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April 9, 2013

Next Stop, Heartland

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Abstract

### Next Stop, Heartland

By Jessica Jaksich

*Next Stop, Heartland* is an original work of fiction. It is inspired by the true story of my paternal grandparents, as recalled by their siblings, children and friends. Told in a non-chronological series of fragmented flashbacks, this novella follows a young woman's journey from overprotected, pampered wife, to widowed mother of five. This is a portrait of blinding love, premature loss and resilience in the face of improbable circumstance.

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my adviser, Jim Grimsley, for supporting me every step of the way and always believing in me as a writer.

Thank you to my committee, Lynna Williams and Dr. Marshall Duke, for your generosity, time and attention.

Thank you to the Jaksich/Reiff family for inspiring me with your story, and allowing me to share in your memories.

Thank you to the Emory Creative Writing Department for helping me to become the best writer I can be.

Thank you to my family, friends, professors and classmates for a wonderful college experience.

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Omaha, Nebraska 1965

Only Jonny would step from his hospital wheelchair into the driver's seat of the car. Dee didn't bother to fight her husband on it; she preferred to save the ten minutes of bickering and get home as quickly as possible. She wished she had agreed to let the nurse accompany them to the car, since maybe then the hospital staff would understand what she had to deal with.

She almost forgot to smile at the much-welcomed autumn breeze running through her hair, the natural light that painted shadows across their faces. Dee took a few huge gasps of fresh air and looked around the large expanse of parking lot before getting in the car. Even with the windows rolled down, the car felt cramped. The stuffy, tense atmosphere of their hospital room reappeared almost instantly.

As they drove, Jonny sang along softly to the Byrds playing on the radio, smiling out at the interstate like it was any old carefree Sunday afternoon. Dee watched him as he mouthed the words, imagining they were on-screen at the drive-in. Except in the movies, there wouldn't be a hospital bracelet around his wrist, and he wouldn't be drowning in a button-down and khakis that now looked two sizes too big.

She guessed he had lost around thirty pounds in the last few months. The beer belly had completely vanished, and his scrawny figure definitely didn't resemble the hearty eater she used to know. Jonny loved food, and he loved beer even more. Of course he would be the one to end up with stomach cancer.

Dee began to form a mental checklist, detailing the grocery items she would need to keep Jonny nourished during his first few days at home. *Broth, Jell-O, ginger ale.* She knew the liquid diet would be a struggle, especially since she would still cook family



dinner for the kids each night. She pictured Jonny with a pout on his face, whining over the mac and cheese that his children got to eat.

“Can’t wait to see the kids,” said Jonny, as if he’d read her mind. They had agreed not to bring their children to the hospital to visit. At the ages of five, four, three and two, her babies thought that Daddy was just away at work for a few days.

“He’ll be home soon,” she had said, countless times each day.

Now, Dee worried that they might be too rough with him, hanging from his legs and jumping on his lap, completely blind to the four-inch incision across his stomach.

“It sure feels good to be back.” Jonny reached his right hand out to stroke Dee’s knee. They were turning left onto 77<sup>th</sup> Avenue, now just a block away from the ranch they’d lived in for the past six years. The streets in their neighborhood were lined with trees, leaves just starting to yellow. Dee sighed at the thought that summer had come and gone without her noticing.

She could feel her husband’s excitement as his fingers jittered on her leg. She struggled to share the same optimism. With Jonny, the glass was always half full, even in rough times like this when it seemed to her that the glass was altogether empty.

“Where is everyone?” he asked as they pulled into the driveway. The lights were out and the house, which was usually bustling with children and family, felt still.

“They must still be at your parents.”

Jonny hopped out of the car and hustled around to the passenger seat. Dee could tell he was in pain from the way that he waddled, but the giant grin across his face suggested otherwise. After helping Dee out of the car, he stopped at the side mirror and began to polish it off with his shirt. She waited silently, watching him tend to his first

baby. He'd picked her up for their second date in the same sky blue Pontiac 59, and she knew from the start that she would have to compete with this car for Jonny's love. The Pontiac was his pride and joy, purchased with the money from his first real job.

"Definitely got to polish the car in the next few days. Make her look real pretty again," said Jonny, chuckling.

Dee held her breath and locked her lips to keep from speaking. She wanted at least one night of peace before the fighting started up again. She looked around the yard at the tricycles lying on their sides, the hose stretched out across the grass, the tire swing hanging from the oak tree. All the remnants of a happy family. Their furnished front porch, a project from a few summers back, was supposed to feel homey and inviting. Now it just made Dee sad.

As Jonny walked toward their front door, he reached his arm all the way up into the gutter. At six foot four, he rarely needed a ladder for housework. Dee watched him struggle to find his balance on his tiptoes, nearly scraping his arm on the yellow brick exterior of their home. She couldn't help but put her hand out to stabilize him. Lately, she felt like she was looking out for her dad, instead of her thirty-five-year-old husband.

"Honey, I told you, I'm fine. You heard what the doctors said."

Dee smiled and nodded her head "yes" in silence, while, somewhere deep inside her mind, another voice was yelling, "No no no no no."

Omaha, Nebraska 1958

They met on the train to Chicago in the summer of '58. Marlene, a girl friend Dee had made from work at the telephone company, had invited her to a White Sox game in Chicago. Dee had never been to the city, and jumped at the chance to go with Marlene and her friends.

The ride from Omaha to Chicago was over ten hours, leaving the station at half past seven in the morning. The girls ran onto the last car at 7:29, out of breath, sweating through their summer dresses. Dee, who was always prompt, nearly had an anxiety attack when Marlene still hadn't found their Sox tickets at a quarter past seven. After tearing apart her bedroom and living room, Marlene retrieved the tickets from an outer pocket of her luggage. True Marlene fashion.

They entered the packed train car just in time, and all found seats several rows apart from one another. Dee took a seat next to an older woman who had already nodded off, and Dee figured she best do the same. She had stayed up late the night before trying to fit four changes of clothes into her new leather weekend bag, even though she would only be away for two nights.

Dee stood up to smooth her light blue cotton dress under her legs, trying to avoid wrinkles if at all possible. The seats were upholstered in a burnt orange fabric that kind of scratched at the back of her knees, and Dee worried that her short curls would fall and frizz if she leaned back on the headrest. Instead, she placed an elbow on the armrest and dozed off with her cheek resting on her hand.

Suddenly, there was a soft tapping on her shoulder, and Dee awoke to see her neighbor struggling to move past her into the aisle. “I didn’t want to wake you, but it’s lunch time, dear,” said the woman.

When Dee finally made her way to the dining car, she saw her three friends already seated and enjoying their garden salads. Dee had struggled to picture herself dining on a moving train, but now watching her friends, it seemed to make perfect sense. The dining room was quite elegant in fact. White tablecloths under white cloth napkins and glass vases full of tulips. Dee resolved that this was definitely worth the twenty-seven dollar fare that she had originally protested.

It wasn’t until the main course that Dee caught a glimpse of the young man seated one table over. He poured ketchup on his chicken entrée and Dee couldn’t help but stick out her tongue in disgust. He looked up just then and smiled at her, and Dee quickly turned her head away, twirling her fork around her mashed potatoes in an effort to appear preoccupied.

For the remainder of the meal, Dee and the mysterious gentleman engaged in a sort of game – dodging looks and half-smiles from across the table. Marlene took notice and looked her friend up and down inquisitively, but Dee just shrugged her shoulders and played ignorant.

As the plates were stacked and drinks were cleared, the man stood to approach Dee at her table. “I’m Jonny,” he said, extending a very large hand toward Dee.

“Delores,” she said.

“Well, Delores, it’s a pleasure to meet you. There’s a free seat next to me in car four, if you’re interested.”

He was tall and handsome, clean-shaven, with a great big smile, but Dee wasn't one to flirt with strangers. She looked to Marlene who raised her eyebrows, urging Dee to join him. At age twenty-six, Dee was one of only a handful of her friends who wasn't married or engaged, and had recently decided to take whatever advice she could get on the dating scene. She surveyed him up and down. His slacks and button-down looked clean and pressed. *Oh, fine.*

Dee followed behind him at a distance. "Here we are," he said, gesturing to a pair of seats right next to a great big window. "Window or aisle?"

Dee almost opted for the window, quite excited about the view of the country, but chose the aisle instead, in case she needed a quick getaway. She took her seat, pulling out her copy of *Around the World with Auntie Mame* as they exchanged introductions. She never did start that book. They talked the rest of the way to Chicago. He was the oldest of three boys and he worked in construction and plant management for a beef packing plant in Omaha. He was a good Catholic boy. "Just the kind your parents will love," he had joked. Dee found the remark a bit presumptuous, but forced a smile anyways. Jonny had been to Chicago once before to visit family, but this was his first White Sox game. He was meeting a cousin in the city before the game.

After hours of conversation, she didn't know much more about him than those few details, but he had her whole life story down pat. He definitely wasn't shy, very chatty in fact, but he insisted on talking about her. Dee really didn't mind. Growing up in a house with eleven children, she rarely experienced this type of attention. Being in the spotlight made her stomach drop, but in the best way.

When Jonny got up to use the restroom, Dee rummaged through her bag for lipstick and a hand mirror. She worried that hours on the train had drained all the color from her face. She chose a pale rose color instead of the deeper red. How embarrassing if he noticed that she had applied makeup for him.

When they finally got to talking about Jonny, he pulled a faded, worn out baseball mitt from his bag and told her to try it on. The leather was smooth on her hand, and she was surprised to find that the glove fit well. She looked down at Jonny's huge hands, confused.

"It's from my Little League days. I used to be real good at ball." He laughed, taking the mitt back from Dee, and forcing his hand inside. "This'll have to do if I want to catch a fly ball."

"I bet it depends on where you're sitting, too," added Dee.

Jonny pulled his ticket out from his wallet and flashed it at her. "Should be right near third base," he said, "perfect foul ball territory." Dee nodded in agreement, although she really knew nothing about baseball. "So, where's your ticket, Delores?"

She rummaged in her purse and quickly found the envelope that Marlene had given her earlier that morning. After the scare, Dee had insisted on holding on to the envelope. She pulled out the ticket, but Jonny snatched it from her hands before she could read a word.

"Hey! Give me that!" she shouted playfully.

"What?" he urged. "I'm not allowed to know where you're sitting tomorrow? I know where you're sitting today!"

She forced a laugh at his ridiculous joke and took the ticket back from him, reciting her seat number out loud. She paid careful attention as she placed the ticket back inside the envelope, and the envelope into an inner pocket of her purse.

“You better not lose that,” he said. “I’m counting on you being there.”

Later on, as the train approached the city, Dee leaned in close to Jonny to look out the window at the skyline in the distance. She felt like a little girl on Christmas morning, giddy and excited by the view. The tall buildings and bright lights resembled the postcard her parents brought her years before, and she could hardly believe she was experiencing the real thing.

Jonny watched her as she took it all in, and softly wrapped his arm around Dee’s shoulder. She was a little nervous – he was a stranger after all – but she didn’t stop him. They were both in short sleeves, and her skin tingled as his arm touched hers. She only hoped that he didn’t notice.

He held her hand as she stepped off the train, and Dee’s eyes widened in amazement at the grandiosity of the station. She’d never seen an indoor train track. And the high arches and ornate columns seemed fitting for the White House or the capitol building. It was simply amazing.

He kissed her lightly on the cheek saying, “It’s been a pleasure, Delores.” She nodded in agreement, before waving goodbye as she walked toward her friends, anxiously waiting a ways down on the platform.

Dee turned back to look at the train, and couldn’t help thinking of childhood nights with her family, sitting around the candles after dinner, praying to someone again and again who she never quite believed was listening. She felt so strongly now that he

was there. Perched over row eight of car four, as she and Jonny rode from Omaha to Chicago that July day in '58.

Dee struggled over what to wear to Comiskey Park the next day. She had planned to sport a black blouse and white pants to show her spirit, even though she knew very little about the team. Now, she felt kind of boyish in her pants outfit, and worried about sweating in the summer heat. She contemplated wearing the green dress she had packed for dinner that night, but knew she'd stand out from the group. Her friends would know why she dressed up, as would he, if they ever found each other. Dee wanted to look casual and effortless, so she stuck to her original outfit, dressed just like her friends.

As soon as they took their seats, Marlene pulled Dee close to her and whispered, "When do you think we'll see him?"

"See who?" whispered Dee.

"Mr. Jonny! Of course," insisted Marlene, squinting her eyes at Dee with judgment.

"Oh, right," she replied. "It's a huge park, I doubt he'll spot me." Dee turned her head toward the field, seemingly engrossed in the game, only to remember that the players hadn't even come out yet.

She shifted back and forth on the hard white seat. She was surprised to see a detailed White Sox Logo built into each chair below the armrest, and wondered why they couldn't have put the effort and money into cushions instead. The field was greener than any grass she'd ever seen back in Omaha, and the sandy mounds were perfectly smoothed like the beach right after a tide comes through. Dee found the manicured field



to be quite beautiful, and let the sun warm her cheeks as she enjoyed her surroundings. She could get used to this type of sporting event. Dee even ordered a hot dog for the first time in years. It tasted like summer and childhood and hot nights at the County Fair.

Right after the third inning, Marlene jumped up to stretch her legs and nearly spilled Pepsi on Dee's new white pants. Dee was just beginning to reprimand her clumsy friend when she caught a glimpse of a tall, lean figure out of the corner of her eye. She turned instantly, and there he was – black White Sox cap, black pants, a light blue button-down, and a white sock hanging out of his front pocket.

“Get it?” he said. “White Sox!” Marlene giggled overenthusiastically while Dee smiled, and the other girls looked on. She had sensed from their train ride that he was the goofy type, and she didn't mind. Suddenly remembering herself, Dee stood up and walked toward him on the stairs. He took her hand in both of his, and Dee hoped her palm wasn't clammy.

As he placed his cap on Dee's head, Marlene signaled to the other girls to scoot down, making room for the new couple to sit together. Luckily, the seats to their right had been empty the whole game, and Dee wasn't forced to sit on Jonny's lap. She had panicked at the thought.

Throughout the game, Dee watched as her married friends transformed back into flirty schoolgirls in Jonny's presence. They hung on his every word, but he didn't seem to mind speaking to a crowd.

To Jonny's disappointment, they didn't even come close to catching a fly ball, but he did land himself a dinner date. “Well, I went one for two,” he told Dee later that day.

After a lot of persuading from Jonny, and serious encouragement from her friends, Dee agreed to join him for dinner. He would take her to Greektown. Jonny explained that he had heard all about the flaming cheese and rowdy waiters, and he thought this was sure to impress a small town guy and girl.

The problem came along when Jonny stated that he wouldn't let her change clothes before dinner.

“But Jonny, we'll look like a bunch of town kids. I can't go to our first date in my clothes from the ball game. Especially in this fancy city.”

“Well, sure you can, darling. You're already the prettiest girl I've seen in Chicago...don't want to make the others feel bad.” Her friends oohed at the comment, and she blushed at how foolish they sounded. Dee couldn't help but smile at him, admitting he had won, but she wasn't pleased. She would go to dinner with him in pants and his cap, and she would feel butterflies the whole time.

Boy, was Dee wrong. At the restaurant, amongst all the city men and ladies, the colored lights and lavish wallpaper, Jonny would not be mistaken for a country boy with the short end of the stick, even with that foolish sock in his pocket. He was tall and loud and charming. His big laugh and goofy charisma were hardly unnoticed when they entered the room. But as big as Jonny was, with him, Dee was grander.

He asked her question after question with an invested interest, he held her hand whenever possible, he even bought her two entrees when she couldn't make up her mind. Dee was mildly horrified when the waiter placed two giant platters of braised lamb and pork chops in front of her; she must have looked like a pig. She decided that if and when

she went out on another date with Jonny, she would let him know that this behavior was simply unacceptable, he was never to order her two meals again. Luckily, the lighting was dim and their corner booth was secluded, so she didn't draw too many confused stares.

Every so often Dee would look around the room at the other women, their fancy dresses and oversized hair, but Jonny never seemed to notice the others. He had Dee.

Soon, she, too, paid them no attention. With him, she was queen.

The next time she saw him was the following weekend. Dee had to eat dinner with people from work, but Jonny picked her up at eight to go to the drive-in. He bought popcorn and a strawberry ice cream cone before the movie started, and Dee didn't dare tell him she was stuffed from dinner.

Jonny pulled a quilt from his trunk – a blue and white afghan that she guessed his grandma had knitted – and spread it over the hood of his car. He helped Dee onto the quilt, almost picking her up off the ground. She felt rather unladylike climbing up in her dress.

When he grasped her hand and stroked her hair, it was like being a little girl again, hopelessly devoted to the boy across the street. When he slipped off his leather jacket to wrap it around her shoulders, she could barely pay attention to the story unfolding on-screen in front of them.

As the credits began to roll, Dee looked to Jonny, expecting him to help them both off of the car, but he didn't move. He held still, with his arm around her, and watched intently as the white names filled the dark sky. All around them, ignitions

sounded, headlights lit up the field, and now Dee could see Jonny quite clearly. He looked to her smiling, like he knew something she didn't.

“You wanna dance?” he asked.

“What? Now?” She was shocked by the suggestion.

“Why not? We have music. We have a guy and a lady.” He gestured to himself and then to her.

“But it's late. Everyone's leaving. We should get going, Jonny.”

He pulled her off the car before she could protest further. He lifted her hands to his neck, and gently placed his hands around her waist. Dee could sense he was nervous for the first time, as he adjusted his hands and looked down at his feet. The dry, yellowed grass crunched under her sandals, but still, she felt small and dainty in his arms.

The movie's soundtrack played on, drowning out the grasshoppers clicking in the distance. It wasn't what she would have chosen for their first dance, but it was enjoyable and soothing. As they danced, the cars filed out one by one. She knew they were being watched, but only out of jealousy. The field dimmed and the noise faded out, until all they were left with was the music, the wind, and the sound of their hearts beating against each other. Soon, the world around them ceased to exist, and on and on they danced.

Dee clung to him, leaned her cheek against his shoulder. She could feel his warm breath move her hair just barely. She knew it must be late, but she didn't dare let go. Even when the credits finished, the music remained. They held each other in silence, both praying to stop the clocks, both thinking they couldn't go home. *If we just keep dancing, the music will keep playing.*

He kissed her at the front door after that date. It was late and the front light was off. She hoped her roommate had gone to bed. Dee hadn't kissed anyone since Marlene convinced her to go out with their boss's nephew last year. Marlene had said, "Even if you don't like him, he may have some cute friends." Wrong, he was a dweeb and his friends were dweebs too. Oh gosh, why had she let him kiss her?

Standing at her front stoop now with Jonny, she hoped she hadn't fallen out of practice. But when his hands held her face and his lips touched hers, every worry fell away. Her mind went blank, and all she could do was feel, feel him holding her, feel her heart racing, her skin tingling.

Omaha, Nebraska 1965

Dee sat on the side of their king bed staring into the lap of her denim skirt. Suddenly she was jolted by Jonny's hand on her shoulders. He shook her as if she had fallen into a sound sleep, when really they both knew she was wide *wide* awake.

"Delores, you're not listening to me. Come on, listen to me."

"I am listening to you, Jonny! I listened to every word of that ridiculous plan. I heard you loud and clear, believe me!" She finally raised her head to look at him, staring him straight in the eyes. "Are you serious? You want to move to Montana, now? Gosh, three weeks ago we were at the hospital!" She stood to confront him, but he had almost a foot on her, and she still had to look up to meet his eyes. "It's cancer, Jonny. Not the flu, not a cold, cancer. You can't just ignore this." She reached for his flannel shirt and lifted it up to reveal the swollen scar across his stomach.

He swatted her hand away. "What are you doing, Dee? It looks the same as it did earlier today."

"Oh, so you do remember it? Because, to tell you the truth, I was thinking you'd lost your mind entirely."

She had to admit she wasn't listening when the conversation began. Honestly, when he first mentioned the job offer in Montana, she thought he was kidding. Joking Jonny, at it again. She forced a few chuckles from her lips to appease him, only to realize the joke was on her. He was actually suggesting that they pick up their life and their family to start over new in Billings, Montana. He was still recovering from surgery, and the memory of the original cancer diagnosis was almost as fresh as the incision wound across his abdomen.

Now Jonny was the one seated on the bed, watching his wife pace back and forth across what used to be off-white carpeting. The house was worn-in, lived-in, and Dee liked it that way. They'd built their family in the yellow brick ranch. Painted the walls peach and light blue together right after their wedding, built the back bedroom after the birth of baby number three.

“Jonny, we don't even know if you're healthy yet.”

She watched the color fade from his face. The light disappeared from his blue eyes like a candle blown out by the wind. He was crushed, and she had done this to him.

“But I'm doing great now. You know the doctors weren't expecting such a quick recovery after the surgery. I beat this, Dee. We beat this.”

She felt a pit in her stomach. Images of the five by five hospital room flooded her mind, wiping the sweat from his forehead as he heaved and shivered. The doctor had actually said that the cancer had a thirty percent return rate, but Jonny had taken this to mean that the odds were in his favor; at least that was what he told his family. She didn't dare remind him of that last meeting with the doctor. Instead his long-winded, big-worded predictions hung like a dark cloud over their bedroom. A foreboding storm neither chose to openly acknowledge.

“You have no idea what this would mean for our family. They've asked me to manage my own plant. Do you hear me, Dee? My *own* plant! Can't you see how huge this is?”

“Of course I can.”

He jumped up from the bed, ruffling the green floral bedspread and clearly overestimating the optimism in her response. “I figure I should probably go down first, to

get everything set up, get things going at the plant. Build my staff. And of course, I'll have to find a house, and fix it up real nice for us. I've already asked around about the best neighborhoods and the schools. It'll be so great for us."

He had planned everything out, from the few plastic dishes he would bring with him on the first trip, to the number of stamps they would need in order to write each other each day they spent apart. Dee thought back to their first date in Chicago, and how it had turned into a date weekend at Jonny's request. When Jonny had a plan, there was no stopping him. This she knew for sure.

"But our life and our kids, everything's just fine here. Things are just getting back to normal," she urged.

"Who wants normal? We could live so much better than this. I want to give you better than this, and I can, with this new job. This opportunity, Dee, this stuff doesn't come around everyday. Not for kids like me."

She could already hear her parents' panicked voices in her head. "*Are you crazy, Delores?*" She thought she must be crazy. He made her crazy.

The conversation didn't end that night. They'd both lost the will to argue; they agreed to sleep on it. She searched her mind for answers as she undressed and brushed her teeth, but her thoughts remained jumbled and cloudy.

When he wrapped his arms around her as they got under the blankets, and pulled her onto him in one smooth motion, she stared into his eyes, begging for some explanation, some recognition of what he was really asking of her. All she found was desperate hope, a look she remembered. An image of that night at the drive-in when they'd first met flashed in her mind – the night they wouldn't stop dancing – the refusal



to let go. She found her answer; it was written all over his pleading gaze. *“If we keep living, I won’t die.”*

She made her decision days before she ever admitted it to him. She would let him go, and in the coming months, she would cringe at the thought that he left her alone for so many weeks in the last year of his life.

Fonda, Iowa 1968

Dee slouched into the kitchen chair with a sigh, bringing the steaming mug of coffee slowly to her lips. She blew softly into her cup, amazed at the sound. The house was quiet, the kids finally asleep. Across the table, Mary and Alice, her neighbors on either side, stirred cream into their coffee, each smiling at the sound of silence. Dee shook her head at these friends who still refused to take their coffee black. Amateurs.

She lit a cigarette and did her best to push the rhyming lines of *the Grinch* out of her mind. Christmas was months away, yet the kids insisted on reading Dr. Suess every night before bed. Sometimes Alice would take over reading duty, but tonight Dee read with Jimmy, Lori and Teresa. Jonny Joe was almost nine and liked to read by himself in his room, which had formerly been the front porch. Alice was on diaper duty with baby number five, Michael, who had just reached eighteen months.

This third house was the smallest by far. A sort of bare bones arrangement compared to the palace in Montana – one bathroom for Dee and the five kids, a porch converted to a bedroom, and a pullout bed in the living room. The furniture was minimalist, the walls white, but her parents were half a block away, and she loved the nights spent with the neighborhood women.

“You want me to help you clean the floors tomorrow, Dee?” asked Mary, looking around the kitchen. Dee slid her house slipper along the floor and winced. It was sticky all right.

“What I want is for you to deal,” said Dee, shoving a deck of cards across the table to her friend. Mary shook her head in amazement and began to shuffle. Dee was never too tired for another round of cards.

Suddenly there was a cry in the distance. Dee rose from the table without a word and walked out of the kitchen toward the back bedroom, where Michael slept in a crib alongside Jim's twin bed. Over the sound of the nearing shrieks, she could just make out Alice and Mary's whispers.

"She looks worn out," said Alice.

They were still worried about her. Dee knew that. After all, the girls started coming over every night once Dee told Mary, in a moment of weakness, that it might just be easier to drive off a bridge with the kids. She never planned to act on it, but she thought it, and for Mary, that was enough.

In fact, Dee hadn't spent much time with Alice until this past year, when Mary started sending her across the street in her absence. Dee felt like she was being watched and studied constantly, but at the same time, she really needed the help, and the company.

A funny thing had happened though. After just a few weeks, Dee realized that she wasn't the only one who needed these late night coffee hours, midday bridge tournaments, and story time with her kids. Alice's husband was away working most nights, she had no children of her own, and she was lonely. As a schoolteacher, she longed to come home to a house full of kids. Mary was the opposite – she needed to get out of her house, a break from her husband and family. He was always home and always high, and she needed an escape. She waited all day to leave her house for the few hours spent at Dee's each night.

So just like that, they'd formed a sort of sisterhood. Still, she didn't feel the need to tell them everything. They all had their secrets, she was sure.

When Dee returned to the kitchen after rocking Michael back to sleep, Alice and Mary were just how she'd left them.

"So, about those floors..." said Mary.

"And we should probably scrub down the stovetops and inside of the refrigerator," added Alice.

Dee shook her head and chuckled. Her face lit up for a second and she had a distant look in her eyes.

"You know, I was his--"

"Queen," Alice and Mary interjected together. Dee hadn't realized how much she talked about him. In fact, earlier that day, she had stood before their wedding picture on the fireplace mantel for several minutes, feeling guilty and sorry for not remembering him enough.

Dee shook her head as if to clear her mind, lifting her hand of cards from the table and fanning them out to examine her luck. "Eight hearts," she said, without looking up.

"Whew-ee," said Alice. "I'd expect nothing less from Dee the daredevil."

"Pass," said Mary.

"Me too," sighed Alice, sliding the blind in Dee's direction.

"So," said Mary, as Dee built her hand, "You got any new reading suggestions for me, Dee?" The girls played 500 so much that they could keep a constant flow of conversation going without losing a point. Bridge required a bit more concentration, but that was their daytime game with some of the other church gals.

"*Eva Trout*," replied Dee. She had taken a job at the public library a few months back and always impressed her friends by rattling off the newest titles.

Alice laid a club down on the table with a sigh.

“Really, you’re all out of trump, Alice?” asked Dee. “You better not make me go set, Mary.” Mary smiled a guilty grin.

“You know I heard in church last week that Marcie Kopp was seeing someone new,” said Alice. “She must be dating someone else each week.”

“I still can’t understand why she got rid of that perfect husband of hers. What a mistake!” said Mary. Both women turned to face Dee, but she had her eyes on her cards.

“Oh, well we don’t have to talk about that,” said Alice, swatting her hand. They were so careful around her. “Dee, did you hear Jonny Joe qualified for the school spelling bee? He’s the representative from the third grade class.”

“Well, that’s just nifty!” exclaimed Mary, a little too over-enthusiastically.

“I can tell already he’s a smart one,” replied Dee as she swept a trick’s worth of cards from the table.

“Mmmhmm,” said Mary, examining her hand. “Oh, and we can’t forget to tell the church girls that we’re switching the date for the pre-Easter carnival.”

“When will it--” Alice stopped mid-question as she let the last card in her hand fall to the table.

“Making ten!” screamed Dee, shooting both fists into the air.

“You’re no fun to play with,” said Mary. “No one else ever gets a chance to win.”

Dee examined the score sheet. “Eight hearts, making ten, that’s plus 300 plus 50 for me, coming to a total of...” Dee looked up at her friends with a huge grin.

“Oh, come on!” whined Alice. “You did not just break a thousand!”

“I won!” sang Dee, rising from her chair. She skipped toward the radio, cranking the volume knob as “Mrs. Robinson” blared through the small kitchen.

“Get up, get up, Alice!”

“What are you crazy, Dee? What do I have to get up for?” Dee was already up out of her seat waltzing around the kitchen, motioning to her friend to join her. As Alice stood, Mary started to sing and before long, both Alice and Dee had joined in. Dee led Alice around and around the kitchen to the tune of their voices over the radio.

*Here’s to you Mrs. Robinson.*

Dee released Alice from her embrace and gallivanted over toward Mary who was still at the table. Dee pulled Mary out of her seat, and they all joined hands, twirling to the music.

*God bless you please, Mrs. Robinson.*

They had to move the small wooden table and chairs toward the living room, otherwise they risked knocking into the stove or sink. Dee had learned to make do with the cramped kitchen when she was cooking, but dancing was another story.

Dee grabbed a whisk from the drawer by the stove. Mary got a wooden spoon and Alice had to settle for a spatula. In any other setting, Dee might not have admitted to knowing every word, but in the privacy of her own kitchen, she sang loud and out of tune. Mary and Alice giggled as Dee tried to hit the big notes, and before long, Dee was hysterically laughing, too.

Anyone walking the streets of Fonda that night would have seen the window in Dee’s kitchen lit up ‘til the late hours, as three girls danced together like they’d never had to grow up.

Omaha, Nebraska 1966

It had been almost two months now since he left – the family still hadn't adjusted. His daily letters detailing the progress made on the Montana house and at the plant didn't help. Dee would study the loops and slants of his script, fighting to convince herself that his handwriting didn't look any shakier than it used to. If he spelled a word wrong, or left one out, the panic would return and her stomach would drop.

If it weren't for the kids, she might not have read some of the letters at all. He was always telling her what to do, or rather, what not to do. *“Don't cut the grass yourself.”* *“Don't let Jonny Joe play rough with Jimmy.”* *“Don't forget to tell the kids I love them.”* *“Don't you touch the gutters or the drains. You just call Tommy or Bill or whoever from down the street and you make him do it.”*

Dee never did get help from any of the neighborhood dads. Instead, she'd forge a little white lie now and then, replying to Jonny's letters with excuses like, “Mr. Johnson couldn't come over 'til the weekend so I just cleaned the gutters myself. They were getting clogged.”

Still, she followed his main request and shared each letter with her children. She wondered what they would think of his instructions and demands.

Every day brought the same questions.

“Where's Daddy?”

“When's Daddy coming home?”

The constant questions made her sick. She explained time and time again that they would be going to meet Daddy as soon as the new house was ready, but even she didn't know how much time they would all have together after that.

Dee cherished the rare occasions when all four kids were asleep at once, or when they'd play together peacefully in the yard and she could focus on her book or her recipe with minimal interruptions.

This afternoon, Dee was comforted by the sounds of her children's giggles and chatter as they took turns riding tractors around the living room. She only needed them to entertain themselves for about thirty minutes when she made lunch.

Dee was peering over the oven door at her mac and cheese casserole when screams erupted from the other room. Before Dee had even made it out of the kitchen, Jonny Joe was at her knees, talking faster than the speed of light. He'd had a growth spurt recently and his overalls now hit him around the ankles. His flooders and dirt stained t-shirt reminded Dee of her father working out on the farm, and she struggled not to laugh at her adorable, and very flustered, five-year-old.

"Slow down, slow down. What happened?" Dee urged as she followed Jonny down the hall.

"Me and Jim were riding our tractors and Jim didn't know but Teresa had her hand inside one of his wheels and he pedaled and her hand got all twisted up in it and he runned over it!" Jonny Joe had tears forming in his eyes by the time he exhaled at the end of his sentence. Dee was grateful for how much her children worried about one another.

Now Dee could hear Teresa sobbing and quickened her pace to a jog as she reached the living room. She quickly surveyed the room. Jim was sitting on the blue upholstered love seat with his arms crossed and his head bowed. Dee knew he was punishing himself for what he had done to his little sister – she would deal with him later. Both tractors had been flipped on their sides, six black wheels in the air.



Between them, Lori held Teresa's tiny hand in her lap, blowing cold air onto her sister's fingers like she had seen her mother do countless times. Dee could see bloodstains already forming on Lori's pink overalls. Good thing they were hand-me-downs from one of Dee's nieces.

Dee lifted Teresa into her arms and brought the injured hand up close to her glasses to examine the damage. Nothing at all serious, only broken skin that had started to bleed.

"Just a few scrapes," she assured her children, before carrying Teresa into the bathroom to clean her hand.

The orange plastic vehicles had been delivered by Santa last Christmas. Jonny had wanted to go all out with the gifts for their kids, since he knew he would be leaving home for a few months to build the new house in Montana. Dee let him have his way, but later threatened to take the trucks away when the kids discovered the horns on each steering wheel, and insisted on sounding them at one-minute intervals. Now, she wondered if the irritating little tractors were even safe toys for her kids. She was beginning to question whether one injury would be enough to teach them a lesson, when Jonny Joe and Lori appeared in the bathroom, out of breath. Jim was just a few steps behind.

Their family bathroom was pretty spacious, but not meant for all of them to share at once. "Woah, woah, woah," said Dee as the kids crowded into the room, wedging her between the sink and the rose porcelain toilet.

"Mommy, it smells funny," whined Lori, scrunching up her face.

"It's just rubbing alcohol, honey. I'm cleaning your sister's cuts so they don't get infected." As the words rolled off of Dee's tongue, an image of her golden casserole

flashed before her eyes.

The kitchen was already smoky when she got to the oven and yanked the door open. Smoke flooded the room and she fanned the air in front of her to get a better look at the charcoal noodles. Dee prayed that her nosy neighbors wouldn't call the fire department.

Her kids were in the room in an instant, all crying just a second after that.

“What’s happening, Mommy?” cried Lori.

“The house is on fire!” yelled Jonny Joe.

“The house is not on fire,” Dee said. “I just burned lunch. Jonny Joe, take your siblings outside into the front yard and wait for me. And no playing on the tire swing!”

As Jonny Joe ushered his three teary-eyed siblings out of the room, Dee struggled to open the window over the sink. It wouldn't budge. Suddenly the window flew open, hitting Dee's forehead with unexpected force. Smoke began to cloud her vision, her ears ringing.

Dee stumbled back from the window, and knocked into the kitchen table. A purple, plastic sippy cup hit the opposite wall with a bang. She tried her best to laugh it off, but a barking cough emerged from her chest instead. Decades as a chain smoker and now burnt macaroni made her wheeze. Dee rolled her eyes at the thought of it. She wanted to tell Jonny. She wanted him to scold her for smoking.

Dee waved an alphabet-themed place mat in front of the oven, fighting to hold back her tears. She hated him for leaving her, and she instantly felt foolish because of it.

She refused to become one of those codependent wives, no matter how much Jonny protested.

Billings, Montana 1966

Dee was scraping potato peels off of the cutting board and into the kitchen garbage when she spotted it. A tomato, bologna and mayonnaise sandwich with, at most, two bites missing. Jonny's lunch. She had made him his usual sandwich after serving the kids bologna and cheese. Now, they were all at the park, giving Dee some peace and quiet to tidy up the house and cook dinner while Michael, only one month old, took his afternoon nap upstairs. Their fifth child had been conceived the night before Jonny left for Omaha, yet another rash decision that had stumped their family and friends.

Dee had *plenty* to do before dinner. Jonny's boss from the plant back in Iowa had come all the way out to see how the Billings plant was running under new management, and he would be visiting the new house for dinner that night.

She knew she better get started on the cooking, but she couldn't take her eyes off of the sandwich. Jonny was a big eater, everyone knew it. In fact, she was surprised he hadn't asked her for a second sandwich at lunch. She thought back to other meals they'd shared in the past week or so. She sent him to work with a packed lunch every day, just as she had back in Nebraska. He loved her lunches; at least she thought so.

Lately, he had been staying at work through dinner, but Dee let it slide. He was still in his first year managing the new plant, and he had to put the time and effort in before he would see the results that he wanted.

On those nights, he would come home exhausted a little before eight, claiming that he had stopped for dinner on his way back from work. Dee rolled her eyes every time, accusing him of wasting money when she would be more than happy to cook for him.

“Darling, I hate to make you spend the whole night in the kitchen. Feeding five little ones and yourself is more than enough for one night!” He would flash that charming smile of his and she’d be forced to drop the topic.

Now, she wondered if he’d actually eaten dinner at all on those nights. Just the night before, they had all gone out for Italian food as a family. Friday nights were always family dinner nights, no matter how busy Jonny was. They would squish four kids in the back seat of his Pontiac (Dee held Michael on her lap in the passenger seat), and drive ten minutes to Italian, the diner, or the neighborhood pub and grill for their weekly meal on the town.

Jonny had ordered a lunch portion of linguini alfredo as his meal, and explained that he’d gone out for drinks and some snacks after work that day. He was trying to bond with his staff, and apparently these types of guy’s outings were the way to do that. It had sounded legitimate at the time. Dee wasn’t used to being suspicious of her husband’s every move.

Suddenly an image flashed into her mind from the weekend before, an image of Jonny lying on the taupe leather couch reading the newspaper. It was the early morning and Dee was sitting in the matching chair beside him, sipping coffee as she looked through the weather section. She heard little feet scampering on the wood floors in the hallway upstairs and knew that some of the children were awake.

Her girls appeared in the living room and ran right to their father. They hoisted their little bodies up onto the couch, climbing onto Jonny’s stomach like they always did. They sat single file, facing him, waiting for the “carriage ride” to start. Jonny was always bouncing the kids around. He definitely was the fun one, Dee thought.

That morning though, she watched as Jonny picked the girls up one by one and set them down on the floor beside him.

“Girls, daddy’s reading right now.”

At the time she had brushed it off, he was such an involved dad, but now, she was having trouble picturing him in that way. Her fondest memories of Jonny were of him on his hands and knees, crawling around the house with two to three kids on his back. Or of him walking through the doorway at night before dinner with a huge smile on his face, tool belt in hand. He was never too tired to fix what Dee needed fixing.

She couldn’t think of a time in the past few weeks that she’d seen Jonny really engaged with the kids, or being handy around the house. Ever since they had set up Michael’s nursery in the upstairs guest room, very little had been done to maintain their brand new home. Was it happening again? How could she have missed it?

The first time Jonny got sick, Dee hadn’t had to search for clues. He was honest with her when he didn’t feel well or couldn’t stomach a meal, but then again, neither of their wildest dreams had predicted cancer.

Now she was sure he was sick again, and worse, he was hiding it from her. She would confront him. *No, not before dinner tonight.* She knew that dinner needed to go well tonight with Jonny’s supervisor. *Oh gosh, dinner.* Dee had completely lost track of time.

She ran to the pot on the stove and lifted the lid to see water boiling, no potatoes. She grabbed the peeled and sliced potatoes from the counter and dumped them into the pot, nearly splashing herself with scalding water. In her old Omaha kitchen, she would never have had the counter space to pull off such a rushed preparation, but the new

kitchen felt industrial-sized. As she chopped the veggies and prepared the rib eyes, Dee tried not to think about how little Jonny would eat, and whether or not his boss would take notice.

It seemed like just a few moments later when she heard the front door swing open, and childish shouts erupted throughout the house. They were home.

Dee giggled when the four kids appeared in the kitchen, all dressed in army uniforms. Both of the boys were wearing helmets, and Jonny Joe was even carrying a rifle. Dee had struggled over whether or not to buy the ridiculous costumes about a month back, but now she was grateful for the comic relief. They had been their big brother and big sister gifts after Michael was born, an enduring yet unnecessary tradition.

Dee threw on a shocked expression and gasped, “Wow! What are these soldiers doing in my house?”

“It’s just us, Mommy!” exclaimed Teresa, the youngest of the group.

“Oh thank heavens, it is! Did you guys have a good time at the park?”

“We ran all over looking for enemies and animals and spies and bad guys,” said Jonny Joe excitedly, struggling over the pronunciation of “enemies.”

“Oh, how exciting! Did you catch anyone?”

“Yeah, we caught one spy who wasn’t fast enough to escape us,” her son replied, looking up at his father who was just entering the kitchen.

Jonny looked utterly exhausted, but Dee dared not mention it, not before dinner. Just then they heard the baby crying upstairs, and Dee was grateful for an excuse to leave the room.

They sat on opposite ends of the bed, not facing toward each other, but not facing away either. Dinner had been a disaster, to say the least. Actually, dinner was rather pleasant, it wasn't until coffee and dessert that the evening fell apart.

Dee had decided to serve coffee and cake after she put the kids to bed. She had learned not to mix sugar with bedtime back when her first child was a toddler.

She nearly dropped the coffee pot and the cake at the sight of Jonny's face. She had left him and his supervisor alone at the table talking about the renovations he had done to the house, and Dee sensed immediately that the topic must have changed.

In the next twenty minutes, her worst nightmares were confirmed. Jonny had fallen short on his responsibilities at work, his employees had noticed a lapse in his health – so much so that they told him to leave one day because he had been caught vomiting – and his supervisor was going to appoint someone else to take over management of the plant so that Jonny could focus on getting well.

Now, she sat across the bed from her husband, wondering what she had possibly done so wrong to deserve all of this lying. Neither of them had spoken since they walked their guest to the front door and said goodnight. Dee was the first to break the silence, a rare occurrence in their relationship.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Dammit, Delores! You think it's that easy to give up on a life you just earned? That you worked your butt off for?”

“I could have helped you out. Maybe things wouldn't have gotten so out of hand at work.”

“You think that's what I wanted?”

“Well, at this point, I really don’t know what you’re thinking at all, Jonny.”

“I’m thinking that I want to go to bed.”

She stood up angrily. “And then what? What happens when we wake up tomorrow? You’ll just go back to work as if you weren’t let go tonight? As if you’re not dying of cancer?” Dee gasped and threw her hand to her mouth as she heard her words echo against the far wall. “I’m sorry,” she muttered softly.

Dee read a mix of emotions on Jonny’s face. She understood the emotions, yet she couldn’t recognize them now, expressed by her husband. Never in their relationship had he looked embarrassed or completely defeated, or worse, disappointed in her.

The look that came next was one she knew all too well, nausea. He stood from the bed and raced past her to their bathroom before she could get in a word. Dee beat herself up inside for not noticing the signs sooner. He must have been sick countless nights in their bathroom. Where had she been?

She followed him into the bathroom and pushed her way into the toilet stall as he hurled.

“Dee, get out of here!”

“Jonny, you need help. Let me help you!”

He turned to face her, blocking her view of the toilet. His lips were wet with vomit. “Please leave, Dee.”

She darted forward, trying to squeeze around him quickly, but Jonny responded even faster. Dee felt his arm against her chest before she saw it. The impact of his body hitting hers pushed her off the ground. She landed in a pile on the tile floor, biting her lip as she met the ground. Blood flowed from her mouth and dripped down her chin in



seconds. She threw her hands to her mouth and stared up at Jonny, stunned. He looked just as shocked. He walked out of the room without looking at her.

When Dee had recovered enough to reach for tissue to wipe her mouth, she saw what Jonny had so desperately been trying to hide. The toilet was filled with blood. Dee's eyes overflowed with tears as she thought back to the last time this had happened. Jonny was already in the hospital by the time this symptom appeared.

Her tears were interrupted by a crashing sound in the bedroom. She left the bathroom to see Jonny standing before a broken window, their bedside lamp crashed on the floor in front of it. He sunk down to the ground, breathing heavily as he crumbled. Dee crouched down behind him and wrapped both of her arms around her husband, pressing her cheek into his back. She could feel him shaking, and squeezed tighter to calm him down.

She listened for the sound of her children moving around upstairs, little footsteps above their heads, creeping from their beds in fear. But no sound ever came.

Dee looked from the beaded lampshade on the floor, to the satin sheets on the bed, and was suddenly repulsed by their bedroom. She slowly walked toward the nightstand, where she picked up a book on the history of Montana, and threw it at their full-length mirror. Dee had rarely felt this kind of rage, but she didn't stop.

Before long, Jonny was at her side, and together they destroyed the beautiful bedroom he had built for them. They snagged the bedspread, ripped open the pillows, stained the carpeting with makeup, and eventually fell asleep together in a room they scarcely recognized, surrounded by piles of feathers and fuzz.

When Dee awoke the next morning in the remnants of her former room, she felt a

strange mix of sadness and satisfaction. She and Jonny hadn't discussed their actions. In fact, they had barely spoken as they tore apart the room. She was certain they had come to no verbal agreement, yet the state of their bedroom represented a mutual understanding that they would be headed back to Omaha.

And if they weren't able to live in the stunning room he had made for them, well, now no one else could either.

Fonda, Iowa 1967

The tiled floor of the bathroom was cold and soothing. Lying on her side with her knees hugged in toward her chest, she could just make out the blue of the tiles in her periphery. Her pink satin robe bunched up underneath her. The image of Jonny in their Montana bedroom, gently untying her robe before bed, passed behind her eyes. She suddenly desired to rip the soft fabric from her body, and destroy every last inch of it. If only she could muster up the will to move at all, to lift her aching body from the bathroom floor.

She saw him everywhere, and she couldn't escape. In her clothes, in her own reflection on the rare occasion that she stood before a mirror, even in the white walls of the house he'd never lived in, the walls he would have painted, for her.

She looked to her hands curled in front of her, the orange plastic bottle in her grasp. Her fingers cramped around it, her eyes strained to count the capsules inside. There had to be at least ten. Dr. Finley had said, "Take half a capsule before bed. If you're still awake after an hour, you can take the other half, but no more."

Oh, how badly she needed to sleep, to enter the darkness. She longed for a state of blurry passivity, to be removed from her present life, to stand on the outside in a place where she wouldn't be required to deal with what happened to her.

She thought about sleeping for days, years. She pictured herself taking all the pills at once, leaning over the bathroom sink as she gulped chilled water out of her cupped hands, throwing her head back to force each pill down. But how could she leave her kids alone? She couldn't. She'd have to drown them in the bathtub first, one by one. They would go to heaven and meet Jonny, even though she would never get there herself.

Jonny Joe would have to be first. He was a big boy now and his daddy had raised him well. She knew he would have stopped her if he were witness. But he was getting pretty tall lately.

After hours of stillness, she sat up suddenly to examine the size of the tub, shrieking loudly as the white porcelain met her eyes. The pill bottle slipped through her fingers and hit the floor. She shook her head violently from side to side, struggling to erase the image. How could she?

She didn't know why, but for whatever reason, she climbed into the tub herself. Rocking back and forth, plugging her ears with her fingers as she began to sob. Her head knocked into the shelf of shampoo and a bottle slid down into the tub beside her. She shifted her gaze to see the glowing yellow of the Johnson and Johnson's label and immediately hugged her knees into her chest to block the sight. She pulled herself into a tiny ball, so tight it hurt, and tried to catch her breath.

After several minutes she lifted her hand to the faucet, turning the knob until ice-cold water came rushing from the spout, drenching her entirely. Her robe clung to her body, her teeth chattered against her knees, and before long the sound of the faucet water drowned out her heavy sobs, her uneven breaths.

She awoke the next morning back on the bathroom tiles, wrapped in several patterned beach towels. The faucet had been turned off, the tub was empty. She pretended to remember draining the bath and drying off. It was safer than wondering if one of her children had found her in the family bathtub. She pushed the racing thoughts from her mind as she rose to fill the tub once again, this time with warm, steaming water.

By the time the first of her kids woke up, she was dried and dressed, working in

the kitchen on coffee and breakfast. When her terrible head cold came on that afternoon, she told her parents and Mary that she must have picked up something at church.

Dee would always wonder who had saved her that night, and when the answers never came, she tried to believe it was Jonny taking care of her as he always had.

A few days had passed before the memories of that night, of those terrible thoughts, resurfaced, at first, in her dreams. Dee woke up in a panic and called Mary to come over at the crack of dawn to watch the babies. She ran out the door before Mary could get more than a word in. Dee walked briskly to the church. It was a chilly day, and she'd left the house without a jacket. She hugged her arms in tight as she mindlessly made her way to St. Mary's. Mid-March in Fonda meant the beginnings of spring, the world painted over in bright greens and yellows. But Dee saw only grey. She hadn't spent much time outside in the past few days. It was hard to reconcile the darkness of her mind with the bright blossoms outside her window.

So early in the morning, there was surely no one around. Dee sat down in the last pew, the wood screamed cold against her legs. She brought her elbows to her knees, and let her head fall heavy into her hands, turning the room to black. Behind her eyes she saw Jonny. He was well. She could tell by the color in his cheeks and the beginnings of his beer belly.

He was doing that goofy dance he often did to embarrass her. The one where his hands would swing back and forth like a symphony conductor, and his shoulders would shrug as his head bobbed. He looked so darn foolish. Jonny would come up close to Dee,

rocking and bopping, making sure everyone at the party knew that she belonged to him. He let out a big, hearty laugh as he reached out to take her hand, grooving to the beat.

Dee opened her eyes at the sound of her own chuckle. She actually laughed out loud, picturing Jonny and his dance. Then she wasn't laughing anymore. Dee cried loud and hard. The sound echoed through the rows of pews, bouncing between the stain-glass windows, surrounding her like the song of the harp.

When the tears were gone, she rested a while just to breathe. In and out until her heartbeat slowed, and her eyes cleared. She slowly inched her way down to her knees, clasped her hands and brought her forehead toward them. All she asked was that she see him again someday.

When Dee stood to leave minutes later, she turned toward the double doors to see one of the Priests standing near the exit. She stopped abruptly, her eyes hardened. She had not a clue how long he'd been there. She wasn't alone.

He smiled softly and stepped aside, his hand gesturing toward the outside. As she passed, he took her hand in both of his, and simply nodded to her.

"Goodbye," she said softly, scurrying out the door.

"You know, Delores," she heard from behind her. "He never gives us more than we can handle."

Dee smiled slightly and nodded her head. She managed to turn away from him before the tears came back to her eyes, and she bit her lip to make them stop.

Omaha, Nebraska 1967

Dee could tell by the shadow over Jonny's hospital bed that the sun was setting behind her. Another day had slipped by. He was napping again and she sat in her usual spot, the scarcely cushioned chair between his bed and the window, holding his hand in both of hers.

She heard a soft knocking at the door and looked up to find Margie standing in the doorway. Margie mouthed "everything okay?" and Dee nodded back with a soft smile.

Dee had become great friends with two of Jonny's nurses, so close in fact that they had allowed her to push a table up against the door of his hospital room so that she and Jonny could be alone from time to time.

Back in the early weeks of his hospital stay, when Jonny's energy level was higher, and his meds doses lower, Dee had spent a short portion of each night sharing her husband's small bed. Nursing him to sleep before heading back to her mother-in-law's house, where the two women would switch places. She had anxiously waited for the sun to set, praying for the darkness to bring them a momentary escape, a brief sense of normalcy. In the pitch black, beneath the crisp, starched blankets, they could be anyone or anywhere that they wanted. In those moments, he wasn't a dying man. In fact, they both relied on these private nights to keep them feeling alive.

They imagined themselves as a just-married couple conceiving their first child, overcome with nerves, expectations and the weight of responsibility as they clung to one another. Or a boyfriend and girlfriend in their twenties, caught up in the heat of the moment at the end of a great dinner date. Hiding behind car seats, drawn curtains, sneaking through backdoors. These nights in his hospital bed always reminded Dee of

their first time, the terrifying, yet exhilarating feeling of breaking the rules. The secrecy, the rush, the unknown, the guilt. The failure to understand what was so wrong about the way that he touched her.

But lately, Jonny hadn't been up for that. He spent most of everyday sleeping, and she sat by his side, praying for some kind of miracle.

As he slept she let her mind wander, thinking of other things. She pictured her kids back in Fonda with her parents, and Michael's teary eyes when she left him with Jonny's aunt each morning, before heading back to the hospital. Many of her friends and neighbors offered to take one or two of the kids, but she refused to split them up. As soon as Michael was a little older, he would be going back to Fonda to stay with his brothers and sisters.

She shook her head and rolled her shoulders back as if to clear the thought from her mind. She scolded herself for thinking so far into the future, planning for months ahead when Michael would no longer be breastfeeding, as if she and Jonny would still be together in the hospital at that point.

Suddenly a strange feeling in her hand woke her from her thoughts. Jonny's hand remained clasped around hers but she felt him going, leaving her. She sat up in her chair and screamed his name. She shook him until his eyes opened.

"It's okay, baby," he said in a raspy voice. "I'm just sleeping."

That night back at Jonny's mother's house, Dee tossed and turned in bed. She prayed that Jonny would somehow recover, but made a promise to herself and to God that if she ever got that feeling again, she would be brave and let him go.



The next day, she waited by his bedside in fear. She couldn't eat, or nod off for even a second. Her hazel eyes were dry and strained. That night, she stayed at the hospital instead of sleeping at her mother-in-laws. She stayed awake all night. At times, she'd put her hand on his chest, or under his nose, just to confirm that he was still there. A few times, she even checked her own pulse, for she felt that she might be the one fading away.

All night he stayed with her.

For days she waited. Each time the doctor or nurses came into the room, they would check his vitals, read his charts, and shake their heads slowly.

"It's just a matter of time now," they would say to her with sad, sorry eyes. She hated that everyone felt bad for her, and even more, she hated this word, "time." Would it be five minutes, or five days? They never said. But what was the difference? It would never be long enough.

She stopped wearing her wristwatch, she lost track of hours and dates. Even night and day began to blend together; she never left the hospital anymore. She guessed it had been three days since she'd showered or changed clothes. Each time she stood to stretch her legs or feed Jonny water, she felt her khaki skirt slip a little lower. She knew she was withering away, but she couldn't bring herself to eat more than a few bites. Jonny had stopped eating altogether, and dining alone meal after meal while he slept was just simply too sad.

Jonny's mom had begged Dee to go home for even a few hours.

"You look awful, honey. You need a break. I'm here with him." When her protesting did not succeed, she forced Dee to stand before the bathroom mirror. Her face

was pale and sunken. The rosy pink had faded from her cheeks and her lips. She didn't look like herself with flat, greasy hair and a wrinkled blouse. But Dee refused to concern herself with makeup, or ironing, or even hygiene at a time like this.

Plus, she thought that Jonny's mom was just scheming to get a few hours alone with her son. In the early weeks of his hospital stay, Dee and her mother-in-law had worked out a system. One would take the day shift, and the other would take the night shift. After about seventy-two hours, they would switch roles. Now, they both spent most days and nights in his small, stuffy room, and this much togetherness had created added tension. They bickered over who held his hand, or who refilled his water glass, and both cherished the moments when the other stepped out of the room. Dee and her mother-in-law had never really gotten along.

Even the nurses had begun to comment on Dee's unhealthy habits. She didn't understand how everyone could be so focused on her health when there was a man dying in that very room. The way she saw it, no matter how little she ate or slept, she was still infinitely more alive than he was, and she hated that.

She didn't realize she had nodded off until his coughing forced her awake. She sat up in her chair and opened her eyes to see Jonny looking back at her. She couldn't remember the last time he had been this awake. His mom had gone home for the night.

"Jonny, hi, you're awake," she said in a crackly voice. She suddenly realized how little she had spoken lately.

"Hi darling," he whispered, reaching out for her hands.

She stood by his bed, holding his face in her palms. She held his gaze for minutes – she'd forgotten the feeling of him looking at her. He smiled and she could have sworn

that she saw the faintest sparkle in his blue eyes. A scarce hint of the loud, charismatic guy he used to be.

He pulled her in toward him and she kissed him on the lips, sending a shiver through her body. She went weak in the knees, nearly losing her balance.

“Come lie with me.”

Lately she had been nervous to lie with him, to even touch him. He felt so fragile to her. But this might be the last time they were awake and alone together, so she agreed, and walked around the bed to lie beside him. He struggled to scoot his body over.

“No, no, I have room. It’s okay,” she said, stopping him.

He rolled to face her, and Dee suddenly wished she could go back in time even if it were just to take a quick shower. Jonny didn’t seem to notice though, or at least he didn’t mind.

He raised his hands to her face, outlining her features one by one like he always did. Now, his fingertips were cold and dry against her smooth cheeks. She felt like a little doll in his arms.

“Why do you do that, Jonny?” She had never thought to ask him before.

“I’m memorizing your face, creating a picture in my mind so I can see you whenever I want.”

Dee nodded her head but said nothing as the strength of his words hit her. Had he been planning for their parting moment all along? She couldn’t remember when he had first started that ritual.

She realized now that it should have been the other way around. She was the one who needed to save every inch of him to memory. She closed her eyes for a second and

tried to picture his face, his strong jaw line, bright blue eyes, stubbly cheeks and goofy smile. Already the image was blurred. She was losing him. A cold sweat appeared on her forehead as panic set in.

He noticed immediately. “Delores, what’s wrong?”

“I’m scared I’m going to forget you. I mean not the idea of you, but your face, and your voice and the way it feels when you stroke my hair and kiss my neck, and all the small things. What if I forget?”

“I like to think I’m a pretty memorable guy,” he said smiling. “And I don’t think you can forget a love like this.” He looked at her with a solemn expression. There were very few times in the history of their relationship that she could ever remember him being serious. Even when he first found out that he had stomach cancer he had said, “Guess I better hold off on all the beer and mayonnaise, right Dee?”

She somehow drifted off in his arms, but every few minutes, she’d wake in a panic, only to find his warm breath still passing over her.

When she woke up the next morning, Jonny was sound asleep. They had both woken up one other time in the middle of the night. He had kept his eyes open just long enough to look into hers and say, “Love you, darling.” By the time she had responded, his eyelids were already drooping, heavy with sleep and sickness.

Now rising from the bed to get a drink of water and open the blinds, Dee had a feeling that they might have spoken for the last time. She straightened his blankets and fluffed the pillow she had slept on, as if these small gestures would make him more comfortable. Watching him lying so peacefully in the bed, she thought to herself that he might not wake up again.

She was right. Years later, she would still find comfort in knowing that the last thing he had seen was her youthful face, the last words he had said, “Love you, darling.”

It was that afternoon when he left her. She felt it coming before the nurses even entered the room. Jonny’s mom had gone to get them sandwiches or pudding from the cafeteria; they’d had no warning.

Dee had been reading *Ladies’ Home Journal*, basking in the sun from the window, when she suddenly got the feeling that she needed to go to him. She rushed to the side of the bed, taking both of his hands in hers, and she could have sworn she felt the life slowly seeping out.

And this time she didn’t try to shake him awake, she didn’t scream his name in panic. She sat and waited, her arms trembling as she held tight to his eerily still hands. The room felt so cold, and so empty. The walls screamed silence.

She collapsed into her lap, bringing her head down to his chest so quickly that an onlooker might have thought she’d passed out. She let go of his hands and grabbed at his pale blue hospital gown with her fingers, nearly ripping it away from his body as she climbed onto the bed. She fought the fabric for several seconds until ultimately surrendering, letting all her weight fall onto him as she erupted in sobs.

When the nurses entered the room, she didn’t speak or even move from his bed. She lay with her head to his still heart as the doctor pronounced the time of death, and the nurses scribbled away on their clipboards. Their voices sounded so far away, like they were standing at the other end of a tunnel.

One of the nurses, she wasn't sure which, came around the side of the bed and stroked her back for several minutes. The gesture was more irritating than comforting. She couldn't stand to be touched by anyone else. Dee sniffled and choked on her own breaths, but still she said nothing.

"We'll give you some time alone to say your goodbyes," said the nurse softly before exiting the room and shutting the door softly behind her.

Dee couldn't pull herself from his chest. He smelled like the sterile waiting room of her doctor's office, and she struggled to remember his favorite cologne, the hint of beer on his breath, the smell of factory fumes after a day at the plant.

She resolved that she wouldn't leave him. She would stay here with him forever, and sooner or later, they would drift away together.

*Time alone. To say your goodbyes.* The words echoed in her head and she felt compelled to say something, anything. But the words didn't come. She thought back to the last words they had shared in the early hours of the morning. *Love you, darling. I'll always love you, Jonny.*

She had never doubted for one second how much he loved her. And she knew that he understood how loved he was, even though her love was a more reserved, quiet kind. She wasn't one for public displays of praise and affection, but he knew what was in her heart.

Still resting on his chest, she began to replay their relationship. From the first meeting on that train to Chicago, to their honeymoon in the Big Apple. She tried to take it day by day, to recall their lives together as precisely as she could.

The summer of '59 in New York City had been hot. The sweaty train rides, their rosy cheeks, Dee's constant worrying that her hair had ballooned in the humidity. She remembered it all like it was yesterday.

They had stood beneath the subway stairs wrapped in each other's arms. The thick summer air clung to them like molasses. Dee normally would have been disgusted by the sticky smell of garbage and urine, and the various rodents that accompanied them on the platform. But she was too amazed by the mechanics of the underground transport system, and the thrill of taking on the big city with her husband by her side. Trains whizzed past them in every direction. The bright lights and sharp gusts of wind, it was all so exhilarating, and Dee felt almost drunk.

They had been kissing for at least ten minutes, if she had to guess. It was a much more public setting than what they were used to, but no one knew them in this big city, and it was late on a Saturday night. The anonymity was a refreshing change. Nothing was a secret for long in a small town, and in the months leading up to their wedding, Dee and Jonny were often the target of gossip.

Now, Johnny's sickness had brought a similar experience, and Dee shuddered at the thought of facing her friends and family alone. Their forced smiles laced with pity and concern. She dreaded reentering the life that was waiting for her outside the hospital doors. She begged her thoughts to take her way, to take her back into his arms.

Again, she saw them on the subway platform. She watched herself from a distance, like a movie. She watched as their shadows swayed just slightly in the station's

dim lighting. She waited in anticipation, remembering how they had almost missed their train.

With her body pressed up against Jonny's, Dee hadn't been able to see much of anything past his face. A huge gust of wind nearly lifted her dress up over her hips, and she struggled to untangle herself from Jonny's embrace to smooth it back down. Just then, she turned to see their train pulling up to the platform.

"Jonny! Weren't you paying attention? That's our train, we have to hurry!"

They were standing quite some distance from the train, and the platform had filled with people without her noticing. Dee did her best to run in her shiny beige pumps, dragging Jonny by the arm as she struggled to push through the crowd. The doors began to shut just as they got to the train. Dee groaned in disappointment and began to turn away, until she saw Jonny out of the corner of her eye. He threw half of his body in between the closing doors. Dee shrieked. With one arm inside the train, he pulled the doors back open, nodding to Dee to get on ahead of him.

The doors shut fully behind them, and Jonny hugged Dee close to him as the train began to move. They were both gasping for air and giggling. A line of sweat had broken out along Jonny's forehead, and Dee's new pearls stuck to her chest. She fanned herself with one white-gloved hand and tried to smooth her dress with the other. Her eyes grew in horror as she looked down toward her waist.

"Jonny! My bag is open!" Dee grabbed her white leather purse, which hung by her side from a gold, chained shoulder strap, and lifted it close to her face. "And empty!" Tears filled her eyes almost instantly.



Dee scanned her mind, trying to remember what she had brought out to dinner that night. Her wallet, she was sure. A lipstick and a hand mirror, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Your wallet! How much was in your wallet, Dee?” She shrugged her shoulders, as if to seem unsure. Jonny had funded the whole trip with his own money. He surprised her with the plane tickets back in March, and she had scolded him saying, “this trip is way too lavish for us!”

Just before they left town, Dee had stuffed some of their wedding gift money into her wallet, making sure that Jonny wasn't looking. She wasn't sure how she would convince him to let her cover some of the bills, but decided to worry about that once they made it to New York.

All he had wanted was to take care of her. Why had she resisted?

She felt a huge pit in her stomach knowing that she had lost three hundred dollars worth of wedding money. Normally, she would have almost laughed at the idea of being pickpocketed. “Looks like he picked the wrong girl,” she would have whispered to herself. But not this time. Tonight, she was worth three hundred dollars, and now, she had nothing.

Earlier that day, before they left the hotel to explore Fifth Avenue, Jonny had locked up some of his money and their plane tickets in the safe. “Do you want to add anything?” She had shaken her head “no.”

By the time they arrived at the Museum of Modern Art, she had forgotten all about the wad of cash in her wallet. They had strolled from exhibit to exhibit in silence. By the fourth or fifth misshapen statue, Dee was ready to leave the museum, but she was

too embarrassed to admit to her lack of culture. Jonny seemed to be really enjoying the art, which came as a shock to her.

They stood in front of what appeared to be a melting cow for several minutes, both staring intently at the metal creature. Finally, Jonny broke the silence saying, “I don’t get it.”

“Oh thank God,” said Dee, relieved. Jonny hugged her into his side and chuckled.

“Should we get out of here? Maybe go get one of those corn dogs from the street cart we passed?”

Dee nodded enthusiastically, and they nearly skipped out of the museum together.

The rest of the afternoon and evening had been perfect. They window-shopped along Fifth Avenue, admiring all the glamorous people and clothing, and then visited the Empire State Building. But even in her fancy dress, heels, gloves and pearls, Dee still felt like they stood out from the crowd.

Now, she knew for sure that they didn’t belong in New York. She had been robbed of their wedding money on their second night out in the city. She turned away from Jonny as the subway bumped along, feeling stupid and naïve.

“Hey, Dee, don’t worry. Come on, it could happen to anyone.” He rubbed her back as she began to tear up again. “I’ll take you to get a new ID as soon as we get back. You won’t need a wallet when we’re here together.”

When they finally made their way back to the hotel room, Dee insisted on going right to sleep. Jonny didn’t even complain, which only made her feel guiltier. She woke up around three a.m. in a sweat and shook Jonny until he opened his eyes.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” he mumbled, still half asleep.

“Three hundred dollars,” she blurted out. He looked at her confused, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“I took three hundred dollars of our wedding money with us. I wanted to help you pay for some of our expenses. And now it’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

“Dee, do you remember what happened last weekend? We got married. There is no your money or my money anymore. We’re in this together, right?”

She nodded her head against his chest. “But I –”

He kissed her before she could finish her sentence. She hadn’t expected him to be so calm. Maybe he wasn’t quite awake. The next kiss was so forceful that she had no choice but to change her mind. He was definitely awake now. Dee felt her body relax as she kissed him back, and wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck.

The next morning, they decided to head to Greenwich Village. Dee and Jonny weren’t up for another day in the fast-paced, brightly lit streets they had explored the day before. The hotel concierge had explained that the Village was very lively on Sundays, and he thought they would rather enjoy it.

Dee didn’t even carry a purse with her, and Jonny brought only a few bills. The bare minimum they would need for lunch and maybe an afternoon snack. When they arrived at the circle in the Village, there were dozens of musicians on fiddles, guitars and banjos. Crowds had formed to listen to the music and Jonny pushed through them effortlessly, leading Dee to the front. He stood directly behind her, resting his head on top of hers, and wrapped his arms around her as they swayed to the music.

Dee couldn't believe the energy that surrounded them. New York City had a mind and soul of its own, and she was so happy to be experiencing it. She nearly forgot about her rude awakening from the night before.

They spent at least an hour at the circle, before walking to Washington Square Park. Dee and Jonny shared a sandwich and a salad on the grass. It was a great place for people watching, and they could see the tallest buildings in the distance. Jonny lay down on his back and Dee rested her head on his stomach, staring up at the nearly cloudless sky. She loved the open air. She had craved it since they'd arrived in the city.

"It's just so beautiful," said Dee. "I don't want to leave."

"You know, there's nothing about this that we can't do in Nebraska," said Jonny. She couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded thoughtful. "We have grass, and picnics, and it's the same sun that shines in Omaha. As long as we've got you and me, right?"

*As long as we've got you and me, right? As long as we've got you and me.* His words echoed through the eerily silent hospital room. Dee played the moment over and over in her head as she lifted herself from her husband's still body, and felt her world crash down around her.

Fonda, Iowa 1970

The doorbell rang repeatedly, echoing throughout the silent house.

“I’m coming!” Dee yelled, setting down her new copy of *Love Story* and her coffee mug so that she could answer the door. She checked her new alligator-skin wristwatch, only one in the afternoon, way too early for the kids to be back from school.

Dee opened the door to see Alice smiling from ear to ear, waving a newspaper back and forth so spastically that an innocent observer might assume she was swatting a fly.

“Oh gosh, Alice. I thought you were one of the kids in trouble, ringing all crazy like that.”

Alice shoved the *Fonda Times* in Dee’s face, so close that she saw nothing but a big blob of gray.

“Alice, quit that! I’m going to lose an eyeball!” Dee slapped the paper down and turned back toward the house, motioning for Alice to follow her inside.

“You know, Alice, it’s Jonny Joe’s job to deliver the papers, not yours.” Dee chuckled at her own joke. Her ten-year-old had taken up a job as a paperboy, and he really enjoyed getting up early to ride his shiny blue bike around town. When he first started the route back in March, Dee had driven him from house to house on frosty mornings. On those days, Alice had her coffee in Dee’s kitchen, waiting for the other kids to get out of bed.

Jonny Joe rarely complained, but still, Dee often felt a tinge of guilt that her baby had been forced into the role of man of the family in his first years of grade school.

“Haven’t you seen the paper yet, Dee?”

Dee typically read the paper every morning after the kids were out of the house, but today, she'd been so engrossed in her book that she hadn't even skimmed over the *Fonda Times*. She had joined a book group through the church that she loved, but this week's book had been assigned to her personally by one of the pastors. Her involvement in the church over the past several years had led to strong friendships with many of the pastors, and they often recommended different readings and events for Dee. She felt like a teacher's pet, and she loved it.

Alice flipped frantically through the paper, the tips of her fingers already black with ink. Dee worried of a paper cut, but chose to keep her mouth closed as her friend continued searching.

“Ah! Here it is! Will you look at that?”

Alice laid the paper down on the kitchen table in front of Dee, pressing her thumb along the crease to create a neat fold.

There they were, smack dab in the middle of page fourteen. Dee ran her fingers over her children's faces, careful not to smudge the ink. It was a nifty picture, and took up about a quarter of the page. She couldn't help but tingle with excitement at the prospect of such recognition, and felt silly afterwards for being so childish.

She was surprised at her own reaction too, as it was just a few short months ago that she nearly refused having the photo taken. The reporter had called her house on a Saturday morning back in June. The kids were outside running through the sprinklers while Dee prepared sandwiches for them to take to the town pool. The reporter explained that there was going to be a feature on Fonda families and their favorite recipes, and Dee had been one of those few selected. He wanted her to submit a recipe to be printed in the

paper, and asked to set up a time to come photograph the family.

“Oh I don’t know about that,” Dee had said, quite surprised by the suggestion.

She agreed to think about it and took down the reporters phone number before hanging up.

“Who was that?” asked Lori, who had apparently heard the greater portion of the conversation. Dee looked to the puddle forming at Lori’s feet, and quickly ushered her sopping wet daughter back outside to join the other kids.

When Dee finally told her children about the phone call, she realized her mistake instantly. Now, there was no way out of it. She looked at the star struck expressions on her babies’ faces and she knew they would be taking that picture for the paper.

Dee had chosen a recipe with the help of her kids, chocolate oatmeal no-bake cookies, one of her specialties, and a family favorite. She had learned the recipe from her own mother, who taught her as a young adult that it was the perfect recipe for cooking with children.

All Dee had to do was combine sugar, cocoa, butter and milk in a saucepan, and then bring it to a boil for one minute. Once this step was done, she would call for her children to come help.

Ever since a horrible fight broke out over who got to measure the vanilla, she had created five separate jobs and assigned them on a rotating basis. Measure the vanilla, measure the oatmeal, stir together, and scoop the batter onto the wax paper by the spoonful. They usually made enough batter for two sheets of wax paper; this is where the fifth job came in.

She had arranged for the photographer to come by the house on the following

Saturday. This gave her one week of time to tidy the common areas and do some shopping for the kids. She would justify the purchases by labeling them as church clothes for the new school year.

She looked at the photo now, printed across page fourteen, and she was rather pleased with it. She looked at Jonny Joe's plaid trousers, and Lori's "groovy" patterned top, as she had called it. Yes, it definitely was the seventies. Dee chuckled to herself as she wondered if her own mother would have ever let them out of the house dressed in such loud clothing. Not a chance.

"What's so funny?" urged Alice.

"They look so serious." Dee pointed to her children's faces. Teresa and Jim were smiling, but her older two, Jonny Joe and Lori, shared a stoic expression, and Michael just looked a bit lost.

Dee had worked hard to coordinate the colors in everyone's outfits. She had even matched them with the living room furniture. Teresa and Lori wore a shade of lime green similar to the new satin throw pillow, and the browns and burnt yellows of her sons' ensembles looked nice against the striped sofa.

Staring at the black and white printed photo now, Dee felt foolish for having wasted so much time. Everyone matched in black and white. The good thing was that her flushed cheeks didn't show in the grey-toned picture. The photographer had been flirty, to say the least, and Dee was still uncomfortable being hit on, especially in front of her kids. It happened pretty often these days.

"You are a beautiful, single woman in your thirties," her friends often reminded her. "Why be surprised that he's interested?"



“I think you guys look just great,” beamed Alice, her eyes still glued to the page.

Dee nodded her head in agreement before adding, “I better get back to my book, but I’ll see you tonight for cards.”

After showing Alice and her newspaper to the door, Dee grabbed her book and headed for the floral-upholstered armchair in the living room. It was a new and much-needed purchase after her last paycheck from the library. Dee loved being able to put her feet up after a hard day, and she still felt that the Fonda house had never been decorated to her liking. She smiled thinking about the photo. She couldn’t wait to show it to her kids.

That night before she went to bed, Dee retrieved the newspaper article from the refrigerator where the kids had posted it. She slowly rearranged the magnets, careful not to smudge any words or faces.

She set the paper down on her nightstand when she went to wash up, right next to the framed photo of her and Jonny standing in Greenwich Village, surrounded by tourists and musicians. Every night before bed, she would look at their picture and say, “Good night and I will dream about you,” just as Jonny had signed all of his letters in the months they spent apart.

Now, she looked to the newspaper clipping. She examined her children one by one. Even without the smiles, they were happy. They looked healthy, put-together, well behaved. They looked like their father.

She studied the woman in the center of the photo. Her pale blue dress, her black-rimmed glasses, and dark, coiffed hair, pearl earrings peeking out. She looked strong, Dee thought. She looked like someone she might like to know.

Dee set down the paper with a smile, and carefully folded back her comforter before climbing into bed. She turned her bedside radio on softly, as she sometimes did to help her fall asleep. Her skin tingled as the first notes met her ears. A sweat broke out along her forehead and she rushed to turn up the volume. It was their song. The song they had first danced to at the drive-in. The song they hadn't heard since. Dee had searched for years with no success, and now, here it was on the radio.

Dee let her eyes close as her body melted into the worn mattress. She listened to her breath rise and fall in time with the music. She felt the rhythm run through her body, her fingers drumming lightly to the beat. She imagined them wrapped in each other's arms, swaying back and forth to the 1-2-3, 1-2-3 of the chorus. Her stomach dropped, her heart raced. She was home. *If we just keep dancing, the music will keep playing.*