really. I’m fine.’

Doubt inscribed itself all over Greta’s long face, visible even behind the ridiculous glasses. ‘Why don’t I get you some water. I don’t have any other appointments today, so there’s no need to rush through this.’ Her face softened, ‘I’ll be just a minute.’

Before Barbara could protest further, Greta’s gray slacks and shoulder pads disappeared into the hallway. Barbara sighed her frustration, realized she was still clutching the pen, and dropped it into her purse. She rubbed her temples, wishing with all her being that Tony had listed someone else—anyone else—or even given the wrong phone number for her. It was a miracle he hadn’t. She closed her eyes, ‘I just want to go home.’

‘I understand completely, Barbara.’

Her eyes flew open at the gravelly voice, embarrassed to have been caught speaking aloud.

Greta wore a sad smile and offered a paper Dixie cup of water. ‘I often think it’s easier to lose those family members we are close to than someone estranged.’

Barbara contemplated the other woman. The social worker waited an awkward moment before setting the cup on the edge of her desk and taking her seat on the other side. It creaked when she sat.

Greta coughed nervously and studied the file. Barbara realized she was still staring, something akin to repulsion stamped on her features. She swallowed and found a tight smile. 'I'm sorry—thank you for the water. Of course this is all...difficult.' She inserted the word as diplomatically as she could, reaching for the cup as a sign that she was ready for the meeting to continue.

'Official diagnosis: compulsive hoarder, possible OCPD' 'refused to take his medication,' 'violent mood swings...sometimes physically violent'—the medical lingo swam through Barbara's brain as she dug around her purse for the unfamiliar shape of the rental car key. She had signed the release form to accept Tony's files after Greta made it clear that she didn't really have the option to refuse.

'He listed your contact information for all emergency and end-of-life purposes. If you don't sign now, the state will just track you down later.' The corners of Greta's mouth pulled down, 'They aren't very nice about it, either. I'd just sign it, if I were you—you have more power to deal with whatever he's left behind this way. And since you've already done the funeral, there's only so much to deal with, honestly. I know you said you've already found storage units – unofficially, I'd tell you that you can just have them emptied, if you don't think there's any reason to go through them.'

The key finally slipped into her hand and Barbara tugged it out of the depths of her handbag, hitting the Alarm button as she did. She growled and dug her thumb

into the Alarm and Unlock buttons until the car stopped howling and chirped happily to tell her it was open and waiting for her. She took a mental broom to the jumble of words cluttering her head and shoved them to the side, tossing the green file folder into the passenger seat.

Barbara slid in and dropped her purse on top of the file before gripping the steering wheel. The key cut into her palm, sandwiched between her death grip and the sun-heated rubber. Overwhelmed by the sheer injustice of it all, she ground her teeth and snatched for the door handle, slamming it shut while she jabbed the key blindly in search of the ignition.

When the car finally started and refreshing air conditioning blew over her, cooling her temper and the summer heat, Barbara closed her eyes. 'Lord, I'm sure you're trying to teach me a lesson. I'm trying to see what it is...but it's hard. Please help me get through these next few days so I can get back to normal, back to You. Please, Lord. Amen.'

She put the car in reverse without looking at the sickly green folder, not bothering to turn on the GPS she had hidden in the glove compartment. She knew the way back to Elizabeth's house.

Greta had also given her a printout full of red and black numbers, pluses and minuses. At first glance, Barbara couldn't make sense of it. 'These are Anthony's active accounts. The pluses are positive balances, the negatives are debts.'

Barbara shook her head against what the social worker was trying to tell her, 'But Tony had a pension. He worked for a big oil company—I can't remember what it was called back then, but he worked long enough to earn a pension. What about that? Where is that money?'

Greta's dour face answered Barbara's question even before she opened her thin-lipped mouth. 'Gone. From what I can tell, Anthony spent his pension long before he came into the care of the state.' She rushed to cut off Barbara's denial, 'But I know he didn't have any outstanding bills from his in-patient care. His Medicaid benefits covered the majority of his fees and I gather that the state garnished some outstanding tax refunds to cover the rest.'

Once she knew what it was, Barbara understood what the balance sheet said: Tony was in debt when he died. The significance of this finally sunk in. She sighed, wishing she could exhale all of her emotional exhaustion, and plucked her earpiece from the cupholder. 'Call Rick Sterling, cell' she told the tinny robotic voice when it asked for her command. She put on her turn signal to enter the freeway while the phone jangled in her ear.

'Barbara?'

For once, Rick's voice didn't set her teeth on edge. Maybe she hadn't been so dumb all those years ago after all. 'Hi Rick, it's me. I just left the social worker and I have some...news.'

Rick waited, having learned in their many years of marriage not to interrupt her when she had something to announce.

'Tony was in debt. A lot, it seems. And now I have to sort out what dies with him and what we will have to deal with.' Her anger gave in to fear as she drove and Barbara broke, tears blurring the road. 'Oh Rick, what a mess! You and I have been so careful, so good with our money. We were set to retire comfortably in the next few years! What are we going to do now?'

Rick's voice sounded canned, but clear. 'Don't worry, Barbara, we'll sort it out. Can you get to a photocopy place or an office store to scan everything and send it to me? I'll read through everything and see what's what. I know you have your hands full out there with the storage units, the funeral and whatnot.'

Barbara could feel her shoulders drop, the tension oozing out of them at Rick's confident words. 'I'll stop on the way back to mom's. I already paid for the funeral on the Visa – I had to do the deposit beforehand and pay the balance today.' She groaned, 'That was a few grand alone. What if he owes even more? Are we going to be saddled with Tony's debt? I don't have any idea how things work after someone dies. '

A beat passed. Rick took a breath and repeated, 'Don't worry, Barbara. We'll figure it out. Just get the rest of those storage units emptied and you can come home while we deal with anything else that comes up.'

Barbara nearly smiled she was so relieved, 'Thank you, Rick. Really, thank you.'

'Sure.' She heard his chair squeak as he adjusted behind his desk. 'Is there anything else, honey? Anything you need me to know or that I can help do?'

This annoyed Barbara sometimes, Rick's tendency always to want to fix something, to *do* something instead of simply listening or nodding sympathetically. This was not one of those times. 'No, no I think that's all. Thank you, again. I'll call you when—oh.' She stopped, a thought crashing through her newfound peace of mind, a golf ball through a window.

'There is something else. A couple things, I guess. I don't think there's anything to be done, really, but I suppose you ought to know. Oh, dang, hold on.'

Barbara turned on the blinker for her exit off the freeway, the aggressive dance of California driving coming back to her as naturally as if she'd never left. Horrible thought.

'Sorry, pulling off the freeway. Anyway, so two big things happened at the funeral today. The first is that mom had an incident – she fainted or something, so she had to go to the hospital. I'll call Jonah and see how she's doing after I get back to the house. I heard him tell the paramedics she has cancer, metastasized. Obviously no one's told me anything about it, so I don't really know what's going on.'

'Oh Barbara, I'm sorry. You know I've always liked her. You and David okay?' Rick's voice was genuine, sympathetic.

She bit the inside of her cheek, 'Well, I mean we're alright. But there's something else.' She could still see Jean's satisfied smirk. 'Some people came to the funeral because they saw an announcement in the paper – I didn't know, but the assisted living facility arranges that whenever someone dies.'

She stopped, trying to figure out how to tell Rick. 'Do you remember Todd and Tim? Shirley's boys?'

Rick made a noncommittal noise that Barbara took as recognition. 'Well, Tony was apparently with a woman before he married my mom, too. She and her two daughters showed up today.' She waited for Rick to react.

'Uh, huh. Wow. I'm not real sure what to say to that, Barbara.'

It was the right answer. 'To be honest, neither do I. I have no desire to kindle new relationships with half-siblings or anyone else related to Tony. I hardly keep up with my full brother as it is.' As she said it, Barbara was a little horrified at the truth.

Rick cleared his throat, 'No, I understand. It's a bit much to handle at this point in life...Not to sound callous, but will you even need to talk to them after this is all done?'

She pulled into a spot and shifted into park before sighing loudly. 'Well, that's sort of the other thing, because we didn't really have a funeral. I mean, the chaplain did give a short service, but we also opened up the floor to anyone who needed to say something about Tony.'

'It got a little ugly. That's when mom collapsed, actually. She spoke first.' Gathering up the file, keys and purse, she opened the car door. 'I'm at Office Depot now.'

Papers rustled in her ear, 'Ok hon. Call me later if you want talk more. Sounds like you've been through the ringer the last few days.'

'That's an understatement. Love you.'

'Love you too, bye.'

The house was dark, although the sun was still up when Barbara pulled into the driveway. She'd faxed everything to Rick, then made copies, and scanned all the documents to an overpriced thumb drive before emailing a PDF of the whole thing to Rick. She didn't want to chance losing anything. The sick feeling gnawing at her gut since she'd arrived in California warned her that things really could get worse, but Barbara wasn't about to do anything to help them along.

She fished out the hide-a-key Jonah kept in the potted palm beside the walkway and let herself into the house. She locked the door behind her and stopped in the foyer, where she was assaulted by Rupert. Yipping and whining, he jumped up

and down, catching his paw on her hose. Barbara pushed him away with her foot, 'Rupert, down!' She shook her head at the run in her hose, closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. 'Thank you, Lord for one quiet night.'

Barbara recalled why the house was empty and felt a pang of reproach at the prayer. 'Lord, please watch over my mother, Elizabeth, tonight. I'm not certain what's happening in her body, but please bring healing and peace to her, and to Jonah. Amen.' The follow-up assuaged the guilt and she opened her eyes to grope around for the light switches in the hallway.

Tony's open box took up most of the space on the guest room desk, so Barbara dropped the new documents and copies in on top. It was less than half-full, even with the folder and new papers. She had already thrown out all useless junk the assisted living facility had kept and the jars of change had gone to Living Faith Church the day before.

Rupert's anxiety worsened when Barbara sat on the bed to kickoff her pumps. It dawned on her that the Biewer had been cooped up inside all day. She led him to the kitchen and let him out to the backyard.

'Almost done.' The thought made her smile as she looked to see if Jonah had stocked anything healthy in the fridge. Rupert had finished his business and was scratching at the back door. She tried to ignore him, but gave in when he started to bark.

After an uninteresting dinner of George Foreman-grilled chicken and dry iceberg salad, Barbara called Rick back.

'Hey hon, I saw your email. I was just sitting down to read through everything. How're you doing?'

Barbara leaned back, 'I'm okay. I was just thinking that this nightmare is almost over. I can come home soon and be done with all of this.'

'Almost. Don't worry about all this paperwork until I've read through it. You just focus on finishing up those storage units and whatnot.' Rick paused and Barbara could hear him clicking and typing, 'Oh, have you heard anything from Jonah? How's your mom?'

She looked down at Rupert sitting at her feet, big doggy brown eyes gazing up at her expectantly. 'I haven't heard anything yet. I didn't want to call and bother him if they're still doing tests or something.' She glanced at the microwave, 'It's almost seven. I guess I'll call after I hang up with you to check on them.'

'Okey doke. Did you ask the social worker about Tony's pension?'

'Hmm? Oh, yes. She said it was all gone. I know the name of the company he worked for is in those papers somewhere. Are you looking at the PDF now?'

'Yeah. We should probably double-check that. You think he really did spend it all?'

She didn't have to think, 'Absolutely. Tony never could hold on to money. He loved to spend it, to buy things – well, junk. Sometimes he bought stuff for other people; he always had a gift for the kids whenever we visited, but mostly it was just stuff. He'd get hung up on something and have to have it, but never just one.

'Remember those awful little troll dolls? The ones with the bright neon hair – they came out when we were kids, I think, but got really popular again around when Deirdre was little.'

'Yeah, I remember. Deirdre had a small army of them she used to leave lying around everywhere. Suckers were creepy. Hurt like hell when you stepped on them.'

'Those are the ones. Tony started buying them at some point and he must have had hundreds of them. They started out on shelves, but he had so many that Shirley started to store them in big plastic bins. I think Deirdre got her trolls from Tony, actually. Well, I guess it would have to have been Shirley who gave them to her. I don't think Tony would have parted with any of them willingly. He always thought they'd be worth something some day. And I certainly wouldn't ever have bought those awful things for Deirdre.'

'Find any of 'em in the storage units?'

'Actually, no. I wonder if Shirley finally got sick of them and gave them away or threw them out. Or they could have been in the unit Tony stopped paying for. Who knows.' A horrible thought struck Barbara. 'Oh no, Rick, what if they're in the units I haven't gone through yet?' She grimaced, 'You're right – they are creepy. I don't want to find a storage locker full of those little plastic faces, hundreds of eyes staring. Ugh.'

Rick chuckled, 'If you do, just toss 'em. Can't be anyone who wants them anymore. Besides, you're probably right and Shirley did away with them long ago. No need to worry.'

'Let's hope so.'

They fell silent, Rick reading and Barbara studying the kitsch on the kitchen wall. She thought of the letters sitting in the shoebox, still largely unread. Rupert had given up on her and curled up to sleep on his bed in the corner.

'Rick, did I tell you about the box of letters we found? From my mom to Tony when they first got married—he was working in Texas.'

'Nope.'

Her brother's name reminded Barbara of the familiar claustrophobia his house had stirred. 'Oh, and I went over to his house on Saturday. It didn't go very well.'

'No?'

'No. We've always butted heads and obviously this is rough on both of us, but I was really on edge the whole time I was there. He asked me to come over to apologize for his behavior at the storage units. He really flipped out on Saturday, Rick. I know I didn't really say much when I talked to you, but he was yelling and cursing at me. That's why I left.'

'Ah. So did he?' He started to type.

'Apologize? Oh, I suppose so, but then we got into it all over again. I couldn't think straight or I might have just walked out. Really wish I had.'

'That sucks, hon. Sorry to hear that.'

Barbara talked over him, 'I'd forgotten, but he started playing with radios while he was in middle school. I wasn't around Tony's place much by then, but I vaguely remember coming over one time and the kitchen was covered in dozens of metal boxes, wires everywhere.' She massaged her temples as she remembered the dim rooms of her brother's duplex. 'I think David's obsessed with them now. I mean, there were electronics and wires literally everywhere in his house. He had one whole room stuffed full of radios and equipment. Everything is organized in boxes

and bins, and it's clean, but even his kitchen was full of gadgets and appliances. It was...unnerving.'

She paused, 'Rick, I think he's hoarding. Like Tony – just different.'

'You didn't say anything about it, did you?'

Barbara shook her head, though she knew he couldn't see. 'No, but I couldn't stay there very long, too much déjà vu or something. Ew, he has a tortoise that just roams around the place. It's so weird.' She closed her eyes against the memory. 'Sorry, that's a different story.'

'So what did you talk about, then?' Rick had stopped typing.

'He showed me Tony's old Chevy. He's been fixing it, restoring it. It actually looks pretty amazing, he even drove it Sunday. And he did apologize for everything he said at the storage units the other day. Oh, speaking of the storage units – so those letters of mom's that David found - she talks about us when we were babies, about her life, that type of thing. Most of it's pretty boring.'

Rick heard her hesitation, 'But?'

She scrunched her face, 'Well, some of it's not. Reading them is weird, but I asked mom about a couple of them Saturday night. She told me some things about Tony, how they got married to begin with, some of the things he did...he really wasn't a good person, Rick. And he was pretty horrible to my mother. She was miserable and had no one to help her. You know I don't believe in divorce, but now that I know more of what happened, I do understand why she finally left. I can't fault her for it.

'It's difficult seeing David now, though. I think maybe that's why I reacted so strongly to his house. That's what we fought about, before I left. He's still so bitter,

angry really, that mom took me and left him with Tony. But she couldn't—' Barbara choked, surprised to find a lump in her throat.

'Barbara? Hon, you alright?'

She swallowed and sucked in a shaky breath, dabbing the moisture from the corners of her eyes with a napkin. 'Sorry. I guess I didn't realize how much this is all affecting me. And mom has cancer... I'll be okay, though.'

'Do you want me to let you go? Why don't you go take a shower and have a minute to yourself, then call Jonah to check on your mom. You can tell me more about David and those letters later. Just focus on the essentials and make sure you take care of yourself, too. Okay?'

She nodded, 'Okay. Thanks, Rick.'

'Of course, honey. That's what I'm here for. Remember: you're almost done. I'll talk to you tomorrow, alright?'

'Okay. Good night.'

'I love you, Barbara. Hang in there.'

'Love you, too.'

She cleared the table and loaded her dishes into the dishwasher, filling Rupert's food and water bowls as an afterthought. She watched as he happily buried his face in the kibble. She called Jonah as she walked in to the bathroom.

He answered on the third ring. 'Barbara?'

'Hi Jonah. I was just calling to check in. How's mom?'

'Oh, she'll be fine. Doctors think she was just exhausted, maybe too much stress, low blood sugar or something. They're doing some tests.' His voice was tired, dull.

She couldn't think of a tactful way to ask. 'Jonah, mom has cancer?'

For a moment all she heard was the white noise of the hospital behind him.

He sniffed, 'Yes, Barbara.'

Suddenly she was furious, 'Why didn't anyone tell me? I've been here almost a week. How serious is it?'

'We didn't want to worry you none. We only told David cause he was helping me get her to and from chemo for a while there. Your mother didn't want anyone making a fuss. It's been hard enough without people moping about.'

'Jonah, she's my *mother*. You should have told me – she should have. A phone call, anything.' She grit her teeth against the anger. 'It's just that I feel like an outsider.'

'Now, Barbara, we never meant nothin' by it. Your mother's always been the private type and she doesn't like to be a burden to nobody.' He cleared his throat, 'Can we talk about this later? I'm staying the night here. Doc thinks she'll be fine to come home tomorrow. We can sit down and talk then.'

'Fine.' Her eyes burned.

'Alright then. Say, would you mind feeding Rupert and letting him out?'

She rolled her eyes and sighed, 'Already taken care of.'

'Thanks. Don't you worry, now. G'night.'

'Jonah? Keep me updated, alright?'

'Sure thing. Bye now.'

'Bye.'

She turned on the shower taps to let the water heat up and returned to her room to drop her phone on the bed and pull her pajamas from her suitcase.

Once in the shower, Barbara sank under the needles of water, her fury dissolving. Chin on her knees, she gave in to the sobs tearing up the back of her throat. She rocked back and forth beneath the shower's rain, steam clouding the space around her. And she cried.

It occurred to her, somewhere in the back of her mind, that California was in a drought and she was wasting water. She couldn't remember if *waste not, want not* was a scripture verse or just an old proverb. It didn't matter. Barbara couldn't focus on the thought—on any thought. Each time she tried to hold onto something in her head, it slipped from her grasp.

Images, ideas, shadows flashed through her mind in a jumble, frightening in their chaos and speed, and Barbara wept. Her stomach muscles knotted tight, until she could hardly breathe, every exhalation terrifying and tempting in the possibility that it might be the last she could make. Just when she knew she would suffocate, her body took over and forced her to fill her lungs with the warm air, half vapor from the steam. She coughed out, 'God! Oh God...'

She sat that way, sobbing and repeating her prayer, rocking, suffocating, and finding miraculous breath again, until the water ran cold. Her skin pickled and wrinkled as she shivered, the blue of her veins an eerie contrast under her whitening goosepimpled skin. It took a superhuman effort for Barbara to stretch out a trembling left hand to the faucet and twist the taps off.

Her arm dropped limp into the tub beside her. Distracted by the dull sound, Barbara lifted her hand to examine it. Otherwise thin and straight, her fingers all thickened slightly at the knuckle—probably from an anxious childhood of cracking and popping them. Her wedding band had always spun on her ring finger, but a size

smaller wouldn't fit over the knuckle. The skin on the back of her hand was hazily translucent, wax paper atop mysterious lines and bumps, the paper crumpled, wrinkled and tired—already used.

She held her hand before her face, regarding it, some alien thing belonging to a stranger. And suddenly Barbara felt very old, incredibly small, monumentally insignificant, and unspeakably, impossibly tired.

She awoke still folded into the tub, shivering beneath her cold wet hair. The burn of tears waited behind her eyes, a heavy dark cloud hovered, ready to descend if she lost focus. Barbara lifted herself up and sent a silent appeal to God for strength. She planted each foot solidly on the pink shag bath mat and looked up to find an old woman peering back at her from the mirror. But that stranger wasn't Barbara, already reaching for a towel.

March 5, 1959

Dear Tony,

Baby is coming! Susan is on her way to take me to the hospital, then take Barbara Marie home while I am there. I've called mother, so father will bring her as soon as he has time to make the drive.

Love,

Elizabeth, & ---

March 18, 1959

Congratulations! You are the proud father of a beautiful baby boy. David Jonathon Chase was born on March 5, and the doctors tell me everything went smoothly—I wouldn't know, I don't remember a thing! I just woke up and the nurse told me I had a perfect little boy in the bassinette. They didn't let me hold him right away, but oh how my heart filled up when they did! He is positively precious and I already love him. (I do hope you like the name – you never did tell me what you preferred. I think it's a nice, strong Biblical name).

We've only just been allowed to leave the hospital. Last night was our first back at home. Father brought Mother last week to take care of Barbara Marie while I was still lying-in. She will stay for another week, at least, to make sure I will be alright with Baby David and toddling little Miss Barbara Marie. (Our clever little girl has even taught mother how to use the television set so she can watch Shirley Temple.) Thank goodness the ladies from church had already set up a schedule to send casseroles over for us, as I only had two ready in the freezer.

Well, I am exhausted, so this is all I will write for now. I think Baby David has your eyes though – they are the most incredible blue. I hope he keeps them.

Everyone at the hospital says he is a very handsome baby and I think he is just the most beautiful little boy I have ever seen!

With love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby David

Barbara permitted herself a growl and tried another key. The twelfth was obviously too fat to slide into the padlock, but thirteen was lucky. She turned the key and let the lock fall open into her hand.

She drew an exaggerated breath as she took stock of the packed locker. 5'x5': 25 square feet of Tony's junk. 25 square feet too many. The boxes seemed to grow larger as she stood there, burying Barbara in their gloom, suffocating her in the dark. Shadows of decades-old desks loomed. She shined a flashlight into the crowded space. From what she could see, it was filled from floor to ceiling of unlabeled, miscellaneous containers of Tony's junk.

A wave of anxiety washed over her and she gasped, heart threatening to batter through her ribs. Embarrassed by her imagination and weakness, Barbara shook her head, dispelling the fantasy. She had work to do. There was no time to dwell on childish fears or distant memories. She hung her purse on the door, pulled the gloves from her jeans pocket and slipped them on. She thought of Matt and found herself wishing the long-haired entrepreneur were around to help her today.

She had forgone the pop-up dumpster and brought only garbage bags this time. She pinched one between her gloved fingers, rubbing to open it, and set it aside. She pursed her lips, pulled on her dust mask and flipped open the flaps of the first cardboard box. Faces framed by feathered hair stared up at her from *Life*. Trash. Her jaw tightened, but she shot off a prayer of thanks. After all, it could have been the top locker.

She slid the box off the stack and let it fall, tensing against its heavy thunk. The locker was only the third one from the end of its interior corridor, so Barbara

kicked the box toward the end of the hall, narrowly missing the handtruck she'd borrowed from the manager. She reached for the next box.

An hour later, the hallway was choked with boxes crammed full of *Life*, Cracker Jack boxes, and *TV Guide*. Barbara had made it halfway down the third stack of boxes and reached the point where she had to step into the locker and crouch awkwardly to pull out each box. She paused to check her watch and drain another bottle of water. She'd bought a case this morning. This was bottle number four and it was only ten a.m.

She squeezed the back of her aching neck and slid the empty plastic bottle into the trash bag before ducking into the locker again. The next box wasn't store-bought like the others. It was an old produce crate, faded images of oranges amidst holes along the sides and a piece of cardboard taped on as a top.

Barbara set the odd carton down and found the box cutter she'd tossed into the cart as an afterthought during her second trip to the hardware store. Three quick slices and she lifted the makeshift lid to reveal papers, yellow despite the harsh pink of the hall's fluorescent lights. Barbara wedged a gloved finger under the first layer and retrieved a paper-clipped bundle. Under the blank yellow cardstock, she found sheets from a pad of old graphing paper, covered in pale blue ink. Barbara frowned as she flipped through the stack and scanned each page. Columns of numbers, pluses and minuses, and dates filled the pages of green grid, headed by unrecognizable scribbles.

She tossed the meaningless pages atop the black trash bag in defeat. She kicked a box of *Life* closer and sat down on the makeshift seat to sort through the

rest of the produce box. The next three bundles she pulled out were more of the same jottings on the same lined paper and went into the same stack of trash.

Folded into an over-sized sheet of blank paper to protect it, the next set of papers was heavy weight and smooth. Squinting, Barbara realized she'd left her reading glasses in her purse. Dread met her when she stood up to retrieve them. Despite her best effort, the locker still looked more than half full. A box of matches would be far quicker and more effective. The thought brought a grim smile to her face.

Aided by her readers, she could clearly see that she was holding an old property deed. She skimmed over the calligraphy to find the basics: address, date, name. Confused, she reread the deed three times. The address was in El Monte, California, sold to Anthony Chase on November 4, 1957. Barbara did the math: she would have been four months old. Tony and Elizabeth had already been living in their Lakewood house for at least a year. Elizabeth once told Barbara that her parents had helped Tony with the down payment as a wedding gift. El Monte was not Lakewood.

She pressed her thumb between her brows, rueful that she hadn't taken Greta Harburg's advice and let the locker go to auction. She shook her head and set the cream paper down as the start of a 'Don't Throw Away' pile. She'd deal with it later. Barbara watched the dust dance through the air in front of the locker, acutely aware that she'd be buried in Tony's ghosts if she allowed herself to be drawn into every possibly interesting piece of paper. Thoughts of matches flitted through her head anew, but she didn't smile. She was so close to leaving Tony behind for good.

She bent to move the half-empty produce box to the side, but picked up the topmost paper despite her resolution. It looked like a fairly recent tax record. She lifted a few more sheets out by their corners. More taxes. She set them aside to examine later, wondering what happened if Tony owed back taxes. Surely the government wouldn't expect payment after his death. She prayed it wouldn't.

More graph paper covered in chicken scratch came out of the box next, straight into trash. A fat document envelope was wedged into the box beneath, but when she finally managed to pull it out, Barbara found more stuffed underneath it. She set the first yellow envelope back in and was about to drop the rest of the 'Keep' papers in with it when she a small, fading note in the bottom corner of the otherwise unmarked package caught her attention.

'Kids.'

It could mean anything, but Barbara recognized Tony's hand: all caps, left-handed, forever smudged. Her third graders had better penmanship.

She hefted the envelope in her hand, torn. It could contain anything or a whole bunch of useless nothing. Her watch, loud in the silent hallway, marked the passing seconds without sympathy. She peered at the paper, trying to see inside. Emotions tumbled through her, anger passing the baton to frustration so quickly that it took Barbara two solid minutes to understand that she was terrified.

Tony was dead. Yet like a child throwing a tantrum, he'd tightened his cold hands around her ankle and forced her to drag him along. This wasn't just an envelope, labeled by a man with whom she shared little but DNA. It was a trap.

He had already ambushed her with two surprise half-siblings, a third ex-wife, and his sick obsession. Barbara was no longer in control—if she'd ever been—of Tony's death.

'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.' The Psalm pushed through to her lips.

She felt fear's grip slipping and it struck Barbara how ridiculous the whole thing was: a grown woman, standing in a storage unit, scared by some envelope that could—for all she knew—be full of old newspapers or report cards. The last thought wasn't helpful. The idea of Tony collecting his six children's school reports repulsed her.

'It's just an envelope.' She used her fingernail to bend the metal clasp and slid out a sheath of papers stuck together with a cracked rubber band. She dropped the envelope into the box and pulled her glasses down onto her nose. She couldn't decipher any of the faded ink on the top document other than the word 'County.' It was probably more trash, but she shuffled it behind the pile anyway. She didn't bother to peel off the fragments of dried rubber.

The second sheet was still legible and Barbara immediately recognized it. She'd seen it before. It was her birth certificate.

Panic fluttered in her throat as she quickly sorted through the rest of the stack. A few now-blank sheets were interspersed between the others, but they were all there, all six of them. Alphabetized and orderly, just like everything else he'd collected: Barbara, David, Jean, June, Tim, Todd.

Her stomach tried to flee and Barbara barely made it to a box of *Life* before she heaved.

She was lying on the bed, one arm flung over her eyes, working to collect her runaway thoughts when her phone rang. She forced open one eye to recognize the local area code but not the number. She let it ring once more before answering. 'Hello?'

'Hi, Mrs. Sterling? This is Matt, from Cheap N Easy Storage.' He waited.

She sat up, wary. 'Hi Matt, this is Barbara. What can I help you with?'

'Oh, it's nothing much. I thought you'd like to know I hauled those bedframes over to Goodwill. I found a friend of a friend who'll buy those cassette tapes off me, too. You sure you don't want the money?'

She sighed against the misgivings stacking up in response to Matt's voice. 'Thank goodness. I thought you might be calling to tell me I missed something important in that locker. Thank you for everything. But no, keep whatever you make from those tapes. It's the least I can do for all the help you gave me.' She closed her eyes in relief.

Matt cleared his throat, 'Well, that's the other reason I called.'

'Oh lord, what did you find? I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you to deal with that stuff—'

'Nothing bad, Mrs. Sterling. I just found a box that didn't have tapes in it. It's a shoebox, says Elizabeth on it.' He paused, 'I didn't open it, thought that would be rude.'

'It says "Elizabeth"?'

'Yes'm.'

'Matt, would it be too much to ask if you'd open that box and give me an idea of what's inside? If you wouldn't mind.' Her thoughts leapfrogged, tantalized at the possibility of more letters.

'No problem. Hang on just a second. I'll put you on speakerphone. I'm in my office, got the box on my desk here.'

Barbara could hear shuffling. After what seemed like an impossibly long time, Matt spoke.

'Huh, well, it's mostly papers. There are a few pictures in here of a couple at their wedding, some babies and kids. Nothing written on the backs of the photos. Looks like maybe a diploma or certificate, too, for an Elizabeth Chase. There's a notebook full of recipes cut out from magazines, a few handwritten.' He paused.

'Anything else?'

'A marriage certificate and a few other official-looking papers. I'm not sure what they all are. You want to keep this, then?'

'Yes!' Quieter, Barbara repeated herself, 'Yes, please. I'll stop by this afternoon, if that's alright.'

She could hear Matt's crooked smile, 'Yes'm, I'll be here. Glad to help.'

'Thanks again, Matt. I'll see you soon.'

'Bye, Mrs. Sterling.'

'Bye.'

May 12, 1959

Dear Tony,

My word, the medicine Dr. Steele put me on is such a miracle! I take it first thing in the morning and everything seems to run smooth as magic for the rest of the day. I do have to be careful to drink plenty of water. I learned this the hard way after coming down with a blinding headache the first time I took it. Dr. Steele said this is normal and now I'm more careful.

Baby David is growing so quickly now and he is such a chatterbox! Poor Barbara can barely get a word in, he talks so much. It's funny to see them reverse like that. Of course it's all nonsense baby talk, but she talks right back to him like they both understand each other, sweet girl. I seem to get so much done during the day now. We have even started taking daily walks again. We go all the way down to the new park a few blocks over most days. I've met a few mothers and Barbara has even made some little friends. I like that she will already be friends with these children when they all go to school together. I know school is years away, but the other mothers and I have all been chatting about it, of course.

Barbara Marie can count up to ten now with almost no prompting, and she is learning her ABCs. she can recite up to L and I'm so proud of her. (We've been practicing every day). Oh, and I Love Lucy is our new favorite television program. Susan just told me that Lucille Ball is a redhead - who knew! I must admit that I find her absolutely sidesplitting, too, so I watch right along with Barbara.

When Baby David is a little closer to a year, I think I will be able to take the children to Wednesday services at church. I was talking to Susan Bellow about it because she's just started to take Georgie (he is only a few months older than

Barbara, remember) and she said it's a shorter service, but that a visiting missionary often delivers the sermon. I do so love to hear missionaries preach. They're always so thrilling and live in such exotic places.

I hope all is well. I haven't had a letter from you in some weeks. We all miss you.

Affectionately,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie and Baby David

Barbara sat staring at the restaurant for ten minutes, hands on the steering wheel although the Prius was in park. 'Hometown Buffet –America's Best Buffet!' the green and white sign above the double doors boasted. It was an oxymoron: like jumbo shrimp, best and buffet just didn't make sense. No such thing.

Like everything else to do with Tony, this hadn't been her choice. She dug her thumb and forefinger into her sinuses, recalling the exact moment she'd lost control of the funeral.

It had been Jean, still smiling secretively, who made the quiet suggestion to bring the 'family' together over a meal. Barbara's jaw dropped, aghast at the thought of spending an entire meal forced to chitchat politely with pseudo-relatives whose mere existence she resented.

Before Barbara could convince her tongue to move, June had chimed in—too eager and bright. She'd missed her chance to intervene, so Barbara clenched her teeth and hoped that everyone else would hate the idea as much as she did. Tim and Todd had barely spoken through the entire ordeal. As she replayed the scene in her head, Barbara had the awful thought that if no one else showed, she would have to spend the evening alone with Jean, June and Janet.

A tap on the window made her shriek. The jolt turned to anger when she recognized David bent over at her door. She grabbed her purse and unclicked her seatbelt, shoving the door open so fast she nearly knocked him over.

David brought his hands up in defense, 'Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. Just wanted to make sure you were ok. You been sitting there awhile.'

The concern on his face pulled his brow tight and Barbara noticed lines in her younger brother's face that she hadn't seen before. 'No, it's fine. I was just engrossed in my thoughts. I didn't mean to yell.'

He jerked his head in the direction of the restaurant, 'Ready then?'

She lifted one eyebrow.

David grinned, 'Right. Let's go get this circus over with.'

They didn't have to ask the hostess where to go. Barbara had picked out Jean's fluorescent pink blouse from the parking lot. Once inside, she felt oddly grateful that David had come and she wouldn't have to endure this alone. But when they turned the corner around the buffet line, it was David who groaned. Every one of Tony's progeny sat at a long table, plus one ex-wife, and all of them seemed to be talking at once through mouthfuls of buffet food.

'Lord help me.' Barbara didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until she felt David's hand squeeze her shoulder.

'Lord help us both.'

Someone mumbled, 'Scuse me' and jostled David, drawing the table's attention.

'Oh! Barbara and David are here everyone! Here—' Jean gestured toward two empty seats across the table from her, billows of blinding magenta following her hand.

Barbara wondered how the older woman had managed to keep the wings from dragging through the gravy drenching the food on her plate. Everything was drowning in brown grease.

David coughed, 'Ah, thanks.'

Clouds of pink polyester whooshed past again, 'Why don't you grab plates and food before you sit? Everyone else is here.' Her smile was wide, but didn't reach her heavily made-up eyes.

The thought of eating anything that had been sitting under a heat lamp brought bile to Barbara's throat. 'Oh, thank you. I'm afraid I'm not terribly hungry though.' The tang reminded her of the papers she'd found that morning and her stomach's churning worsened.

David glanced sideways at her, 'I'll be just a minute then. Can I get you a water, Barbara?'

Too late, she realized she had just talked herself into sitting at the table alone with her half-siblings for as long as it took David to load a plate. 'Oh—I can get it. I'll just take a look around the buffet and see if anything strikes me.'

Jean wasn't listening, already engaged in conversation with the person next to her, Tim maybe—or Todd. Barbara couldn't remember which brother was which. A forkful of gravy-covered something punctuated her new half-sister's words. Barbara shuddered and turned toward the buffet line, resigned.

Grease, breading, and gravy oozed under the heat lamps in various shades of brown. On the salad bar, Barbara watched a fly land on the wilting Caesar salad mix. She found the drink station and picked up five different red plastic cups before finding one that wasn't crusted with lipstick or food. She rinsed it out twice before filling it with water from the soda fountain.

David was pondering the buffet like it was life's most complex philosophical quandary. Barbara rolled her eyes, reminded once more how different she was from her brother. She tried to imagine how she would have fared if she'd been the child

left to be raised by Tony. The thought was enough to make her stomach resume its churning, pushed by the stench of fried food.

She left David to his meditation and navigated her way back to the table, still noisily making its way through plates of food. Some had even made it to dessert. Barbara sat awkwardly, attempting to make herself as small as possible so she wouldn't brush elbows with the skinny woman next to her—June. Her half-sister didn't pause as she chattered through mouthfuls of artificially colored gelatin and frosted cake.

Barbara sipped her water, the only barrier between her and the rest of Tony's brood. Jean also ignored her, continuing an enthusiastic diatribe to one of Shirley's sons and Janet, to her right. She was talking about a TV show Barbara had never heard of.

She hadn't paid much attention to the brothers at the funeral. It had to be Todd now at June's mercy. Tim was married, according to Tony's address book and David, and Todd's left hand was empty aside from delicately manicured fingers. Before she could wonder any more about Tony's other sons, David returned from the line, two plates piled high.

Jean saw David and finally acknowledged Barbara. 'Didn't see anything you liked, Barbara?' The faintest hint of aggression tinged her voice.

'Like I said—I'm just not very hungry.' Barbara met her half-sister's gaze and regarded her closely for the first time. Aside from the sun damage and lines—made more obvious under layers of make-up sinking into them, Jean wasn't unattractive. They had the same eyes. Tony's eyes: wide, sharp, deep blue.

‘Barbara?’ David was staring at her expectantly, half his salad speared on his suspended fork.

Barbara remembered the fly and tried not to wince. She forced a tight smile, ‘Sorry, just thinking.’

‘I’m sure you have a lot to think about.’ Janet’s face was an unreadable bronze mask.

Everyone was watching Barbara. Plates in varying states of griminess covered the table in an oily mosaic. The restaurant’s noise moved around them as they waited for her.

Finally, ‘Yes, I suppose it is quite a lot.’ She wasn’t sure what they wanted from her.

Jean raised a defined eyebrow, ‘Tony had some storage units full of stuff, right?’

Barbara could punch David for giving that tidbit away. ‘Yes, he did. Full of trash, mostly.’ She took a small sip, hoping David would eat quickly so they could leave, their familial obligation fulfilled. It was the least he could do at this point.

Jean’s smile was sweet, her shimmery lip-gloss miraculously intact after her meal. ‘What makes you think it’s all junk? Has anyone else looked at it?’ She frowned in exaggerated concern, ‘You can’t be going through it all by yourself. Is David helping you?’

Sensing danger, David jumped in, ‘Well, yeah. As I can, around work, you know.’

Barbara nodded at the lie. ‘He has a truck.’

‘But what’s in those things that you need a truck?’ Sensing weakness, Jean focused on David, the rest of the table following her gaze.

‘Just boxes of junk, mostly. Straight to the dumpster, most of it. Those Cracker Jack boxes, magazines, TV guides...’ David shrugged and stabbed another forkful of a cheese-smothered casserole.

Jean pulled her frowning mouth down farther, ‘You mean you’re just throwing all our father’s things away? Without giving the rest of us a chance to see?’

Suspicious, Barbara narrowed her eyes, trying to see Jean’s ploy. Although Matt and the tapes came immediately to mind, she wasn’t about to play this game. ‘It really is trash, Jean. Just boxes and boxes of trash. Old magazines, candy boxes, TV guides—garbage, all of it. And Tony asked that I be the one to manage everything. He wrote a letter and—even his will, which I got from his social worker yesterday—names me sole executor.’ She was aggravated, the muscles in her neck tensing. Jean should have been grateful that Barbara was shouldering all the work. Taking on Tony’s trash and debt certainly hadn’t been her choice.

Todd and Tim exchanged a look over the table, but Barbara couldn’t read their expressions. She wondered why they had agreed to come. From what she could tell, they looked like they had their lives together.

Jean was talking again, ‘Oh, that’s right. You did tell us that. And now you have his will.’ She looked around the table to gather support, ‘Well, no one else has seen it. We’re all Tony’s family, and we’ve all been closer to him than you ever was. Why’d he pick you?’

Barbara set her hands in her lap, squeezing her frustration out on her left thumb. She arranged her stern teacher’s face and looked straight back at Jean, into

Tony's eyes. 'I'm sure I don't know.' There was no mistaking the antagonism. The air was heavy around Barbara, pressing against her. David had abandoned his fork, biting a nail as his eyes flicked between his sisters.

Jean was triumphant, 'Exactly! No one knows. What's in those storage units? What's in that will? Why haven't you shown us!' She leaned forward, snarling, 'What are you hiding, Barbara?'

That was when Barbara realized it was an ambush.

David didn't want Barbara to drive, but nothing in the world could have compelled her to leave herself at the mercy of another family member for transportation after the last few days. She knew he was right, though. She trembled the entire thirty-minute drive back to Elizabeth's house.

She very nearly pulled into the first church she passed, a wild idea of medieval sanctuary seizing her, but the sign advertised it as Seventh Day Adventist. Instead, she found herself muttering every scripture on fear she could recall, starting with the entire Lord's Prayer—she couldn't remember how the verse on fear began so she recited it all.

She was in such a rush to get out of the car that she caught her purse on the gearshift and almost ripped the strap from the bag, wrenching her right shoulder. She forced herself to breathe and rescue the abused satchel. It wouldn't do any good to hurt herself – or the bag. She leaned in to grab the shoebox she'd forgotten from the passenger floorboard. Resisting the urge to slam the door as hard as she could, Barbara pushed it deliberately closed and listened for the double-chirp as she felt for the lock button on the remote.

Jonah was standing in the open front doorway. 'So, how'd it go?' He took in the purse clutched in her shaking hand, the shoebox in the other, and for once, her stepfather seemed to understand. 'Come on in and sit down, honey. I'll make some tea. And you probably didn't eat, did ya?'

For the first time in the forty-three years she had known Jonah, Barbara felt the urge to hug him. She walked past him into the foyer. 'Thank you.'

She dropped the insulted handbag onto the growing stack of papers on the desk and started to sink onto the edge of the bed, but the sight of boxes brought her abruptly upright. She couldn't be surrounded by Tony right now. Still, she was surprised to find herself moving toward the living room, calling for Elizabeth, shoebox in hand.

'In here, Barbara.' Her mother's thin voice floated down the hall.

Barbara had to smile when she saw Elizabeth reclining on the couch, surrounded by dozens of bright bouquets, a haphazard army of 'Get Well Soon' cards, and more than a few boxes of candies. Wigless but happy, Elizabeth looked for all the world like a child in her nightie, a half-eaten chocolate in her hand and a smudge on her chin. Rupert lay at her feet, chewing noisily on a squeaky toy.

'Come sit.' She motioned with the chocolate toward the loveseat, piled full of pillows and blankets, signs of Jonah's solicitousness.

Barbara cleared a space and obeyed, setting the box on the cushion beside her.

'It must have been awful,' Elizabeth stated through the rest of the truffle.

She sighed loudly, surprised at how grateful she was to be here, sitting in this room, on this sofa, with her mother. 'It was. It really, truly was.'

Elizabeth examined the heart-shaped box resting on her stomach, consulting the lid to map out the filling options before gleefully selecting one. She nibbled at the corner, 'Do you want to talk about it?'

Barbara honestly didn't know. Her mother had never offered to listen to her before. How different this trip—her life—might have been if Elizabeth had. She might not have gone out with Tommy her junior year, might never have had Nat, married Rick, had Deirdre. She would have been someone else entirely, hardly Barbara at all. The thought was prickly, discomfiting.

'Of course, you can always just sit and eat chocolate with me. I read somewhere it's as good for boosting your mood as cocaine—and I would know.'

Elizabeth chuckled as she popped the rest of the candy into her mouth.

Barbara gaped. She couldn't remember ever hearing her mother joke—about anything. It was so unexpected that Barbara barely registered the reference. For so long, Elizabeth had been an enigma, a puzzle Barbara stopped trying to solve. She went to church, volunteered, tithed, and seemed otherwise content to live life from her seat on the sofa, watching TV and crocheting.

This was not that Elizabeth. A wave of sadness and regret washed over Barbara; her life wasn't the only one shaped and constricted by Tony.

'Are there any hazelnuts left?' Barbara ate candy exactly three times a year: a Cadbury crème egg at Easter, a Reese's Peanut Butter cup at Halloween, and a candy cane at Christmas. But the world had changed.

An unopened box came flying toward her, 'Not in this one. I ate them all—they're my favorite.'

Barbara had never considered what Elizabeth's favorite anything was before. She grinned, 'Mine too.' She slid the ribbon aside and pulled the top off to find the right truffle. 'Mom, what's your favorite color?'

She was already seeking out another candy, 'Oh, lavender, honey. That's easy.' She fished another one out, 'Mmm, salted caramel's nice, too. Why? What's yours?'

She savored the melting chocolate, the thick shell decadent around the velvet of the creamed hazelnut filling. Barbara had forbidden Rick to give her chocolates years ago. Now she almost wished she hadn't. 'Eggplant.'

'Oh, that's nice, too.' Elizabeth stuck her tongue out to catch the string of caramel stretching down from the bitten half. 'What colors did you do your house in?'

The rich hazelnut lingered in Barbara's mouth, the sugar lowering her guard. 'It's all neutral tones, very calm, but I suppose it's boring, bland.' She looked at her mother, 'I've never asked you to come visit, have I? I'm sorry. You should. Maybe Christmas—Nat and Deirdre almost always come home for a few days. I'm sure they'd love to see you.' The invitation was out before she could chase the words back into hiding.

Elizabeth smiled around the rest of her candy, chocolate dimpling the corners of her mouth. 'I've never been on an airplane. It might be nice to fly. Maybe it's time.'

'Maybe,' Barbara agreed. She would like this Elizabeth to see her house, the home she'd so painstakingly designed with Rick and decorated herself. And to see

her children, grown and successful, even if Deirdre didn't always follow how Barbara had raised her.

Elizabeth retrieved a box of saltwater taffies from the floor. She scrunched her face, 'Who eats these? And anyway, they'd pull my dentures right out!' She offered the box to her daughter, 'What are you mumbling?'

Barbara waved away the taffy, 'No thanks—that stuff is awful. I was just thinking of the Proverb about raising your children, how they will follow what you teach them.'

'Oh?'

Barbara shrugged, contemplating the box on her lap, 'It's just...well, for the first time, I don't know if I believe it.' She waited, but Elizabeth only nodded for her to continue.

No lightning struck, but she was cautious. 'Well, you were not a bad mother – ' She held up her hand to stop the protest, 'I know what you said the other night, but you weren't. You took us to church, you taught us to be neat, clean, polite, to say our prayers, and to be respectful. That's more than some of my students' parents can manage.'

'And?' Elizabeth's eyes were clear, attentive.

The taffy box teetered on the edge of the coffee table, so Barbara reached a foot out to nudge it back to safety. 'That goop would never come out of your carpet. The point is, you did a pretty solid job, mom. At a certain point, you weren't in control of David and me anymore—we were.' The words spilled out as fast as the thoughts came. She'd never considered any of this before.

Elizabeth sat up against her stack of pillows, 'Proverbs only take you so far, I've found. But, what about your children? Can you say the same?' Her voice was curious.

Barbara nodded slowly. 'Well, of course I have in the past, but I can see now that I can't hold myself responsible for their choices. I taught them and raised them as best I knew. What they do with that is their concern. I can't control them, and their choices now don't reflect on me as their mother – well, not directly.'

She frowned and reached a hand to Elizabeth, 'I'm sorry mom. I've held so much against you for all these years, and it really wasn't your fault. You were just doing your best to protect me from Tony, but I couldn't see that.' Her mother's face blurred, 'I'm so, so sorry.'

'Me too, honey. Me too.' Elizabeth squeezed her daughter's hand, 'But despite everything, I am so glad that you are here.' Chocolate darkened her grin.

She tasted salt as she smiled, 'So am I, mom.' The topic reminded her of the storage locker. 'Mom, I need to show you something else. I found it today.' She lost the smile, 'I didn't even get a chance to tell anyone at that horrible dinner, but I found all the kids' birth certificates and a box full of things with your name on it, too.'

'You what?'

She released her mother's hand to stand, 'Hold on. I think you might be able to help me with some of this.' She tried to screw her face into an apologetic smile. 'Let me know if it's too much.'

Barbara left the box from Matt on the loveseat as she went to retrieve the papers. She dug out her reading glasses, talking before she made it back into the

living room. 'These papers are really old and I can only really read some, but these six – they're birth certificates.'

She offered them to Elizabeth who grinned and wiggled her chocolate-covered fingers.

'Alright. Scootch over and I'll show you. See? These are all of us: Me and David first, then Tim and Todd, June and Jean. I can't figure out why Tony had them, but here we are: all six of us.' She felt a tinge of the earlier nausea, but talked over it. 'I didn't look through everything, but I couldn't tell what these top papers were. Maybe you can help?'

Elizabeth shrugged and licked her fingers clean one by one. 'Please hold.'

'Ok, well, what about this one? All I can read is "County" at the top...' Barbara peered at the page, 'Hospital? Could that say County Hospital?'

'If you can't read it, I sure can't! But here,' Elizabeth gestured toward the end table. 'My readers should be around there somewhere, or Jonah's, whichever.'

She retrieved the glasses for her mother and leaned closer to examine the page together. 'I can sort of make out a date, 1958? 1956? Maybe 1959? I can't tell.'

'Don't laugh at an old woman, but I have one of those lighted magnifying glasses around here, too. Came free with some AARP thing, I think. Check the basket on the coffee table.'

Barbara retrieved the gadget and was surprised to find that it actually lit up when she slid the switch to On. 'Ok, let's try again. Oh, yeah, that says 1959 – May something. There's a signature at the bottom, but it's really faint. I can't tell whose it could be.'

'May 1959...Oh.' Elizabeth's hand covered her mouth. She was trembling.

'Mom? Do you know what it is?'

Her voice was faint, 'I think I might. It's not something I talk about...Jonah knows. I never told you kids. You weren't old enough to remember.'

Barbara shook her head, 'Mom, you're not making sense. Do you not want to talk about this?' She set the magnifier and paper down.

'No, no I think I should tell you. You have a right to know who your father was – what he was.'

Thinking her mother had forgotten their conversation over the letters, Barbara tried to speak gently, 'Mom, it's okay. You already told me about how you married Tony, the baby you lost. We don't have to talk about that again. It's okay.'

Elizabeth reached out to grasp her daughter's wrist, 'No, this is something...else.'

Barbara tensed.

'He made them do it to me, said I wasn't a fit mother, that it was the only way to make sure I didn't do anything again to risk you kids.' Her voice was thin, but she spoke quickly.

'Mom, I still don't understand. You're worrying me.' Her mother's distress was contagious.

Elizabeth's eyes swam, but Barbara could see her mother was clear-headed.

'After I went to the hospital...for taking all the pills. Well, the doctors called Tony. Said he had to know, since I was his wife, and I mentioned you kids. I never knew until years later, after Jonah and I were married. He never told me. Barbara – '

Her fingers tightened around her daughter's wrist. 'Barbara, he told them to make sure I couldn't have any more kids. Said it was a sign I wasn't mentally fit and

they should do whatever they needed so I wouldn't be a danger to you kids, to any new babies. They gave me some drugs, told me they were to help me sleep, and when I woke up and felt the pain, they said they'd had to clean out my stomach. It was a lie. They took my uterus, Barbara. Tony told them to take everything. And they didn't even tell me. Just...took it.'

She blinked, horrified. 'Oh, oh god. Mom...I'm so sorry. That's unforgivable.'

'Now the doctors think the total hysterectomy may have saved me from getting cancer even earlier.' She released Barbara's wrist.

'What? I don't know what to say to that, mom. I—I suppose I'm grateful for that, but nothing makes that less horrible.'

'I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the cancer sooner. Jonah told me you were upset. I just didn't want you to worry.' She smiled weakly through the tears, 'I'm not terribly grateful, though. The cancer came back. The doctors say I probably only have a few months, maybe six. They gave up on chemo a while back. Just made me sick and miserable all the time.'

Biting back what she wanted to say, Barbara squeezed her hand gently. 'It's okay mom. I'm not upset. You don't have to talk about it.'

Elizabeth nodded and rested her head against her daughter's chest.

Numb, Barbara stroked her mother's fine white hairs as they cried together, wishing again that she had never answered that phone call from Mary at Seaview Assisted Living Facility.

Barbara forgot the shoebox until she'd washed her face and changed into her pajamas. 'Mom? You still in here?'

Elizabeth answered from the master bath, 'Had to use the ladies'.'

Barbara dropped onto the loveseat and opened the box. Matt had replaced its contents neatly.

'Is that the other box, then?' Elizabeth resumed her place on the sofa. Rupert had disappeared in their absence, abandoning his soggy toy.

'Mhm, yes. It was in the locker.' She examined the label. 'That's Tony's handwriting.'

'So it is. What's inside, I wonder?'

Barbara pulled the top paper out, yellowed but thick, textured with an official stamp at the bottom. 'Well this one's easy – it's your marriage certificate.' She passed it to Elizabeth. 'But this is odd.'

She read through the document twice before she spoke again. 'Mom, I thought you didn't go to college.'

Elizabeth had set aside the certificate and was about to take a bite of a newly selected chocolate. 'Nope, had you kids, instead.'

'I don't know what this is, then. It's a certificate for completion of an Associates degree in "Secretarial Science." But it has your name on it, Elizabeth Chase, dated 1961.' She offered it to her mother.

Elizabeth waved it off, 'University of Oregon?'

She checked, 'Yes.'

The other half of the candy disappeared. 'That must have been the correspondence course. A friend was taking business classes and gave me the catalog. I forgot I'd done that.'

Barbara stared at her mother, 'Mom. I tried to get you to go back to school for *years*.'

'Eh, not the same. That there—' she bobbed her head toward the certificate. 'That was just my little rebellion. I had this friend Agatha. She was ambitious, going to be a businesswoman, and Tony wouldn't even let me be an Avon lady. I resented him for that. So I fibbed a bit about the bills for a few months so until I had the money for tuition and signed up for the course.' Her smile was mischievous, 'Tony never knew. I nearly always fudged the expenses so he couldn't tell. He must have found that after I left.'

Barbara mimed applause, 'Not quite the docile housewife, after all! Good for you.'

Elizabeth lifted her housecoat in a mock curtsy. 'Merci. So what else is in there?'

'These are all handwritten lists, items and names. Maybe gifts? Oh, you wrote the date here: November 27, 1959.'

'That'll be David's baby shower. Is there a bathinette on there?'

'It's here. What on earth is a bathinette?' Barbara set the sheets aside.

Elizabeth laughed, 'Oh it's the most ridiculous thing, definitely not safe, but it was all the rage then. It was this sort of combination baby bath and changing table. They had a nasty habit of pinching if you got your hand in the wrong spot, though.'

'They still make something like that. I'm sure it's safer now. I certainly hope so, anyway.' She pulled a thick notebook from the box.

'My recipe book! Let me see. I've been missing that for years, wondered where it got to.' Elizabeth motioned for Barbara to give it to her and opened it at

random. 'Mmm, mother's chicken n' dumplings and her special cream cheese pie.'

She looked up to Barbara, rueful. 'Do you know I've been trying to make these from memory for years? My memory isn't a reliable cook, unfortunately.'

Barbara sat back as the recipes absorbed her mother. Neither spoke for a few minutes, although Elizabeth would occasionally sigh, giggle or 'mmm' quietly.

Finally, she closed it. 'I'll make copies of some of these for you and Deirdre. I know you like to eat healthy, but I want you to have the family recipes, even if you never make them. They're the one thing I've always been grateful that my mother passed to me.'

Barbara smiled, 'I'll save them for holidays. I'm sure Rick will love them.'

She set the notebook aside. 'That's the best thing you've found yet from Tony's junk. Anything else worth looking at in there?'

Loose photos covered the bottom of the box. Barbara tipped it to show her, 'Pictures.'

Elizabeth used her nails to collect the prints and held them up to inspect them. 'Well this is a copy of the one I showed you the other day.' She turned it to Barbara, 'You and David at Easter.'

She didn't wait for a reaction, shuffling the photo to the back of the pile. 'Oh, but I don't have these anywhere else.'

Barbara scooted closer to her mother, 'Tell me about them.'

Elizabeth's smile crinkled her eyes, her voice warm. 'These are some nice memories. This is your second birthday party. My friend's husband brought his camera. Weren't you a beautiful baby?'

She held the fading photo of a young woman balancing a toddler on her hip, careful not to touch inside the white border. 'Yes, I was. And you were a beautiful mother.' Barbara held the print up beside her mother's face. 'You look so happy.'

'I was. I remember that day. My friends helped me throw this lovely little party for your birthday. Mind you, it was just an excuse for all of us to get together, but you were so happy that it was all to do with you. You were a little self-absorbed for a two-year-old.' Elizabeth chuckled as she took the photo back. 'I wasn't always unhappy, then. I did have good friends.'

Barbara pulled the next print from her, 'What is this? I don't remember you smoking.'

Three women in a-line dresses held long cigarettes and puffed smoke toward the camera through pouted lips.

Elizabeth blushed and giggled, 'Oh dear. I'd forgotten all about that. Agatha smoked, see, and convinced Susan and me to try it. It was her husband who had the camera, I remember now. He thought it would make for an interesting artistic shot.' She laughed harder, 'That was the one and only time Susan ever smoked. She got sick right after that photo was taken!'

Barbara shook her head, but smiled despite her disapproval. 'Such a rebel, mom. I had no idea.'

'You don't even know the worst of it! Susan vomited on the hi-fi!' She was laughing so hard, she started to cry, sniffing as she tried to tell the story. 'Mr. Jones got a picture of that, or at least he tried to, and thought it the most hilarious thing he'd ever seen. But Agatha –' She paused to catch her breath, 'Poor Agatha told me the hi-fi reeked of sick for months after!'

Jonah stopped in the doorway, tea tray in hand, taking in the laughter, the candy wrappers strewn like confetti across the coffee table and floor. He didn't move until Barbara called to him.

'Jonah! Come on in. We can't be left on our own with all this candy. We'll give ourselves stomachaches and spoil our appetites. You must help.' She waved at the collection of boxes and lids.

'I could hear you gals all the way from the kitchen—sounds like a good time in here.' He slid the tray onto the coffee table, pushing a space clear for it, and lingered, his unasked question palpable.

Elizabeth tossed a crumpled foil onto the tray. 'Well, it is now. Don't hang about, dear. Come sit. Barbara's right—we need help eating all this!' She patted the sofa and giggled.

He glanced to Barbara, uncertain. 'I was just bringing the tea, was fixing to heat up some supper...The ladies from church brought all sorts of food.'

'Oh, who needs dinner.' Barbara licked melty caramel from a paper, 'This is more fun. You're welcome to stay.'

Confusion and awareness that something had shifted between the women froze Jonah's feet. 'Ah, well now. If you're sure you don't want some real dinner.'

Elizabeth pulled her slippered feet up under her nightgown and smiled. 'We said sit, you old fool. Don't make me ask again.'

In that instant, wispy white hairs standing defiantly at odd angles, swimming in a floral cotton gown a few sizes too big, Barbara saw Elizabeth as the vibrant girl who'd defied her parents to go on her first date and smoked a cigarette on a lark. All the sass, intelligence, and humor her mother had been robbed of decades earlier

shone through the wrinkles, even as the shadow of cancer loomed. The thought punctured happy image.

'Eh, Barbara?'

She snapped back, 'Sorry, what?'

Jonah was clearly nervous, 'I was just sayin how good Elizabeth looks now, what with all that scare yesterday and all.'

She swallowed the lump in her throat, 'Yes, she does. She really does.'

Elizabeth pretended to blush, poking Jonah in the ribs with a slippered toe. 'Now stop it you two. I look just as old and wrinkly and faded as I did this morning, or yesterday morning. Maybe more old and wrinkled!' She laughed.

'Now mom' Barbara started, wanting to contradict her, but Elizabeth wasn't entirely wrong. Neither was she right. She didn't have a chance to finish justifying Elizabeth's lack of wrinkles when a balled-up foil bounced off her forehead.

Elizabeth cackled wildly, kicking her feet up and down. 'Don't lie, Barbara – it's a sin!' She wagged her finger in mock condemnation. Rupert, excited by the game, chased after the foil.

Barbara couldn't help but laugh with her mother.

Jonah looked back and forth between the two, lost.

'Catch!' Barbara followed her mother's lead and lobbed a paper-wrapped taffy at Jonah. He caught it, to everyone's surprise, leading to more giggles.

'I'll have to take my teeth out, you know.' He said, but the women only laughed harder.

'Oh, leave em in – I did!' Elizabeth exaggerated her wink as she popped another truffle in her mouth. Barbara couldn't resist the infectious laughter, even as

something scratched at the back of her mind, trying to get her attention. She dismissed the itch.

She and Elizabeth had gone through all of the papers after her mother finally stopped crying. In addition to the birth certificates, Elizabeth thought the others were hospital discharge papers for herself, Shirley and Janet after the children's births. They decided there wasn't anything for Barbara to do about the decades-old certificates. Barbara slid all of the papers under an empty box of chocolates on the table and the two had been working their way through the rest of the candy boxes since, flitting from topic to topic, talking about anything but the man who had brought them there and the cancer eating away at Elizabeth's body.

Jonah stayed up with them until the living room clock chimed midnight. He stood and slipped out of the room carrying Rupert, not entirely unwelcome, nor entirely comfortable. Neither woman commented on his exit.

The sun shone gold and lavender through the curtains on empty candy boxes and wrappers strewn about before his wife and stepdaughter finally gave in to their yawns and wandered off to bed, exhausted, but content with the distraction from the past and present.

June 11, 1959

Dear Tony,

Dearest husband, I cannot even begin to apologize. I am truly sorry that I was so foolish. You are right, I should have been more careful with my medicine. I will be ever so careful from now on. I'll pinch pennies anywhere I can in the next few months to help cover the hospital expenses. And I will stop going to the doctor for every little thing, as you say. God does help those who help themselves. I had thought that we might see you soon. I am sad that my hospital bills mean you will have to stay in Texas to keep working. I am really very sorry. I've been so careless.

Dr. Steele phoned me yesterday and he says I have recovered perfectly, although I may not have a monthly cycle anymore. I can't say that I will complain about that, although I'm not sure I understand it. Overall, it sounds like no harm done (except the bills, of course). He adjusted the dosage of my medicine and reminded me to drink plenty of water and eat regular meals. I suppose I had gotten a little out of the habit of sitting down for meals since it's only me and the little ones. They don't exactly eat on the same schedule as adults. At least Baby David is still on the bottle—Barbara Marie is suddenly very picky about her food. It's exhausting trying to coax her to eat anything and she makes such a mess.

She has developed the habit of following me about the house practically holding onto my hem since I came back home (and Kitty only a step behind her). It sounds endearing, but it's beginning to wear on me. I nearly trampled her yesterday – she was so close on my heels. I am hoping she will grow out of it soon. Baby David is just an angel and growing every day. His baby blanket is finally done and he just

adores it! I've started on Barbara's now, but it will take longer, as it needs to be much bigger than David's.

I've added the boxes you sent to the spare room. I won't unpack them, though, unless you don't want me to. I don't know where I'd put whatever is in them if I did, anyhow. I've labeled them with the date so you know what they are whenever you are back to open them. I hope that's alright.

I really am terribly sorry. I hope you'll forgive me.

Our love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby David

Barbara woke to sunlight on her face and wafts of toast and coffee in her nose. Her phone, forgotten in her purse, was almost dead. It clung to life long enough to inform her that it was eleven forty-five. The memory of the night made her smile, even through her annoyance that she'd lost yet another half of a day.

She started to pull out clean clothes, intending to head straight to the shower. Her Bible sat on the nightstand, reproachful. As she reached for it, her stomach gurgled long and loud.

Barbara grimaced, guilty. 'I think breakfast needs to come first today.'

A little horrified at herself all around, she dropped the clean outfit onto the mussed bed and plugged in her cell. It lit up to tell her she had a missed call and voicemail from Todd. Barbara flipped the phone over without listening to the message and yawned her way to the kitchen braless under her pajama set.

Elizabeth lounged at the table in the breakfast nook. Her sparse hair was wilder than ordinary, full of the bravado only sleep can give. She had added a housecoat to her ensemble, one Barbara recognized.

'Good morning.' She addressed her mug.

Jonah didn't look up from the stove, 'Mornin! How's scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage sound?'

Barbara couldn't place the robe. 'Sounds great—but 86 the sausage. I don't eat pork.' She took in the empty mug on the counter, 'Is this one for me?'

His grey head dipped, 'Yup. Milk's in the fridge, sugar's on the table with Mrs. Sweet Tooth over there. The sausage is that fake meat, vegetarian nonsense. Tastes pretty decent, though. Still wanna pass?'

She yanked the stubborn refrigerator door open, 'Sure, I'll give it a try. Deirdre tried to sell Rick on it a few years back. His doctor told him to cut back on sodium and meat to lower his cholesterol. He wasn't buying.'

She pulled out the carton and heard Jonah chuckle as she swung the heavy door closed, failing to find the sweet spot between slamming it and being dragged along with it. 'Thank you for cooking for me this whole trip, Jonah. I haven't told you how much I appreciate it.' She released the treacherous door and mustered up a sleepy smile, hoping it looked as genuine as her gratitude.

He looked up from the skillet, 'My pleasure, Barbara. You've always been my daughter, you know.'

Guilt kicked Barbara low in the gut, sharp atop the lingering ache of the sugar binge. She whispered, 'I know.' Louder, she addressed Elizabeth, dozing over her coffee. 'Mom? Want a warm-up?'

'Hm? Oh, sure.' She yawned and nudged her mug closer to her daughter with one hand, leaning on her other, elbows on the table. Rupert lay curled up on her slippers, watching Jonah intently.

Careful to keep her mug from clanking against the pot, Barbara brought the coffee and milk to the table. She filled her mother's nearly empty cup first.

'How do you feel today?' She topped both off with milk and sat beside Elizabeth. She took a sip and promptly regretted not brushing the fuzz from her teeth.

'Oh, like I ate three boxes of chocolates, stayed up all night, and only got four hours of sleep.' She winked as she spooned several mounds of sugar into her coffee.

'Jonah thinks I was being irresponsible—I daresay it's high time I do something fun.'

Her spoon clanked as she stirred, 'What about you?'

Barbara crinkled her nose, 'I'd say pretty much the same. I think I'll try to take an extra long walk tonight as penance. Hopefully my body will forgive me.'

'Then let this be a lesson to you girls!' Jonah's smile softened his admonition as he set their plates in front of them, quiet atop the thick braided place mats.

'Butter and jam a'comin.'

They waited until he'd seated himself before a glass of grape juice. 'I already ate, while you two night owls lazed away.' He looked to Barbara, 'But I'll say grace?'

At her nod, he thanked God for family, good food, and Elizabeth's quick recovery. He didn't mention cancer.

'Amen,' they chorused.

'Oh!' Barbara voiced the thought before it was fully formed, 'I gave you that housecoat for your birthday—I don't remember which.'

'Why, yes.' Elizabeth looked down, 'It's really cozy, but I don't think I've worn it but a couple of times.'

Jonah sipped his Welch's while he watched the two women. Barbara sensed he was still ready to protect Elizabeth at any moment. The thought brought more than a little shame.

'So Jonah, mom and I were talking about you coming to stay with Rick and me for Christmas. The kids will be around, too. What do you think?' She nibbled a bite of the vegetarian link. She couldn't remember what sausage tasted like, but if it was anything like the chalky link in front of her, she wasn't missing anything. She forced herself to chew and washed the bite down with half a mug of coffee.

His bushy eyebrows shot up. 'Really? I mean, it's just.' He waved his hands helplessly, 'Gee, I'm sorry Barbara. I wasn't prepared for that. It's a great idea. I'm sure we can make it work.' He smiled brightly.

Ignoring the new twinge of guilt his obvious flustering prompted, she smiled back. 'Great. If you want, I can even have Rick find flights for you. There's usually one with only one connection from here to Charlotte, now. It's not so bad.'

Elizabeth squinted at her plate, 'I think it would be neat to fly. My friend Agatha used to fly with her husband to all sorts of wonderful places when we were young. I remember her telling me about how fancy it all was—dressing up, gourmet meals in the air, champagne.'

'Well, it's not quite that nice anymore.' Barbara chuckled, remembering the screaming baby and tiny packet of peanuts that had highlighted her flights to California. 'Wait, you said Agatha. She was in one of the photos last night, too. Was that Agatha Jones?'

Her mother nodded, fork in mouth.

'I remember her from your letters. You wrote about her quite a bit, I think.' Barbara took a sip of coffee while Elizabeth chewed. 'Do you keep in touch with her at all?'

'Yuck, that sausage really is the worst. They have some nerve even calling it that. Jonah, stop buying that dreck. Either we eat the real stuff or nothing. I am too old to chew on play-doh and that fake meat cannot possibly make me live any longer. It might even kill me faster! Blech.' She pulled a face, sticking her tongue out at her husband. 'And no, Barbara, I didn't keep in touch with her. Tony made me stop going to the church where I met her and forbade me to see her or the other

church ladies. And after I left, we lived too far from the church to go regularly. I suppose I could have called after I left, but I don't know what I would have said.'

Jonah reached across the table to take her hand, wrinkled face full of sympathy.

She patted it, 'Oh, what did I know? I never told anyone why I stopped coming to church, Tony just wouldn't let me go one Sunday. Who knows? Maybe they thought I died.'

Barbara added her hand to the pile, 'I can't believe he wouldn't let you go to church! Thank god you got out.'

The three shared a moment before reclaiming their hands to finish the meal. An idea struck Barbara, 'Would you want to look for Agatha, mom? I don't think it would be very hard. We can start with the phone book and I'll ask Deirdre or Nat to look her up online.'

'Yes, yes, I think I would. Thank you, honey. I probably have her old address and phone number in my old book, although I'm sure it's changed. Do you know I've had the same book since I was eighteen? An old school friend gave it to me as a wedding gift. She told me every married woman ought to have a real leather address book, and I've used it all these years.'

She set her fork on her plate, 'I can get it when we finish breakfast—lunch, whatever this is!'

'Great.' Barbara flashed a smile and turned her focus back to her toast.

Jonah plunked his empty glass down and announced, 'Well, I had a thought.'

The women looked at him, expectant. 'Well?' Elizabeth prodded, 'Don't just leave it dangling out there, Jonah. It isn't nice to tease ladies.'

He winked, 'Me, tease? Naw. But in seriousness, this whole thing has weighed heavy on me since you called to say Tony died, Barbara.' He arranged his hands on the table, waging a thumb war with himself. 'See, I was worried Tony might do something what like he did, leavin all his mess for you or David or even Elizabeth to deal with. So I started asking around to some of the folks I know at the rec center—you know I volunteer there a couple days a week. See, some of them have lost family members and had to deal with wills and all, too.'

His left hand won the war and he looked up to his stepdaughter. 'Anyhow, Barbara, the point is that most of them said they ended up hiring a lawyer. It seems that if there's actually something to inherit, families go a little cuckoo over it, contesting the will and whatnot. And even if there's not a will or inheritance, there can be some pretty complicated stuff to deal with. So I was just thinking, maybe it's time you have someone else do the heavy lifting.'

His eyes were sad above his smile, 'It ain't right that you should shoulder his leftovers.'

'I agree.' Elizabeth's eyes were sharp. 'He isn't worth it. And now his god-awful family is coming after you—just get out of the way, Barbara.'

She spoke slowly, 'Well, I hadn't really thought about it, but Deirdre did say she has some attorney friends out here. I suppose I could call her and ask.' Her head drooped, 'I guess I was trying to do the right thing. Be the good daughter and all. But now...after finding out about the debt, and then that surprise attack last night from Jean and everyone. I honestly don't know what to do.'

'Call Deirdre. Get the numbers. And talk to Rick, I'm sure he'll agree.'

Optimism crinkled Jonah's eyes.

Elizabeth nodded, 'No good will come of trying to handle this all on your own, Barbara, honey.'

She looked from one parent to the other. How different her life might have turned out if she'd allowed them to support her all those years ago. 'Alright,' she finally agreed, 'I'll call Deirdre.'

For the first time she could remember, Barbara didn't dread calling Deirdre. It was a new sensation when it came to her youngest.

'Hello?' She sounded annoyed.

'Deirdre—it's mom.' She tucked her lips in nervously.

'Oh. Hi mom. Sorry—I cracked my phone screen, so I can answer calls, but I can't see who's calling. It's really aggravating.' She took a breath, 'What's going on? How's Cali?'

Barbara resisted the thought that Deirdre wouldn't have answered if she had seen it was her mother calling. 'Well, I'm trying to tidy up some of the loose ends here with Tony and I remember you telling me that you and Masud have attorney friends here?' She crossed her fingers that she'd gotten his name right.

'Oh, that's right.'

She could sense her daughter's relaxation through the phone.

'Daddy said things got a little nutty. But, yeah. We know a couple lawyers near grandma. Masud grew up out there, you know.'

Barbara didn't.

'I can't get to any of my contacts right now—because of my phone—but I'll get them from Masud tonight when I get home from work.'

She rustled something in Barbara's ear, but it wasn't loud enough to drown out her relief that she had remembered Masud's name. 'Thank you so much, Deirdre—I honestly don't know where I'd even start to look otherwise. This is all so...overwhelming.'

Deirdre had shifted her focus and was all business, 'Yeah, not a problem mom. Do you want me to call you back, or text or email them?'

Her daughter was trying to bring the conversation to a close. 'Whatever is easiest for you, dear.'

'Ok, well, I am still at the office right now...' She let the words hang.

'Oh, right. Sorry to keep you! Thank you again.'

'Sure mom. B—'

Barbara cut off her farewell, 'Oh I almost forgot: Grandma's going to try to come out for Christmas with Jonah this year.' The invitation came as much a surprise to her as it must have to Deirdre—given the long pause afterward.

'Uh, I'll have to talk to Masud about it and let you know. We were planning to go on a cruise with friends...'

Barbara back peddled, 'Oh, that's fine, honey. It was just a thought, that's all.' She hoped she hadn't gone too far. She was well aware that Deirdre assumed a hands-off approach to their mother-daughter relationship, finding it best if they limited face and conversation time. 'I'll let you get back to work. Just let me know. I know Grandma would love to see you. Thanks again—I love you.'

'Love you too, mom. Bye.'

'Bye.' She stared at her phone until the screen went dark. Belatedly, she wondered if Elizabeth had mentioned cancer to her granddaughter in their weekly calls.

A flashing light reminded Barbara that Todd's message still awaited her. She contemplated the phone, trying to think of the worst possible scenario. She couldn't come up with anything worse than what had already happened, so she put the voicemail on speakerphone.

'Hi Barbara, it's, uh, Todd—well, and Tim. Listen, we feel really bad about everything. We just wanted you to know we don't want anything from you or Tony. We only meant to go to the funeral, you know, do the right thing. Jean's turned whole thing into a big clusterfuck. Anyway, we're sorry. And we wanted you to know you don't need to keep us in the loop with anything else. Thanks. Bye.'

Barbara's smile grew as the message played.

Deirdre didn't send the lawyer's contact until well after six, so Barbara didn't bother to call until the following morning. Apparently Deirdre had already told Joshua Silberberg, Esq. to expect a call from her mother.

'Mrs. Sterling! Good to hear from you. How are you holding up?'

The rush of warmth she felt for this stranger caught Barbara by surprise. He hadn't sympathized with her "loss." 'Hello Joshua—thank you. I'm managing, and I take it Deirdre filled you in on what's happened?'

'Well, some. I got the sense that she isn't entirely certain herself.' He paused and Barbara heard the faint tapping of a pen. 'In any case, I think this sounds like

something best discussed in person. I look to be free this afternoon any time between one and three. Would sometime in there work for you?'

'Let me check.' She didn't have anything scheduled, but she consulted her pocket calendar anyway. 'Today should be fine. Where is your office located?' Her pen was already pressed to a note pad.

She jotted down the address and directions, agreeing to meet him around 2:30, then hung up. A quick phone call to Rick supported her decision.

'Whatever it takes, Barbara. Let's just get this done.'

She collected the birth certificates and will, along with the paperwork and documents from the assisted living facility and social services. She stacked everything neatly and regarded them for a moment before adding the receipts from the funeral home and the deed to the mystery house, too. If she was going to hand off Tony's mess, she might as well get rid of it all.

June 20, 1959

Dear Tony,

I have the most exciting news—Susan Bellows and her husband have invited us to join them at their cabin on Big Bear Lake for two weeks! I said I would have to check with you first. Will you be home? Oh! I'm sure the children will love the water and fresh mountain air. They've never been outside of Lakewood. Some time in nature will be good for all of us, and the Bellows really are the nicest people.

I'm sure you and Mr. Bellows will have plenty to discuss—he's in telephones, I think I mentioned? At any rate, he's terribly clever and always asks me questions about your work with the oilrigs, although I'm afraid my answers are hardly expert. I only know what little I've read in the Encyclopedia. Oh, Tony, do say that you can be home to join us. They are planning to leave the week of Independence Day so Mr. Bellows can light fireworks over the lake for the children. Barbara is great friends with their youngest Georgie and since Susan's older girl will be there with us, I will have a little respite from watching the children.

Of course I understand if you cannot join us. I shall miss you terribly while we are there, but I think the three of us could certainly use a holiday and change of scene. I hope this reaches you soon. Please write back quickly. I can't wait to tell Susan the good news!

As if that all wasn't enough, I've really had such a wonderful day today. Agatha rang me this morning to see if I should like to go with her to see a film—I can't remember the last time I saw a movie. (I think it must have been an Elvis Presley, but mother would die if she knew that, so don't tell!) Agatha wanted to see 'Porgy and Bess.' I never would have thought to see it myself. I'm sure you've heard

of it—Sydney Poitier plays the leading man, but I was more taken by Sammy Davis, Jr. He is so talented, such a beautiful voice. And oh, how lovely is Dorothy Dandridge? She is so graceful. I can't believe I hadn't heard of her. I'll have to look for her name in the TV Guide in the future.

Agatha's friend Carol joined us. Their husbands went to college together. Carol has a teenage daughter who stayed with Barbara Marie and David and she must have been quite the sitter—both were fast asleep when Agatha dropped me home. She even made a casserole and tidied up about the house. Such a sweet girl and very capable, and she's just fifteen! I made certain to get Carol's number from Agatha. I wouldn't mind having Joyce (that's her girl's name) watch the children again. It's so convenient to have Susan's girls watch the babies when I'm with her, but I don't always feel right asking them to sit for me if I'm not going out with Susan. And Joyce is a wiz. Her casserole really was delicious—potatoes and chicken and cheese and broccoli—mmm.

We had such a lovely time, popcorn and this new chocolate candy called 'M&Ms'. I splurged a little and had a soda. I'd forgotten how much I love Coca Cola. It was really wonderful to have such an unplanned afternoon treat with Agatha, and I really enjoyed Carol.

Is there a cinema near you? I know how much you love music. I think you would enjoy 'Porgy and Bess'. But now I am off to do some laundry—little David creates an impressive pile of dirty diapers!

With Love,

Elizabeth, Barbara, and Baby David

'Destination. Is on the right. Destination. Is on the right.'

'Once is plenty, thank you.' Barbara swatted blindly at the GPS, neglecting to put on her blinker before making the right turn into a small, but full, parking lot.

Above the lot towered a glass office building that looked entirely out of place in the otherwise flat professional park in Cerritos. A sign indicated 'Additional Parking In Rear.'

It took Barbara another ten minutes to locate an empty space on the top floor of the three-story garage. She was sweating by the time she walked into the frigid air conditioning of the granite-floored lobby. She looked for a reception desk before it dawned on her that the foyer was merely a series of doors and elevators. A marquee on the wall between the elevators on the right listed occupants in the 'East Wing.' Joshua Silberberg, of Silberberg & Rabinowitz, LLP, was apparently not located in the East Wing.

When Barbara had spoken to Joshua yesterday, he gave her his suite number along with the building address. She pulled out her notes from the call and held them up against the business listings in the West Wing.

'Suite 6119...sixth floor? There he is, floor six, suite nineteen.' Barbara peeked over her shoulder, self-conscious about talking to herself. She was alone. She pressed the elevator call button and stepped back, centering herself to wait between the two West Wing elevators. She took in the gray granite floor, inlaid with a bronze metal in a large Greek key design. Barbara nodded in admiration as the elevator dinged, an open maw between walls overlaid with a deep gunmetal marble.

She stepped inside the vacant car and selected 6, her heart unexpectedly speeding up. 'No reason to be nervous, Barbara—it's only a consultation. Jonah and Elizabeth are probably right: it's better this way.' She spent the rest of the slow ascension staring at her reflection in the mirrored box. The warped image was not flattering.

A cheery young receptionist with an expensive highlight job greeted Barbara as she hauled open the heavy oak door to suite 6119. 'Hello! Welcome to Silberberg and Rabinowitz. How can I help you?'

Barbara found she needed to clear her throat before replying, 'Hi, yes, I'm here to see Joshua Silberberg? I'm Barbara Sterling. He said any time between one and three would work...' She felt distinctly out of place in her sensible flat black shoes, black pleated slacks, and pale blue oxford—rumpled and sweaty after her adventure in the parking garage.

The receptionist's smile grew, 'Sure! Let me check that he's free.' She used one French-manicured nail to select a button on a massive phone and spoke into the earpiece Barbara hadn't noticed her wearing. 'Josh? You have someone here. Is now—' She waited, 'Of course. I'll let her know.'

Another button and the receptionist refocused her attention on Barbara, 'He's just finishing something up, Mrs. Sterling. He said it won't be more than ten or fifteen minutes.' She indicated three upholstered chairs along the wall, 'Please, take a seat—can I get you something to drink while you wait? Coffee, tea, water, soda?'

Barbara arranged herself in the first seat, resting her purse on the carved wooden arm. 'Oh, water. Please—thank you.'

The highlights bobbed along behind the receptionist as she disappeared down a hallway on the far side of her desk. Barbara hardly had a chance to examine the waiting room before the girl reappeared.

She handed a cold bottle of water to the older woman, 'Let me know if I can get you anything else!' She pirouetted on one black patent high-heel, her long legs covered the few feet to her desk effortlessly. She adjusted her black, high-waisted pencil skirt and sat, leaving only her gauzy salmon blouse visible to Barbara over the heavy wood.

For the first time, Barbara felt both frumpy and old. Even though she was well into her fifties and many of her peers already retired, she had never considered herself old. It had only been a few years since she was one of the youngest teachers at her school. Now she might be the oldest. The thought made her tired.

She flipped through the folder containing everything official she had collected about Tony's death and burial. His death certificate was on top: Born October 18, 1930, Died July 10, 2014. Barbara did the quick math. If Elizabeth and Tony were any indication of her genetics, she could very well live to see ninety. The thought wasn't as triumphant as it might have been. Rick would likely die before she did—she already knew that. His parents had passed away only a few years earlier, a year apart to the day. Deirdre called it romantic in one of the few moments she wasn't sobbing. Her father-in-law's funeral was also the only time Barbara remembered seeing Rick cry. The display of such public male emotion had made her uncomfortable. She had been fond of her father-in-law, but maintained her composure. Someone had to anchor the family.

'Mrs. Sterling?' Rich baritone interrupted her thoughts.

Her eyes followed it to its source. A large hand extended toward her, 'Mrs. Sterling, I'm Josh Silberberg. It's so good to meet you, although I wish it were under better circumstances. My condolences.'

Her right hand managed to make it to his without her guidance, but her mouth didn't cooperate. She nodded. His words were smooth, rehearsed, but she nevertheless believed they were genuine.

He released her hand and gestured toward the hallway behind the blonde's desk, 'Shall we?'

She stood and followed his pinstripes, their length exaggerating his height. Barbara could only claim to be five feet and six inches tall at her tallest, and she was unpleasantly aware that she had been slowly shrinking in the years since she turned forty. The suited man in front of her was six feet five inches tall, at least. It was hard to tell, Barbara realized, her eyes drifting up to the high ceiling. She wondered if the effect was meant to make people feel small and insignificant. It was certainly effective.

He stood smiling slightly, his arm stretched to usher her into his open office. The room was the largest office Barbara had ever seen. A heavy carved executive desk took center stage. Cherry wood, possibly. An impressive leather chair sat behind the desk as if it, too, awaited her arrival. Two plush armchairs atop wheeled feet cleverly disguised as claws were positioned at angles in front of the desk. The entire wall behind the desk was glass, providing a view of the greater Los Angeles area that even Barbara found striking. The other three walls of the room were lined with floor-to-ceiling wooden bookcases, all full.

‘Please, sit.’ Josh lowered himself into the imposing seat, the leather welcoming him graciously and silently.

Barbara sank rather ungracefully into one of the plush brown seats, first leaning back, then perching on the edge when it sucked her down into its cushions. She felt like a small child in a chair meant for grown-ups. She couldn’t think of what to say. She’d never hired an attorney before.

Josh smiled deeply, revealing perfectly straight, white teeth. ‘Now Mrs. Sterling, as I said, I do wish that we had met under happier pretense, but that’s life.’ His smile faded, ‘So let’s get to the heart of the matter, shall we?’

Barbara managed to nod, ‘Yes.’

He leaned back, lacing his fingers together and resting them on the desk. ‘You said it was your father who passed away, correct?’

Nod.

‘And you’ve already held the funeral, burial?’

Another nod.

‘Is that all the paperwork you have there?’

She thrust the folder toward the desk, struggling to stand when she found that the seat was situated far enough that she wouldn’t be able to reach. ‘That’s everything I have. Well, all the important parts, anyway. The assisted living facility gave me a whole box of his things. That’s the paperwork I got from them and from the social worker, the receipts from everything, his will...’ She trailed off and sat back in the armchair, careful not to relax into it.

‘This is probably all we need.’ He flashed white teeth before bending his head over the manila folder.

'Okay.' Without anything else to say, Barbara was left to stare at the top of the attorney's head. His nearly black hair was flecked with gray, highlighting his temples.

Despite his height, Josh was not a large man. Nate would have been able to tell her what sport he once played. Deirdre would make a comment about his strong jawline and how handsome he was underneath all those tailored suit layers. Deirdre had a knack for making comments that prickled Barbara uncomfortably, even if no one else noticed. She squirmed in the chair, both in an effort not to be absorbed into its depths and to distract herself from wondering exactly what inappropriate comment her daughter would have made about the fit attorney.

'Hmm, okay. I think I get the picture.' Josh lifted dark brown eyes from the papers.

Rick had eyes like that once. 'Oh?' she managed, her unease subsiding in the presence of his matter-of-factness. Rick had that, too—still.

'Yes. I presume you are not Anthony's only living family member?'

She didn't correct the name, 'Hardly. Three ex-wives, six children total.'

Josh didn't pursue her comment. 'Has any of them expressed interested in the will, contributed to—or offered to—his after-death expenses?'

She shook her head, a quip Janet had made about the 'cheap' coffin echoing loudly in her memory. 'Actually, they ganged up on me to insinuate that I'd somehow schemed to keep the will from them—that's what made me ask Deirdre for help finding a lawyer. But no, they definitely did not offer to pay anything.'

His face was unreadable, 'I see. It looks as though Anthony owed a fair amount when he died. Were you aware of this?'

Barbara hooked first her left ankle behind her right, then reversed them. Perhaps a lawyer had been a bad idea. He might cost more alone than everything else she'd already put on her Visa.

Josh sensed her consternation, 'Now, Mrs. Sterling, don't worry about my fees. Masud and I grew up together and I've been vacationing with him and Deirdre for years. It's my pleasure to help you. Please.'

His warm smile reassured her, despite a lifelong belief that lawyers weren't to be trusted. Or doctors. 'I didn't know until I spoke with Greta—his social worker.' She dropped her eyes, wringing her hands out like rags, embarrassed by what he must think of her as a daughter. 'I...well, I hadn't spoken to Tony in years. I didn't know he was in a nursing home until they called to tell me he'd died.'

Josh set his elbows atop the file, chin resting on his clasped hands. He nodded, face impassive.

She took a deep breath and blew it out hard. 'He wasn't a good father. Honestly, he was a terrible person.' Her eyes pleaded, 'God help me, but I just want to be rid of him.' Tears threatened to overflow, but she forced herself not to blink.

She waited for judgment to fill Josh's face, but he only nodded once more. 'I understand, Mrs. Sterling—'

'Call me Barbara.' She interrupted him.

He cracked a small smile, 'Barbara. I understand, and you aren't the only person to go through this type of thing. Many adult children grow away from their parents.' He shrugged and leaned back, 'It's basic psychology, really, but somehow we still feel guilty about it.'

He tapped the folder, 'Although California is a community property state, it looks like most of his debt will be forgotten now that he's dead, so you won't have to worry about that. He was not married at the time of his death?'

She shook her head quickly, dashing the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand in an attempt to be discreet.

Josh pretended not to notice. 'Good. That makes the debt fairly straightforward. You won't be responsible for any of it, in any case. I didn't see any paperwork for a life insurance policy, but we can track that down using his social security number. If there is life insurance, it's possible we will have to fight to get some of the money to cover your expenditures thus far—but that's really only if he listed a beneficiary other than you, and if the policy is larger than what he would have needed for end of life and death expenses. It's highly unlikely that your father's creditors will have any rights to life insurance funds as they are typically protected by law.'

Barbara's pulse calmed as Josh spoke, his deep male voice comforting and confident. She wasn't sure she understood everything he said, but she trusted him.

'Now,' he paused, 'If there is a significant life insurance pay out, above what you need to cover everything—Oh, he was buried, not cremated?'

'Yes, he told the assisted living facility and his social worker that he wanted to be buried. I'm not sure it's in the will.' Her pulse quickened. 'Should I have checked the will for that? I just did what they told me!'

Josh raised a hand to quiet her. 'No need to worry, Barbara. I'll go through the will myself. It will be fairly straightforward, though, as it's the basic form will that the state uses for anyone in the system. And to be honest, even if he did want to

be cremated, you could either do it now or ignore it. Wills are really only enforced in terms of physical and financial property. Last wishes are a nicety unless the decedent previously discussed what they want with their family. More often than not, families don't even see the will until after they've held the funeral. ' He winked, 'Although, between you and me—I'd rather be cremated! It's in my will, of course. My fiancée hates the idea that I want to be burnt into ashes and "kept on a mantel."

His deep laugh rolled over her, filling the room.

Barbara smiled and raised her eyebrows, 'You may have to change that will after you get married, then. She will probably outlive you, you know!'

He chuckled, 'Oh, she definitely will! What about you?'

Her eyes widened. Rick had never asked, and Barbara knew he'd drawn up a will with his attorney only a year earlier. 'Buried, of course!'

'You don't want to haunt your children and watch over them from an urn over the fireplace?' He winked.

She straightened, 'No. I'm a Christian. I believe that my body will one day be called up in the Rapture. I don't know how that happens if you've been cremated. I suppose God would work it out, but I'd rather not make extra work for him.'

Josh chuckled at first, but cleared his throat and rearranged his mouth when he saw she was serious. 'I can't argue with that.' He shuffled the papers around in the folder. 'So, as I was saying, in the event that there is a larger life insurance pay-out, my fee is 30%.'

He spoke casually, but Barbara's jaw dropped. 'A *third*?'

He wasn't fazed, 'I'm sure that sounds high, but you must remember that if there does happen to be a larger pay-out, the beneficiary is not likely to be you, so I

will have to put the hours and effort into a suit to legally change the beneficiary.’ His smile was perfunctory, ‘It’s the only case in which I’d charge you any fee, as a favor to Masud and Deirdre.’

Barbara remembered why she didn’t trust doctors or lawyers. Tony had refused to go to a doctor or hospital in all those years before she had erased him from her life. He mistrusted anyone with a salutation that didn’t begin with M. ‘Kooks and finks, Barba, you remember that. All that medical gobbledegook and legal mumbo jumbo—never trust a doctor or a lawyer!’ Barbara shuddered at the memory.

‘Barbara? Are you alright? I know this can be rather overwhelming.’ The concern in Josh’s voice was sincere.

She blinked slowly, ‘I apologize. A little déjà vu, I think.’ She met his gaze as she made her mind up to trust him. ‘Your fee is fine. I’m sure my half-siblings would have something to say about it, but that’s too bad.’

He nodded, ‘Wonderful. I’ll have Jessica get all your contact info so we can keep you updated on what’s happening.’ He started to rise.

‘Oh! There is one more thing – well, a couple.’ She waited until he had reseated himself. ‘He had several storage units full of junk, and – well, I think there may be a house.’

Both eyebrows shot up. ‘A house? I didn’t see a deed.’

‘It’s here.’ She handed him the deed. ‘I think it’s for a house he bought his first wife—well, I’m not sure they were legally married, to be honest. Janet. They had two daughters together. He bought it around the same time he bought the

house he and my mother lived in, but that's the only explanation I can think of. I found it with the original birth certificates of all his children.'

He let out a low whistle. 'Well, this certainly makes it a bit more interesting.' He looked over the paper at her, 'What do you want to do with the house, if it's still in his name? Some of his debtors may try to squeeze it for the money he owes.'

'I honestly don't know. I have no idea if Janet still lives there, or if that's really why he bought the house. The timeline does seem right. I haven't asked her, or her daughters. Things were ugly enough as it was the one time they brought up the will. My two half brothers have made it clear they want nothing to do with Tony's affairs now. What do you think?'

He rubbed his chin where stubble had started to darken his jaw. 'I can't really tell you much until we find out what the house's status is—it's possible it was seized years ago, or he sold it. They didn't always transfer deeds and mortgages cleanly like they do now. It makes tracing ownership of older properties something of a rodeo.' He set the deed on top of the rest of the papers, 'I'll look into it and let you know what I recommend when I have more information. Sound good?'

'That's fine. Do you think I need to worry at all about the stuff that was in his storage units?'

'Hmm, it depends. You already went through them, I take it?'

'Well, yes – most of them. My brother and I got into an argument in the midst of going through the first two, so we didn't exactly finish. Apparently he found some boxes of old baseball cards from when he was a kid. He kept those, although I don't know what he wants to do with them – sell them, maybe. And I found boxes of cassette tapes in one of the lockers, but I gave them to the kid who owned the place.'

Everything else was just trash.' She paused, 'Tony was a hoarder, you ought to know.'

'I see. Well, I don't think you have anything to worry about. It doesn't sound like there was any reason for Anthony's other potential heirs to even know about the units, and there was nothing of value in them. Did you close the accounts on all of them?'

'Yes. He had another unit that he'd already fallen behind on, so it was auctioned off earlier this year. I closed the others.'

He nodded, 'That's fine then. I think you're set for now. I'll let you know if anything else comes up, alright?'

This time Barbara let him stand. 'Great.'

She trailed him to the waiting room, where Jessica typed Barbara's answers into a computer and disappeared to photocopy the papers Barbara had handed Joshua. She was sweating again by the time she slid into the sauna of the rented Prius, but she didn't mind. Tony was officially someone else's problem. Barbara grinned and cranked the AC. The cold rush of air felt like peace and she breathed a prayer of thanks as she reversed out of the space.

Barbara was still smiling when Jonah opened the door to her knock, but he didn't return her smile.

'Barbara, honey, come on in. Your mother's in the living room. We've had some...news.' His red eyes dropped, 'You had better ask her about it.'

The cool glow of peace shed with each step she took down the hall.

Elizabeth sat on the couch in her housecoat, legs curled up underneath her, bareheaded, her ghostly knees jutting out. Barbara resisted the irrational urge to tug the cotton over her exposed patella.

‘Hi mom. Jonah said you had news. What’s going on?’ She sank into the love seat as Jonah dropped onto the sofa and wrapped an arm around his wife. Balled-up tissues littered the floor. An infomercial for an exciting ultra-absorbent towel droned in the background. Even Rupert was moping on the rug in front of the TV.

‘Mom?’

Elizabeth didn’t acknowledge her, ‘That thing absorbs a whole quart of water—can you imagine! Amazing, the things they make today.’

Barbara looked to Jonah, confused.

He patted his wife’s shoulder, ‘We need to tell Barbara the news, Liz-a-bear.’

It had been years since Barbara had heard Jonah call her mother by the pet name. The intimacy of the moment made her self-conscious.

Elizabeth watched as the salesman cheerfully soaked up another bucket of water, then wrung it out again. ‘You tell her, dear.’

Dread crept over Barbara, its chill warning her that something bad had happened. Perhaps she shouldn’t have pawned Tony off onto a stranger—a lawyer—even if he was a pleasant, handsome one.

Jonah’s voice was husky and he didn’t meet Barbara’s eyes. ‘We got a phone call from the hospital today. They did some scans, ran some tests on your mother after that spell at the funeral. We were hoping they wouldn’t show nothing, maybe she had low blood sugar or something, maybe side effects from the chemo. They

warned us about that, you know, even though it's been a few months since her last round.'

Tears broke past his lashes to trace the wrinkles down his face. Barbara looked away.

'Well,' he cleared his throat. 'Seems those tests did come up with something, something not good.'

Barbara focused on Elizabeth, crying silently as she watched the infomercial. 'What did the hospital say, Jonah?'

His voice shook, 'Her white blood cell count is low, real bad, Barbara. They think—they said—well, I don't see any other way to say it, honey.'

She could see him in her periphery, but she kept her eyes trained on her mother. 'Jonah.'

'The cancer's metastasized to her brain and spine, Barbara. Real bad-like, too. She's already got an appointment to go in tomorrow morning for more tests, but they're not real optimistic.'

Barbara didn't look at him. She was calculating. Elizabeth had been born in 1938, eight years younger than Tony, but she wouldn't live as long.

'Did they say anything else?'

He honked his nose loudly. Barbara tensed against the sound, but her shoulders and neck refused to relax after he stopped.

'No, they want to do more tests to be sure. They said we could talk about new treatment options after tomorrow's test results, but more chemo won't do much good now.' He laid his head on Elizabeth's chest and Barbara watched her mother's delicate fingers slowly caress his white head, wet eyes glued to the infomercial.

Barbara stood, her body heavy, her head full of grey static. Jonah's sobs followed her down the hall until she closed the guest room door.

Barbara was halfway through Philippians chapter four when the doorbell rang the first time. '8Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.'

She finished the verse and shut her eyes, meditating on verse seven. '7And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' Peace. The relief she'd felt on leaving Josh's office had been tangible. Then came Jonah's sobbing revelation that Elizabeth's cancer was beyond medical help. Peace would be nice.

Crying had always seemed pointless to Barbara. Men's tears irritated her, bordering on anger. Her own tears over the past week disappointed her. She was done crying.

Her musing was interrupted by the doorbell's tinny chime. Jonah must have taken Rupert outside or the dog would have been barking at the sound. Elizabeth was likely still sitting in the living room. Barbara exhaled her frustration as she stood. She couldn't imagine any visitor at four seventeen on a Thursday afternoon anyone would be happy to see.

She opened the door, face set, ready to dispose of a solicitor. The day had thrown enough at her already. She didn't have the patience for anything else. 'Jean!' Baffled, Barbara gaped at her half-sister. 'What—I—What are you doing here?'

Jean's watermelon lips pulled back in a less-than friendly sneer. 'Is that any way to greet family? Come on Barbara, we're sisters.' She wore a short, tight jean skirt with frayed holes, paired with a faded, low-cut fuchsia shirt.

Barbara could see the black lace of Jean's bra. She composed herself, instructing her eyes to stay on Jean's make-up, not her cleavage or too-exposed legs. 'What do you want, Jean?' She put on her salesman face again. Jean had to go, even if she wasn't peddling magazines or vacuums.

Jean faked a pout. 'Is that really all you think of me? You're not even going to ask me to come inside? And I came all the way down here to see you. During rush hour, even.'

Over a copper shoulder, Barbara saw a beat-up Mustang convertible, red, well over a decade old. She thought about Josh Silberberg, the impressive office, massive leather chair, and professional secretary. He probably drove a car like Nat's—a BMW or Audi. 'No I'm not. Now, what do you want?'

She dropped the smile, 'Fine. Be a bitch. I came to see if you could be reasoned with, see if you were maybe smart enough to get that *we* are Tony's family, too. But I guess you know better. You think you're so much better than the rest of us: all stuck-up and east coast in your boring, ugly old teacher clothes. I hope you're ready for what's coming, Barbara. ' Her chipped nail polish shook too close to Barbara's nose.

'Well guess what, Barbara – you ain't the only kid Tony had. You didn't even grow up with him. You're nothing special.' She raised her hands to shrug dramatically, 'But you're lying and I know it. Bet you think you can get away with it—throwing away Tony's things, never asking anyone else what we think, if we want our dad's stuff, at least see what's in those storage units! He was our *dad*. And how do we know you're really throwing it away, huh? Maybe you're keeping it all for yourself, or selling it and keeping the money!'

She pushed her mussed bleached hair over one shoulder. 'Guess what: we're suing you, Barbara. I came over here to give you one last chance. If you'da been nice, maybe I wouldn't have gone through with it. But no, you're a cold, selfish bitch. I don't even feel bad about it. You're gonna get what's coming to you for stealing from Tony—from all of us! You're gonna regret this.'

Barbara wondered how quickly Rick could book a return flight for her. Maybe she could be home on Saturday, in time to take her usual place for the morning service on Sunday. The picture made her smile.

'What are you, stupid? We're suing your ass! What are you damn happy about?' Jean's face was blotched with anger, her orange hands balled into fists at her hips.

'I just realized: I can go home now.' Honey filled her voice and Barbara let her smile widen. 'Thank you, Jean, for letting me know what you intend to do. I'll be sure to let my attorney know that he should expect to hear from your lawyer soon. What's his name?'

She could see the coffee and tobacco stains on Jean's tongue as the older woman sputtered. 'You—you wouldn't dare. You don't have a lawyer. Don't lie!'

'Oh, yes I do. I hired him today, actually. His name is Joshua Silberberg. You may want to tell your lawyer.' Barbara started to close the door, 'Goodbye, Jean.'

'You fucking bitch!' Jean shrieked. 'Don't you dare shut that door! I'm gonna get what's mine. You won't get away with stealing from Tony and us like this, you cunt. It's not fair. You got no right!'

On a hunch, Barbara paused. 'Oh, there is one more thing, Jean. You may want to tell your mother to start packing her things. Tony had quite a bit of debt and unpaid bills, you know. That house is probably his only asset. I'm pretty sure it will be seized to pay for some of what he owes.' She was gratified to see the color drain from Jean's face under the layers of makeup. Its Crayola color reminded her school would be starting again in only five weeks. Soon she would be back to the usual routine.

'How do you—no one knows about that! That is *our* house. You're lying. No one can take it from us!' Jean's raspy voice was filled with panic. 'Tony had money, I know he had money! He was always buying things...he's got money somewhere. We just have to find it.'

Her tone changed, 'C'mon Barbara, we're family. Help us find that money and you get a share too. At least don't tell anyone about the house—we need it, mom and June and me. Shirley and her kids, they're fine, they don't need nothin, but we're struggling, the three of us. We got nothing but that house.'

Tears welled up, but stopped short of falling, dammed up behind clumped mascara. 'Barbara, have a heart.'

'Have a heart?' Barbara's eyes narrowed, her smile gone. 'You came here pretending to be friendly, to be family—a wolf in sheepskin. Then you call me names and insult me. Now you're begging for my help.'

She shook her head, 'It's pathetic, Jean. Get a job. Tell Janet to get a job. Go be responsible for your life, like the rest of us. I've handed everything over to the attorney. It's out of my hands and good riddance.' She pushed the door closed a little too hard, but the slam felt right. Satisfying, final.

Barbara twisted the deadbolt and turned to find Elizabeth swaying in the hallway. 'Mom—I didn't realize you were there.' She stopped. She wasn't sure what her mother had overheard, or what she might think about anything she had. One side of Elizabeth's hair was pressed flat from a pillow.

'I suppose you'll be flying home soon, then.' Elizabeth yawned.

'Well, yes, I was planning to. I only have a few weeks of summer left, and I'll have to get my classroom ready before school starts, go through curriculum—'

Elizabeth brandished a hand to stop her. 'You don't have to make excuses, Barbara. You're done here. You're going home. I understand.' Lines pressed into her right cheek mapped where she'd lain against a pillowcase. Her eyes were puffy, but sharp and aware. 'Go home, Barbara. Really. Leave Tony behind. I didn't protect you from him all those years ago, but I won't let him cause you any more trouble now.'

Gratitude welled up to choke Barbara. She swallowed hard and moved toward Elizabeth. For the first time since Barbara could remember, she hugged her mother.

July 2, 1959

Dear Tony,

I was so sorry to receive your letter—I feel I've done nothing but upset you these last few weeks. It was thoughtless to consider going on a holiday with the Bellows when the hospital bill is yet to be paid, and that is entirely my fault. I've also told Agatha I can't accept any invitations to the cinema in the future. Of course I didn't think there was any harm in seeing 'Porgy and Bess,' but you are right. It's a foolish waste of money. I will be more thoughtful and careful in the future.

I am terribly sorry that I upset you when I recommended you see the movie too. I didn't even consider that the entire cast is colored. I'm sure Agatha didn't consider whether it was appropriate for the three of us ladies to see, or she probably would not have recommended it. I must admit that I was so caught up in the music I don't think I even noticed the actors were black. Not that that's any excuse.

I will refrain from social outings other than church and visits to Susan and the park from now on. I think it must be good for the babies to spend some time with people other than me. All the magazines and Dr. Spock say so, anyhow. But do not worry, I will not have any more cinematic adventures.

Baby David is growing just as he should and is the happiest baby anyone could ever want, although he and Barbara have both been cranky lately because of the heat. It's so hot here now that I can barely stand to move. I've brought out those Chinese fans you gave us to try to keep cool. I do wish you could see David. He isn't saying real words yet, but he is very close to 'Mama' and he calls Barbara 'Babbab.'

It's really precious. He loves his sister dearly. It is a little amusing when Barbara tries to hold David: Kitty climbs right up her to curl up on top of Baby David!

I hope you are well in Texas and finding ways to stay entertained. The children send their love. I promise to be more sensible in the future.

Always,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and Baby David

P.S. Even with the trip to the cinema, I've managed to save on nearly everything this month.

Account/Expense	Budget	Actual	Over/Under
Groceries & Milk	\$65.00	-\$61.59	\$3.41
Mortgage, Taxes & Insurance	\$97.00	-\$97.00	\$0
Utilities	\$10.00	-\$6.94	\$3.06
Toiletries, Clothes & Sundries	\$20.00	-\$13.78	\$6.22
		Foundations - \$6.32	
		Talcum powder - \$1.00	
		Clothes detergent - 67¢	
		Fabric for B & D - \$5.79	
Household Goods	\$15.00	-\$11.92	\$3.08
Gasoline & Car	\$40.00	-\$34.12	\$5.88
Toys	\$5.00	\$0	\$5.00
Spending Money	\$15.00	-\$6.35	\$8.65
		Cinema Ticket - \$1.00	
		Soda pop - 5¢	
		M&Ms candies - 5¢	
		Shears - \$5.25	
Postage	50¢	-16¢	34¢
Doctor & Medicine	\$15.00	-\$3.40	\$11.60
TOTAL	\$282.50	-\$235.26	\$47.24

'Barbara?' Elizabeth's voice was muffled through the door.

Barbara looked up from the passage in Psalms, 'Come on in, mom.'

Unruly wisps of white hair framed Elizabeth's small face. 'Do you have a minute? There are some things I want to show you.'

Surprised, Barbara closed her Bible and stood. 'Sure.'

She followed her mother into the master bedroom, where Elizabeth had spread a white sheet on top of the quilt.

Before Barbara could sort out what was scattered on top of the sheet, Elizabeth spoke. 'I hope you don't think me morbid, but given everything that's happened, I started to think that I wanted to make sure you and David had everything you wanted before I go. I didn't want you to have to sort through my things—or Jonah. And there are some items I want you to have.' She eyed the bed, 'I'd already decided to do this before we heard from the doctors, but now...' She looked up to Barbara and shrugged, 'It's just the right time, I think.'

Barbara nodded, unsure what she was agreeing to and whether she should agree to it at all.

Elizabeth smiled and clasped her hands in excitement, 'Good! Let me show you, then.'

She pulled her daughter closer to the bed. The sheet was covered in jewelry, photographs, boxes, and a variety of knickknacks.

'Mom, are you sure you don't you want to keep this stuff?' the words snuck out.

Elizabeth's face was set, 'No. I don't need any of this anymore.' She pointed to a delicate string of pearls, 'Tony gave those to me, believe it or not, and I had them checked out years ago—they're real!' She winked, 'He got some things right, every now and again. Maybe Deirdre would like them? I don't know if she would wear them, but pearls are one of those timeless things. She could keep them in a box, at any rate.'

Barbara reached a hand to finger the string of tiny pearls, yellowed from age. 'They're lovely, mom. I'm sure she'd love to have them.' Her double strand of 9mm pearls came to mind. 'I hardly ever take mine out anymore. Rick gave them to me on our first wedding anniversary.' She chuckled, 'I was so upset he didn't give me stationery!' In retrospect, the pearls had been a much better gift than the monogrammed stationery set she'd presented Rick with such flourish.

Elizabeth mirrored her smile, 'You were so determined to do your marriage right, all Emily Post and *Modern Bride*. Do you remember the fuss you put up about the flowers at your wedding?'

She winced, 'I read that an all-white bouquet was bad luck, but some white was good luck, and something about peonies. I don't even remember now!'

'But I talked you into red roses with baby's breath.'

Barbara wrinkled her nose, 'I despised the baby's breath. I do think of that every time I see our wedding photos.'

Elizabeth had picked up something white and lacy. 'You've only seen this in pictures, I think. I made this for you before you were born. You wore it to church your first Easter and somehow managed to get egg dye on it! Look—see those faded purple spots? I never could get them out.'

'Of course I did. It's beautiful—do you want me to keep it for Nat...or Deirdre?' The thought of Deirdre having children didn't quite register. Her ambitious daughter wasn't the domestic type.

'I think that would be nice, don't you?' Elizabeth's grin drooped, 'I may not be here to meet my great-grandchildren, but I'd like them to have some remembrances of me, at least.'

'Oh mom...' Tears blurred her mother's face despite Barbara's resolution. 'Don't count yourself out yet.' She forced a wink, 'Besides, at this rate, there won't be any grandchildren anyway.'

Elizabeth smoothed the tiny white dress. 'Still, I'd like you to take it now.'

'Of course.' Barbara considered the sheet, 'Why don't I get a couple of chairs from the kitchen and you can tell me about everything here?'

Elizabeth's eyes crinkled with joy. 'Just fetch one. I'll sit on the cedar chest.'

Barbara smiled back, but it faded as she walked to the kitchen. She dropped into a chair, face in her hands. She counted to thirty, then reached for a napkin, dabbing at her eyes as she let out a shaky breath. She blew her nose and tossed the napkin into the garbage bin before picking up the chair. Tears would not help.

Elizabeth had taken up residence atop the chest at the foot of the bed, a pile of reusable shopper bags at her feet and a long box on her lap. Less of the sheet was visible and she had turned on all the lights in the room.

Elizabeth looked up from the framed photo she held. She extended it to her daughter, 'I don't know if you've ever seen this.'

Barbara shook her head as she inspected the fading black and white portrait. 'I don't think so. Are they your parents?'

'It was taken just before they moved to California. They were from South Dakota, you know, farm country. Father had heard there were jobs in cities in California, so they got married and moved. He was twenty-nine and mother only sixteen—can you believe.'

Barbara raised her eyebrows and handed it back. 'What year was it? It must have been a big deal to make such a big move, so far away from family.'

'Oh, it must have been 1933 or so. I don't think they had much choice.' She set the frame aside before taking the lid off the box. 'Now, these are yours.' She tilted it toward Barbara and handed her a tissue-paper-wrapped bundle.

Barbara slowly unwrapped the layers of paper. 'What are -?' She stopped when she saw the small, delicately painted face. 'Oh. My dolls!'

Elizabeth watched her, 'You remember them?'

She lifted the small doll from the tissue, hair and dress flattened, but otherwise perfect. 'Of course—my Madame Alexander dolls.' Barbara smiled at the details on the miniature girl.

Elizabeth took stock of the box, 'I got you the first one when you were six. I don't suppose you remember. I think her name was Cissy. Your father was furious with me, but it was one of the few times that I didn't care.'

Barbara fluffed the doll's curls, 'Why was he upset about a doll?'

Her mother didn't look at her, 'It was partly the money. Even then those dolls weren't cheap.'

'Partly?'

'He blamed me.' Her voice wavered, 'I would get so overwhelmed sometimes. You and your brother were more than I could handle, and sometimes you got

underfoot, made a mess...Tony just wanted you out of his way, quiet. He'd fly off the handle if you got into his things.'

'Mom, it's okay. That's over now.' Barbara patted her mother's arm, reassuring. 'I don't see what that has to do with the dolls, anyway.'

'Barbara...' She hesitated, 'Well, I suppose you ought to know: I would buy you one of these dolls to get you to behave, after one of Tony's blow-outs. He took it out on me, but he wasn't the only one who yelled. I bribed you to calm down, keep quiet after...' She set the box on the bed and hid her face in her robe, muffling her voice. 'I'm sorry. It was just too much. There were so many days I could hardly get myself out my bed, and you kids took so much energy and attention. I didn't know what else to do.'

The carefully molded face hadn't faded, her too-wide eyes staring up at Barbara. She couldn't tell what expression the figure was meant to show beneath the painted pout and blush. 'I don't remember that part.' She wrapped the blonde doll back into the tissue. 'I only remember really loving these dolls.'

Elizabeth sniffled, but didn't lift her face.

Barbara perched on the cedar chest beside her mother. 'Mom, there's no need to dredge any more up about Tony. Truly. It doesn't matter now why you got me these dolls.' She reached an arm around Elizabeth's small shoulders and squeezed.

Elizabeth whimpered, 'You did love those dolls. And they weren't all—I got them for your birthdays and Christmases...'

'See? There's nothing to apologize for.' Barbara withdrew her arm to take the box from Elizabeth. She relocated to her chair and opened a second wrapped

bundle. A strawberry blonde doll with a cast on one arm lay beside miniature crutches and sunglasses. She sat back in the chair, memory creeping back.

'Mom...Did you get me a doll after I broke my arm?'

Elizabeth nodded into her robe.

Barbara replaced the lid without touching the doll. She counted ten boxes on the sheet and wondered which held happy memories. Elizabeth's eyes peeked, watching her, as she held the robe over her mouth. Her hair was mussed up in a Mohawk, reminding Barbara of Tony's trolls.

'I'd rather not keep these, mom.'

Their blue eyes met and Elizabeth lowered the robe from her face. 'I understand.'

'You know, you could have your stylist cut your hair so you don't have to worry about putting on a wig.' The thought blurted out before Barbara could soften it.

'What?' Elizabeth stared at her, confused at the sudden change in topic.

'It's the style now for older women to have short spiky hair, dye it pink or blue. You could try it out, if you wanted. I know you don't always like to wear your wig.'

Elizabeth blinked and bobbed her head, 'What about purple?'

Barbara smiled, 'Purple, too.'

'I like it.' Elizabeth grinned back.

'Always the rebel, you.'

Her mother winked, 'Always.'

'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found, t'was blind, but now I'm free...' Barbara dabbed at her eyes as the soprano intern poured herself into the notes.

'Thank you, Colette, for that beautiful hymn.' The pastor flashed a benevolent smile at the wispy redheaded singer. 'Now, if everyone would stand and join us to worship.' He stepped back from the podium and gestured to the music minister.

Barbara didn't look at the projected lyrics. She knew the words by heart. She closed her eyes and raised her arms, giving herself over to the lyrics.

Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that You're my God

Altogether lovely, altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

'Next a classic hymn—turn to number 308 in the hymnal, or use the screens for the words.' The music minister spoke over the smooth piano transition.

The choir joined the instruments after the first eight-count of 'Washed in the Blood of Jesus.'

Barbara let her tears fall, music and power washing over her like the messiah's blood of the hymn. She sang and left any thoughts of Tony, boxes, and cancer at the foot of the cross. Salty rivers traced through her makeup, and she smiled.

September 14, 1959

Dear Tony,

I haven't received a letter from you in weeks, but I have received the money wires. I hope everything is alright. I'm know you're very busy and don't have time for letter writing. I do like to think you enjoy these little missives. Barbara understands now that these letters go to you. She insists on sending you a 'present'. You'll see her 'signature' at the bottom of the page (it's the bright red crayon scribbles, in case you need an interpretation). Her newest drawing is folded in.

Baby David has settled into his routine and is mostly content to play with his toes and nap. He does love to be held, but he doesn't mind if I sew or crochet or braid while I hold him. We've been a very quiet little trio the past week or so. We even turn the television on while we all sit together. David loves Walt Disney Presents. He laughs and coos and kicks up his little feet every time it comes on. The Bellows are taking a day-trip to Disneyland in Anaheim before school starts. What a lark! She asked me if we'd like to go, but I just don't see how Barbara Marie and David would enjoy it, so I told her 'thanks, but no'. They are too young still. Perhaps in a few years we can all go. Wouldn't that be a treat?

Agatha Jones joined me for lunch on Monday. She's taking a correspondence course from a university in Oregon. You will never guess the course: Economics - can you imagine! She tried to explain some of it to me, but I'm sure I didn't understand a bit of it. I've never been very good with politics and it sounds like Economics is politics with math (how dreadful!). She is so clever, though, and she really finds it fascinating. She showed me the course catalog, too. I had no idea that there were so many different courses: Literature, Art – even Business and

Psychology. I'm sure she will be a success. She said it helps that Mr. Jones is in Business (he has his bachelor degree in Business Administration). He has taken to asking her about her studies each evening. He reviews her work and they talk about how it applies to his job and her Avon business. It's all so very interesting, but certainly beyond me.

Susan has sells Tupperware now – have you heard of it? They have all these neat little containers with air-tight lids to store just about anything you could imagine. It's not like Avon, where you go door-to-door. Susan just invites ladies she knows over to her house for a 'Tupperware Party' and everyone can play with the products and order them right there. I got a few pieces to help in the kitchen and I use them for everything I can – they're so versatile. It's really a fantastic value. I'm glad she and Agatha are both busy and doing so well, but it gets a bit lonely with only the children for company.

In other news, the boxes you sent in July finally arrived last week – I did not realize you're such an avid collector! Where shall I put everything? Or would you like me to put them in the spare room? There's hardly any space in there anymore. I've already started to arrange all the old TV Guide copies on the shelf with the books. There is still some room if there are magazines you want me to display.

It's time for I Love Lucy. I need to wake David for a bottle and make sure Barbara Marie hasn't fallen asleep. She's such a brat if she falls asleep too early. Did I tell you her new favorite word? 'No'. She's driving me to tears. Susan insists it's only the 'terrible twos' and she will grow out of it soon. The end can't come quickly enough for me.

I hope you're well. We are all looking forward to seeing you next month. (You are still planning to come home?)

Our Love,

Elizabeth, Barbara Marie, and David

EPILOGUE

Barbara shoved a full bag through the trap door, wincing at the accompanying twinge in her back. She rocked back on her heels and took a deep pull from her water bottle, meaning to take a quick break to wash the dust from her throat. A ding forced her to relinquish the bottle and shuffle the Christmas boxes around until she found her phone.

'Where are you?' Rick was home from golf.

Annoyed he couldn't be bothered to poke his head into the garage, Barbara contemplated ignoring the text. Decades of experience taught her that this would be her husband's only effort to find her. She pushed aside the irritation.

'Attic. Cleaning.' She didn't wait for a response. 'Need your help.'

He wouldn't, but she couldn't get upset at him if she didn't ask. She started to set the phone down, but the labels she had printed with Deirdre's and Nat's names on them stopped her.

'Cleaning out attic. Labeling your things. Need you to go through them at Christmas or I donate. Love, Mom.' She carefully selected her children's names and sent the group text, a novel trick she'd learned from her new, fresh-out-of-college team teacher.

The thought of Miss Winters made Barbara smile. She'd been dismayed to learn that her former 3rd grade teammate of five years, Mrs. Swift, had decided over the summer to leave her teaching career altogether. Barbara had been too upset at the time to reach out to Moira, but now that school was back in session, the teachers' lounge gossip was in full swing. She overheard the Spanish and music teachers tutting and tsking that Myra hadn't left by choice. Apparently, her husband

had an affair and she'd discovered him with the other woman—the mother of a student at their school. Barbara didn't stay to hear who that parent was. She knew it would come out eventually. There was no need to look at a child differently because their mother had broken up a family. It wasn't the child's fault.

Miss Winters, Sarah-with-an-h, had materialized during prep week blonde, bubbly, and optimistic. Barbara was less than enthused about her new team teacher, but Sarah was smart, handled her classroom well, and came often to Barbara for advice. Five weeks into the quarter, Sarah had won over the older woman. Barbara was enjoying, truly loving, teaching again for the first time in years. And Sarah had taught her how to send group text messages and added a Bible app on her new smartphone. It had been a good school year so far.

Alarming creaks and grunts drew Barbara's attention to the ladder, where Rick's graying head emerged. 'Hey you. Inspired to clean out the junk after the mess this summer?'

She waved vaguely at the dark space, the overhead bulb casting odd shadows from her movement. 'Haven't made much progress. I just told the kids they either take what they want at Christmas, or I'm giving it away.'

The light reflected off the silver hairs slowly taking over his once-brunette head as he nodded. 'Fair enough.'

She waited for the offer of help she already knew he wouldn't make. 'Are you busy?' She knew he wasn't. It was barely noon on Sunday and he'd just finished a round of golf. He might be hungry, but not busy.

Rick climbed up another rung to get a better view. 'Eh, not really.' He pulled a face, 'We really do have some crap up here, don't we? I guess I forgot how many

times we said we'd just keep something in the attic.' He chuckled and scratched his head, 'Let me change and grab some food. I'll come help you if you can clear a space big enough for me.'

Barbara gaped.

He winked, 'C'mon now Barbara, you think after thirty-three years of marriage that I didn't know you were going to ask me to come help? Did you eat?'

Barbara shook her head, sheepish. 'Of course you knew. And no, I haven't eaten.'

'Great. I'll bring you a sandwich.' His head bobbed back down until Barbara could see only the ladder once more.

She retrieved her phone and started to tap: 'Lots of memories up here. Dad is helping. Hope you'll come for Christmas. Love, Mom.' She hit Send and smiled. She really did hope they'd both come. It would be good to have the kids around for Jonah's first Christmas alone.

1. INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THESIS

Women writers, in short, have articulated their pain. But they cannot, or for the most part have not, imagined characters moving, as the authors themselves have moved, beyond that pain.

—Carolyn Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood*

For so long, Elizabeth had been an enigma, a puzzle Barbara stopped trying to solve. She went to church, volunteered, tithed, and seemed otherwise content to live life from her seat on the sofa, watching TV and crocheting.

—*The Collection*

My inspiration for *The Collection* was rooted in my fascination with the shifts between generations of women in families: their mental health, religiosity, and ideologies. Framed by the context of an abusive, hoarding husband and father, I wanted to explore the effects on a family of its patriarch's mental health disorders¹, obsessive need for control, and objectification of the women within his family. During an early draft of *The Collection*, it became clear that the greater significance of the novel was not, as I had originally thought, the nature of the relationship between mental illness and religion; rather, the novel's importance lies in its mimetic portrayal of women shaped by and subjected to a context of sexist social expectations, prejudices, and censorship. Therefore, in order to effectively discuss the plot and characters of *The Collection*, and to synthesize my research, I wove together social-psychological theories within a feminist framework.

As I delved into the writing and research process, I began to wonder if there was a greater question to be asked regarding the combination of all of the factors in the novel. I began to look for answers in psychology, as it broadly considers the

¹The phrases 'mental health disorder,' 'mental health challenge,' 'mental health condition' and 'mental illness' will be used interchangeably, per the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) recommended terms for writing about mental health conditions ("Words Matter").

long-term effects of childhood on adults, and I soon found two theories that offered tested tools with which to discuss the protagonist's development and the impact of her family life on her. Attachment Theory exemplifies this: while first proposed by John Bowlby as a psychological theorem building on systems theory, it has more recently been integrated into psychoanalytic theory not only to identify the source of an adult's mental health issue(s), but also to treat related disorders (J. Holmes 2). Similarly, Intergenerational Theories of Personal Development—as a subset of Family Systems Theory—approach analysis of adults by looking back at their parents, their childhood experiences, and comparing the psychology of both the adult children and their parents. While theories of Intergenerational Development share many of the same aspects as the popularized sociological phenomenon dubbed Generation Gap (Bengtson 7-8), their focus on the family unit makes them a more precise mechanism with which to evaluate both the protagonist—as an adult child—and her aging parents. Rooted in Karl Mannheim's sociological writing on "The Problem of Generations," the term 'generation gap' refers to a population en masse (Bengtson 8), whereas theories of Intergenerational Development narrow the generational scope to the members of a single family unit—much like Attachment Theory focuses on a child and her parents. In other words, theories of Intergenerational Development stem from the notion that "The family of origin is the most important social group that influences the individual's development" (Harvey and Bray 2); likewise, Attachment Theory traces the source of adults' relationship and social tendencies to children's relationships with their parents (J. Holmes 81).

The final and overarching aspect of my critical tactic came in a surprising form. While researching writing women characters, I came across the works of Carolyn Heilbrun. Her 1988 book *Writing a Woman's Life* is a feminist critique of how women's lives have typically been written in non-fiction (*Writing* 11). Her evaluation highlights not only how male-written biographies of women censor out much of those women's lives, but also how women similarly fail to include those same aspects in their own memoirs and autobiographies, as well as in biographies they author of other women. I was intrigued by Heilbrun's arguments and found that they still rang true with my personal experiences nearly three decades later—an evaluation Heilbrun marks as essential in her 1981 feminist treatise on women and their search for identity in the twentieth century, *Reinventing Womanhood* (72). This realization led me to probe the veracity of Heilbrun's arguments against the psychological and sociological theories I was using, as well as popular culture, and the broad ideas of feminism. Heilbrun's book prompted me to give more weight to the authenticity and verisimilitude of the protagonist of *The Collection*: Had I written a woman Heilbrun would have criticized? Had I also, as the author of that woman, fallen into the trap of limiting and censoring my female protagonist, adding to the litany of women writers who—according to Heilbrun—failed even to do our own (cis)gender justice? These questions are not easy to answer and require a context within which to evaluate my responses.

Fiction written from a similar contemporary feminist perspective might provide a context within which to address the questions prompted by Heilbrun, as well as a unifying framework for the psychological aspects of Attachment Theory and the theories of Intergenerational Development. Rather than attempt to

approach feminist literary criticism or theory as bodies of work, or feminist psychoanalysis narrowly, this research focuses specifically on how women of one generation shape their daughters—both literal and figurative—in the next. I chose to use the theoretical models of Attachment Theory and Intergenerational Development as sources of insight into the characters and their relationships, and as a lens through which to discuss the paradigm shift in generations between Elizabeth and Barbara. Mental health is one significant area against which the mother-daughter dyad in *The Collection* can be subjected to Heilbrun's feminist critique, as she is highly critical of psychoanalysis' patriarchal bias. I made the creative choice to write both of the protagonist's parents as presenting with mental illnesses in the novel, enabling me to play with the divergent effects of those illnesses on the mother and father. I drew on society's long-standing social and psychoanalytic prejudice toward women, whose history in the care of male psychoanalysts' hands led to the concepts of hysteria and penis envy (Mitchell 7-10), and the stigma associated with mental health disorders (Hinshaw, Cicchetti, and Toth x). Within my novel, Barbara is affected both by her father's obsessive-compulsive hoarding and abusive obsession with control, and by her mother's depression and borderline personality disorder (BPD). In addition to the direct effects on Barbara as a result of her parents' mental illnesses, her father's treatment of her mother's mental disorder shapes Barbara's opinion of her mother, warps her expectations of women and their role in a family, and instills in her a pervasive lack of self-esteem—bordering on self-hate.

Elizabeth experiences first-hand the more pronounced patriarchal gender restrictions of the mid-twentieth century, and impresses upon her daughter many

of the same limiting and damaging ideals to which she was subjected. Barbara's father approaches her with the same objectifying expectations regarding gender with which he treats her mother, also contributing to and perpetuating the patriarchal context. Understandably, the protagonist absorbs her family's gender expectations, although they manifest in her adult life in a very different manner to her mother. Once I identified the handing-down of patriarchy from mother to daughter in my novel, I chose to explore the particularly insidious effects it would have on the protagonist. However, as this research does not focus solely on the mother-daughter relationship, it would be excessive to review the extensive body of research and writing about the mother-daughter dyad. But because the cumulative body of work related to mother-daughter relationships is integral to understanding the characters' relationships within my novel, I will only reference key texts and works as they relate to *The Collection*.

Within my novel, *The Collection*, anger plays a unique secondary role, particularly as suppressed anger and as a counterpart to depression. It is significant that while Heilbrun marked women's anger as taboo in 1988 (*Writing* 15), current attitudes have not much changed toward women who express or demonstrate their anger (Salerno and Peter-Hagene 581), as shown in recent psychological studies, popular entertainment and media, and feminist theory. Anger continues to be treated as distinctly masculine—both in the right to express it and the shape that expression takes—by extension, anger is unfeminine and as such, off-limits for the female-identifying gender² (Fabes and Martin 539; see also Salerno and Peter-

² I will clarify here that this research focuses on cisgender females; although its application to transgender women—on whom American media and law have

Hagene 582). Stereotypes (Fabes and Martin 532), social expectation and recent media treatment of high-profile episodes involving angry women all reinforce this negative view of women's anger. Yet memoir and fiction alike have consistently explored women's anger since Heilbrun remarked on it nearly three decades ago. In an effort to demonstrate how *The Collection* relates to and fits into current women's writing and similar fiction, I have applied this critical perspective to other works: Siri Hustvedt's *Blazing World*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, and Tracy Letts' play *August: Osage County*. Likewise, memoirists like Alix Kates Shulman and Jeanette Winterson have written accounts of parts of their lives that neither shy away from the 'unfeminine' nor the ugly, anger, and pain integral to their narratives—their selves; these memoirs offer real world examples against which to compare the fictional women in *The Collection*.

The cohesion of these three areas, Attachment Theory, theories of Intergenerational Development, and the feminist critique put forth by Heilbrun, provides the structure through which I am able to discuss and evaluate the protagonist of *The Collection* as a woman, as well as myself as a female author. While my novel is not inherently feminist—in the sense that it neither prescribes a world of equality, nor offers up a feminist heroine battling the patriarchy á la *Blazing World*—it is feminist in its scrutiny of a world I wrote to be recognizably similar to our own; it looks closely and uncomfortably at the devastating effects both of a patriarch's chauvinist treatment of the women in his family and of the impact of the matriarch's perpetuation of her husband's sexism. The Barbara

recently focused—is not misplaced, there are additional layers of social and psychological complexity to anger in transgender women.

readers meet at the beginning of the novel undergoes a transformation as a result of her journey home and into her family's past, leading her to confront the past in all its trauma, but also to find a way out of it by the end of the book. By way of answer to Heilbrun's argument in 1981 that women writers had "failed to imagine autonomous women characters" (*Reinventing* 71), in writing *The Collection*, I attempted to imagine women characters framed by a narrative designed to highlight the cause(s) of that lack of autonomy, as well as to offer them the opportunity to achieve independence. *The Collection* is the story of Barbara, a woman who puts herself first despite a traumatic childhood, out of wedlock teenage pregnancy, early marriage, commitment to a "traditionally" feminine vocation, and adherence to deep Christian religious belief. Barbara stands in stark contrast to her mother, Elizabeth, whose self-fulfilling prophecy of submission to others negatively impacts herself and her children for decades.

2. THE COLLECTION: AIMS AND GOALS OF THE NOVEL

The question that prompted the novel was: What type of relationship could a religious adult woman who has a mental disorder have with her aging mother whose life has been defined by her own mental illness? I began with the intent to write a novel about a late-middle-aged woman, Barbara, who: has undiagnosed depression, has a borderline personality disorder (BPD) and uses charismatic religion as her coping mechanism. Through Barbara, I hoped to explore the greater implications of these two factors on her relationship with her aging parents and adult children—specifically, her mother and daughter. I chose to utilize BDP, depression, hoarding, and obsessive-compulsive behavior as prominent characterization tools in *The Collection*; although I ultimately chose not to emphasize the symptoms of Barbara's BPD, I did characterize her mother more flagrantly with the personality disorder. I used mental illness and Barbara's religiosity to create unique conflicts and crises within the novel; both offer well-studied theories and phenomena from which to draw inspiration, although my creative and selective application of my research means that neither the characters nor the plot fit neatly into theories.

Ultimately, the novel is an exploration of Barbara, the protagonist, recognizable as a real woman. As a result of her attempt to create a life outside of his impact, Barbara does not mourn her father's passing, nor grieve for him in the way one might expect. Her apathetic response to his death combines with her responsibility to him post mortem to force her to face his past and secrets. Since leaving California and cutting her father out of her life in her early twenties, Barbara

has sought to build a world that shares no resemblance with her childhood. As a married woman in her fifties, she finds solace and stability in religion, although it does not save her entirely from the BPD and depression from which she suffers; nor does her faith purge her of the anger she carries.

Barbara's father, in absentia, was one of the foundations on which I structured the novel, both as a catalyst and driver of the action: Tony's hoarding disorder results in visible, life-long effects on the entire family. It soon became clear to me, however, that the combined effects of her father's mental illness and his chauvinist treatment both of his wife and Barbara were equally as important in understanding Barbara's character as an adult as was Barbara's relationship with her mother. Likewise, in order to write about the protagonist's adult intrafamily relationships, I needed to consider both her elective estrangement from her father in her adulthood because of his hoarding disorder and its impact on her as a child. The effects of Tony's disorder, as well as his patriarchal mindset, on the protagonist's mother and younger brother are also key aspects of the novel's development. While writing the novel, I was surprised to find that I had unwittingly included the pervasive influence of this sexist construct in such a way as to connect the social-psychological theories of my research to Heilbrun and open a discourse on parents' roles in instilling gender norms.

The question of how the elder two generations would affect a third generation is implied within *The Collection*, but I quickly realized that it would be too complex to address the third generation (Barbara's children) explicitly within the novel in its current form. In addition to the word count limitation, in order to develop the complex relationship between Barbara and her daughter, Deirdre, I

would need to manipulate significant plot shifts so as to draw Deirdre deeper into the story and craft the conflicts necessary to provoke a crisis—including contrasts with her brother. As the plot hinges on the relationships between Barbara and her parents, I felt forcing Deirdre into Barbara's spotlight would detract from the exposition and crises Barbara faces; this is why Barbara's adult children both appear only as minor characters, serving to illustrate aspects of Barbara.

I included Elizabeth's narrative in the novel for two reasons: understanding Elizabeth is necessary if Barbara is to overcome her particular set of challenges in the book, and Elizabeth's story frames Barbara as sympathetic—or at least pitiable. I wove Elizabeth's story into the novel as a series of letters, written over the course of 1958 and 1959, at the beginning of her marriage to Tony. The letters create a secondary timeline to bring Elizabeth to life as a young woman, newly married and a new mother. Historically, letters have been a chosen medium of communication—often subject to complex structures of etiquette—between women otherwise isolated in their homes³, a distinction I found fitting for Elizabeth's situation (Pearsall). The one-sided nature of letters also emphasizes Elizabeth's isolation and lack of emotional support or affection from Tony. The letters offer hints of Tony's control and restrictions on Elizabeth, ultimately requiring the reader to question her reliability as a narrator: the better Elizabeth understands Tony, the more she censors what she writes, placing greater significance on what she is not telling her husband. Although a journal or diary would have provided more direct insight into

³ This is exemplified in the study and collection of ancient Greek (Mondini 1916) and Egyptian women's letters written so early as 300BC (Bagnall and Cribiore 2008), as well as throughout the medieval era and Renaissance (Daybell 2006) up to modern times.

Elizabeth, her early struggles with BPD, depression, and coping with life as a mother and housewife, the letters force Barbara to confront Elizabeth in order to discover what was happening outside of the carefully edited correspondence. Ultimately, the constrained letters serve as a metaphor for Elizabeth's limited voice and agency throughout her life as a result of her marriage to Tony.

I wrote Elizabeth's poor mental health as a key element of her struggles as a mother, and the largest contributing factor to Barbara's conflict with her (as a result of her insecure/avoidant attachment). Elizabeth has what a psychiatrist would diagnose as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), as BPD offered me the opportunity to justify Elizabeth's actions and reactions in the novel: BPD is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as "a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity" (Lawson xi; see also Krawitz and Jackson 38). The symptoms of BPD with which I characterized Elizabeth fit the profile of what Christine Ann Lawson dubs the 'Waif' in *Understanding the Borderline Mother*, in which Lawson examines the effects of the disorder on the children of mothers who have BPD (Lawson 56, xv). Lawson's constructs are useful for discussing Elizabeth, although she is ultimately a fictional character, and for connecting the mother-daughter relationship of Elizabeth and Barbara with Attachment Theory: "Children with borderline mothers begin their lives with an insecure attachment to an emotionally unstable mother" (Lawson xv).

Another of the themes I develop in the novel is how family secrets—both overt and those caused by unintentional omission—can create breakdowns within a nuclear family and distort the members' relationships outside of their immediate

family. I built on the secrets in *The Collection* to explore how Barbara's flawed perception of her patriarchal family and childhood shapes her as an adult; when Barbara learns the subjective truths about her family, she is faced with a crisis of identity. I deliberately created a family context that would lead Barbara to this crisis not only so she might have an opportunity for redemption, but also to play with the numerous possible outcomes for her fate. Retrospectively, I drew on social-psychological research to consider how Tony's patriarchy and Elizabeth's perpetuation of it would have affected Barbara and contributed to her anger, religiosity, and beliefs about gender. I began writing based on the broadly accepted notion that a traumatic, tumultuous, or inconsistent childhood family experience will affect a child's development and likely continue to impact her approach to people and circumstances throughout adulthood (Styron and Janoff-Bulman 1016). Psychology supports this specifically through theories of Intergenerational Development and trauma, as well as through applied psychotherapy and even more recent expansions of Attachment Theory (Ng and Smith 430; see also Harvey and Bray 299), which I will discuss further in the coming chapters. I fashioned Barbara's fictional childhood family (also referred to as her "family of origin" or "nuclear family") to provide the context for her to experience loss, trauma and disappointment at an early age: a depressed mother with little self-esteem or confidence, an often-absent, mentally ill, hoarder father with deeply held beliefs about women's place in the household and in society. The reader will find that Barbara's childhood rises in importance throughout the novel: it becomes more clearly tied into her personality, her approach to the world, and her emotionality as an adult—despite the fact that she's largely repressed the specifics of her childhood

trauma. The revelation of secrets kept both by Barbara's mother and father fans her suppressed anger, while simultaneously creating the opportunity for me to choose how adult Barbara reacts to what she learns. While I have not written Barbara to be so self-aware as to draw clear parallels between her childhood and adult self, nor have I given her every piece to the puzzle of her past, these revelations will take shape for the reader over the course of *The Collection*.

Although Tony frames the relationship of the mother-daughter dyad, I wrote the relationship between adult Barbara and aging Elizabeth as the core of the novel. Secondary to Barbara's experiences are her mother's; within the subtext of the letters emerge themes of conventional married life and strict gender role expectations for women in the late 1950s, as well as the quiet horrors that this life entailed for Elizabeth in the novel. I established Tony's dominance over his wife through her responses to him in the letters, wherein her omissions are nearly as important as what she does write. Although both generations of women struggle with what would today be diagnosed as BPD, they fit different profiles and therefore engage different coping mechanisms. Elizabeth's BPD also creates a plausible environment for Tony's compulsive hoarding disorder to evolve and subsequently damage his wife and children. Less visibly, but no less affective on the protagonist, I used Elizabeth's submissiveness to Tony and his hypermasculine attitude toward his wife and daughter to ingrain in Barbara a flawed understanding of gender, roles, and her own self-worth.

3. CHILDREN AND PARENTS: ATTACHMENT THEORY AND THEORIES OF INTERGENERATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

But who were they? Though I've squinted through the keyhole at their past, read their private letters and manuscripts, I still can't say.
—Alix Kates Shulman, *A Good Enough Daughter*

3.1 ATTACHMENT THEORY: BRIEF OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

I discovered Attachment Theory and decided to include it in my thesis after I had already begun to write *The Collection*. Using my fiction as the starting point, my research initially focused narrowly on religiosity, mental health, and the impact the combination of the two had on multiple generations within one family. In my early efforts to find a unifying focus through which to view *The Collection*, Attachment Theory emerged as a useful tool for organizing the chaos of family life within the novel, as well as serving as a more specific psychological lens through which to discuss the relationships of the protagonist with her family. When I first identified Attachment Theory's possible application to *The Collection*, I considered only the implications on parent-child relationships and the avenue the theory provides for discussion of the outcome of parent-adult child relationships; specifically, Attachment Theory could be applied to Barbara and her adult relationship with her aging mother, as well as to Barbara's life-long relationship with Tony.

As I delved deeper into Attachment Theory, I learned that it becomes more psychotherapeutic and treatment-focused when applied to adults. While I had already committed to and written much of the fundamental character traits, crises, and plot of *The Collection*, I chose at that point to use Attachment Theory to investigate the protagonist through my own creative application of the theory. My research functioned initially as a way to examine my novel after the fact, but as I

revised later drafts of the novel, my research also informed some of the creative decisions I made in the fiction. Much as a psychotherapist would outline a therapy plan and seek to understand the underlying and pervading cause of a patient's mental condition, Attachment Theory permits me, as the author, to explore: what childhood incidents and family influences shaped Barbara, the effects of her childhood on herself and—by extension—on her family, and what the future implications for her might be. As an author, I also have the liberty to ignore any obligation to follow the protagonist's future through to a single conclusion or outcome, and the choice not to adhere to a strict application of Attachment Theory.

Psychoanalyst John Bowlby published the first version of Attachment Theory in his trio of papers *The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother* in 1958, *Separation Anxiety* in 1959, and *Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood* in 1960 (J. Holmes 61). Bowlby published the initial, coherent theory that is now known as Attachment Theory, but its development and evolution have not been the result of his work alone. Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth developed empirical studies to test the theory with Bowlby shortly after the theory's publication, ultimately leading to the theory's wider, although not universal, acceptance by the psychological and psychoanalytical community (J. Holmes 1-2, 103-106). As Bowlby wrote in *A Secure Base* some thirty years after the publication of *The Nature of a Child's Tie to His Mother*: "During the 1930s and 40s a number of clinicians on both sides of the Atlantic, mostly working independently of each other, were making observations of the ill effects on personality development of prolonged institutional care and/or frequent changes of mother-figure during the early years of life" (23).

Drawing on family systems theory⁴ (Ng and Smith 432-433), Bowlby's theory initially focused narrowly on the role of the mother, which alienated him from many clinicians, as most schools of thought at the time found that his theory left out what they considered to be cornerstones of psychoanalysis (J. Holmes 66). Post-Bowlbian research has since expanded not only on his theory, but also brought some reconciliation to its initial rejection by connecting to Intergenerational Family Systems Theory—one of the models related to Intergenerational Theories of Personal Development, which I will discuss later.

Attachment Theory, in summary, focuses on the deep emotional bond that one person forms with another on whom they rely, beginning with an infant's bond with their mother. In *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory*, Jeremy Holmes defines "attachment" as "an overall term [that] refers to the state and quality of an individual's attachments" (67). According to Bowlby's theory, this attachment, or bond, supersedes both time and space (age and distance), but is not necessarily reciprocal. These attachments are formed in the interest of an individual's survival, wherein a person may form a strong attachment, or bond, with another individual who appears likely to render support in the event the first person's survival is threatened (Grossman 55). Within the context of family, children form powerful emotional bonds with their parents in infancy and during childhood because their parents, particularly their mothers, are essential to their survival. The effects of these attachments are most easily understood in terms of separation: a child's

⁴ "Any system is an organized whole, and elements within the systems are necessarily interdependent. This assumption applies to the mother-father-child triadic system, caregiver-child dyadic system, and the child with his or her internal attachment and behavioral systems." (Marvin 2003, qtd. by Ng and Smith 432)

response to their mother's absence will illustrate the type of the child's attachment to their mother (Bowlby 4). Holmes presents separation in terms of "proximity seeking to a preferred figure," such as the habit of a toddler or young child of following their mother (J. Holmes 68). Both Bowlby and Holmes go on to explain that this proximity seeking, as well as the primary attachment figure—typically discussed as the mother/primary care-giver—will change as the child ages and develops.

Ainsworth's introduction of the concept of a 'secure base' can be analogized to the children's game of tag: children run about attempting to hide from the chaser, and when threatened with imminent tagging, may run to a person, object, or area designated as 'base' (J. Holmes 70, 223-224). Base is a place of safety, although in the game of tag, this safety is temporary. Ainsworth's concept of base follows the logical next step of a child in the game: when she has recovered her breath and courage, she leaves base and runs out to rejoin the game, hoping to continue to elude the tagger. Holmes describes Ainsworth's secure base as providing "a springboard for curiosity and exploration" (70). Children who are confident of a secure base in their mother, or in another primary attachment figure, will venture away from their base to play, explore, and otherwise grow in both social and psychological senses. The "secure base" is thus the foundation for the first and ideal Bowlbian bond type: secure (J. Holmes 70).

Within Bowlby's Attachment Theory, there exist three bond types or attachment styles: secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 317). These attachment styles express the spectrum from a strong, ideal working of the attachment system to a less secure functioning, ending with the

essentially non-functioning bond, in which an infant's utter lack of confidence in their primary care-giver results in their expectation to be spurned by their primary attachment (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 317). Beyond this simple explanation, however, Attachment Theory goes on to posit that the so-called "attachment figures" have a resounding impact on individuals long past childhood, affecting their mental and emotional wellbeing into adulthood (J. Holmes 9). These attachment styles translate into observable behavior in pre-adolescent children: a child with a secure attachment will venture out to play, although she might grow nervous the farther she moves from her mother (J. Holmes 70); an anxious/ambivalent attachment style might manifest itself in the child's unwillingness to leave her mother's side, potentially with a selfishness that ignores the needs of others, including her mother, siblings, or father (J. Bowlby 92); an avoidant attachment will result in voluntary separation from the mother in order to prevent rejection or pain, so a child with an avoidant attachment will seek out her mother as little as possible (J. Holmes 71). Whereas a secure attachment is the ideal and healthiest style, an avoidant attachment style can stem from childhood trauma such as loss, grief, abuse, or simply consistent demonstration on the mother's part that she is not to be relied upon. One common manifestation of an avoidant attachment type is anger, insomuch as it acts both as a mechanism of defense against and prevention of future separation, loss, or disappointment (J. Holmes 81-82). This outcome is directly relevant to Barbara in *The Collection*, as I will discuss in further detail later.

Once a person moves beyond the life stages of childhood and adolescence, Bowlby's theory argues, "childhood patterns of attachment are carried through into adult life and...are transmitted to the next generation" (J. Holmes 81). Beyond

adolescence, in other words, although adult children no longer rely on their parents for security or care, the years of primary attachment to a parent essentially train a child's psychology to use a certain attachment style: an "internal working model" (J. Holmes 82). Within Attachment Theory, it is ideal for an adult to move from an attachment to her parents to an attachment to a romantic partner; it follows that an adult's primary childhood attachment style will affect her choice in a partner, as well as her interactions and relationship with that partner (J. Holmes 83).

Religiosity⁵, or conversion to religion, in adulthood also has an interesting psychological correlation among adults who had insecure attachment styles in their childhood⁶. Beyond Bowlby's original theory, it has been further postulated and substantiated that in addition to one's internal working model affecting romantic adult relationships, one's childhood attachment style and family relationships could lead to a substitution of religion in place of a healthy romantic relationship. In their 1990 paper, Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Phillip R. Shaver point out the analogous figures of a secure parent attachment and the "ideal" attachment style and "secure base" offered by the traditional Christian God (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 318-319). It stands to reason, argue Kirkpatrick and Shaver, that if a person experienced a childhood attachment style that was anxious, insecure ambivalent, or disorganized, then in adulthood, they would seek a replacement attachment relationship that is secure (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 320). Religion provides the opportunity for such a seemingly low-risk secure attachment in lieu of a romantic attachment. In the case

⁵ Peregrine Murphy Kavros notes that, "Religious, religiousness and religiosity are used interchangeably within medical literature" (Kavros 768).

⁶ Atheism has also been studied as a potential reaction to insecure or avoidant attachment styles, but this is not relevant to *The Collection's* protagonist or the scope of this analysis.

of the Christian God, both the language depicting God as a father figure and the pervasive doctrine that religion provides "safe haven and comfort" offer religion up as a strong candidate to substitute for what would typically be an adult romantic relationship (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 318-319). This aspect of religiosity and Attachment Theory is of particular relevance to *The Collection* and is exemplified in Barbara, although this was more coincidence than strategy on my part: I had already established Barbara's religiousness and the foundations for what I would only later identify as her childhood avoidant attachment style and adult ambivalent attachment style with her husband.

Also in 1990, Pehr Granqvist and Berit Hagekull evaluated the motivations behind adults' religiosity in terms of their childhood attachments (254). They found that adults who had maintained avoidant attachments to both parents were more likely to seek out religion for emotional reasons. This was even more likely for adults whose parents were not particularly religious. Adults who fit these criteria were also more likely to have undergone a sudden religious conversion, rather than a progression (Granqvist and Hagekull 265-266). This type of sudden conversion is consistent with Barbara's conversion to evangelical Christianity, although her conversion takes place outside of the timeline and scope of the novel.

3.2 ATTACHMENT THEORY: APPLICATION & EFFICACY

Both as Bowlby developed it and as his successors have expanded it, Attachment Theory applies to family units and to young children, but with significant long-term effects. Since Bowlby's initial publication of the theory in the late 1950's, it has been extended to include theory on and application for: adult

attachments, psychotherapy, treatment of mental health issues such as depression, diagnosis of psychotic illness, counseling, social work and more. Jeremy Holmes notes of those who have championed Attachment Theory beyond the 1960's, "The Post-Bowlbians...have developed Attachment Theory into a major framework of developmental psychology in ways that are highly relevant to psychotherapy" (J. Holmes 2). The evolution of Attachment Theory through both clinical and theoretical expansion has resulted in a very applicable theory and structure that can be used to understand, evaluate and treat children, adolescents and adults alike. One of the most prominent applications of the theory in both the United States and the UK has been in Social Work⁷, although the exploration of its use in understanding and treating mental illness such as depression in adults (Bettman) also serves to demonstrate the universal nature of the theory and its potential for application. In particular, interventions based on Attachment Theory for younger children have been shown to be highly effective and are therefore supported by and for mental health clinicians (Zeanah, et al). Similarly, the integration of Attachment Theory into the treatment of adult depression has seen positive outcomes both by understanding possible causes of the depressive state and for formulating treatment plans and therapies (Bettman). Because of Barbara's tumultuous childhood, as well as her adult religiosity and attachment style, I identified Attachment Theory as a uniquely appropriate way to discuss her; however, I neither set out to write a protagonist based on Attachment Theory, nor did I apply the

⁷ This is demonstrated both in social work guides such as Gillian Schofield's 2002 instruction monograph *Attachment Theory: An Introduction for Social Workers*, and academic works such as Thomas Joseph Blakely and Gregory M. Dziadosz's 2015 article "Application of Attachment Theory in Clinical Social Work" published in the *Journal of Health & Social Work*.

theory with integrity. Instead, I took creative license with the aspects of the theory I did intentionally include in *The Collection*, particularly as a tool for rounding out characterization in the later drafts of the novel.

Michael B. Sperling, William H. Berman and Glenn Fagen's 1992 article "Classification of Adult Attachment: An Integrative Taxonomy from Attachment and Psychoanalytic Theories" in the *Journal of Personality Assessment* further validated Attachment Theory's application to adults, although with modifications to Bowlby's initial attachment styles. Sperling et al's work builds on Mary Main's "Adult Attachment Interview" (George et al) and its resultant adult-specific representations of attachment, namely: secure, insecure/dismissing, and insecure/preoccupied styles (Sperling et al 242). Arguing that these three styles are really broad categorizations, Sperling et al set forth four adult attachment styles based on clinical experience and theoretical structure that exist within the avoidant and resistant styles: dependent, avoidant, hostile and anger (239). Significantly, the authors highlight the importance of recognizing that relationships in adulthood are inherently more complex than child-parent figure attachments in childhood (240). Additionally, Sperling et al's expansion on Bowlby's and Main's work focuses on "behavioral manifestations of dependence and anger, as derived from the interaction of primitive relational drives, defenses, and interpersonal experience" (239). The attachment style of an adult should not be assumed to have evolved directly from their childhood attachment style to their parents according to Sperling et al, who indicate that "contextual influences" are the most significant for adults (241). It is crucial to note, however, that this does not preclude childhood experience, inclusive of attachments to parents, from playing a role within those

influences. This shift from broadly categorizing attachment styles to look more distinctly at the resulting behavior also raises the argument that an adult's anger can be tied into an attachment style, and hence traced back to their childhood and family.

Attachment Theory approaches one of the basic questions of psychology: Do parents pass on more than genetic material to their children?—in other words: nature versus nurture? A 2011 study by Joyce A. Baptist et al looked at the potential negative effects of a person's childhood attachments and their parents' conflict management styles on the adult child's interpersonal conflict management style (56). Crossing into socio-psychology, Bowen's theory of intergenerational development (which led to Intergenerational Family theory, as mentioned previously) supports the idea that children may model their adult interactions off those of their parents (Baptist et al 57), and the study specifically hypothesized that "perceived levels of disengagement and enmeshment in families-of-origin influenced subsequent relational conflict styles" (65). In other words, if a child has anxious or avoidant attachments as a result of their parents' volatile or aggressive conflict resolution style, the adult child is more likely to use a similar conflict style. The study found that adults who identified themselves as having more anxious or avoidant childhood attachments were more likely to engage in hostile or volatile conflict management tactics, rather than using validating methods to seek common ground and resolution. This again supports Bowlby's connection between an adult's anger and their childhood family, attachment and engagement styles. Likewise, this study illustrates the interconnected nature of Attachment Theory with the models of Intergenerational theories of Development.

3.3 ATTACHMENT THEORY: STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

One of the strengths of Attachment Theory is its apparent universality. Jeremy Holmes breaks his address of the "implications" of post-Bowlbian Attachment Theory into three major areas of potential within psychoanalysis: the practice of psychotherapy, psychiatric disorder, and society (127). It is worth noting that in his introduction to *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory*, Holmes articulates one of his objectives for the work as an attempt "to understand [the] discrepancy between public recognition and professional avoidance, and the attempt to remedy it by showing how Attachment Theory can inform the practice of adult psychotherapy" (2). Holmes goes on to identify a key biographical note of Bowlby's life: within the psychological society of which Bowlby was a part were two members engaged in a faction war based on Freudian theory. Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud, championed her father's central claim that Oedipal relationships (the father) were at the core of neuroses (3). Opposite Freud stood Melanie Klein, the first psychoanalyst to focus on the mother-infant relationship, maintaining that both mother's and infant's experiences required focus from psychoanalysis and theory (4). Klein would go on to become essential to the foundation of feminist psychoanalytic theory, building on her emphasis on the discovery of self through an infant's interactions with their mother (Chodorow 10). This historical point is important because the divergent theories of Freud and Klein led Bowlby to depart from either school of psychoanalysis and create what he considered to be a third, different theory. This theory diverged from the others both in its approach to psychoanalysis in a scientific sense and to the causes of neurosis (J. Holmes 4). Arguably, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, particularly if viewed historically and

inclusive of post-Bowlbian and adult attachment theories, is not antithetical to feminist psychoanalysis as put forth by Mitchell or Chodorow, as it both recognizes the importance of a child's healthy, continuous relationship with their mother, as well as the potential adult outcomes of an unhealthy attachment and mother-infant relationship. One such outcome, germane for this research, is anger.

One of the reasons I found Attachment Theory so appropriate for my purposes is its chronology: in *The Collection*, Elizabeth is writing about her two young children in 1958 and 1959—the same years in which Bowlby was publishing Attachment Theory in reality. In a sense, Attachment Theory is equally rooted in the years of its inception—or at least those of its creator, Bowlby—as are the characters in my novel. While feminist psychoanalysts criticize Bowlby and other male psychologists for the pervasion of patriarchy both in and through their work, in this research, it serves to underscore my point that people are subject to the influences of their era (or generation). It is precisely because Attachment Theory is rooted in Bowlby's early twentieth century mindset that I am able to use it alongside a novel about generations. J. Holmes writes, "Psychoanalysis, perhaps more than it would care to admit, is influenced by the prevailing cultural climate. The Oedipus complex with its emphasis on castration anxiety reflected the power of the patriarchy of its day. With the weakening of paternal power within the family came the rise of the female principle within psychoanalysis" (J. Holmes 9). Holmes' point is illustrated not only by Bowlby's and Klein's focus on the significance of the mother in a child's development (4), but also by the sheer dominance of women in the psychoanalytic field at the time (9). While Bowlby's Theory was incomplete—as indicated by the necessity for Main to develop it further—he was working in the midst of a

psychological tradition that was only beginning to focus on women over men. As a result, including Attachment Theory in my research and this critical work gives greater insight into Elizabeth and the era in which she raised Barbara.

The clear weakness of Attachment Theory was its initial limited scope. The gap filled by Main's research and resultant theories on Adult Attachment, further expanded by Harvey and Bray, emphasize how Bowlby's core theory is too narrow for application beyond childhood. While the applicability of Attachment Theory to psychoanalysis and therapy supports its strength, its weakness is also evident in its seeming inability to stand alone; however, Attachment Theory's capability to meld with related theories—such as Intergenerational Development, as well as later work by developmental psychologists—indicates that while Bowlby's theory is not all-encompassing, when paired with other psychological, psychoanalytical and sociological theories, it is a useful and effective tool with which to evaluate, analyze and treat. This weakness is also what led me to Intergenerational Theories of Personal Development.

3.4 INTERGENERATIONAL THEORIES OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Karl Mannheim's 1927 essay "The Problem of Generations" was the first to call major attention to the idea of friction between generations: "Individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process" (Mannheim 290). Popularized in the 1960's, "Generation Gap" is the catch-all phrase referring to an array of social-psychological theories focused on the differences between one generation (parents) and the next (children). In 1970, however, Vern

Bergtson went so far as to credit the phrase "generation gap" with "worldwide usage and a sort of connotative reality," while clarifying that "the phenomenon to which it refers is undoubtedly neither strictly generational nor is it a gap" (Bergtson 8). Ideed, the "common location" identified by Mannheim includes the entire spectrum of culture, politics, and ideology, as well as fashion, music, and entertainment

More recent socio-psychological theories stemming from the idea of generation gap frame the concept within the context of family (as opposed to entire generations) in holistic terms as "intergenerational ambivalence" (Lüscher 585), and the collective socio-psychological implications of the generation gap within a family as Intergenerational Family Systems Theory, which includes Intergenerational Theories of Personal Development (Harvey and Bray 299). Rather than a single stand-alone theory, like Attachment Theory, Intergenerational Family Systems Theory and Intergenerational theories of Personal Development are models meant to include an individual's complete array of social influences; for example, David Harvey and James Bray theorized that family relationships have clear effects on both physical and psychological health (Harvey and Bray 298). Beyond simply forming emotional and psychological attachment styles, as Bowlbian and post-Bowlbian Attachment Theory postulate, theories of Intergenerational Development argue that family is the most important factor in a person's overall development (Harvey and Bray 299). Moreover, the reality of a person's familial relationship itself is less impactful than their perception of the relationship—a distinction particularly compelling with regard to Barbara in *The Collection*. Like Attachment Theory, Intergenerational theories of Personal Development maintain

that the effects of a person's family relationships will continue throughout their life, even if they no longer interact with family members (299). If applied to *The Collection*, this model predicts that Barbara's voluntary estrangement from Tony and minimal interaction with Elizabeth and David as an adult will be ineffective as a means of escaping her family: the damage has already been done.

Bowen's family systems theory also provides a crucial connection between Attachment Theory and suppressed anger, lending empirical credence to my argument that Elizabeth's self-silencing and emotional suppression directly contributed to Barbara's suppressed anger. While Attachment Theory offers a reason why children might become angry as a result of loss, family systems theory has expanded to explore specifically how parents transmit (or pass on) emotional and psychological tendencies to their children (Brenning et al 802-803). One study queried how the combination of an adolescent's attachment to their mother and the mother's internalizing of symptoms—particularly of depression—could predict or relate to the adolescent's internalization (Brenning et al 802-803). The study found that adolescents whose maternal attachments were self-reported to be avoidant, and whose mothers internalized symptoms were significantly likely to mirror their mother's internalizing behavior (Brenning et al 811-812). In other words, a depressed mother who internalizes her symptoms, like Elizabeth, would predictably pass on the same behavior to her child—in this case, Barbara.

My research specific to theories of Intergenerational Personal Development focuses on the particular chasm created by a combination of religious belief and mental illness, exacerbated by the existing era-driven ideological gap between generations in *The Collection*. Extending both Mannheim's original theory and

Demartini's modified ideas on generation gap, conflicting religious beliefs create the possibility of a significant, and perhaps unique, disconnect between two generations in a family (or a society). Psychological disorders, either in the parents or children, would also create a complicated conflict between the generations (Foster 3149). Both religiosity and mental disorders are presented as potential results of a childhood primary attachment to a parent that is anything other than a secure attachment, although to say that an attachment style led directly to a psychiatric illness would be a gross oversimplification (Holmes 180-181). The entangled factors affecting Barbara's childhood in *The Collection* offer merely a fictional example of the complex challenge of analyzing what shapes a person, which these models and theories seek to make sense of and predict through socio-psychology.

Kim Foster's 2010 study of adult children whose parents suffer(ed) from severe mental illness overwhelmingly concludes that even as adults, children of such parents bear varying, but lasting, marks of these illnesses; one of the negative lasting impacts includes strained emotional relationships in adulthood (Foster 3146). These extensions of generation gap theory are further supported by the findings of Edward J. Clarke and his team in their 1999 article "Types of Conflicts and Tensions Between Older Parents and Their Adult Children," which further categorize the conflicts contributing to this generation gap into six categories, of which the two most pertinent for this research are: first, Politics, Religion, and Ideology, and second, Communication and Interaction Style (263). Undeniably, the social factors contributing to generation gap significantly impact the parent-child relationship as well; however, the result of the combined facets of religious belief

and psychological disorder on the gap, whereby social factors exist as a type of baseline or constant, is the specific focus of this research and is most germane to the novel.

Whether represented in reality or fiction, children are limited in their capability to understand their parents. Pre-pubescent and adolescent children simply lack both the scope of life experience and the mental and emotional capacity to understand their adult parents. Katherine Covell and Rona Abramovitch questioned children aged 5 to 15 about their perception of the cause of their mothers' emotions: happiness, sadness, and anger; the researchers then posed reciprocal questions to parents. Their study found that the younger children were far more likely to indicate themselves as the cause of their mothers' anger and happiness; however, predictably, the older the children questioned, the more likely they were to attribute the responsibility for their mother's emotions to a broader spectrum of causes (Covell, and Abramovitch 989). A child's misunderstanding of a parent's emotions or the source of those emotions could result in an insecure/ambivalent or avoidant attachment style in childhood, potentially impacting their adult attachment style, as well, vis-à-vis Harvey and Bray. Pre-pubescent children are limited in their capability to understand the complexities of their parents as whole beings, so they rely on their perception of their parents or their situation. In the case of the Covell and Abramovitch study, this is exemplified in how the children responded to the question: "How can you tell your mom...is feeling happy/sad/angry?" The responses were split into "expressive" and "behavioral" cues, with crying falling into expressive "because in many instances the children referred to 'tears in her eyes' or 'tears on her cheek' as descriptors of

crying" (Covell and Abramovitch 987). The results of the study indicated not only that the younger the child, the more likely they were to indicate themselves as the sole cause of their mother's anger (987), but also that the older the child surveyed, the more likely they were to attribute their family as the cause of the child's own emotions (988). These results demonstrate how a child's perception of their mother's emotions could lead to a particular attachment type, and also offers an example of the importance of perception versus reality in intergenerational development and relationships.

Jeanette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* illustrates not only a fascinating example of a woman writing honestly about herself, but also offers the distinctive narrative of a woman defined by her childhood attachment style to a mother with mental illness. I've included it here both to illustrate the real applicability of Attachment Theory and Intergenerational theories of Personal Development, and to contrast Winterson's autobiographical story with Barbara's fictitious one. Significantly, Winterson openly reflects on her lifelong difficulty in finding and maintaining a truly healthy, loving relationship—a romantic attachment that should be classified as secure. Winterson's memoir also details the long-lasting impact of her adoptive mother's extreme religiosity. "People were the problem. How do you love another person? How do you trust another person to love you? I had no idea. I thought that love was loss" (Winterson 8). When Jeanette was a child, she embraced the Bible and the Christian God because they offered love and acceptance where her mother did not (22). Mrs. Connie Winterson was physically, verbally and emotionally abusive, as well as fanatically religious. Had she ever seen a psychotherapist, Mrs. Winterson would likely have been

diagnosed as suffering from BPD, fitting the profile Christine Lawson's designates as Hermit⁸ (Lawson 79-81). "She suffers from acute persecutory anxiety, and spends her life warding off a nameless internal predator. She may be convinced that whole groups of people are dangerous or evil, particularly those who do not share her interests or values" (Lawson 84-85). Hermits are also likely to be very superstitious, potentially relying on obsessive-compulsive type rituals (Lawson 92-93). Mrs. Winterson's infallible evangelical Pentacostalism provided both the fodder for persecution anxiety and the solution of ritual and superstition. As an adult, Jeanette writes, "My mother, Mrs. Winterson, didn't love life. She didn't believe anything would make life better...The only escape was Armageddon" (Winterson 22). Mrs. Winterson's adherence to the strictest interpretation of the Bible did not preclude her from administering corporal punishment to young Jeanette, often locking her in the coal bin, occasionally locking her out of the house to which Jeanette was never given a key, and once locking her in a room for days without food. Jeanette is clear in her memoir that this is neither normal parental nor typical Christian/religious behavior, but the impact of Mrs. Winterson's BPD, religiosity and abuse persisted long into Jeanette's adulthood. The long-term results of Mrs. Winterson's BPD and Jeanette's resulting anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachments to her mother are Jeanette's difficulty trusting others, allowing herself to become vulnerable to romantic partners, and expressing affection.

⁸ Lawson categorizes borderline mothers into four characterizations: Waif, Hermit, Queen, and Witch; these categories correspond to the specific types of symptoms and behaviors exhibited by mothers with BPD, and are titled after fairytale tropes.

3.5 ADULT CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS IN THEORY, MEMOIR, AND FICTION

Beyond children's relationships with and attachments to their parents, research on adult child-parent relationships in the U.S. largely attributes their continued relationship to two seemingly conflicting factors: obligation and independence (Lye 95). Obligation tells adult children that in order to re-pay all of the financial and emotional support their parents supplied while they were children, they must care for their parents as they age. Independence is the deeply rooted American tenet that teaches children they should strive for independence from their parents upon reaching young adulthood⁹ (Lye 95). When adults are viewed in the context of their parents, as "adult children," the culmination of the factors of attachment, intergenerational development and perception serve to underscore the idea that even as "independent" adults, adult children are impacted by their parents and childhood family life.

Alix Kates Shulman writes in depth of the surreal challenge an adult child faces in her efforts to understand, to know, her parents in her memoir *A Good Enough Daughter*. The emotional experience Shulman documents supports both the theoretical implications of intergenerational development and the verisimilitude of Barbara's experience digging into her parents' past in *The Collection*. Whilst preparing her parents' home for sale following their entrance into an independent living facility, Shulman is confronted with how little she knows about her parents. "I

⁹ The reversal of caretaker roles has been the subject of numerous popular and scientific articles and studies in recent years, but will not be examined within the scope of this research, although its impact on adult children cannot be ignored. Further, recent studies suggest that often, inclusion of aging parents in adult children's lives results in conflict not only between both the parents and their adult child(ren), but also between the adult children and their spouses (Beaton, et al 144).

felt an illicit excitement: in the forty years my parents had lived in this house, I'd never stayed in it alone. Now I could search out its secrets without asking for permission" (5). Aware of the complicated nature of children's relationships with their parents throughout their lives, Shulman highlights her guilt that she did not spend more time with her parents before they were too old, their memories too distant to access. Her experience also rings true with the dichotomy of expectation for adult American children wherein they must balance both obligation and independence. "That ambitious lust for freedom that tempts each successive generation of Americans to obliterate its past propelled me in my rush toward independence to identify my family with everything I'd renounced—a move not only cruel but self-defeating, since my scorn was soaked in guilt" (10). The guilt Shulman encounters after she returns to manage the sale of her parents' house is fed by the tantalizing crumbs of answers about them that she finds inside it, emphasizing the enormity of what she does not know. Shulman also reflects on the impact her efforts for independence had on her relationship with her mother. "...I failed to acknowledge my ties to her or her effect on me until it was nearly too late" (192). Shulman here recognizes the pitfall of the Americanized ideal of independence, of separation for the sake of defining oneself outside of her parents. This is a realization Barbara makes in passing as she begins to learn the truth of her mother's first marriage in *The Collection*; unlike Shulman, Barbara bears little regret over her flight home from California to North Carolina.

August: Osage County is a rich literary example of the disconnect between generations of a family and the damage the resulting secrets can wreak. While almost every member of the Weston family is harboring a secret in the play, the two

most damaging center on the addict matriarch, Violet. It is important to note that Violet Weston also exhibits signs of a borderline personality (BPD)—defined by Lawson as the Queen, with outbursts of the Witch. "The darkness within the borderline Queen is emptiness... Emptiness results from deprivation and triggers anger... The common denominator among borderline Queens is emotional deprivation. As children, they felt robbed; consequently, they feel entitled to take what they need" (105). Queen Violet is liberal with her frequent outbursts of anger, along with her jealousy of Barbara as her father's favorite, belittlement of Ivy because she is single, and outright mockery of her youngest daughter, Karen, for constantly seeking happiness in men. In her discussion of the Witch persona, Lawson clarifies that, like Violet, most borderline mothers are not always Witches (Lawson 130). But Violet's jealousy of Barbara, coupled with her willingness to let Bev die, her attempts to ruin her younger daughters' chances at happiness, and her attempt to force Barbara to stay all fit the profile of the Witch. Witches are defined by their "need for power and control over others, the need to elicit a response of fear and shock" (127), their likelihood to emotionally sacrifice their children (128), and her tendency only to appear "to those who trigger her rage" (130). Lastly, the Witch does not treat all of her children the same, instead forming unique patterns of behavior specific to her relationship with each child (Lawson 130) – as Violet does with each of her three daughters.

In the final act of *August: Osage County*, Violet admits to her daughters Barbara and Ivy that she knew of her husband's affair with her sister Mattie Fae, resulting in Mattie Fae's son Little Charles. While Barbara had learned that Little Charles was her half-brother the day before, Ivy is unaware either of the affair or

the paternity she shares with her first cousin. Violet interrupts Ivy while she attempts to tell Violet that she and Little Charles are in love and moving to New York City, destroying Ivy's hope of love and a normal life. After Ivy leaves in tears, Violet tells Barbara, "You know well's I do, we couldn't let Ivy run off with Little Charles. Just wouldn't be right. Ivy's place is right here" (135). Violet's motive is multi-faceted: it ruins Ivy's hopes of a relationship with Little Charles, subsequently undermining her motivation and commitment to leaving Oklahoma and Violet, and it also highlights Violet as the 'all-knowing' matriarch of the family – a trait of which Violet boasts, and which also reveals her as a Queen. "I've always known that. I told you, no one slips anything by me" (133). Violet brings the other secret to light only to Barbara when she admits that when Bev left, he wrote a note for her with the name of the motel where he'd be staying. Violet tells Barbara this in the same context of taking the "high ground," painting herself as the victim. Barbara, however, sees through Violet's Queen persona and clarifies that Violet could have stopped Bev from killing himself if she hadn't been high and hadn't been so selfish. Violet's secrets result in her solitude, her husband dead and her daughters all gone, leaving her alone with Johnna, the live-in assistant Bev hired before he died. Her secrets are most redemptive for Barbara; only when Queen Violet reveals the awful truth that she waited until Monday, when she could first empty out their safety deposit box, to call Bev at the motel does Barbara see the extent of Violet's selfishness, enabling Barbara to kiss her mother farewell, pick up her keys, and leave Violet to her own devices.

Unlike Shulman's homecoming in *A Good Enough Daughter*, the secrets exposed in *August: Osage County* are catastrophic. The secrets and lies central to *The*

Collection share similarities with both Shulman's memoir and Letts' play: Barbara encounters secrets while digging through Tony's storage units full of hoarded junk, but she learns of others from her mother, brother, and half-siblings. She learns that both of her parents kept secrets and her father lived a complex life of lies in addition to his hoarding. Ultimately, it's unclear which secrets in *The Collection* are most egregious to Barbara, who blames her mother and detests her father. While Barbara's departure from California in *The Collection* is hardly as explosive as the adult children's in *August: Osage County*, the secrets are no less insidious or destructive.

4. WOMEN, WRITING, AND CAROLYN HEILBRUN

To write at all is an act of aggression, and writing about other people's writing is to compound aggression with hubris.

—Terri Castle, *Boss Ladies, Watch Out! Essays on Women, Sex, and Writing*

There remains an aspect both of the novel and the research that must be addressed: the question raised by Heilbrun's feminist criteria, as both the protagonist and the author should be evaluated in terms of who we are as women. If Bowlby's theory and the socio-psychology of Intergenerational theories of Personal Development were to be applied too narrowly to the female protagonist, it would mean analyzing her through tools that are construed by many feminist psychoanalysts, such as Chodorow and Mitchell, as built largely for and by men (Chodorow 3). Mitchell even goes so far as to posit of psychoanalysis, "psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 47). While Mitchell was writing about Freud, her point is more than appropriate for this research: *The Collection* takes place in a patriarchal society, ergo its characters can be understood using similarly patriarchal tools. In both fiction and reality it is simultaneously easy and an oversimplification to blame an adult woman's so-called issues on her parents, her childhood, or her coping mechanisms for either. What is more difficult is to address all of this *and* the woman herself in a manner that does not simply label her as a victim of her circumstances, doomed by psychoanalytic and psychological theory to exist as nothing more than a product of influences outside of her control. To do so would be to fall into the trap into which Heilbrun accuses so many other authors of falling: "The failure of women writers to imagine female selves as characters is a more profound failure, though it has been

recognized as a phenomenon only in the twentieth century" (*Reinventing* 72). The single most important criterion Heilbrun identifies to avoid this failure is autonomy (*Reinventing* 72). In order for Barbara to be believable, recognizable as a woman who *could* exist, she must have recognizable flaws, but she must also be responsible for her choices and destiny. Rather than attempt to meet Heilbrun's criteria head-on, I've taken an approach that presents the protagonist (and her mother) within the context of patriarchy and their lack of autonomy. Just as Mitchell pointed out that psychoanalysis doesn't prescribe patriarchy, neither does *The Collection*. Rather, my novel explores the lives of two women who failed to escape a recognizable patriarchal society and presents the opportunity for at least one of them to render herself autonomous. Barbara's flaws in *The Collection* can be viewed as the result of childhood and family experience, personal choices, and the coping mechanisms she has chosen to employ. Barbara's choices and intention to be independent are what set her apart from the "victim" trope in general, as well as from her mother.

Additionally, the long-term effects on Barbara of her tumultuous childhood include depression and repressed anger. Her mother, Elizabeth, is similarly angry as a result of a lifetime of dependence on men and her particularly brutal marriage to Tony. Despite their anger, neither woman appears to be 'angry' during the majority of the narrative. The explanation for their lack of expressiveness is multi-fold and stems from my desire to craft both Barbara and Elizabeth as recognizable and believable. First, women are typically less likely to express anger than men (Fabes 533; see also Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux 107-108); second, women have been conditioned to the stereotype that anger is a male response (Fabes 533; see also

Salerno and Peter-Hagene 582); third, psychology supports the idea that suppressed anger can and does manifest as depression (Busch 271). The first two gender-based explanations for why Barbara and Elizabeth are reluctant to express anger in the novel relate directly to the gender roles to which Tony—and society—conditioned them to conform. Anger is considered a negative emotion, closely tied to aggression (Fabes 533). Women are taught from childhood to be less aggressive, more pleasing, and 'gentle,' resulting in a lack of expressiveness of their anger. In other words, the expression of anger is masculine (Fabes 533). Heilbrun highlights the underlying danger of this social conditioning: "If one is not permitted to express anger or even to recognize it within oneself, one is, by simple extension, refused both power and control" (*Writing* 15).

Elizabeth, married in the context of the conservative, clear gender roles of the American 1950s (Miller et al 565-567; See also Carr, and Hardy), was not permitted to express *or* recognize her anger. Despite the clear injustices Elizabeth suffered at the hands of her husband—miscarriage, verbal and emotional abuse, living in a household surrounded by his obsessive hoarding, lack of autonomy, sterilization without her consent—society told her that she needed to be a "good wife" and good wives in the 1950s were not angry. Elizabeth's struggle with depression is evident throughout the novel, both as a young and old woman. While the depression she suffers after her miscarriage and post-partum may be the exception, her ongoing severe depression can be reasonably understood as the manifestation of her suppressed anger at Tony and at her life in general. This is certainly not a new idea about the 1950s era American housewife: Betty Friedan expounds upon it in *The Feminine Mystique*. Barbara has similarly buried her more

aggressive emotions, such as her anger at Tony. While she is more willing to emote anger in the novel than her mother, decades of suppression have still led her to manifest her emotions in other subtle ways.

4.1 WRITING A WOMAN'S LIFE AND REINVENTING WOMANHOOD: THE FEMINISM OF CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN

It is perhaps only in old age, certainly past fifty, that women can stop being female impersonators, can grasp the opportunity to reverse their most cherished principles of 'femininity.'

—Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

The late feminist and detective novelist Carolyn Heilbrun addresses part of the unique difficulties and challenges of creating a "real" woman in *Writing a Woman's Life*. Although her analysis in this book is focused specifically on how women are portrayed in biographies, autobiographies and memoirs written both by men and women (excluding fiction), Heilbrun's critique of how women write about themselves and are written about can be applied to fictional characters, as well. Despite Heilbrun's distinction that she wrote *Writing a Woman's Life* to focus on non-fiction (*Writing* 11), its primary question of why women's writing of themselves remains constrained is distinctly feminist. Further, Heilbrun fearlessly includes herself within the body of authors and work that have failed to write autonomous women (*Writing* 113-121). She provides direct examples of female-authored fiction thus constrained in *Reinventing Womanhood*, pointing to Simone de Beauvoir's own admission that Anna of *The Mandarins* "'hasn't the autonomy that has been bestowed upon me by a profession that means so much to me'" (qtd. in *Reinventing* 72), and Jane Austen's protagonists' predictably succinct marriages (*Reinventing* 72). Heilbrun is brutal in her criticism of women fiction writers,

bemoaning, "The failure of female writers to imagine female selves as characters" (*Reinventing* 72). Heilbrun's ruthlessness on herself as an author and on her own work is demonstrative of the future she hopes for in women's writing and authoring. Heilbrun argues that women writers, as feminists, must write women "who achieve a sense of their own selfhood," but do so in a feminine voice—in contrast to what Heilbrun considers to be a masculine voice (*Reinventing* 73, 82-84). The masculine voice, as Heilbrun describes it, is most simply understood to occur when an author of either sex writes a male protagonist, a male narrator, or from an ambiguous third-person point of view (*Reinventing* 83-84). With Heilbrun's criticism in mind, I have striven to write in a feminine voice, as Barbara is the protagonist and her voice is heard through the free indirect narrative style (Wood 10-11) of the novel. I have also attempted to create a woman who emulates what Heilbrun calls the "true condition" of a woman, although admittedly within a patriarchal society.

Although Barbara, the protagonist of *The Collection*, would not call herself a feminist, she is independent and meant to be honest and unflinching in a way that Heilbrun accuses many actual women's accounts not to be (*Writing* 12). While I initially approached writing Barbara from my personal observations and experiences, Heilbrun's work led me to question how well Barbara might stand up to an in-depth analysis. In *Reinventing Womanhood*, Heilbrun goes so far as to accuse women writers of "articulat[ing] their pain. But they cannot, or for the most part have not, imagined characters moving, as the authors themselves have moved, beyond that pain" (*Reinventing* 72). This query and Heilbrun's accusation led me to hold Barbara up against the combination of: psychology and psychoanalysis, and

Heilbrun's critique in *Writing a Woman's Life*. In psychological terms, I utilized Attachment Theory and theories of Intergenerational Development to dig into Barbara's character. Taking Mitchell's assessment of psychoanalysis as uniquely suited to analyze patriarchal societies a step further, Heilbrun accuses traditional psychoanalysis of playing a key role in perpetuating patriarchy: "Indeed, the history of the psychoanalytic movement in America is a model of how patriarchal institutions work" (*Reinventing* 99). Rather than separate Heilbrun's perspective from the psychological tactic, I sought to integrate traditional psychology and psychoanalysis with Heilbrun. I do not find that the two are not mutually exclusive; rather, as I have discussed, they work to inform one another.

Psychology supplied me with the tool with which to measure Barbara's experience, to determine if it—as Heilbrun wrote—"articulate[d] her true condition" (*Reinventing* 94). The final piece of evaluation I drew from *Writing a Woman's Life* is simultaneously reflective of me, as the female author, and of Barbara, as the female protagonist: Had I given myself permission (taking the gross liberty to assume that I have the right to do so) to write a woman who fits what Heilbrun describes as one who "may well for the first time be woman herself" (*Writing* 131)? Heilbrun ties power directly to anger (*Writing* 16-17), but predicts the "laughter of women together" as the "revealing sign, the spontaneous recognition of love and insight and freedom" (*Writing* 129). Measured this way, I believe that Barbara and *The Collection* do aspire to—if not meet—Heilbrun's criteria: Barbara expresses, then releases her anger, leading both to actual laughter with her mother and to more general joy at the novel's close. By contrast, Hustvedt's Harry Burden falls short in the expression of "love and insight and freedom," as she

dies still angry, striving to exert power and change; however, because Harry's character is defined by her art experiment meant to gain and exert power, I would argue that she doesn't fail to meet Heilbrun's lofty expectations, but is instead in a different stage of the process. Strout's Olive Kitteridge, the wonderful lady curmudgeon, does find love and freedom, but with a lover. Strictly speaking, Heilbrun hoped for women laughing together, but the healing and hope inherent in Olive's second love are powerful in context of a woman who's spent her entire life angry.

4.2 HEILBRUN AND THE TABOO EXPRESSION OF WOMEN'S ANGER

Of particular importance to Heilbrun is anger. She marks the historical state of anger as out-of-bounds for women in her evaluation of Mary Sarton's 1968 memoir *Plant Dreaming Deep*. The autobiography, Heilbrun assesses, minimalizes Sarton's anger "in the old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance" (*Writing* 12). Sarton herself realized that she had failed to translate her pain and anger into *Plant Dreaming Deep* and later wrote *Journal of a Solitude* (1973) in order to give deliberate focus to those off-limits emotions and experiences. Heilbrun heralds Sarton's 1973 revisitation of her first memoir as a distinct moment of change in women's autobiographies. Heilbrun writes, "Above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives)" (*Writing* 13). This distinction of anger as the emotion or state most illicit to women rings true nearly thirty years later, as women

in the U.S. are still ridiculed, condemned or dismissed if they dare to exhibit the anger that is acceptable and even, at times, applauded in men. Indeed, the idea that women are "more emotional" than men is a consistent finding in studies on gender stereotypes (Fabes and Martin 532).

4.3 WOMEN'S ANGER BEYOND HEILBRUN

The tropes of an "angry black woman" or an "angry feminist" are well recognized by feminists and occur frequently both online and in real life, and nearly every woman has been told to "calm down" or that she is "too emotional" at some point in her life. In fact, women self-report as striving to present themselves as happy while actively suppressing negative emotions such as anger in order to meet social expectation (Garner and Estep 396). Of the angry feminist stereotype, Barbara Tomlinson writes, "Contemporary US political and academic discourse abounds with a recurring set of formulaic claims that feminist scholars (and feminists in general) are angry, unreasoning, shrill, humorless, ugly, man-hating, perverse, and peculiar" (Tomlinson 101). Tomlinson points to the danger inherent in the trope, as it is used to "delegitimize social criticism" feminists (in general) seek to express (103). In popular media, the "angry black woman" has also become a trope (Walley-Jean 58-69), as illustrated by books like Sapphire's *Push* and its later film adaptation *Precious*, along with franchises like Tyler Perry's Madea¹⁰ play and films. The negative stereotype isn't limited to fictional characters: in 2012, U.S. first lady Michelle Obama defended herself against accusations that she had caused tensions

¹⁰ The stage play *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (1999) was Perry's first iteration of the Madea character, followed by *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* as a play (2001) and then film (2005); Perry has written and produced 10 Madea plays and 10 feature films to date.

with White House staff (Bruce; see also Hayes 18-19, and A. Holmes). Obama defended herself: "I guess it's more interesting to imagine this conflicted situation here and a strong woman. But that's been an image that people have tried to paint of me since the day Barack announced. That I'm some angry black woman" (qtd. by Bruce). Recently, women of color have taken back the negative stereotype, owning the phrase with books such as Denene Millner's *The Angry Black Woman's Guide to Life* and personal essays like Dominique Matti's "I'm Absolutely an Angry Black Woman." The increase in personal essays and articles¹¹ defending women's right to emote and express anger—a defense that feels like it should be unnecessary—further demonstrate a shift in women's belief in our right not only to be angry, but also to express our anger. Stereotypes and socially enforced beliefs about women and anger undermine not only their (our) right to be angry, but also the validity of that anger and its underlying causes.

The evidence of society's discomfort with women's anger is more than anecdotal, and certainly not limited to feminists or women of color. A study published in 2015 by Jessica M. Salerno and Liana C. Peter-Hagene in *Law and Human Behavior* found not only that men and women alike perceive women's anger negatively, but that both sexes also found men's anger to be more persuasive (590-591). The results of the study indicated that although anger is generally perceived negatively in either men or women, women are more likely to suffer negative consequences as a result of expressing their anger, whereas men are likely to

¹¹ Examples include: Lisa Dremousis "If You Say Something Idiotic, I'm Getting Mad Because You're an Idiot, Not Because I'm a Woman;" Anna Holmes "Even Today, an Angry Female Arouses Fear and Is Dismissed;" Lyz Lenz "How Women Are Owning the Right to Their Anger on Twitter;" Mary McNamara "Angry While Female: Why It Matters That Beyoncé, Kelly Ripa, and Samantha Bee Won't Hide Their Outrage."

benefit from increased social influence when they express their anger (Salerno and Peter-Hagene 289; See also Jack 141). In other words, when men express anger, both genders find them more persuasive; if an angry man's opinion aligns with his listeners', the audience interprets his anger as validation of their opinion. For women, however, expressing anger lessens their influence over an audience: if an angry woman's opinion dissents with an audience member, the audience is more likely to believe more firmly in their dissenting opinion, taking the woman's anger as confirmation that they are right (289). The results of this study are concerning: the study took place within the context of a jury deliberation, indicating a potential negative impact on women jury-members, along with greater implications for women outside of the court room. At the very least, the takeaway from the results of this study is that anger is most likely to work against women in any situation.

Outside of psychology, politics provides another painful example of the contrast in current perception of women's versus men's anger. Hilary Clinton's current and 2012 campaigns for the U.S. presidency have provided the opportunity for conservative and liberal opponents alike to lambast, criticize or mock her for expressing anger—among other emotions—while simultaneously praising the same in her male opponents (Satlin; see also Newton). If the results of the Salerno and Peter-Hagene study are an indication, despite her supporters' defense of Hilary, her anger may solidify opponents. The question is not whether women are more emotional, more emotive, or even angrier than men; the problem is the treatment and perception of women who dare to emote publicly or angrily.

A cursory Google search for "women anger" or even "angry women" illustrates the negative social perception of women who express their anger. Below

a series of stock images of women pulling their hair, shouting open-mouthed, pointing, or knitting their brows, the first page of hits returned 9 articles and blogs posts (see table 1). Of the nine results on the first page: seven results were authored by women¹², one by a man, and one by an unidentified author¹³. While nine results certainly do not constitute a complete statistical analysis by any means, the top hits to this Google search do provide an illustration of current attitudes toward women's anger in popularly accessible online media. The range of publications and author backgrounds also indicate that the fascination with women's anger is not restricted to feminists or psychologists—nor only to women.

Of the results included, "Anger Across the Gender Divide" is the only article based on psychology. Subtitled "Researchers strive to understand how men and women experience and express anger," Melissa Dittmann's review in the American Psychological Association's *Monitor on Psychology* focuses on recent research and theories about anger's causes and expressions, and the differences in men and women of both (52). Dittmann indicates that both men and women have been socially trained how to—or not to—approach and express anger. Both sexes have been poorly trained, according to psychologist Sandra Thomas, PhD. Thomas points out that boys and men have been taught that anger is an expression of manliness, and that physical expression of anger supports that manliness. Women, on the other hand, have been conditioned to try to refrain from expressing anger. Thomas

¹² Comrade Snacktastic: Snackers of the World Unite's content indicates that the blogger is female.

¹³ The article "Anger Management" is in the 'Health Guides' section of the *Center for Young Women's Health*; under the "About Us" page, it is noted that 'Health Guides' on the site are written by 'health care clinicians' at Boston Children's Hospital.

explains, "'Women usually get the message that anger is unpleasant and unfeminine,' Therefore, their anger may be misdirected in passive-aggressive maneuvers such as sulking or destructive gossip" (52). Thomas conducted a 1993 survey addressing the causes of women's anger, finding "powerlessness, injustice and the irresponsibility of other people" to be the most common (52). The results of that survey, interestingly, support Heilbrun's argument that "open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life" is forbidden to women alongside anger (Heilbrun 13). Dittmann's review continues to highlight current and potential future research into how both sexes experience and express anger, including attempts to understand what occurs when someone is not aware that they are angry. The act of bypassing the realization that one is angry is referred to as "anger diversion" and preliminarily appears to manifest in related "anger symptoms" (Dittmann 52). The review includes Psychologist Deborah Cox, PhD, who notes that while the two sexes may divert anger differently, the process by which they do so may actually be the same. "'Your anger is wrong and should be gotten rid of as soon as possible' may be the core thought behind the process" (Dittman 52). The research review concludes with Cox's indication that increased understanding of anger may necessitate a change in tactics, potentially even moving to analysis of personal written accounts of anger (Dittman 52).

TABLE 1

First page of search results from Google: "women anger." The Appendix includes screenshots of the actual results.

Hit Rank	Article Title	Author	Publication	Author Credentials
1	"Why Are Many Women Angry?"	Lawrence Wilson, MD	Dr. Wilson website	Healthcare practice focused on nutrition
2	"The female ANGER epidemic"	Rachel Rounds	<i>Daily Mail UK</i>	'Femail' columnist for <i>Daily Mail UK</i>
3	"Harnessing the Power of Anger"	Marcelle Pick, RNC, MSN, OB/GYN NP	<i>Women to Women</i> site	Founder of "Women to Women" women's health clinic and website
4	"Anger Issues in Women"	Katherine Chatfield, BA English	<i>Body+Soul AU</i>	Freelance writer for <i>Body+Soul Australia</i>
5	"It's Still Not Okay for Ladies to Get Angry"	Erin Gloria Ryan	<i>Jezebel</i>	Managing editor, <i>Jezebel</i>
6	"Anger Across the Gender Divide"	Melissa Dittman	American Psychological Association's <i>Monitor on Psychology</i>	Staff, <i>Monitor on Psychology</i>
7	"Pat Graney's 'Girl Gods' explores women's image and anger"	Misha Berson	<i>Seattle Times</i>	<i>Seattle Times</i> theater critic
8	"Anger Management"	Center for Young Women's Health Staff	<i>Center for Young Women's Health</i>	Health care clinician at Boston Children's Hospital
9	"Why Are Women So Angry?"	Unnamed female blogger handle 'Comrade Snacktastic: Snackers of the World Unite'	<i>The Big Groupthink</i> blog	Unknown; blogger

Current popular cultural attitudes toward the expression of women's anger remain negative. As an anger researcher, the implications of Cox's statement that eliciting people's "verbatim stories" as written testament are significant in terms of methodology (Dittman 52). More significantly for my research and the context of both Heilbrun's arguments and *The Collection*, Cox's statement brings us back to the problems Heilbrun highlights. Logically, if anger is to be understood best through autobiographical accounts, women and men must both first write of themselves without filters. Heilbrun points out the pitfalls of such accounts for women in particular, but her observations also fall in line with those psychologists who study anger. It could be possible, then, to navigate a woman's narrative and recognize her anger honestly if the author is aware of Heilbrun's proposed pitfalls, the psychology of anger, and her own biases and tendencies to divert anger.

It is important to note that Heilbrun draws a clear connection between anger and power: "...women's exercise of power and control, and the admission and expression of anger necessary to that exercise, has until recently been declared unacceptable" (*Writing* 17). Building on the studies I discussed earlier in this chapter, I would argue that American society continues to deem both women's anger and power unacceptable—Hilary Clinton provides a pertinent example to support this claim. The relationship between power and acceptable expression of emotion is key to my understanding and writing of Barbara and Elizabeth in *The Collection*.

In recognition of the nearly unilateral negative response to women who express anger, I chose not to write Barbara as an expressively "angry" woman—although anger expression was one of her defining traits in my earliest drafts of the

novel. Personal experience, combined with Heilbrun and my research, indicated that if Barbara were overtly angry, readers would likely discount her and disengage from the novel. While I believe that it is any author's right to upset or challenge her readers, I did not want to alienate readers. Therefore, Barbara is incredibly angry, but in the novel, she has suppressed her anger in order to conform to the gender-appropriate behavior her father and mother ingrained in her throughout her childhood. Barbara's anger appears in *The Collection* in subtle, but specific habits. Barbara's constant silent criticism of the people around her—including her husband, stems from her anger. I chose to include this tendency from the first chapter, in which Barbara is so focused on her anger at a coffee spill Rick left that she barely registers the announcement that her father is dead (*The Collection* 6-8). Barbara is also passive aggressive, a propensity common to women who self-silence. Her internal criticism is certainly an aspect of this, but more overtly, Barbara's small gestures like slamming a cabinet door (8) or looking at her watch to emphasize someone's tardiness (25), as well as smug corrections in conversation with others (25-28) are manifestations of her passive aggression. She also manipulates the people around her in order to get what she wants out of them, an example of which is when she tricks David into 'volunteering' his help with the storage units (65-66). This particular manifestation of the patriarchal gender expectations about anger expression Elizabeth instills in her daughter, while largely invisible, is insidious, affecting Barbara's relationships with her husband and children, her mental and physical health, and her perception of the world.

Similarly, Elizabeth spent her life working to meet the societal expectation of a "good wife" and "good mother," and she understood that "good" women do not get

angry. As demonstrated previously, socio-psychology supports Heilbrun's argument that "...because women have so long been told that to be shrill, or emotional, or argumentative is reprehensible in the circles of power, the merest hint that they are transgressive is enough to silence most of them" (*Reinventing* 205). Elizabeth manifests this silence in *The Collection* as a result of Tony's constant gaslighting: he questions her intelligence, dismisses the legitimacy of her health concerns, and denies her any opportunity for advancement or independence by ensuring her dependence on him. While Elizabeth never appears to express anger at the compounding injustices, restrictions, and intentional cruelty in *The Collection*, the reader encounters a plethora of legitimate reasons to believe that she has every right to be angry. Unfortunately, Elizabeth does not express her anger and instead suppresses her anger—self-silences—contributing to her severe depression and BPD.

5. REAL, ANGRY WOMEN IN LITERATURE

...she looked down on me from the imperious heights of Harrydom, as cold and grand as she could be, and announced that she did not need my approval. She would not accommodate my whims. She had moved out of the way once too often, thank you very much, tiptoed around in her old life like a slavey waiting for crumbs to fall.

—Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*

In the years since Heilbrun published *Writing a Woman's Life*, new forms of both memoir and fiction about and by women have emerged. Without always blatantly referring to their work—or even themselves—as 'feminist,' authors such as Elizabeth Strout, Judith Rossner, and Anne Whitney Pierce have pushed against the confines of what women are permitted by society to be within their fiction. More overtly, Siri Hustvedt and Kate Walbert, as well as male playwright Tracy Letts, have offered up women who intentionally either do not fit into the standards of "womanhood," attempt to throw them off, question them, or successfully reject them entirely. Their fictional works bring to life women who abandon their children literally and emotionally, self-sabotage, struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, rage against the male establishment, or strive to fit societal and familial expectations. The commonality of these authors is not that they write solely of feminists or women who overcome, but rather that they express something approaching Heilbrun's declaration that "the individual woman must learn to recognize and to value her own experience and to articulate her true condition" (*Reinventing* 94). The women they write are recognizable in their pain, their anger, and their strivings to move past both to find identity independent of their circumstances.

Two novels featuring women who are not only angry, but whose anger defines them, are *The Blazing World* and *Olive Kitteridge*. Neither novel is written in standard prose, as Hustvedt's oeuvre is collage and Strout's technically a collection of short stories. Metaphorically, it seems fitting that books featuring such unconventionally angry and unfeminine protagonists also refuse to conform to typical novel structures. Hustvedt's and Strout's novels also provide a unique avenue for comparison against *The Collection* in order to understand where my novel fits with current literature written by women authors about women protagonists. The protagonists of both novels share similarities with Barbara, face some similar challenges, and live within the same recognizable patriarchal society that shaped Barbara. The distinctions between the characters, however, are also crucial: the protagonist of *The Blazing World* fights actively against sexism and patriarchy, while the protagonist of *Olive Kitteridge*—after whom the novel is named—cannot contain her anger despite her efforts to conform to the confines of domesticity and small-town domestic life. The primary difference between these protagonists and Barbara is their divergent expressions of anger: whereas Barbara largely suppresses her anger, Hustvedt's and Strout's protagonists emote openly.

I wrote *The Collection* for myself, neglecting to identify a target audience or sub-genre until after the fact. It is not a happy story, and I would argue that its end, while hopeful, is far from resolved. *The Collection* is both literary fiction and women's fiction; I cannot argue that the most likely audience for the novel is not women. Yet, the potential reader of *The Collection* is more likely to have read *Olive Kitteridge*, or perhaps watched the mini-series on television, than to have read *The Blazing World*—intentionally dense, disorienting and intellectual to reflect its

protagonist, its intended audience is either highly educated or widely read. My novel and Strout's require little or no foreknowledge of the reader and are thus accessible to a wider readership. Heilbrun challenged women writers to write ourselves, and while Barbara is not me, parts of me certainly leached into her as I attempted to write a novel pointing at an uncomfortable social truth: the most obvious source of patriarchy is not always the most damaging.

5.1 THE BLAZING WORLD AND THE COLLECTION: AN EXPLORATION OF ONE WOMAN'S MONSTROUS ANGER

I wanted to throw back my head and howl, It's mine! but I clenched my teeth. Dizzy, dissonant, aggrieved Harry, a ghost outside her own opening.

—Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*

Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World* posthumously narrates a woman artist's life. Fictional editor I. V. Hess compiled the supposed pieces of the protagonist's life into a collage: excerpts from her alphabetized journals within which she noted her philosophies and observations of herself and the world, articles written about her and her art, and written statements by the characters around the protagonist, including her children, a late-life lover, and an assortment of social, art, and personal acquaintances. If the title is familiar, it's intentional: Hustvedt/Hess chose *The Blazing World* as an homage to the fictional protagonist's final work, as well as to Margaret Cavendish's 1666 science fiction/speculative fiction novel titled the same. The protagonist is artist Harriet "Harry" Burden—a woman too large with talent too great. Harry is not feminine in the traditional physical sense, as she is too tall and wears her wild hair short, nor does she fit socially dictated parameters for a "feminine" woman. Yet, Harry is sexual and sensual, beloved both by her

polyamorous husband and, as a widow, by her lover. Harry is a mother, a wife, a widow, and an artist, and her anger consistently discomfits those around her, including her late husband and adult children. Harry's life is chronicled through the lens of a five-year-long experimental project for which she created three distinct exhibitions using the guise of a different male artist for each of her works. The Editor's Introduction explains, "She titled the project as a whole *Maskings*, and declared that it was meant not only to expose the antifemale bias of the art world, but to uncover the complex workings of human perception and how unconscious the ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer's understanding of a given work of art" (Hustvedt 1). In simpler terms, Harry sought to turn the art world on its ear by playing a trick on it. By creating art that the critics lauded as genius, new or brilliant, but attached to a male artist's name when she had been the true artist behind the works, Harry meant to prove her point that the art world was sexist, shallow and woefully ignorant. Although the project was not as satisfying as Harry hoped, it nonetheless served to drive her point home—painfully.

Like Barbara, Harry's story is one of identity—the lack of and search for recognition of hers both as a woman and as an artist. *The Blazing World* fits within the scope both of the psychological themes related to attachment and personal development within family, and the greater framework of what it is to write a woman's life. Siri Hustvedt is also a female author, further supporting the case for *The Blazing World* as a novel within which a female protagonist approaches Heilbrun's hopeful criteria for a biography of a woman written in such a way that it speaks of her in her "true condition." The oddity, however, is that I. V. Hess, Editor of Harry's book, writes only in the first person and avoids any hint of their gender—

a stark contrast to Harry who, in an attempt to reclaim her womanhood, both used male pseudonyms in writing and men as beards for her art. The traits by which *The Blazing World* most frequently defines Harry's inability and unwillingness to fit into the traditional female mold expected of her are her anger and her intelligence—often in tandem. Harry's anger plays a significant role throughout the novel, as do her bouts of depression, presenting an appropriate protagonist to compare to Barbara in *The Collection*.

Harry's anger is backed by a voracious thirst for learning and knowledge, as well as an impressive capability for recall and widespread knowledge of a variety of subjects. In the worst of all female traditions, she learned to contain her opinions and not to correct others' errors so as not to make people uncomfortable. Phineas Q. Eldridge, performance artist and friend of Harry, recounted:

It was true they didn't want Harry the artist...but then Harry scared them off. She knew too much, had read too much, was too tall, hated everything that was written about art, and she corrected people's errors. Harry told me she never used to set people straight. For years she had sat by, silently listening to people mess up references and dates and artists' names, but by then she had had it...Harry had stopped backing down. (125-126)

Harry's long-time silence in the face of others' ignorance is symptomatic of one of both Hustvedt's and Harry's arguments: the world does not want to be corrected by women and is angered when it is. Harry's fictional experience implies the larger reality that society is made uncomfortable by a woman who is better educated and more intelligent, knows more, corrects others, and is willing to fight for her opinion

or to defend her knowledge. In an interview about Harry with Cynthia Clark, former owner of an art gallery, Clark recounts how "She made a scene once at a dinner...this woman, who we all thought of as very quiet, burst out and rattled on about philosophy, art, language. She was very loud, lecturing, unpleasant" (18-19). Clark adds that Harry's husband was upset by the incident. Maisie, Harry's then-adult daughter, also recounts that her father so disliked conflict that he would change the subject when Harry argued or disagreed with someone. Infuriated, Harry would still attempt to engage him, continuing with her defense while Felix "embarrassed, glanced around the room and wished she would stop" (88). Even when she is dying of cancer, Harry also rightly recognizes the energy required to maintain her anger: "I did not know how angry I was. How I have raged. I think I cannot rage anymore. I think I am too feeble and then the spite comes up again..." (338-339).

Harry plays an interesting foil both to Barbara and Elizabeth in *The Collection*, creating a connection between education (or knowledge) and the right to express anger. Barbara has a college education and is well versed in the Bible, while her mother consumes television more than books and hasn't used her typist skills since adolescence, or her secretly earned A.A. in Secretarial Studies ever. Harry is an insatiable learner and authoritative presence in conversations touching on a span of intellectual topics. While Barbara acts out small aggressions by habitually correcting those around her, Harry rages at others' ignorance and stupidity, refusing to capitulate when she believes another is mistaken. Barbara's social status as a college graduate and teacher has enforced in her the acceptability of asserting her authority in these small instances, but always with restraint. Harry's education,

institutional and informal, has endowed her with the sense that she is entitled to this fury at others' mistakes. Elizabeth appears to be the opposite of Harry, quiet and reluctant to cause conflict, ever submissive to those around her—particularly men—as she has never been influenced to do otherwise. Yet like Elizabeth, Harry self-silenced for most of her life, in deference to her husband. The negative response to Harry's outbursts underscores the reason I did not write Barbara as expressively angry; while Harry's difficult—bordering on unsympathetic—personality is tempered by the accounts of the people who love her, as well as her private journals, Barbara's storyline follows her exclusively. Elizabeth is similar to Harry in this aspect: Elizabeth's letters tell a sympathetic story that the reader consumes before and during encountering Barbara and her attitude toward her mother.

Harry is a feminist and fervent advocator for gender equality, and although she does not so crudely announce this in her writing, she does rage against the ignorance, misogyny and sexism of the art world; her journals are the only medium through which her voice is heard. As a young woman, she is both appalled and angered by the lack of representation of women in the art world. Her rants against the disparity are belittled and dismissed by others merely as attempts by Harry to justify her own difficulty in attaining widespread appreciation and recognition for her art. After meeting and marrying her husband, art dealer and collector Felix Lord, Harry's journals, as well as others' accounts of her, indicate that rather than see her as the outspoken artist Harry Burden, people chose to pigeonhole her only as Mrs. Lord, Felix Lord's oddity of a wife. Following Felix's death, Harry wrote:

Perhaps being ignored is worse—that look of boredom in the eyes of the other person, that assurance that nothing from me could be of any possible

interest. Nevertheless, I had hoarded my direct hits and humiliations, and they had made me gun-shy.

Not to my face: That's Felix Lord's wife. She makes dollhouses. Titters

To my face: I heard that Jonathon took your work because he's a friend of Felix. Plus they needed a woman in the stable.

In a rag: *The show at Jonathon Palmer by Harriet Burden, wife of legendary art dealer Felix Lord, consist of small architectural works cluttered with various figures and tests. The work has no discipline of focus and seems to be an odd blend of pretentiousness and naïveté. One can only wonder why these pieces were deemed worthy of exhibition. (30-31)*

Interestingly, and conveniently for this research, Harry maintains a life-long friendship with her childhood friend Rachel Briefman, in adulthood a psychiatrist. Following Felix's sudden and unexpected death at the breakfast table, Harry's grief manifests physically as her body rejects food. Rachel refers Harry to a male psychiatrist-psychoanalyst, Dr. Fertig, about whom Harry both writes and speaks to others as playing a key role in her freedom as a person, as a woman, and as an artist. Through her therapy with Dr. Fertig, as well as in conversations with Rachel, Harry comes to recognize the impact her parents and childhood had had on her as an adult: craving the approval and attention of her academic father from whom she inherited her love of learning, learning to keep her opinions quietly to herself from her mother's quiet demeanor in the presence of Harry's father, and also a passionate love for her children from her mother. In this, Harry echoes both Attachment Theory and Intergenerational theories of Personal Development. Rachel

writes of Harry's mother: "I now think that Ruth Burden ordered her world to keep anxiety at bay and to preserve the quiescent surface of her husband, who was roiling underneath and drank his three martinis every evening to subdue the rising floods" (50). Although she does not treat Harry as her patient, Rachel does not restrain herself from making observations of Harry rooted in psychoanalysis, both to Harry's face and in her writing about her. In *The Collection*, young Barbara similarly internalizes Elizabeth's portrayal of the role of wife, even while actively seeking the approval of her father, Tony. Unlike Harry, Barbara's attachment to her mother is ultimately betrayed and she transfers her primary attachment to Tony—which he does not requite. Tony, like Harry's father, values boys more highly and therefore will not invest the time in Barbara that she desires, leaving her with an avoidant attachment style with Elizabeth and an anxious/ambivalent attachment style with Tony. A crucial distinction between Harry's and Barbara's mothers in the novels is their mental condition: while Elizabeth suffers from depression and BPD, Ruth Burden appears to have been mentally healthy. Elizabeth's inability to shelter Barbara from Tony, or even to assert herself to her husband, is not entirely similar to Ruth's active attempts to protect Harry from her father, despite Ruth's apparent submission to him.

The themes of anger, psychology and family are tangled up together (mimetic of reality), but run through every stage of Harry's life chronicled in *The Blazing World*. Harry's anger is ill received by most, including her children and husband. It is at times directed with extreme precision, at others spewed forth as a general rant that her audience finds overwhelming or incomprehensible. Near the end of her life, Harry made the conscious decision to aim her rage at the art world,

its sexism in general, and its exclusion of her specifically. Hustvedt describes the effect against which Harry rages as "the drama of perception," explaining "When it comes to art, the mere fact that a man has made it is enhancing, and when a woman makes a work of art it's lessening and even polluting. The pollution values of femininity are much higher than masculinity" (Hustvedt, "Gender"). Harry's experiment of creating exhibits under the mask of male artists simultaneously provided her the opportunity to demonstrate the pollution at which she raged and the vulnerability to fall victim to it. Of the three artists with whom Harry chose to work, she remained on positive terms with one, shattered the psyche and confidence of another, and was devoured by the persona and duplicity of the last. Her anger's negative repercussions are most tangible in the person of Rune, the third artist Harry ill fatedly chose for the *Maskings*. Unlike his predecessors, Rune sought to claim sole credit for the exhibit under his name, mocking Harry, her art, her project, and her anger at the art world in his dramatic final farewell. Rune's success prior to his involvement with Harry, coupled with his success following it, also served to cast doubt over whether Harry could have been the creative genius behind any of the three exhibits, and specifically the one for which she employed Rune as her beard¹⁴. As a result, Rune undermined not only Harry's role as creator and artistic genius, but also her credibility as an artist and a person; in her attempt to assert the female over the male, Burden's female sex was violated and stolen by

¹⁴ "Beard" is a slang term for a straight person who carries on the pretense of a heterosexual relationship with a homosexual person in order to protect the homosexual partner's true sexuality. Phineas P. Eldridge remarks in *The Blazing World*, "In the gay world, disguise has a long history, which has never been simple, so when Harry asked me to beard for her, it felt as if I were merely tying an extra knot in a very old rope" (Hustvedt 114).

Rune's maleness. Ultimately, Rune's testament against Harry casts public doubt over her claims to have been the driving force behind all three projects that comprised *Maskings*. Hustvedt has also spoken about the entangled nature of Harry's complex psychology and the dangerous game she plays by undertaking *Maskings*:

The act of donning the mask alters the person who is wearing it and the art that is made because of it. The mask is not something that is only about hiding, but also about revelation. When Harry role-plays, she finds this dangerous, slightly sadistic masculinity inside her, and a contempt for the sniveling female figure Rune plays. That's complex, because we know that Harry lacked confidence as a child. She is a person who desperately wanted recognition from her father and he could not give it, and she has the fantasy that had she been a son, she might have been able to have it. (Hustvedt, "Gender")

Although the novel is framed around the *Maskings* project and its subsequent debate, the psychological struggles of Harry throughout her life are chronicled, too. Rachel, for example, expresses to Harry outright her specific concern over the possible causes and effects of the *Maskings* project on Harry. She also highlights the subconscious efforts of Felix Lord to tell his wife of his numerous affairs and lovers, and of Harry's subconscious determination to ignore them. After Harry's death, Rachel writes of the overt longing Harry's father indicates by nicknaming his daughter and only child as a boy. She recounts Harry's sometime childhood wish to have been a boy, "...I can say that had she been one, her route would have been

easier. Awkward brilliance in a boy is more easily categorized, and it conveys no sexual threat" (51). This appears more subtly in *The Collection* through Tony's disappointment in David and echoes the higher value Tony placed on his son than on his daughter. Harry's bouts with depression and grief-driven bulimia are both symptomatic of her repressed anger, much like Elizabeth's depression in *The Collection*. Heilbrun writes: "Forbidden anger, women could find no voice in which to publicly complain; they took refuge in depression or madness" (*Writing* 15). Psychology also supports the connection between women's suppressed anger, particularly when it is self-directed or when anger is ineffective (Jack 145), and Dana Crowley Jack identifies both irritable bowel syndrome and eating disorders as two potential results of self silencing (144).

Harry's frustration with who she was, who she was perceived to be, and how she was treated is anger, albeit of the simmering type, as well as the explosive rage of which she was also capable. Despite sometimes expressing anger, Harry's depression is not uncommon: "Uncontrolled, explosive anger expression does not protect women against depression" (Jack 145). Heilbrun also comments on the repercussions of repressed or unavailable anger: "If one is not permitted to express anger or even to recognize it within oneself, one is, by simple extension, refused both power and control" (*Writing* 15). Harry Burden as a younger woman is disallowed access to her anger, rendering her impotent as an artist and voice. When, as a widow and an older woman, Harry seizes on her rage and seeks to find an outlet for it, she simultaneously exerts power and control, but because her efforts do not lead to the outcome she desired, her perceived failure contributes to her

depression (Jack 145). And in Harry's case, the power and control she seeks to exert is overtly over three men in order to control the larger art world by extension.

If we overlay Attachment Theory on Harry, her trajectory from a child attempting to please her father to a woman obsessively ignoring her husband's infidelity make sense. The girl Harry sought unrequited approval from her father and found a replacement adult attachment in her husband, Felix. In her efforts both to please Felix and to force their marriage into the secure attachment she desired, Harry repressed herself: she self-policed in the company of others, she forced herself to stop mid-argument or mid-tirade to keep from upsetting Felix, and she accepted her role and identity as "Felix Lord's Wife." Harry's childhood experiences with her father and her mother's treatment of him create the context for her behavior as an adult. The intergenerational effects within the Burden family are deeply ingrained in Harry. Following the example set by her mother—much as Barbara's anger repression reflects Elizabeth in *The Collection*—Harry actively buries her brilliance and passion in order not to upset the delicate balance of her marriage. It is therefore darkly ironic that while Harry was repressing her artistic talents, intelligence and knowledge, Felix was living out a rich polyamorous life full of travel and many lovers. Felix never changed who he was for his wife, yet her every effort was concentrated on compressing herself into the wife she thought he wanted. The connection here to Elizabeth in *The Collection* is clear: Elizabeth tried desperately to be the meek, obedient, "good" wife and mother that Tony demanded of her, unaware that he simultaneously lived a dual life, supported a second family and lived largely independently several states away. All three women paid steep psychological and personal prices for their sacrifice.

Another significant theme of *The Blazing World* is monsters. Rachel writes of Harry's favorite adolescent book, *Frankenstein*, and its chilling resemblance to and expression of Harry's search for understanding and identity. Harry also creates life-sized dolls of Felix after he dies, heated to imitate the warmth of life. Her Felix dolls mimic the creator-creation model of *Frankenstein*, unsettling her adult children—although her pre-pubescent granddaughter adores them. Harry's notebooks also include numerous mentions of monsters or devils. Hustvedt (and the enigmatic I. V. Hess) even used "Monsters at Home" as the working title for the novel, but on completing the book noted in an interview, "the title didn't fit what I had written...The monster Harry is redeemed by the artist Harry" (Hustvedt, "A Conversation"). Harry's independence from strict gender lines and refusal to comply with society's expectations of her as a woman also render her monstrous, and Hustvedt makes it clear that Harry is aware of her monstrosity. Aside from her physical appearance, Harry's anger is one of her most gender noncompliant traits, contributing to her monstrosity in the eyes of the art world, Felix, and even her children.

Harry Burden, in her anger, refusal to submit to the world's wish of what and who she should be, joy, freedom and creation, would seem to meet Heilbrun's criteria for the true account of a woman. Her use of male artists as masks is, in its own way, a direct answer to the outright expressions of anger, power and laughter Heilbrun seeks. Harry's experiment demonstrated that her work truly was perceived differently when it wore a man's name. The controversy caused by her involvement with Rune and his refusal to admit to the extent of her role in their project supports the same hypothesis, as the art world found itself largely

incredulous that the woman Harry Burden could have been the driving creative force behind their exhibit. The result of *Maskings* is predictable in terms of Heilbrun: Harry attempted to create an expression of her anger in order to exert power and control over her life and over others. To accomplish this, she extended her anger to exert power over and control of three male artists. The failure of Harry's attempt—insomuch as Rune is able to discredit her on the basis of his maleness and her femaleness—is indicative of the impotence of and lack of receptiveness for Harry's anger by society at large, much like Dr. Frankenstein and his monster.

Where Hustvedt wrote Harry to be intentionally unconventional, even monstrous, I wrote Barbara and Elizabeth as socially defined characters. Elizabeth struggles to live up to the expectations set by the magazines, television shows, and media of the 1950s, as well as the expectations of her own mother. Heilbrun's comments on the dynamic between mothers and daughters illustrates the problem I sought to create through Elizabeth's hopeless attempts to be the "ideal" wife and mother: "Whatever the drawbacks, whatever the frustrations, or satisfactions of the mother's life, her mission was to prepare the daughter to take her place in the patriarchal succession, that is, to marry, to bear children (preferably sons), and to encourage her husband to succeed in the world" (*Writing* 119). I exacerbated this narrative through Tony's dominance and Elizabeth's mental illness, but the result remains the same. Even Harry, a rebellious woman refusing to be confined to the small niche the world wanted her in, learned her mother's lessons well: through a lifetime of marriage to Felix Lord, Harry self-silenced and played the socially acceptable wife, ever in her husband's shadow.

5.2 OLIVE KITTERIDGE AND THE COLLECTION: ANGER AS A MASK

And if her platter had been full with the goodness of Henry and she had found it burdensome, had flicked it off crumbs at a time, it was because she had not known what one should know: that day after day was unconsciously squandered.

—Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*

Olive Kitteridge is a novel-length collection of short stories about a retired schoolteacher in a small town called Crosby, Maine. The stories all take place in Olive's limited world, although she is not the protagonist of all of them, nor are they all told from her point-of-view. Yet, *Olive Kitteridge* builds a coherent picture of Olive through the collective narrative. Olive is married to a pharmacist, Henry, and mother to their son, Christopher. She is a large woman, gaining weight as a result of secret binges following her retirement. While Olive is a difficult woman, often abrasive and angry, she is also complex; over the course of the book, the reader begins to understand what makes Olive the way she is and grow more sympathetic toward her. The reader first meets Olive and Henry before they have retired, while Christopher is still in school, although the narrative follows Olive into retirement, Henry into death, and Christopher into adulthood. As a whole, *Olive Kitteridge* is a portrait not only of Olive, but also of her identity in relation to her family and community.

Olive's anger is one of her defining traits—although it contrasts sharply with the empathy and compassion of which she is also capable. Those most prone to her anger are her husband and son. The first story, "Pharmacy," focuses on Henry and is told from his point-of-view; Henry makes frequent mention of Olive's anger, shouting, and harsh treatment of Christopher. Henry serves as a deacon at their church, while Olive evolves into an atheist and unloads on him when he, in

frustration, asks if it's too much to ask that she attend church services with him.

"'Yes, it most certainly is too goddamn much to ask!' Olive had almost spit, her fury's door flung open. 'You have no idea how tired I am, teaching all day, going to foolish meetings where the goddamn principal is a moron! Shopping. Cooking. Ironing. Laundry'" (9). Likewise, references throughout the book indicate that many of her students feared or disliked Olive. Much like Tony's rage and hoarding disproportionately affected David's childhood, Olive's volatile emotions take their greatest toll on her son, Christopher. As a younger child, Christopher fights back with his mother and becomes disengaged from her as a teenager, but as an adult, he seeks to remove himself from her. In terms of Attachment Theory, Olive's temper pushed Christopher's childhood anxious/ambivalent attachment to her past its breaking point—much as Elizabeth's apathy pushed Barbara into an avoidant engagement style. As a result, Christopher's attachment to his mother from adolescence into middle age would be classified as avoidant. He moves across the country to California for a number of years, and only invites Olive back into his life when he has moved back to New York City to marry his second wife, a woman who already has children. Christopher and Barbara are parallel in this avoidant relationship with their parents, including the drastic geographic changes; but while Barbara permanently avoids Tony, Christopher does attempt to reconcile with Olive.

Olive's push-and-pull relationship with Christopher is possibly also the result of her BPD-like tendencies: Olive's overeating correlates with the Queen borderline mother personality's "oral greediness," as do her loudness and bouts of rage (Lawson 103-105). Olive's father's suicide also supports a borderline

personality: "The borderline Queen lacks the experience of *feeling* special and suffers from feelings of complete emptiness, angry yearning, and insatiable longing" (Lawson 104). Whether Olive truly had BPD or not, her tendencies and behaviors toward Christopher (and Henry) were sufficient to enforce his avoidant attachment and engagement styles with her. One commonality among children with borderline mothers is the destructive long-term effects on the mother's mental illness on her children; Christopher eventually enters therapy to seek relief, while Barbara turns to religion for refuge.

Despite Olive's rough exterior, she is vulnerable—a trait she shares with Barbara. Olive loves Christopher and is fiercely protective of her son. She has no use for her first daughter-in-law from Connecticut and when Christopher announces their imminent move across the country to California after only four months of marriage, Olive is alternately despondent and enraged: "She wept at times with such noise the dog whimpered and trembled and pushed his cold nose into her arm. She screamed at the dog. She screamed at Henry. 'I wish she'd drop dead'" (142). Despite her admonitions and shouting, Olive also deeply loves Henry and is strongly affected when he suffers a stroke that renders him helpless. Forced to place a nonresponsive, but alive, Henry in a care facility, Olive flounders in her efforts to create new structure in her life. Her son relies on the avoidant attachment and engagement styles he'd developed toward her in his younger years, protecting himself from her while simultaneously breaking her heart. In the midst of this crisis, Olive's atheism provides an important point of contrast to Barbara's religiousness: Barbara's religion is fairly effective at providing comfort, attachment, and insulation from her anger and depression; Olive, having rejected religion, is left to seek other,

less successful, solutions. With neither Christopher nor Henry to turn to, Olive is forced to turn to other avenues for support—contrary to her deep-seated belief in keeping one's troubles to herself. Olive's unhealthy relationship with food, characterized by overeating, binging, or hiding her eating habits from Henry (before his stroke), also point to her ineffective expression of anger and inability to process her other emotions (Jack 144-145).

Olive is at times harsh, others deeply empathetic—although she struggles to express her empathy and often fails. When Olive is faced with a former student, now a mother, whose husband has died, she is compassionate and sympathetic, but she recognizes her own limitations: "She would like to rest a hand on Marlene's head, but this is not the thing Olive is especially able to do" (180). A similar incident in *The Collection* occurs when Barbara recognizes that she would like to embrace Jonah, but chooses not to reveal her sympathy for her stepfather. In direct contrast, Olive expresses her anger openly to her immediate family, screaming, shouting and cursing at them, even when they are not the real targets for her frustration and rage. Olive's anger is also often a mask for other emotions, like her depression at the thought of Christopher moving across the country or the unnamable swirl of feelings assaulting Olive after Henry goes into the nursing home. In this, Olive is similar to Barbara and Elizabeth in *The Collection*: Barbara and Elizabeth repress their anger, which then manifests as depression for both women; although Olive expresses anger, she doesn't do so effectively (Jack 145), also resulting in depression. When Henry is a shell of himself in the facility and Christopher aloof in California, it becomes clear that Olive's greatest antagonist is herself. Olive's father committed suicide when she was a girl, and while she publicly mocks the absurdity,

cowardice and selfishness of the act, she is less opposed alone—especially after Henry's stroke: "The thought that she could, anytime she needed to, kill herself went through her head. It was not the first time in her life she'd thought this, but before, she would think about the note to leave. Now she thought she would leave no note" (150). The connection between Olive's father's suicide and her tendency to rage is also predictable in terms of Bowlby's theories on loss and the stages of grief (J. Holmes 87-91). Bowlby specifically addresses the potential impact of a parent's suicide as a "common cause[s] of intensified separation anxiety" leading to anger, "often also of intense degree" (Bowlby "Retrospect" 671). From the Attachment standpoint, Olive's childhood loss of her father to suicide is the ultimate abandonment, a trauma that led Olive not only to undergo the stages of mourning Bowlby outlines (J. Holmes 87-91), but also inspired in her a deep-seated anger and fear of abandonment. Lawson also makes the connection between Olive's childhood abandonment and adult BPD: "...the borderline mother's behavior reflects the degree to which her emotional needs were unmet as a child and the way in which caregivers responded to her" (Lawson 44). It is reasonable to speculate that Olive's mother would have found parenting difficult in the wake of her husband's suicide, leaving the child Olive to cope with the loss on her own.

Like many married couples, Olive and Henry change over the course of their marriage (Ng and Smith 430), and like most children, Christopher strives to differentiate himself from his parents as an adult¹⁵ (Harvey and Bray 299-300). Olive's and Henry's lives following Henry's retirement from the pharmacy become

¹⁵ As described by Bowen's Intergenerational Family Systems Theory (Harvey and Bray 298-300).

more entwined in some ways, as they seek hobbies and pastimes to keep busy in the absence of jobs and parenting duties. During this period, Olive is less angry and explosive, although no less irritated by her husband. Without Henry as a buffer, Olive's anger is more often internal—or even self-directed—like Barbara in *The Collection*. Olive is angry at growing old: so embarrassed that she'd dripped melted ice cream on herself while visiting a remarried Christopher in New York City, Olive grew so infuriated that she cut short her visit. Again, Olive's anger is often a mask for her other emotions: rather than express to her son and daughter-in-law that she feared growing old and being treated like a feeble, useless person, that she was mortified at having dribbled food on herself like one of their children (228). Both angry and embarrassed that neither Christopher nor his wife told her of the spill, Olive internalized her feelings and lumped them together under the familiar umbrella of anger (228). It is also important to note that at this point in Olive's life, she again fears abandonment: Christopher has demonstrated that he will permit only limited involvement by Olive, and Henry has been either effectively and actually dead for years. This fear manifests in Olive's anger and her bouts of depression, characterized by feelings of uselessness and wishes for death. Olive's redemption does not come at the prodding of a therapist, but equally unexpectedly in love. The final story, "River," follows Olive as she meets Jack Kennison, with whom she is open about her regrets—most of which are built around her anger.

Another story in *Olive Kitteridge*, "Criminal," introduces Rebecca Brown, daughter of Crosby's Congregational minister. Although Olive makes a minimal appearance in the chapter, anger and abandonment take center stage. When Rebecca was a young girl, her mother left her family to become an actress in

California and found Scientology along the way. Abandoned by her mother and, as her Aunt Katherine said, "spousified" by her father, Rebecca's world revolved around her father. Although deeply affected by the loss of her primary attachment to her mother, Rebecca was not permitted by her strict, religious father to mourn the loss of her mother. Instead, she cooked, cleaned and was made to abide by a series of strict Biblical "thou shalt nots" (235). The snapshot of Rebecca in "Criminal" finds her living with a boyfriend and applying for jobs after college and after the death of her suppressive father. Frustrated by her inability to find fulfilling work, still haunted by her father's regime and her mother's abandonment, Rebecca finds an outlet for her repressed anger in pyromania. The story ends as Rebecca calmly fills a backpack with fire-starting material, planning to target the doctor's office that recently dismissed her chronic heartburn and stomach pain as a "sensitive stomach"—ironically, her stomach ailments were likely the physical manifestation of her anger (Jack 144). In addition to lighter fluid, Rebecca includes symbols of her anger toward her mother in her bag: "She watched herself quietly slip from her underwear drawer the old postcards from her mother. In the kitchen she ripped them in half—and when she did, a tiny sound came from her. She put them into the knapsack" (250). Rebecca's stifled anger and illegal outlet stand in stark contrast to Olive's frequent expression of anger. Attachment Theory indicates that the women's similar childhood abandonment traumas—Olive's father's suicide and Rebecca's mother's departure—coupled with their similar taste in laid-back partners suggest that Rebecca could have been Olive in another life, or Olive Rebecca. The danger of anger, the metaphor appears to say, is that it burns regardless, but one has a choice in whether to control it or let it consume.

Olive compares well with Barbara in *The Collection* in three key facets: her anger as the result of childhood abandonment, her love for her son, and her struggle to find her identity. As discussed previously, a psychoanalyst would likely pinpoint Olive's childhood trauma of her father's suicide as the source of her anger (Bowlby "Retrospect" 671; See also Ledgerwood). In addition to its roots in her father's abandonment of her via suicide, Olive's anger toward Henry stems from her frustration that she is not more like him. Whereas Henry is friendly, always ready to say the right words to a customer, neighbor, or stranger, Olive is awkward and cold—even when she doesn't mean to be. Similarly, while Elizabeth's abandonment of Barbara is actually a preference for David, and Tony is emotionally unavailable and physically absent, albeit alive, Barbara is deeply affected by her childhood perception of her parents' abandonment of her—a perception which shapes her relationships as an adult (Harvey and Bray 299). Barbara is hardly as socially cumbersome as Olive, but she similarly resents her husband's easy-going nature. Rick's ability to take a crisis in stride and propose solutions infuriates Barbara because her first reaction is emotional. Barbara treats each incident as a personal affront, causing her to respond with anger, resentment, frustration, and annoyance—none of which she feels free to emote, resulting in self-silencing and anger suppression (Jack 144). Regardless of whether Rick is the cause, he often receives the brunt of her anger—just as Henry is the recipient of Olive's. Rick grates on Barbara's nerves, but unlike Olive, she doesn't always emote her anger; rather, Barbara typically responds passive aggressively.

Just as Olive loves Christopher, despite her tumultuous relationship with him, so Barbara loves her son, Nat. Barbara's clear preference for her son and

firstborn mirrors Elizabeth's preference for David; aside from the gendered implications of prioritizing their sons, Elizabeth's, Barbara's, and Olive's preferential treatment of their sons is predicted by their BPD (Lawson 40-42). Although Olive only has one child, his attachment pattern to her is similar to Barbara's toward Elizabeth. As a child, Barbara's primary attachment to Elizabeth becomes first anxious/ambivalent after David's birth, and ultimately degrades into avoidant—just as Christopher's attachment to Olive does. Relatedly, Olive's attachment to her father is similar to Barbara's to Tony. Whereas Olive's relationship—and thereby attachment—with her father was severed as a result of his suicide, Barbara's avoidant attachment to Tony comes as a result first of his physical absence and later of his unrepentant hoarding and its ultimate endangerment of her life. Unlike Olive, Barbara only treated Tony as though he were dead, and thus still has to deal with her relationship with him when he does die.

Olive, like Harry Burden and Barbara, doesn't fit into the mold society expects of her. As a wife, mother and schoolteacher, Olive is expected to be kind, gentle, and 'feminine' in the traditional sense. Olive is none of these. Barbara, in the same three roles, is similar to Olive in her no-nonsense approach to her students. In a departure from her usual stringent personality, Olive's softer side is seen most often in context of her students—both current and past. Barbara's students do not make a large appearance in *The Collection* as the plot occurs over the summer, but readers can intuit that she does not grow particularly attached to them. In the Epilogue, however, the reader notes that Barbara is at least protective of her students (*The Collection* 272-273). Barbara is not the typical teacher who longs for summer, and her hobbies consist largely of her religion. Olive's free time, on the

other hand, is filled with gardening, canning, sewing, and other traditionally feminine domestic duties. This adherence to typical gender roles is perhaps the only clear facet in which Olive exists without chafing against society's expectations—and she genuinely enjoys them. Both Olive and Barbara resist looking internally to examine honestly why and how they are the women they are. Olive only does so late in life, whereas Barbara is essentially forced by Tony's death to confront her past and the traumas that shaped her. In many ways, Olive is the woman Barbara could have been had she not turned to religion as her primary secure attachment.

5.3 THE COLLECTION: SUPPRESSED ANGER

...Barbara had the distinct impression that she was being treated as an unexploded bomb—handled carefully, at a distance, and with a certainty that when she did blow up, he didn't want to be anywhere nearby...

—*The Collection*

Barbara's anger is the primary focus within the scope of this research, but her anger is understood best in context with other characters: Elizabeth never expresses her anger, while David is explosive in his, as is Jean. Another influence on Barbara, her anger and her expression of anger is Tony. While exhibited only anecdotally through Elizabeth or David, or read in the subtext of Elizabeth's letters to him, Tony's expression of anger toward Elizabeth and their children had a significant, and divergent, impact on each.

Barbara expresses anger both in traditionally feminine and overt, or typically masculine, ways. Elizabeth's self-silencing during Barbara's childhood taught Barbara that women should not express their anger. Yet throughout the novel, Barbara's resentment toward and frustration with others are clear. She is passive aggressive toward her family and outsiders, but is also likely to exhibit

aggressiveness toward family, such as when she and David escalate into a screaming match at his duplex. Barbara's tendency to suppress her anger or express it through passive aggression may also be partly due to her religiosity. The anger Barbara harbors directly contradicts the Christian directives to forgive and "turn the other cheek," but passive aggression allows her to avoid the contradiction. Barbara's religiosity also serves to insulate her, to an extent, against both depression and anger; her religion may also have protected her from developing BPD like Elizabeth. Maddi et al's study comparing the effectiveness of religion versus 'hardiness'¹⁶ in remediating anger and depression supported other studies that indicate that religiosity does provide a buffer against both anger and depression (Maddi et al 149). Religion, however, is not a perfect remedy and was actually found to be less effective than hardiness (Maddi et al 149). The study found that while both hardiness and religiosity contribute to overall health and mental well-being under stress, as well as to "help people to tolerate stresses, cope with them effectively," hardiness was significantly more effective (Maddi et al 149). In other words, while Barbara's deep Christian faith keeps her from succumbing to the anger and depression that so deeply affect Elizabeth and David, it does not insulate her entirely. It leaves her susceptible to the bouts of depression hinted at in *The Collection*: her postpartum depression, the meltdown in the shower, the migraines and headaches consistent with someone suffering from depression. While psychology has not drawn a clear relationship between religiosity and BPD, studies do indicate that people who are more religious tend to have the least BPD traits

¹⁶ Hardiness "constitutes an operationalization of the existential courage and motivation to search for the overall meaning of one's life" (Maddi et al 148).

(Hafizi, Tabatabaei, and Koenig 140). The causality is unclear (ie: whether increased religiosity better prepares people against BPD or whether people who have BPD are less inclined to be religious), but psychiatrists have posited that religion's positive effect on providing relief from and minimizing stress could be one key (Hafizi, Tabatabaei, and Koenig 140). For purposes of discussing both Barbara's religiosity and Elizabeth's lack thereof in *The Collection*, the cause is less important than the outcome. Incidentally, because Elizabeth is only socially religious, her religion does little to protect her from depression and BPD. Barbara's rigorous morning prayer and devotional (meditation) routine in the novel also presents an interesting twist to her anger expression. Sandra Thomas' anger interviews of 535 women found that in response to the question of whether they did "anything else ...when angry that has not been mentioned on our questionnaire" listed, among other strategies and behaviors: prayer and reflection (Jack 144; Smucker, Martin, and Wilt 149-153). The religiosity I ascribed to Barbara in *The Collection* becomes infinitely more complex when viewed not only as a substitute secure attachment, but also as a coping mechanism for her suppressed anger.

Although I manufactured Elizabeth's depression as a characterization device, in reality, psychology recognizes depression as a manifestation of self-directed or internalized anger (first posited by Freud in 191 and subsequently substantiated, although not universally; the theory is adamantly opposed by some) (Droppelman and Wilt 212, 217). Numerous psychological theories offer misdirected, suppressed, or self-directed anger as the cause of or an aspect of depression—particularly for women (Droppelman and Wilt 216-217), although the discussion is neither complete nor unanimous; women, anger, and depression simply have not been

studied enough. In Elizabeth's case, the guilt and shame she would have felt as an unwed mother in the 1950's could have triggered her depression. Her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and resulting marriage to Tony in order to appease her religious family's—and society's—expectations, her subsequent miscarriage, her two well-born children, her post-partum depression and abandonment by Tony all compound complex emotions of guilt, shame, anger, fear, loneliness and depression—along with the biological changes as a result of pregnancy and maternity (Droppelman and Wilt 214). Psychology agrees that it would be difficult to determine whether Elizabeth's depression is the expression of the other deeply ingrained emotions, or whether those emotions only exacerbate it. Regardless, Elizabeth holds her anger close, wrapped into her depression, rather than expressing it like David, or even Barbara, in her way.

Both Attachment Theory and Intergenerational theories of Personal Development support the way in which I wrote Barbara's emotional and psychological identity as an adult as shaped by her childhood and parents. As a child, Barbara resented her mother's focus on and liberal demonstrations of affection toward David. While Barbara first responded to losing her primary attachment figure by exhibiting anxious/ambivalent behavior in order to gain Elizabeth's attention, she ultimately resorted to an avoidant attachment to avoid further disappointment and emotional pain. Barbara's resentment against Elizabeth continued, however, as Barbara grew old enough to understand the nature of Tony's hoarding and its effects on his family's lives. Barbara viewed her mother as weak because, from her perspective, Elizabeth seemingly did nothing to protect her children from Tony's hoarding and emotional abuse—the discovery of Elizabeth's

letters prompts the crucial shift in Barbara's perception of her mother in *The Collection*. At the same time, I imagined that Barbara's anger toward her father grew, first because of his obsessive-compulsive hoarding, and later because he also focused his fatherly attentions primarily on David. As she grew older, Barbara bottled up her anger toward Tony, eventually cutting him out of her life rather than examining his impact on her or expressing her anger at and to him. I drew on my experiences as a woman and observations of the women around me to write Barbara's passive approach to her anger surrounding Tony, but psychology confirms that it is inherently feminine in its execution (Jack 141). Similarly, while Barbara maintains a distant semblance of a relationship with Elizabeth as an adult, she treats her mother as incompetent. Her comments, tone of voice, and attitude toward Elizabeth express a muted, passive aggressive anger. While one might expect Barbara to be more expressive in her anger toward Elizabeth—and toward her husband, to an extent—that she does not is indicative of the deeply ingrained example Elizabeth set for her daughter as a child. Barbara learned from Tony that men were allowed to express anger, to rage, to shout, and to be explosive in their expression (Fabes 533; See also Jack 141). From passive Elizabeth, I have shown how Barbara has absorbed society's gender-based restriction of a woman's expression of anger: women do not have permission to rant, rage, or shout (Fabes 533; See also Jack 141). As the author, I did not want to distance the reader from Barbara as a result of her anger expression; however, given the childhood familial context I had written for Barbara, and the gender-based social allowances for anger, her anger suppression is an authentic possible outcome. I chose to restrict Barbara to typical feminine behavior regarding anger for this reason, although it sets her

apart from characters like Harry and Olive, who express anger in typically masculine manners.

Hustvedt ensures that Harry is not entirely satisfied at the close of *The Blazing World*, although she sought to express her anger in as many forms as are available to her: *Maskings*, her pseudonymous letters to editors, her private journals, and her public outbursts. While *Maskings* did not have the effect on the art community that Harry had hoped for, it did prove her point about gender. But Hustvedt's novel also warns that Harry's anger was not without consequence, beyond even the psychological and emotional trauma she underwent as a result of Rune's refusal to bend to her will. Less than a year before Harry's death, she writes in "Notebook O" of the devastating effect of her single-minded focus on channeling her anger into *Maskings*. "I am alone. I have lost Bruno now, too, lost him to my schemes and my rage and my failure. I wanted to bite the world bloody, but I have bitten myself, made my own poor tragedy of things" (323). As is fitting for a woman who struggled her whole life for identity and to be comfortable in her own skin, Harry dies not at the hands of another person, but of the cancer attacking from inside her own body. In the weeks prior to her death, Harry writes in "Notebook T" of her body's degradation, "I am truly a monster now, ashamed of its hideous body" (337). And yet, despite her raging, her fury, Harry does not die alone. Her children and grandchildren, Bruno, and her favorite tenants are with Harriet Burden as she draws her last breath, still angry. The last time Harry spoke, she repeated "no" three times, but just before, she admonished her granddaughter Aven to "Fight for yourself. Don't let anybody push you around. You hear me?" (351). Even on her deathbed, Harry was acutely aware of the difficult world ahead of her young

granddaughter, having had the misfortune to be born a girl, and urges her to fight against it.

Olive Kitteridge also offers the sharp contrasts between Olive's frequent external expression of anger and Rebecca Brown's simmering internalized anger. While Olive is quick to snap at, shout at or even hit her husband or son, Rebecca's rage is deeply subdued. Only in her thoughts is Rebecca daring enough to say, "Fuck you" to the mother who abandoned her. Incidentally, Rebecca's story is also illustrative of the health consequences women often suffer as a result of constantly suppressing her anger; she visits the doctor's office in the first place to address ongoing stomach issues and heartburn, only to be told she has a "sensitive stomach" and nothing else is wrong. In all likelihood, Rebecca's physical symptoms were the result of a lifetime of suppressed anger and self-silencing (Jack 143-145). The end results of the women's divergent anger expressions are also dissimilar, as Olive ultimately harbors regret, but little rage, and Rebecca calmly sets out to commit felony arson to undo years of anger suppression. For Rebecca, arson is symbolic not only of the expression of her anger, but also of the control that has been denied to her for most of her life. Living under her father's strict religious rules restricted Rebecca from doing, trying, and experiencing. Thus, when Rebecca is leaving her apartment at the end of "Criminal," she focuses on the words she will hear if she's caught: "'You have the right to remain silent. You have the right—You have the right—You have the right.' It would be worth the arrest if they put it like that" (250). But Olive, who has so freely expressed her fury throughout her life, finds herself accepting, calm, and not yet willing to give up on the life that she's raged so often against.

Barbara, unlike either Harry or Olive, is religious, a distinction that anecdotal and psychological evidence both mark as protective against anger and depression (Maddi et al 149). While Barbara often translates her faith into a 'holier than thou' attitude toward the world, allowing herself small resentments and frustrations, she is not buried under them like Harry. And because Barbara is not frequently expressive or explosive in her anger, she does not face so many regrets as Olive does. Barbara is by no means mentally healthy and is far from emotionally healthy, but her choice in coping mechanism following her traumatic, avoidant childhood provides enough defense that she is not rendered helpless like her mother. Psychology also maps the potential connection between an avoidant attachment, as I wrote Barbara's childhood attachment, and her conversion and adherence to a deeper religious belief than her mother (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 317). In other words, while Barbara is angry and depressed, unlike Olive, her religiosity prevents her from succumbing completely to either. Darkly, and representative of the greater concern to the few psychologists and psychiatrists focused on women's anger, none of these women characters is effective at expressing her anger—with the exception, perhaps, of Olive. Harry dies angry and embittered at her perceived failure. Rebecca seeks anger expression through an act that is ultimately self-destructive. Olive lets go of her anger only in the last years of her life, primarily out of fear of dying alone. Elizabeth's anger suppression, depression and BPD controlled and restricted her to resignation and submissiveness. Barbara's anger toward her mother diffuses as a result of their interactions throughout *The Collection*, but I intentionally did not write a clearly recognizable reconciliation between the two. Likewise, I did not explicate Barbara's attitude toward Tony at the close of the novel, leaving the

reader to wonder if she has let go of the pain and anger, forgiven him, or still harbors anger and resentment against her father.

Secrets and lies are also a source of anger for many of the characters in *The Collection*. The most obvious secrets surround Tony, but Elizabeth also holds her past close. I used the striking visual of storage units full of Tony's accumulated hoarding as symbolic manifestation of the secrets in the novel, but the storage containers contain neither all of the secrets, nor all the answers. Elizabeth's secrets function to protect her, to build a wall between the traumatic past and her acceptable, cared-for present. Tony's secrets, and his lies, created the space he needed for his complicated existence—abandoned family and obsessive hoarding. Like Barbara and Ivy in *August: Osage County*, Tony's family members are angry when his secrets are revealed. Although in *The Collection*, Elizabeth and Barbara find some empowerment in airing out the past, like Barbara in *August: Osage County*, David relives his childhood trauma, and Jean sees only the opportunity for exploiting Barbara and their father's death. The exposure of Tony's multiple families, the extent of his hoarding, and the pain he caused those around him ignites frustration into anger. Like Olive, David's anger is explosive and often misdirected, catching Barbara in its fallout. David expresses his anger in typically masculine ways: shouting, clenching his fists, and posturing. Meanwhile I wanted Tony's ex-wives, Janet and Elizabeth, to express their anger with a cool collectedness that comes from lifetimes of self-silencing. But Barbara struggles to maintain her feminine anger expression—suppression—amidst the discoveries about her childhood, Tony, Elizabeth, and her half-siblings. To disrupt Barbara's reliance on her feminine anger management techniques, such as passive aggression and prayer,

I used the culmination of events in *The Collection* to push her to express her anger in more typically masculine ways, typified by her shouting match with David. Even when she is expressing anger outright, I ensured that Barbara's constant need for control leaked in: rather than fly off the handle, curse and scream like Olive or the women from *August: Osage County*, Barbara uses verbal digs and personal attacks (admittedly in a raised voice). I wanted to use Barbara's anger to give voice to the un-Christian thoughts and resentments she harbors, despite her religiosity.

6. WOMEN, ATTACHMENT, AND FAMILY IN THE COLLECTION

6.1 MOTHER AND DAUGHTER: ATTACHMENT THEORY AND PATRIARCHY

For we think back through our mothers if we are women.
—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In her infancy, Barbara only appears in the novel through the letters, and therefore perspective, of her mother—Barbara's primary attachment figure at that point (J. Holmes 69). While the plot of the novel hinges on Barbara's relationship with and the death of her father, the development of that relationship over time as a product of Barbara's relationships with her mother and younger brother David are directly pertinent. Her father's absence during much of her infancy further strengthens her initial maternal attachment, and Elizabeth's life almost exclusively revolves around her infant daughter. This bond is initially reciprocal and secure, but Barbara reverts to an anxious/insecure attachment when Elizabeth gives birth to Barbara's younger brother and shifts her attention to her newborn son. Although young Barbara is aware of this shift in affection and attachment to an extent, because she is a child, she is unable to process the full ramifications of her mother's attachment shift to a new sibling and continues to see her mother as her primary attachment figure. In response to the change, Barbara exhibits the attention-seeking behavior chronicled in Elizabeth's letters: following Elizabeth around the house, throwing tantrums, and mimicking her mother. Because Tony is physically absent, toddler Barbara cannot transfer her primary attachment to him; had he been present, Bowlby's theory indicates that Barbara would have replaced her mother—her preferred primary attachment—with her father, although it served my purposes as the writer not to facilitate this shift (J. Bowlby 69). I intentionally designed a context within which

the Chase family is uniquely isolated, lacking engagement with either set of grandparents, Barbara is left with a short attachment hierarchy consisting only of her parents; Tony's absence negates him, so Elizabeth is the only other option for Barbara. I intentionally crafted this isolation to set up Elizabeth's eventual emotional overload and intensify the negative effects of her mental breakdown on Barbara.

Elizabeth's earlier letters highlight how she doted on her daughter; this is evident in small details such as referring to Barbara as 'Barbara Marie,' as well as grander gestures like curling her daughter's hair every night so that young Barbara had curls like Shirley Temple (an act that also imbues Elizabeth with a certain limited control and power that is otherwise unavailable to her). I chose the late 1950s era in part because of its restrictive gender roles: with little opportunity for activity or adult interaction outside of church, Elizabeth fashions Barbara into the center of her daily microcosm. Elizabeth's letters also hint at the debilitating migraines and depression that render her unable to give her full attention to Barbara, resulting in Barbara's shift to an anxious attachment style, wherein she cries and screams whenever Elizabeth leaves her (although Elizabeth attributes Barbara's crying to external factors, such as teething) (*The Collection* 3). Elizabeth narrates some of her physical and mental struggle in her letters to Tony, but she attempts to trivialize both the magnitude of her health problems and the impact motherhood has on her in an attempt to convince Tony that she is the model housewife. In actuality, Elizabeth's condition was serious: she suffered from postpartum depression, developed mental health concerns as the result of her isolation from others, and ultimately exhibited a borderline personality (BPD). In imagining

Elizabeth's life, as well as the expectations she'd have felt pressured to meet, it was clear to me that she was never mentally or emotionally equipped to meet the demands of the single motherhood in which I'd placed her. Barbara's anxious attachment to her mother is exacerbated after David is born, while Elizabeth is simultaneously struggling with severe post-partum depression and pouring all her remaining energy and emotion into her newborn. I subtly marked this shift on Elizabeth's side through her letters: she begins to refer to Barbara only as 'Barbara' rather than 'Barbara Marie,' she focuses more time in each letter on David than on her firstborn, and when she does write of Barbara, Elizabeth tends to write mostly of her frustrations with her toddler daughter.

Elizabeth's lack of confidence in herself and resignation to her role as housewife and mother are clear in her letters, and I highlighted both through her short fascination with becoming an Avon lady (*The Collection* 4). Lawson characterizes Elizabeth's Waif Mother borderline personality type by her helplessness, fragility and resignation. She "does not see herself as competent regardless of her level of education, intelligence, or employment" (Lawson 63). Tony's implied response to Elizabeth indicates not only his control over her, as he forbids her to continue to save money to purchase her sales kit and berates her for considering that she might be capable of selling Avon products (*The Collection* 11-12). A similar indication of Elizabeth's Waif personality is seen through Barbara's adult eyes early in *The Collection*:

...Barbara always treated her mother as something of an imbecile.

Conveniently, Elizabeth usually acted the part. Tonight was not an exception.

Elizabeth had probably never been a very bright woman, had little education, and didn't seem to be bothered by either of those facts. Barbara had held her mother in something approaching contempt since she'd graduated from teaching school and moved out on her own. She'd stopped encouraging Elizabeth to take bookkeeping, or computer, or office management courses at the community college years ago. For the last decade, Elizabeth had seemed content to volunteer here and there, and otherwise to stay at home, crocheting or knitting to the background noise of the Cooking channel. (17)

I designed Elizabeth's trauma, low self-confidence and Waif borderline personality, combined with Tony's controlling nature and the strict gender roles of the 1950's, to make her especially susceptible to patriarchal norms. Additionally, throughout *The Collection*, Elizabeth not only systematically self-silences, but she also exhibits what psychology calls "preemptive self-condemnation" in an attempt to forestall Tony's negative reaction if she expresses anything hinting of anger (Jack 142). In other words, she has developed the recognizable habit of criticizing or punishing herself for anger expression before Tony has the chance to react to it (Jack 142). It was important to me that Elizabeth appear always to tread carefully, fearful of upsetting her husband; like many Waif mothers, she "learned that submissive behavior was the most adaptive response to an oppressive environment" (Lawson 60). The problem this enabled me to set up is young Elizabeth's subsequent enforcement of this sexist gender role education on her children, passing her own limited worldview and possibilities on to Barbara.

Waifs are also highly romantic, seeking love and attention from their partners— as Elizabeth seeks to please Tony despite his continued rebuke and mistreatment of her (Lawson 60); the recognizable trope of an abused woman who stays with her husband not only makes more sense in this context, but I believe Elizabeth's BPD draws more attention to the complex reasons why she (or any woman) stays—a defense that I needed to make sympathetic if I was to give Barbara and Elizabeth an opportunity for reconciliation. Elizabeth's approval-seeking behavior also underscores the breadwinner-housewife gender role model of the 1950s, effectively illustrating to young Barbara (and David) that this was the ideal family model. Hypermasculine Tony, as I had written him, only grows more impatient with his needy wife, only treats Elizabeth with further disparagement. Again, assigning Waif BPD traits to Elizabeth lent believability to her response to Tony's apathy or rejection: "When Waifs find themselves abandoned or rejected, it often triggers "rage or depression" (Lawson 59). In *The Collection*, Elizabeth's on-going struggle with depression can be traced back not only to Tony's abandonment of her, but also to her minimal social interactions, suppressed anger, guilt over her miscarriage, and untreated post-partum depression. I used the familiar context of the 1950s to construct this claustrophobic life for Elizabeth in the novel, and found in my research that psychologists connect the relative isolation of mothers of young children with a greater likelihood to suffer from psychological issues (Miller et al 566; see also Droppelman and Wilt 215). Through her letters, we see Elizabeth vacillate between isolation and hyper-socialization, seeking to spend time at church, with friends, or even at the park with her children, but otherwise constrained by

her solitary role as a mother. This also fits the profile of a Waif, who may feel so undeserving that she self-isolates into her depression and withdrawal (Lawson 59).

The Waif's helplessness tends to trigger "caretaking behavior" (61)—in Elizabeth's case, I introduced her second husband, Jonah, as the white knight to rescue her and indulge her helplessness. However, this helplessness can have quite the opposite effect on the Waif's children, as they will find her inability to care for herself frustrating or even suffocating (61); Barbara exhibits this impatience with Elizabeth, while David becomes a secondary caretaker for her. Once again, Elizabeth's reliance on a man to 'save' and care for her is impressed upon her children, perpetuating the gender inequality inherent in the 'damsel in distress' narrative. Additionally, as in Elizabeth's case, the Waif's tendency to tolerate abuse can have significant repercussions on her children. Although I was not drawing on research at the time, I demonstrated the variations in Elizabeth's effect on her children by crafting David, like Jonah, to become over-protective of Elizabeth. While Barbara's story ends on a note of hope, David's mimicry of Tony's hoarding and exhibition of characteristics of the Hermit borderline personality type indicate an unhealthy long-term outcome (Lawson 62). I resigned David to this fate to reflect a darker social truth: childhood trauma is inescapable for many people. As Barbara resents her mother for not protecting David and herself from Tony as children; my decision to write Barbara as a teacher also inadvertently fit the model that some children of Waif mothers will go into "helping professions" (Lawson 63). I used Elizabeth's and Barbara's interactions in *The Collection* to show that while Elizabeth's BPD is clearly less damaging on Barbara as an adult, the long-term damage is rooted in Barbara's childhood anxious attachment style, including her

adult religiosity and avoidant attachment style. Within the context of Elizabeth as a Waif mother, even her attempts to share her story openly with Barbara throughout the novel, pass on keepsakes at its close, and resign herself to her death by cancer are damaging; Barbara allows herself to care again for her mother, despite years of distancing herself, and therefore leaves herself open once again to the negative affects of the Waif.

Despite the anxious attachment style¹⁷ Elizabeth unwittingly fosters in Barbara, her daughter continues to attempt to regain her affections, as some children of Waif Mothers do (Lawson xv, 69). Tony, both physically absent and emotionally volatile, does not arise as an immediate potential substitute in whom Barbara could find a secure attachment. Incidentally, when Tony does make the odd appearance at home, I used Elizabeth's letters to reveal that Barbara looks and asks for him after he leaves, implying that Barbara seeks attachment to Tony when he is present as an alternative to the unreliable Elizabeth (*The Collection* 21). I used Tony's absence and apathy toward his daughter ultimately to reinforce Barbara's attachment to her mother. Over time, Elizabeth's on-going struggle with mental health and depression, coupled with her focus on David, fosters Barbara's avoidant attachment style with her mother. I wrote the incident in which Barbara breaks her arm and is buried under the desks Tony purchased—an incident Barbara sees as manifest evidence of Elizabeth's continued inability to stand up to Tony and his obsessive compulsive hoarding—to provoke a crisis that would understandably sever Barbara's attachment to her father. Simultaneously, Barbara blames her mother for the accident and resents her for leaving Tony, further feeding her

¹⁷ Holmes; see also Kirkpatrick and Shaver.

avoidant attachment to Elizabeth. In order to set up Barbara's distrust of and distance from both parents, I did not offer another possible figure, resulting in her avoidant attachment and engagement styles with both parents. Although both of Barbara's biological parents are alive during her childhood, she undergoes a complex form of loss as a result of her physical separation from Tony and emotional distancing from Elizabeth. I later found that Bowlby draws an obvious connection between separation, or loss, and anger: "...if the mother is absent, or is herself liable to retaliate rather than to accept her child's anger, the growing child may be left harbouring phantasies of revenge and hatred which then becomes manifest in delinquent behavior" (J. Holmes 87). After Elizabeth's remarriage to Jonah when Barbara is an adolescent (outside of the novel's timeline), Barbara extends her anger, avoidant attachment and engagement style toward her stepfather, seeing him as an extension of her mother, rather than a potential attachment figure.

In a recognizable teenage rebellion, Barbara seeks out a new primary attachment outside of her family. As predicted by Bowlby, Barbara acts out as a result of her anger at both Tony and Elizabeth—and by extension, Jonah. Although the narrative does not explicitly detail her rebellion, the subtext supports the image of a Barbara who, after the physical and emotional trauma of breaking her arm as a ten-year-old, separates from Elizabeth and her vague reliance on religion to seek attachment and fulfillment from other people—men, in particular. In lieu of a bond with her mother or a surrogate attachment with religion, hints throughout the novel reveal that adolescent Barbara forms a romantic bond that results in her pregnancy with her son Nat. This, too, fits the pattern of a child of a Waif Mother. It is only in Barbara's mid-twenties, after she has married Rick and given birth to their daughter

Deirdre, that Barbara turns to the surrogate attachment of personal religion, vis-à-vis Kirkpatrick and Shaver.

While I did not write Barbara to follow exactly in Elizabeth's Waif BPD profile, partly as a result of her religious insulation and largely because it didn't support the story I wanted to tell, other fiction explores the dark possibilities that occur when a mother's mental illness is passed on to her daughter. In contrast to *The Blazing World* or *Olive Kitteridge*, Anne Whitney Pierce's novel *Rain Line* features a powerful example of a Waif mother in Lydia, the protagonist's—Leo's—mother. Although the overarching plot is about Leo's struggle to regain her footing after she survives a car accident in which her boyfriend Danny drowns, Leo moves back into her parents' house while she tries to find normalcy, placing her in constant contact with Lydia. Pierce exemplifies the relationship between Leo and her mother through their mutual refusal to call each other by the correct name. Throughout the novel, Lydia insists on calling Leo 'Claire,' while Leo addresses her mother as 'Lydia,' rather than 'mom.' Pierce makes it clear that Leo is primarily attached to her father as a result of her Waif mother; although Lydia was once a talented opera singer, she suffered a breakdown and withdrew from the world. Her lack of involvement with her daughter leads to Leo's resentment and anger toward Lydia: "This was the revenge I'd chosen, I suppose—denying her maternal address" (18). While Lydia hid herself away, a radio's chatter her constant companion, young Leo was left to fend for herself; she built a fantasy world around her, fed by her father's constant inventions. This is an important distinction in storyline, as Harry, Olive, and Barbara (as well as Rebecca) could not rely on their fathers. Leo's relationship with her father provides insight into what Barbara could have become

had I not included Tony's mental illness, as well as deeply rooted anger and patriarchal ideas. Despite Leo's fantasies, Pierce makes it clear that young Leo was aware of the precarious nature of her family:

I kept my family secrets from the world, about how I washed my underwear in the sink with bubble bath and drank black coffee with heaps of sugar, how I kept my father company in the nether hours making magic potions in the bathroom while other children slept, how I wandered the house in my mother's old opera costumes, looking for secrets and stones unturned...how my mother was a phantom of the opera and my father a wizard by night. I kept those secrets because I was afraid someone would find them out and take me away. It didn't matter how happy we were, or who was to blame. Either way, I'd be the one who'd have to go. (50)

Leo's fear of abandonment mirrors Lydia's—and Olive's, Harry's, and Elizabeth's—and as Leo descends into depression and clouded uncertainty following Danny's death, she becomes more like her Waif mother. When Leo discovers she is pregnant, she does not seek anyone's help while she decides whether to keep Danny's baby; even when Leo finds a supportive romantic partner in Kilroy, she struggles to accept that he wants to be with her, baby on the way and all. "The paradox of the Waif is that by accepting help she loses control. The Waif is a help-rejecting victim and helplessness is a defense against closeness and loss" (Lawson 58). The novel ends with Leo's acceptance: of her baby daughter, that Danny killed himself the night of the accident, of Kilroy's love, of her mother's effervescence, of her father's unfulfilled dreams, and that she can be for her daughter what Lydia could not be for

her. Rather than accept her slide into becoming another Waif-like Lydia, Pierce allows Leo to find the strength to change in her own daughter, thus ending the avoidant attachment and Waif BPD cycle.

The distinct contrast between Leo and Barbara lies in their fathers. Pierce portrays Leo's father as affectionate, caring, and present—although unrealistic and ungrounded. I depict Tony as volatile, inaccessible and ultimately unreliable as a result of the obsessive-compulsive hoarding that consumes him, likewise separating him from Harry's academic, aloof father and from Olive's deceased father. It is similarly important to note Leo's awareness that her family's home would be damning if seen by outsiders; readers can extrapolate from the subtext of Elizabeth's letters, the incident of the falling desks, and the contents of Tony's storage units that the Chase home was overflowing with his hoarded belongings and therefore socially unacceptable. Likely embarrassed by the state of her home as a result of Tony's hoarding, the child Barbara would have similarly avoided inviting people into the family's house (Grisham and Norberg 236).

While I characterized Barbara's relationship with Elizabeth in adulthood as contemptuous and resentful, rather than demonstrably angry, Barbara does seek independence and separation from Elizabeth, as well as attachment and affection from a man. Like Leo, Barbara makes the conscious choice to be different from Elizabeth—as I've implied Deirdre strives to be different from Barbara. As David accuses Barbara in *The Collection*, she married Rick at the first chance she had, moving across the country to North Carolina with him. I used the geographical distance Barbara inserts between herself and her parents to illustrate her anger and resentment at both, but also to indicate her attempts to protect herself—as well as

Nat, their grandson. Although I didn't detail it within the novel, Barbara predictably comes to find that Rick does not provide the secure attachment she is seeking, so she turns to religion in what would be typified as a "sudden religious conversion" (Granqvist and Hagekull 266-267).

6.2 RELIGION AS ATTACHMENT

And the Bible told me that even if nobody loved me on earth, there was God in heaven who loved me like I was the only one who had ever mattered.

—Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*

We went to church to socialize, to stay sane, no matter how much we lied to ourselves about being good Christians. We were stuck at home with babies and housework all day—it was the only time we saw other women. God didn't have much to do with us and we didn't much have time for Him.

—*The Collection*

While I included Elizabeth's regular church attendance in her letters, her religious experience is the type described by psychologists as "socialization-based," or the result of her own parents' religious beliefs (Granqvist and Hagekull 254-255). In *The Collection*, she also admits to Barbara that her primary purpose for church attendance was an attempt to socialize and mitigate her isolation as the mother of a young child(ren) (*The Collection*; Miller et al 566). Likewise, I included no evidence in *The Collection* to support an image of Tony as a religious man. As a child, Barbara would have associated religion and church with her mother. Barbara's tenuous childhood relationship with Elizabeth, degrading into avoidance, would likely have deterred her from accepting her mother's religion as an adolescent. To the contrary, rather than become nominally religious as a result of her mother's socialization, I chose to write adolescent Barbara as rebelling, seeking attachment and attention

outside the family or church. Multiple studies support a link between adults' perceptions of their parents and God—especially as related to their mothers, who would typically have been their childhood primary attachment (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 320). I also used Rick's apparent apathy toward religion—as evidenced through Barbara's thoughts in the novel—to support the image of Barbara as not yet religious when they married. At some point after her marriage to Rick, however, I envisioned Barbara as undergoing a sudden religious conversion in order to set up conflict with her husband and children, and to create tension through Barbara's religious morals and ideals. Incidentally, this type of conversion, along with the intense level of Barbara's commitment to her faith, is consistent with her avoidant attachments to her parents (Granqvist and Hagekull 254, 266-267). Similarly, the post-marital timing of her conversion could suggest that Rick did not pose an adequate primary adult attachment for Barbara, so she turned to religion to compensate (Granqvist and Hagekull 256-257; See also Kirkpatrick and Shaver 320); I also used Barbara's religious belief to convey her disappointment in Rick through her judgments of and frustrations with him, playing on the Biblical advisement that believers and nonbelievers should not be "unequally yoked" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Barbara's substitution of the Christian God as her attachment figure has deep ramifications for all of her human relationships and interactions—consequences that inspired some of the core aspects of the novel. In the few interactions Barbara shares with her husband Rick in *The Collection*, she treats and views him with frustration, distaste, condescension, disappointment, and even regret. Barbara is similar in this respect to Olive in *Olive Kitteridge*, although Olive is consistently

more aggressive in her anger, criticism, and occasional contempt for Henry; likewise, Strout reverses the spousal religiosity, as Henry is religious and Olive an atheist. I wrote Barbara's treatment of Rick to be distinctly passive, illustrating the socially-acceptable feminine expressions of anger: she rolls her eyes, slams cabinets, and thinks to herself privately of his shortcomings, but she rarely verbalizes them. Like Olive, Barbara is also not always annoyed with her husband: as the plot unfolds and Barbara finds herself in a deeper mess than she anticipated, she turns to Rick for support when her religious attachment is incapable of providing the tangible help she comes to need (*The Collection* 180-183); outside of theory, this also allowed me to explore the limited practicality of Barbara's reliance on religion. As an adult, another potential cause and result of her primary attachment to God is Barbara's avoidant engagement style with her daughter, mother, stepfather and brother. This is typified by Barbara's clear reluctance to communicate with her daughter each time Deirdre appears in the novel. Similarly, I envisioned Deirdre's avoidant engagement style with Barbara as the result both of Barbara's clear preference for Nat, Barbara's religiosity—which Deirdre does not share, and Barbara's Queen-like BPD traits. I intentionally emphasized the striking parallelisms between mother-daughter relationships in both generations—Elizabeth-Barbara and Barbara-Deirdre—through both mothers' preference for their sons. Unlike Barbara, however, I wanted Deirdre to have had a comfortable relationship with her father, a secure attachment, which is visible in her secure engagement style with Rick. Deirdre's secure attachment to Rick, coupled with what appears to be a secure adult romantic attachment to her boyfriend, also predicts Deirdre's lack of religiosity—a distinction I believe is important. Although Deirdre is

a minor character in the novel, like Jonas, Rick and Nat, I exploited Barbara's relationship with her daughter to give the reader insight into Barbara as a mother, as well as how Barbara's experiences and religious belief have influenced her relationships with her immediate family.

Beyond *The Collection*, *The Blazing World*, and *Olive Kitteridge*, author and literary critic Terry Castle writes of the potential negative impact of family and kinship bonds on a character's (or person's) life in her essay entitled "To the Friends Who Did Not Save My Life¹⁸." She defines the theme as "the ironic perversion of kinship," and it is applicable and relevant in contemporary fiction—which is exactly Castle's point: "The inexplicable transformation of once-cherished bonds of flesh and spirit into hatred, spite, brutality, even outright murderousness" is present both in eighteenth century and modern literature (Castle 112). Although the "perversion" can be reframed through psychology to be less inexplicable—as in the case of Barbara's refusal to maintain a relationship with Tony—the concept remains sound. In fact, Castle points specifically to the individualism of Western life today as the cause of the ongoing perversion: as people move farther away from their blood family, they substitute friends to provide the type of relationships family would once have offered. "With the fragmentation of age-old 'face-to-face' communities, increasing personal mobility, and the explosive growth of towns and cities—those dank, roiling concatenations of total strangers—traditional family networks are shaken, deformed, or broken up altogether...The human world becomes more sinister and more bewildering" (116). Like Barbara, moving across

¹⁸ Castle's tongue-in-cheek title of this essay is a reference to Hervé Guilbert's *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*.

the country from her parents and sibling, the modern insistence on individualism is "...a potential labyrinth of lost, isolated, 'friendless' souls" (Castle 117). While Intergenerational Family Systems Theory supports adult children's eventual individuation or "ability to function in intimate relationships without being controlled or accepting an inordinate amount of responsibility for others," Barbara's complete avoidance of her family of origin surpasses the healthy concept of individuation (Ng and Smith 432). In the novel, I show this through Barbara's marriage to Rick, which intentionally and effectively severs her familial ties when they move from California to North Carolina, but her adult attachment to her husband doesn't provide her with the support she needs from her new family. Instead of seeking "friends...to compensate for one's absent or hostile kinfolk" (Castle 119), I position Barbara to find an alternative in religion and the Christian God. I also wanted to demonstrate the irony that Barbara's children also move away from their parents and establish new lives, friendships and attachments—but unlike their mother, they do so with people, not a spiritual substitute or God figure. In the novel, Deirdre provides an example of healthy individuation, as she doesn't allow Barbara to intimidate or control her in their interactions. Although Barbara's disapproval of Deirdre, her boyfriend, and her lifestyle is clear, their interactions over the course of the plot of *The Collection* indicate that Deirdre has successfully established her autonomy, or "personal authority in the family system" (PAFS)¹⁹,

¹⁹ PAFS is a stage in the family developmental cycle defined by "renegotiation and the terminations of the hierarchical power boundary between the young adult and parents that had been previously maintained by intergenerational intimidation," as developed by Williamson in *The Intimacy Paradox* (Ng and Smith 432; See also Williamson 7).

and is therefore likely to suffer minimal future conflict with Barbara moving forward (Williamson 6-10; See also Ng and Smith 432).

I wrote Barbara's preoccupation with attending church services to be a symptom of her religiosity, like her judgment of others. When Elizabeth admits to Barbara that she and many of her peers in the late 1950s largely attended church for the socialization, Barbara is horrified. For Barbara, services are a time for reflection and communication with God, whom she considers to be her heavenly father (Granqvist et al "Religion" 51). Her reaction to Elizabeth's admission makes sense in the context of the Christian God as Barbara's substitute father attachment: insulting or demeaning a human father with whom she had an attachment would be bad, but the insinuation that God was not important to Elizabeth is close to heretical in Barbara's mind. Her defense of God contrasts sharply with her apathy toward Tony, indicative of her severed relationship with Tony, as well as the importance she places on her relationship with God as a substitute attachment.

7. CONCLUSION

Above all, the dream of taking control of one's life without the intrusion of a mother's patriarchal wishes for her daughter, without the danger of injuring the much loved and pitied mother.

—Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

Within fiction, women can write worlds in which they "speak as women from their own experience," as Heilbrun calls for us to do (*Reinventing* 99). These experiences include trauma, secrets, family legacies, and anger. I chose to write *The Collection* in a world recognizable as our own in order to explore uncomfortable social truths.

Women are still disallowed by society to express our anger, yet society simultaneously feeds our anger with its unequal treatment of our gender; *The Collection* offered an outlet for me as a woman author both to express my fictional women's anger and to explore the consequences of women characters' expression of anger. Through my novel, I explored the potential consequences on a woman who is the product of her parents who exist within a recognizable patriarchal society. Ultimately, I do not believe that my novel falls into the category of novels and women writers so criticized by Heilbrun for stopping at the anger and pain of their female subjects. Rather, *The Collection* moves beyond the suffering of the female characters to offer hope for growth and change.

I intended to write a novel about a religious woman shaped by her terrible childhood and parents, but *The Collection* ultimately outgrew my original goals. *The Collection* is a snapshot of a fictional, but complex, woman's life—and yet she stands up to psychological scrutiny. It was essential to me throughout the creative writing and research process that readers identify Barbara as recognizable, someone who could exist, perhaps even similar to a real-life acquaintance. I committed to

Barbara's character early in the drafting process and frequently found the socio-psychological theories I encountered in my research to be validation of the character I had written. The relationship between my novel and my research is tangled, each informing the other and developing in context of each other. Perhaps the greatest challenge I faced during my research was my own greed for knowledge; each theory, book or article I encountered offered multiple other tantalizing resources and I struggled not to get lost in the exponential possibilities available. There are dozens of other socio-psychological theories I could have chosen to structure my discussion of *The Collection*, and a swath of feminist theorists and writers against whose ideas I could have compared it. For example, I could have solely explored Elizabeth's involuntary sterilization as a literal and symbolic representation of the dominance exerted over her by Tony and the patriarchal structures of their society. Likewise, I could have focused *The Collection* on Elizabeth's story, her sterilization also representative of society's silencing and censoring of women who don't fit. Ultimately, the limited breadth of the discussion in this critical work motivates me to pursue further the ideas, theories, and critiques I've introduced and used herein.

In the end, I chose to use Barbara's faith to arm her with the necessary resilience to endure her father's awful legacy, her mother's tragic truths, and her brother's unresolved abandonment and rage issues. Her experience throughout the novel is pain, much as Heilbrun describes in both *Reinventing Womanhood* and *Writing a Woman's Life*, but she is able to move through the pain to find life—possibly even absolution—on the other side. Her family of origin may feel odd or abnormal, yet both Attachment Theory and theories of Intergenerational

Development point not to one ideal 'normal' family as the source of well-adjusted, mentally healthy adults, but rather to an array of possible points of origin and paths to fulfilling adult lives. Perhaps Barbara's most relatable trait—for women readers—is her unexpressed anger, stemming from an unfair childhood fraught with emotional and physical trauma, and the self-silencing example set by her mother. Women of older generations might identify more closely with Elizabeth, recognizing the feelings of entrapment, duty, and resignation that permeate her life.

I see a complex relationship between the causes and outcomes of women's anger, less cyclical and more like a snowball rolling downhill, collecting ever more snow as it gains speed. The childhood and events that molded Barbara into the woman she is when we encounter her in the novel are not only plausible, they are mimetic and psychologically defensible. The environment I created by combining Elizabeth's BPD and depression with Tony's absence and hoarding would cause extraordinary strain on young children and negatively affect their attachments to their parents. But I did not attempt to draw clear causal relationships; in fact, I intentionally wrote *The Collection* to question which of Barbara's parents truly caused her the most harm. In the decades since Bowlby first proposed Attachment Theory, studies have shown repeatedly that a childhood attachment type other than secure opens adults to a wide array of potential interpersonal conflicts as adults. This is borne out in Barbara's suppressed anger and depression, as well as her zealous religiosity. Similarly, David's burgeoning hoarding, isolation, and latent anger do not bode well for his chances of forming a new adult attachment in a romantic relationship. There is no clear resolution for Barbara, nor did I wish to

close *The Collection* with one, instead creating the space outside of the novel for the reader to imagine her fate.

Women's anger is a little studied, but growing, area across psychology, medicine and literature. In future research and writing, I hope to integrate these fields in order to better understand why we, as women, are who we are. Not only are our adult interpersonal and familial relationships rooted in the complex relationship between our childhood attachments, our mothers' ideals and beliefs, and other factors such as mental illness, but research suggests our physical health may be as well. In fiction, Harry Burden ceased to be able to eat as a result of her grief following her husband's death; Olive Kitteridge ate too much to subdue her anger, depression, and feelings of unworthiness; Rebecca Brown's self-silenced anger simmered below the surface, appearing as digestive problems and heartburn; Elizabeth not only suffered from severe depression and BPD, but her suppressed anger and isolation also compounded to manifest as migraines, anorexia, fatigue, apathy, and possibly suicidal tendencies; Barbara, despite the protection afforded her by her religious faith, suffered from migraines. Parents pass on far more than genetic traits and ailments to their children.

Understanding women's anger is not the end—it is the starting point. Tracing the causes, starting with childhood, of women's anger is also not a solution; rather, it highlights the problem. Women must not only know why we are angry, but we must also be permitted to express our anger and learn how to express it in healthy ways. It also cannot be ignored that men and boys are faced with a similar problem on the opposite end of the emotional spectrum: they have been taught that it is not manly or masculine to express emotions stereotypically associated with

women. The conclusion here is not only that literature provides an agile toolset with which to examine and rebuke the socially-enforced gender norms that damage everyone, but also that they are an essential medium within which to reject the old, binary norms and propose a new holistic spectrum. *The Collection* explores the cause and results of a family's enforcement of gender roles, offering a possible next novel as one in which gender roles are reimagined or completely undefined.

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