

ABSTRACT

Letters to Each Other: A Short Story Collection

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This short story collection explores how elements of nonfiction can be tied into fiction through the incorporation of psychology research. Each of the eight stories incorporates psychology research as a driver of plot and/or character decisions and thought processes, thus adding a scientific element to each piece. In some ways, both psychology research and fiction seek to increase understanding of the human mind, so this project seeks to marry those two pursuits. Additionally, the stories are an attempt to explore various human relationships, so they each take the form of a letter. The “writer” of one letter is the “recipient” of the next (Anne writes to Brady, then Brady writes to Clark, then Clark writes to Dani, etc.), highlighting interconnectedness and playing on how people are all related to one another.

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LETTERS TO EACH OTHER: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas

May 2022

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INTRODUCTION

“Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.” – Albert Camus

My favorite aspect of fiction is that it helps deepen the reader’s understanding of others. I view fiction as a tool that helps us love others more, and I believe the way it does that is by helping readers better understand others. So, as I approached this creative project, I knew I wanted to write something that I felt would increase the reader’s understanding of others.

The idea that fiction deepens one’s understanding of others is not necessarily a novel one. Researcher and novelist Keith Oatley has done a lot of work to back up the claim that fiction helps us know others better. Oatley has extensively studied the connection between reading fiction and empathy, and he is a passionate advocate of the idea that fiction increases our understanding of others. In an article from Discover Magazine, Oatley is quoted as saying, “Reading novels enables us to become better at actually understanding other people and what they’re up to” (Schmidt, 2020). In another article on Oatley’s work from the Washington Post, he echoes this sentiment: “When we read about other people, we can imagine ourselves into their position ... That enables us to better understand people, better cooperate with them” (Kaplan, 2016). Ultimately, Oatley advocates for the idea that through a greater understanding of others, fiction makes us better.

Oatley’s claims are backed up by his own research studies as well as the studies of others. One of his central claims is that fiction acts as a simulation of social worlds

and, as such, helps us understand others. In a literature review looking at a lot of the research regarding fiction as a social simulation, Oatley (2016) writes, “The social world is complex and, although we humans are good at understanding others, we are not always that good; literary simulations help us to improve” (p. 626). Fiction gives us a simulated experience of interacting with others that can help us improve at the real thing. One study that he cites in this review—written by Mar et al. (2006)—specifically studies if fiction, over nonfiction, improves social ability. They found that fiction readers tend to have more social skills than nonfiction readers, and they attribute this to the fact that readers of fiction get social experience from reading whereas readers of nonfiction do not. Thus, even simulated social experiences in fiction are enough to improve the social skills of readers. This study is evidence that fiction does, at least on some level, increase understanding of others in the social world.

As a related finding, studies have also found that empathy increases with reading. To name just a couple of studies, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that empathetic skills increased over time in participants who read fiction. Additionally, Tabullo et al. (2018) performed a study in which they tested the connection between Theory of Mind processing and fiction. Theory of Mind is essentially one’s ability to understand what someone else is thinking—thus it is a measure of how we understand others. They found that “reading fiction engages and promotes Theory of Mind processing, leading to better performance in cognitive empathy tasks” (Tabullo et al., 2018, p. 366). Overall, it is clear that fiction does increase understanding of others to some extent.

Given this aim of fiction—to increase understanding of people in a real way—I was struck by the similarity of the aim of psychology. At its heart, psychology is a

scientific discipline aimed at better understanding the behavior of people. This connection between literature and psychology is one that has received some attention in academia. Emir (2016) writes, “Literature and psychology are two branches of science that study human soul. Psychology researches human behaviors and their causes while literature depicts human behavior through fiction” (p. 49). There is most definitely a connection between the two; they are intertwined in various ways. The similarity between fiction and psychology was very compelling to me, and I knew I wanted to marry the two in this project.

To begin this endeavor, I considered the concept of nonfiction-based fiction. On some level, I believe that all fiction incorporates nonfiction—even in the wildest fantasy novel, there must be some truth to what is written that is not merely fiction. As is the sentiment in Camus’s quote above, fiction—though it itself is fabricated—tells some truth. Further, based on the research of Oatley and others, some elements of fiction do translate in real ways to our lives. In some cultures, fiction and nonfiction are even blended together. In an article from *The Guardian*, Lea (2016) explains that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is difficult to make in some languages, thus illustrating that it is a distinction that may not be as important as it is typically made out to be. I believe fiction does communicate truth, thus the line between fiction and nonfiction may not be as definite as meets the eye, and in this project, I wanted to blur that line further.

Therefore, keeping in mind the similar aims of psychology and fiction, as well as my hope to incorporate some element of nonfiction into my fiction as a comment on their compatibility, I decided to infuse each fiction story with some form of psychology

research. This incorporation of research would add a level of truth—scientifically proven truth—to each of my made-up stories. In some cases, the bulk of the inspiration for the story is from a research article. In others, research is incorporated in smaller plotlines or character decisions. Some applications are very specific, while others are broader. My hope is that by using this research to guide the writing of these stories, I have increased my ability to tap into human understanding; by using this nonfiction to guide my fiction, I hope I have built a world that strikes something particularly real.

Individual explanations of the research incorporated into each story can be found in the Appendices. Each story has its own appendix which explains in detail what research was used and how. For the sake of this project, psychology research is defined as peer-reviewed journal articles that have been accessed through PsycInfo, a database with a focus on psychology. All but one of the articles (Frampton & Fox, 2018) were accessed this way. For the most part, the research incorporated into stories is not via direct quotes; however, occasionally, a quote from interview data cited in an article is quoted either directly or nearly directly. These instances of quotation are designated in the story with an asterisk and more explicitly cited in the corresponding appendix. Readers may want to read all the stories at once and then all the appendices, or they could read a story and then flip to the corresponding appendix to learn right away about the research incorporated.

The final element to note about these stories is that they all take the form of connected letters. I decided to make this a piece of epistolary fiction because I thought it would allow the texts to put relationships first. One of the best ways to understand others is through relationships with them, so this felt like a natural choice. Placing the reader on

one end of a letter helps to place them in a more intimate relationship with the character. Further, I made the decision to connect the letters—the recipient of one letter is the writer of the next. The collection begins with Anne writing to Brady, followed by Brady writing to Clark, Clark writing to Dani, Dani writing to Ed, etc. My hope is that this interconnectedness further helps the reader understand others more by demonstrating how all kinds of people are connected through each other. Many of the characters I have developed are far apart from each other—in age, background, gender, etc. However, they are all connected—albeit loosely—to one another. Hence, the title of the collection: Letters to Each Other.

I

Anne to Brady

Dear Brady,

This is going to make me sound crazy, but I think of you whenever I'm back in New York. I was there for a business trip last week, and I caught my eyes lingering an extra moment on every man I passed who looked like you, trying to tell if it was. Every clean-shaven, handsome man commands my attention in the busy streets, just because he might be you. I can't quite remember what you look like. When I try to remember your face, all the features are malleable, except for your clean shavenness. You're always clean shaven—that I remember—but sometimes when I think of you, you have a cleft chin, sometimes you don't. Sometimes your nose is round, sometimes there's a slight point. Maybe there was a time when I had an accurate image of your face, but the more I grab onto the clay of you in my memory, the more I warp it.

What I can picture is where we met—on the subway. I remember the feel of the hard subway seat under me; the drying cola spill on the ground between the seats; the ad on the window across from me of a smiling personal injury lawyer with the slogan, "They hurt you, we make their pockets hurt"; the sticky, sweaty, espresso-y, morning-breath smell trapped inside the car; the slight squeak of the doors as they opened at each stop; the static of the announcer's muffled voice—all of that, I remember more solidly than I can remember your face.

I was breathless when I got on the subway that day because I had woken up late. It was my third day in the city on business—a Friday—and I was flying home the next

morning. Most of my meetings that trip had been near my hotel, but this one was too far to walk to. My company would have covered cab fare, but I've always liked riding the subway when I'm in the city, so I opted for a subway pass instead.

I hadn't timed the morning quite right—I had decided to forgo the complimentary room service breakfast to get a bagel on the way to the subway. I hadn't really considered how long the line at the bagel place would be, and even though it moved faster than an average line, it still set me back longer than I had budgeted for. I remember feeling funny in that line because I noticed that everyone in it was looking through everyone else. It was like all the people in the line only saw a line, they didn't see other people. The strangers in that line really did feel *strange* to me.

Because the line took so long, my walk to the station had been brisk—which just made me feel like I fit into the city better. I ate my bagel while I walked. I always liked to imagine I could fit in in New York. I could match the pacing if I wanted to. That day you told me you thought I was a New Yorker until you noticed my shoes—you said they were far too practical and that real New York businesswomen trek in heels, because they can. I guess there's a little more to it than just matching the pacing. But in the masses of the streets, I ate my bagel and matched their pace and felt like I did belong in this collection of strangers who were each walking to a different place. That is one thing I love about New York: the shared pace of all the people with different destinations. The city has always felt like an airport to me in that way—everyone in transit separately, but also in transit together.

I made it to the subway station on time—barely—and caught my train. I was out of breath, and I was so relieved to find the car pretty empty for a Friday morning as I took

my seat. My destination was several stops away, so I got out a book to read, but I hardly actually read it. I enjoyed watching the people on the subway way more than I was enjoying *Wuthering Heights*. It was more the look of reading that mattered to me—the feeling of the book in my hands. I wanted the other people on the subway to think I was reading more than I actually wanted to read.

You got on at the second stop after I did. I had been people watching at each stop, and I noticed you instantly as the herd entered the car—and I immediately retreated into the pages of my book, just to look busy. I was uncomfortable with the fact that you might see me watching you. You sat down right next to me even though there was a handful of other open seats. I remember trying to hide my silent surprise, staring at the words without reading any of them. I had that dreadful feeling of actually wanting to focus on the words on a page but being too consumed by your surroundings to process them. I was hyperaware of your presence there next to me. The air between us felt dense.

Of course, you were very attractive, but there was something more to it than just that. Maybe it was the fact that just a month before, I had gotten out of a year-long relationship, and this was the first time I'd felt that someone was attractive. It was very small—what I felt—but I was feeling it nonetheless. Maybe it was the fact that you were wearing a cologne that smelled like the one my ex used to wear, but yours was somehow sweeter. Maybe it was that even though you were a stranger to me, you were an entirely *un-strange* stranger. I don't know—but whatever it was, it made the air dense.

I saw peripherally that you were reading something on your phone—a New York Times article maybe. I kept staring into the now incoherent words in my book (incoherent only because I was so distracted), but my eyes slowly crept to see your shoes. They were

brown oxford shoes, with beautiful curves. I could tell they were expensive, but not obscenely so. And they were practical, but not obscenely so (mine were obscenely practical). Yours were the shoes of a New Yorker.

I figured that you and I would just sit there, next to one another, quietly, until one of us had to get off the train. I didn't know if you felt the density between us, but I reasoned that you probably didn't. I was okay with that. I was okay with the idea of a wordless interaction on a train with a handsome stranger. It was the kind of story I could tell my friends when I got back home. I could later lament that I didn't say anything. For some reason, I found myself sitting there relishing in the fact that a few hours from then, I would regret not saying anything, but it would be a sort of glad regret. The sort of regret you tell people you have but don't *really* feel. If I had thought I'd feel real regret, I would have said something, but I knew there was a possibility I'd regret saying something more than I'd regret just sitting there in silence, so I opted for the silence, looking forward to my future regret.

And then the train halted, jerking everyone slightly. An announcement came over the intercom that there was going to be a delay due to technical issues. A collective sigh went over the passengers, sweeping through the density between us. I had closed my book when the announcement began, and after the announcement I checked my watch. You did the same—and then said, “So, are you going to be late now?”

I was surprised at the ease of your question. Your voice didn't sound how I thought it would. It was firmer than I imagined. It didn't really match your shoes, but I didn't mind that. “Probably,” I said. I did end up being late that day. In that moment I was disappointed that we were talking, I guess because that meant I could no longer

imagine what it would be like to talk to you. I could no longer wish I had said something—sometimes it's nice to just wish.

“You?” I asked back.

“Yeah, but I'm just meeting a friend, so it'll be fine. You on the way to work?”

“A meeting, yeah.” I was afraid the conversation would stop there. I didn't want it to. The only thing scarier than the fact that we had started to talk was the fact that we might stop. At that point, we were some of the only people talking on the train—a handful of other people had murmured to each other at the announcement, but no other strangers seemed to maintain their conversation. I wanted to, mostly because I couldn't bear the thought of sitting next to you in silence for the rest of the delay. A small interaction was worse than no interaction for some reason. “I'm actually from out of town, just here on business. This is my last day.”

“Ahhh, I wondered. Have you enjoyed your trip?”

“Yeah, I guess. It's been mostly work, but tonight I have a ticket to *Phantom of the Opera*.”

“Have you seen it before?”

“Once, when I was a little girl. The chandelier terrified me, but I loved the costumes. That's all I remember.”

“What made you choose that to see, then?”

“I don't know. Everyone seems to love it. And the chandelier can't be *that* scary now that I'm grown, right? Are you a fan?”

“I guess. I'm not a big theatre guy, but it is probably one of my favorites that I've seen.”

I didn't know what to say back. By this point, I had talked to you much more than I thought I would get to, and now a part of me wanted to leave it at that. My fear of the conversation ending had quickly turned into a fear of it continuing. There was no way out of this interaction for me where I didn't wish it had gone differently. I was afraid I'd say something dumb, and it would taint the whole interaction. But I was also afraid of a lull in the conversation, of us retreating back into silence.

I wanted to remember this as a simple interaction on a train with a very attractive—and mysterious—stranger. I wanted to plaster it like that into my memory.

But I don't think you have much mystery in you. You couldn't remain mysterious to me. While we talked, each time I felt like the conversation had come to a stop, you had more words. I was thankful for that, for your excess of words. Not everyone has an excess of words.

We ended up stopped there like that for more than an hour. You said it was the longest subway delay of your life, but that it felt like the shortest. You said a lot of subtly flirtatious things like that to me. I think I tried to say some back. I hadn't flirted in so long, and I didn't know if this was just friendly conversation on a train. I knew it really couldn't be much more than that. But it wasn't insufficient to me.

We talked about work. You told me that you were a hospice worker, which didn't surprise me. I remember thinking to myself, *I wouldn't mind dying while looking into his eyes*. The worst part is, I thought that seriously. It sounds like a joke—a flirtatious comment. But that wasn't what it was when I thought it. When I thought it, I could have sworn it was the most serious thing I had ever thought. It didn't even feel like I myself

was thinking it. As you became more familiar to me, my own thoughts became more strange.

We talked about family—our relationships with our parents, our siblings. You told me your dad had died when you were young. We talked about the best places to eat in the city, about our favorite music. It was like first-date talk, but without the pressure. At least, without most of the pressure. I still felt some, but the pressure in our conversation was welcome in a way it never is on first dates.

We also talked about relationships. I don't remember how that came up. I think you brought it up first; you told me you'd never been in love. For some reason, this prompted me to tell you what it felt like when Henry broke my heart. He and I had broken up once before, but that time I had done the breaking up, and we had only been together a month before I ended it. The second time, he did it, and we'd been back together for a year when he did.

I think I described it to you something like this: "I remember thinking that the feeling of him ending it was supernaturally familiar, like I had felt that before, and then I realized it is that surprising burn, like from a cup of coffee. You know when you think your coffee is cooled off enough to drink, but you sip it, and it burns your tongue? That surprise you feel? That burn that shouldn't surprise you but still does? That's what it feels like whenever I hear something about him or think something about him. Like I thought I've finally gotten over it, but somehow, I haven't. My friends all think I'm over it, I think. But I'm starting to wonder if I ever will be, if the coffee will ever be cool enough to drink."

After I told you that, I knew I probably wouldn't ever see you again. Up until that moment, I had a sliver hope that you'd ask for my number and we'd decide to try long distance. It was silly, the idea that we'd try long distance after just meeting in a subway delay. But up until that moment, that thought had been in the back of my mind. But when I found myself putting my heartbreak into words, I knew I subconsciously knew that you'd have to stay a stranger. Only a stranger can bear that kind of truth for another person, the truth that I hadn't yet had the courage to tell anyone else. Sure, you weren't a strange stranger, but you were a stranger nonetheless. And it was your stranger-ness that made me feel like I could say what I did.

I told you things I still have never told another person. Maybe you told me some, too—it seemed like maybe you did. I asked you what it was like to watch someone die, and when you responded, the words seemed new to you, like a gift you'd never given before. You said, "I don't really watch people die very often. It's more like they just die when I'm not there, and then I am told that they've died. And that, well it's kind of like the opposite of what you said about coffee. It's like waking up and thinking there's warm coffee in your mug and sipping it to find out it's cold. But not just the surprise of that, more so how that makes your insides feel. A chill where there should be a warmth. Not so much an emptiness—it's not like I've lost a part of myself. I suppose that's what it feels like for their families. But their death isn't like an absence for me necessarily, more like a different kind of presence. A cold presence that fills me from my throat to my stomach. A chill I can't shake for a while."

I guess I'll never know if you've ever described this feeling to someone else, but I doubt it. But maybe that's why we do it—why we tell strangers things—because they'll

never know whether or not those are things we've ever told anyone else. Because they'll never know that those secrets are secrets. And because even if that stranger doesn't keep it a secret, you'll never know.

Then the train eventually started moving again, our conversation slowed. My stop was the next one; I'd need to go immediately to get to my meeting, for which I was now most definitely late. The delay had given us permission to talk, but once it was over, something changed. The air was dense again.

When I stood up to get off at my stop, you said, "My name's Brady, by the way."

I hadn't realized that I didn't even know your name. Somehow, we'd been talking so long, sharing ourselves with each other, but we hadn't thought to share names until right at the end. I was glad to know to know your name—immensely glad to know it—but it felt weird. Like you were breaking a code we had. It was probably the least intimate thing I learned about you, but something about names feels so intimate.

I heard once that in England, people tell each other their names at the end of a conversation, and they only do so if they hope to talk again. I wonder if that's true.

"I'm Quinn. It was good talking to you, Brady."

But the thing is: my name isn't Quinn. I actually don't know anyone named Quinn, and I don't know why I told you a fake name. My real name is Anne, but the pseudonym just poured out of my mouth. Like a compulsion, almost. I couldn't help it, and I couldn't make sense of it. I wanted you to know me—I had let you know me more than I had let a lot of people close to me know me. But for some reason I didn't want you

to know me like that. I couldn't physically let you know my name because of everything else that you knew about me by that point.

“You too, Quinn.”

And then I got off the train. The sound of you saying my fake name echoed in my mind the rest of the day. “Quinn” in your voice played on repeat as I walked to my meeting. Truthfully, I think the main reason I regret telling you a fake name is because it meant that I didn't get to hear “Anne” echoing in your voice all day. I wish my real name could have played on repeat in your voice, but I won't ever know what that sounds like. I won't ever know what it feels like for you to actually know me; that might be for the best. But still, I wish that the final word of our conversation could have been you saying my name—my real name—the first and only time I'd ever hear you say it. I ruined that.

That night I did get to go to *Phantom of the Opera*. The chandelier still scared me—I guess I never grew out of that—and the costumes were still beautiful. There's a song in it called “Think of Me.” It's not a song about strangers. But as I sat in the plushy red seat in the audience—alone—for me, it became about you. You weren't really a stranger, after all. But you also were, that was the beauty of it. In the theatre that night, the gorgeous soprano voice sang, “Remember me, once in a while. Please promise me you'll try,” and I found myself tearfully hoping you'd try. But there was a pang of regret that even if you'd remember me once in a while, you'd remember Quinn, who wasn't really me. I wanted you to remember Anne, but I'd ruined that, for whatever reason. You'd remember my stories, but you'd never remember Anne. I suppose that's true of my memory of you, too, though. I remember your stories, and I fondly remember what it was

like to meet you, but I never even knew you enough in the first place to remember *you*. I can't even remember your face.

After the show, I rode the subway for a couple hours, just back and forth. It probably wasn't the safest thing for me to do. But I wasn't thinking about that. I just wanted to run into you again and tell you my name is Anne. It became so important to me that if you ever did try to remember me, you remembered Anne. And of course, I knew that you weren't going to be on the subway again, that late at night. You had no reason to, and even if you did, the chances of our paths crossing again were practically zero. But I had nowhere else to look for you. You were just Brady from the subway. And I needed to at least try to tell you my name.

Like I said, I've looked for you every time I've been back in the city. Not on the subway always, but often. But maybe it's best that I don't find you. Maybe it's best that you are the attractive man with a face I can't quite remember. There's an intimacy with strangers you can't find anywhere else, and I think it's best that that is the only intimacy we ever share. It's easier to cry in public when everyone there is a stranger—it becomes so much more embarrassing to cry when you know the people around you. Weirdly, I think I knew from the moment you sat down that I'd always look for you in the city from that day on, but never find you. I knew it even that night when I rode the subway back and forth. The fact of my looking for you is part of it.

You'll never read this letter—I have no way of getting it to you. And even if I did have a way to send it, I wouldn't want you to read it. That would ruin it—it would melt the clay of you I hold in my mind. It would ruin the comfort that some man named Brady

knows how I felt when I got my heart broken, and he's the only person who does. But it would be a way for me to tell you my name.

I never told anyone about meeting you. At first, I thought for sure I would tell my friends, but I never did. I guess I wanted it to be our secret.

Yours,

Anne (not Quinn)

II

Brady to Clark

Clark,

I want to apologize, first and foremost. Because things should not have been the way they were. This is a feeling I often have—this feeling that things should not be the way they are, or should not have been the way they were. Sometimes I feel it intensely over little things. Like the other day, I saw a woman’s grocery bag break while she was walking home, and her groceries spilled all over the street. I had a strong feeling of *that should not have happened*. Or sometimes when I’m walking and see a car that is damaged in one way or another—a large dent on the door, a missing bumper—I think that it shouldn’t be that way, there shouldn’t have been an accident that caused that damage. Other times I feel it over bigger things—watching the news, or reading sad memoirs chronicling childhood abuse. *Things should not be that way*. Big or small, it’s always the same feeling. But I never feel it as intensely as I do over my work. There’s an added gravity when it involves my work. And the strongest I’ve ever felt it over my work has been when I think of you and Celia. Things should not have been the way they were for you two. And they should not have been the way they were between the two of you and me. They just shouldn’t have.

I don’t know what it was about you and Celia that made me want to be your friend more than your employee. The first time I came by—just for an introduction—you offered me coffee. That wasn’t unusual; a lot of families of patients offer me coffee. But there was something about the way you poured the coffee that captivated me. You took

such great care with each step, yet you did so effortlessly. Effortless care—that’s what was so special about you, I think. You handed me a mug nearly overflowing with an ideally colored mix of coffee and milk, and you told me that you and Celia had gotten the mug in Sweden years ago, and I remember thinking that the mug from Sweden made the coffee taste better. Somehow it tasted Swedish—that was what I thought when I sipped it. I don’t even know what that means—I’ve never been to Sweden. But that was what crossed my mind as I sipped it. It was a heavy mug, I also noticed that when you handed it to me. When you were holding it, it hadn’t looked very heavy, but it was, and I felt it when I grabbed it from you.

Your home was bright. I noticed that the first day, too. I couldn’t quite put my finger on how you kept it that way even with all of Celia’s medical supplies. Usually, the homes I work in have lost their brightness. No number of windows can light up a living room that also holds a hospital bed. Sickness suffocates a home—but not yours.

I imagine that when Celia was well, she must have done the cleaning and decorating—the two of you were so traditional, so it must have been Celia who did those things. But when you had to do the cleaning, you did.

I noticed on that first day that every pillow in the living room was set with such care on the chairs and couch. When I arrived, Celia was sitting on the couch, but while we talked, she asked to move to the bed because she was feeling too tired to sit up on the couch. We moved her together, each lifting one side, so she didn’t have to bear her full weight. That was the first moment I felt how fragile she was; she didn’t look fragile—so many of my patients clearly look weak, but not Celia. But even though she didn’t look

sick, the sickness was getting to her, and I felt that when we moved her. That was the first moment I palpably understood why she was on hospice.

Once she was in the bed, you discretely re-fluffed the pillows on the couch where she had been sitting. She watched you do it. I remember thinking: *This is their routine*. For some reason that routine made me wince. For the first time with you two, I thought *things should not be this way*. Celia watched you fluff the pillows with a painful gratitude, like she was thankful you did it but devastated that you had to, pained by your duty to rearrange the pillows. Maybe I felt what I did because I was sharing in that small pain of hers.

That day was mostly filled with chat and introductions, which is usually how my first days are. We talked about how you two met—at a dinner party. You asked me if I had a girl—that was how you put it, which was funny to me—and I told you I didn't. The two of you immediately began scheming about who you could set me up with, if any of your friends had grandchildren my age. I learned right then that you didn't have children or grandchildren of your own, though you had always wanted them. Celia said to me, "It got to a point when we knew we weren't going to have kids. It wasn't a particular moment exactly, but a gradual acceptance of that fact. That was a sad gradual acceptance. The better thing to accept was accepting that Clark was really—really—all I would ever need. That one was happy."

Celia had a way of putting things that made everything sound beautiful. You did, too, but your gift for words paled in comparison to Celia's. There was an easiness to talking to both of you, especially when you were together. Usually when I meet patients and their families, they are all so overwhelmed with thinking about loss that there's no

room for them to talk about anything else. You were different—you both asked me a lot about myself. I wasn't used to that. The impending grief typically fills up every space, but not with you two. Looking back, maybe it was filling all the spaces, but you just kept somehow finding extra room to fill with other things. You wanted to know the answers to all the questions I sometimes get asked—if I have siblings, where I'm from, why I got into this line of work. But you also asked questions I'd never been asked before by clients—what the hardest loss on and off the job had been for me, if I believed in God, if I wanted to be a hospice worker forever.

On the subway home that day—the day I met you and Celia—I cried. It had been a long time since I'd cried over the job, and even longer since I'd cried in public. Every other time I have cried over my job, it has been over a death—a patient I loved finally passing away. Those tears come expectedly; they make sense. I'm certain there has never been a hospice worker who managed to avoid crying entirely. But this cry was different for me. It felt like the cry was happening to me, not like I was crying. I hadn't been expecting to cry. Not at all. But as I was thinking about how I was looking forward to seeing you and Celia again, I was reminded that every time I went back to see you, there was a chance it could be the last time. I cried because I was dreading the last time before I had even really been for a real first time, because I saw how much the two of you depended on each other, because I couldn't bear the thought of you without her (even though you were practically a stranger to me at that point). I cried because I felt that things should not have been the way they were.

As you know, from that day forward you two were on my rotation every afternoon. I usually came around 3:30 pm, scheduled to stay until 5 pm. After a couple weeks you invited me to stay for dinner one night. I think it was a Wednesday. I said yes, because it looked like you'd already made enough food for me, and I didn't want it to go to waste. I also thought it sounded nice—my typical night was a TV dinner alone. Then on that Friday, you asked me to stay again, and next week it happened again, and I started staying most nights.

The food that you made was always good. You did the cooking because Celia couldn't anymore, much like the cleaning. But you always credited Celia for the meals, saying you used her recipes and that she coached you through it. In fact, if I ever complimented your cooking, you always insisted that I compliment Celia instead because she really deserved the credit. You'd tell me that her notes in the cookbooks were the only reason any meal ever came together. She would always blush at this. Another painful routine the two of you had in those last few months.

Looking back, I never should have started staying for dinner. It's not against the rules of my hospice company, but I knew it was a bad idea. They tell us to keep a certain distance from our patients, and I know that is good advice. Even though it often feels like the biggest impact I have is on the living, I am really there to help the dying. Once the dying die, my job is done. I have to move on to a new patient; I cannot continue serving those who the dying leave behind. That's never easy, and it's never easy to remain detached from these situations, but it is necessary. I think it was especially difficult to remain detached from the two of you because I didn't want to.

I just couldn't say no to dinners with you and Celia, so I never did say no. I think Celia could have asked me to paint the whole house pink or run naked through Times Square and I would have said yes. About a month in, I realized I should probably stop agreeing to meals because it was building an unfair relationship with both of you; I was getting too close. But I kept staying. And for the record, I never stayed for dinner out of pity for you or for Celia. I was always afraid that's what you thought, but I never said yes out of pity. No, it was that I wanted to spend time with you. Genuinely wanted to. And I was concerned for both of you—more time meant more checking in.

The fact that staying was something I *wanted* was what made it all so much worse—at my core, it was selfish of me to stay with you two. I wasn't crossing boundaries because I felt bad and didn't want to say no, I was crossing them because I was selfish and because evenings filled with your company were so much more bearable than the evenings I spent at home. It even felt a little like you two were almost taking pity on me by inviting me. I needed an invitation like that. I was lonely. You'd think the living pity the dying, but maybe it's the other way around.

So, for two and a half months, I dined with the two of you. It flew by—really, it flew by. Those were my favorite nights. I looked forward to them, I scheduled my life around them. I once got invited to a birthday dinner for a friend—not really a close friend, but a friend nonetheless—and I told him I couldn't go because of work. When I told him that, I felt sick to my stomach. Not because I was lying to him, but because it felt wrong to call my meals with the two of you “work.” It was then that I realized the complete and utter allegiance I had to you and Celia. Not only would I choose dinner with you over dinner alone, but I'd choose it over my own friends, and I wouldn't feel

bad about lying to my friends, but I would feel bad about minimizing what those meals were to me.

There was one dinner when I told you both what it was like for me to lose my father. He died when I was a teenager—he got really sick. A hospice worker came to the house every day in his last four months. I saw how much my father appreciated her help and appreciated how she took some of the responsibility away from my mom and my brother and me. That was what made me want to go into this work. I told you that when I lost my dad it felt like there was an absence in every room. I told you about how I cried at school the first time they told us we needed to get permission slips signed because my dad always signed those. I had never told anyone that, not even my mom. Celia said to me, “Things should not have been like that for you. No boy should lose his dad when he’s that young.” I was stunned by this, stunned that she shared this feeling I had always so profoundly felt: some things just should not be the way they are. That was when I realized how many lines I had really crossed with the two of you.

Whenever I got there on Mondays, you’d always leave to go to the store for groceries for the week. You wouldn’t ever leave Celia alone, so you’d only go for groceries when I was there. Even then, you hated leaving her. I’ve noticed for a lot of my patients, leaving the house gives their families a breath of relief. When they’re gone, they don’t have to think about the sickness. They can leave death at home and go take a break. I think that’s a big part of my job—giving people a break. My presence allows a guiltless escape. I don’t provide care as much as I provide presence. * But for you, it seemed like

leaving did the opposite. Celia was your breath of relief; leaving meant facing the world alone, and that was what scared you most about her death, I think.

While you were gone at the grocery store, Celia and I would talk. I'd ask her about herself, and she'd ask me about myself. I loved these one-on-one conversations I got to have with her. When we talked, I noticed that almost all of her answers looped back to you. You were always her answer.

One of those days, she asked me what I thought happens when we die. I didn't answer her question, because I didn't have an answer, but I asked it right back at her. She said, "I don't know, but I've always loved surprises."

And I joked back, "Then why did you ask me? You wouldn't want to ruin the surprise."

"Being in on a surprise doesn't always ruin it," she said. Then she told me about a surprise party you threw for her years and years ago. She said that she'd never told you, but she had suspected something. She knew you were up to something, and that almost made the surprise sweeter. I don't really know what she meant by that, but I will always remember it.

"Are you afraid to die?" she asked me, with a quietness uncharacteristic of her.

"Honestly, no. Something about this work, I don't know what it is, but it has shown me how peaceful death can be. Painful, sure, sometimes. But peaceful. I guess I just feel equipped to die."

"I think I feel the same way. I'm just scared for Clark more than anything, I think." There you were in her answers.

The other thing that always happened on Mondays was that I would sneak Celia a Snickers bar. She had told me that she loved Snickers, but that candy bars had always grossed you out. She knew if she asked you for a Snickers, you'd get it for her. You'd do anything to make her happy, especially once she was sick. But she also would do anything to make you happy, too. Which was why she couldn't get herself to ask you for a candy bar, knowing how much you hated them.

When she explained this to me, at first I thought, *How sad that these two people, married for over fifty years, can't communicate effectively about a Snickers bar.* So, I started bringing her a Snickers bar every Monday. We'd split it in half. Every time I'd insist that she should eat the whole thing, and every time she'd insist that we split. Then, I'd take the wrapper with me so that you'd never find it. That became our painful routine.

It later hit me that it wasn't that you couldn't communicate about it, but that you each loved the other too much to try.

I wish I could remember what we ate the last night I dined with the two of you. I've been trying so hard to remember, and I just can't. I don't remember Celia seeming any worse that night than she did on any other night. I don't remember thinking that it was going to be her last. I was so thankful that her condition had remained generally stable over the time I'd been working for the two of you. I don't think you—or I, for that matter—could have faced her declining. But nonetheless, even without a clear physical decline, she had been getting closer and closer to dying. She wasn't declining, but she also wasn't getting any better.

I am rarely with my patients when they actually die. You'd think it would happen often—having someone die in my arms. But it doesn't. It's actually easier for me when they die while I'm there. I'm not sure why that is. Maybe it's that there is no surprise to it. I'm called in to help someone die, so it feels natural when I get to be there for the act of dying. Being there with them does give me peace. But most of the time I just receive a phone call from my supervisor that my patient has "expired." Would you believe that's the word they use on the phone sometimes? "Expired." Like milk. I'm sure some hospice workers like that language—there has to be a certain sterility to how you interact with your patients. It makes it easier. I get that. When you see death all the time, it can sometimes be nice to see it as something other than death. But I see our work as helping a person *die*, so the dying has to be part of it. Not expiring—*dying*. Those phone calls are never easy, and it doesn't make them easier for me when they say "expire." It's not about the words they use—it's about the surprise, the chill I get from the inside out.

When the phone rang with the call from my supervisor about Celia, I knew it was about her before I picked up. I saw the number flash on my screen, and I felt the stab in my stomach immediately. I don't know how, but I felt it. I had other patients at the time who seemed worse off than her, so it was more likely that one of them had died, but I just felt a complete dread as I answered because I knew it was her.

When the call ended, I realized how tightly I had been gripping the phone for the duration of it. My hand was sore. Then all of me felt sore. This is why it is not good to get too close to your patients or their families. This is why they warn us against building the kind of relationship I did with you two.

I came over to your house after Celia had died to help you pack up her medical supplies. This wasn't an unusual task for me—I usually use it as an opportunity to say goodbye to the families I work for, and say a final goodbye to the sick, who are, at that point, gone. But being in the space, even without them in it, is enough for me to say goodbye.

When I came to help clean up Celia's supplies, I knocked on the door. It had been a while since the last time I knocked at your apartment; I had gotten into the habit of just opening the door and letting myself in. You and Celia were always expecting me, and Celia had told me to just start coming in without knocking. But that day I knocked. I felt like I had lost the authority to open the door if Celia wasn't on the other side of it. It was no longer the apartment that I had walked into dozen of times—it was so different without her in it, even from the outside. Her absence made the door impossible for me to open, so I knocked.

When you came to the door, I could tell you'd cried the night before but not that morning. Your face looked intact, but there was an uncharacteristic redness to it and a hoarseness to your voice. You didn't ask me why I had knocked. You knew. When I walked in, I saw that you had already started packing up. You immediately got back to work, and I stood there at the entry of your living room, not sure what I could do. Suddenly you stopped and said, "I'm sorry. I meant to offer you coffee. Do you want some?"

"Sure," I said, mostly just because it meant you'd be doing something other than packing hospital bed sheets—sheets I could tell you'd washed the day before—into boxes.

You went to the kitchen and poured me coffee, taking great care with every step, just like always. But the effortlessness to your care was gone. It pained me to see how much effort it was taking you—pouring the coffee, getting creamer from the fridge. I realized then that without Celia, everything was going to require effort for you.

You handed me the coffee in the same mug you gave me that first day. You said, “Celia and I got that mug in Sweden.” I acted like you hadn’t already told me that. I noticed that the mug now looked as heavy in your hand as it felt in mine.

You told me about your trip to Sweden while you packed up the rest of Celia’s medical things. You had both told me about it before, and I couldn’t tell if you didn’t remember telling me or if you just needed something to talk about other than her absence. I just listened.

While I listened, I took a sip of the coffee. I was expecting it still to be hot, but I guess I had been listening longer than I thought without drinking, and it was cold. I once described a patient’s death like that—sipping cold coffee that you expected to be warm. Right then I wanted to break the mug. I wanted to break it for so many things: because Celia was gone, because I couldn’t stand seeing you without her, because I had knocked on the door, because I didn’t know who I was going to eat dinner with anymore, because you couldn’t tell stories like she could, because I shouldn’t have been staying for dinner so often in the first place. Because things should not have been the way they were. Of course, I didn’t break the mug. But sometimes I wonder if I should have.

Over those couple hours that we spent drinking coffee and getting things packed up, we didn’t talk about her death at all. We talked about her in a way that acknowledged

she was gone, but we didn't talk about her death. It was as though she was out running errands or on a trip. I felt the delicacy of death that day.

And at the end of those hours, that was when you invited me to the funeral. And that is mostly why I am writing, to apologize for saying no, and explain why. I guess I want you to know that it was not that I didn't want to go, but that I couldn't. I couldn't set a precedent for mourning my patients in that way. I mourn them, but not at their funerals. I mourn them gradually as I care for them, as I write evaluations of their health and discuss their condition with their families. So, in part, I said no for me.

But I also said no for you. I couldn't lead you on to believe I was going to be a part of your life without her. Again, it's not that I didn't want to be, but I couldn't. I was going to be assigned a new patient, my life was going to move on from the two of you. Again, it's about precedence. Attending funerals and maintaining relationships is not a precedent that I can set. I wouldn't be able to eat dinner with you every night when I wasn't already there for work. That just wasn't how my life was, and I was afraid going to the funeral would signal that I would try to continue the relationship. I carry a lot of burdens in my work, and even though dinner with you was never a burden, I thought it would become one eventually if I let it continue.

I can't explain why, but I was also afraid that if I said yes, you were going to tell me I was like a grandson to the two of you. You were probably never going to say that—I'd known you only for a couple months. You two had so many years of marriage before knowing me, and I was certainly blowing my role in your lives out of proportion. But I guess maybe that's what it felt like to me, that I was your grandson. I knew it was wrong that I felt that way, and I needed to distance myself from that feeling. My patients needed

to be patients, not family, and if I let you continue to feel like family, I was afraid no patient would ever feel like just a patient again.

I went out of town the weekend of the funeral, visited my brother in Chicago. I was afraid that if I was in town, I would end up going. For most patients, I don't even know the date of the funeral. I'm not invited, and I wouldn't go anyway. But for Celia, I had to be miles away to guarantee I wouldn't go. I guess I just want you to know that—know that it wasn't easy not to go, and that I'm sorry I couldn't, but that I know it was right.

I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you this, but I think it will help you understand: About a month after her funeral, I went to visit Celia's grave. This is something I had only done once before, in my five years of working in hospice. I visited the grave of my very first patient who passed. I hadn't been invited to that funeral. I think if I had, I might have gone because I didn't know any better. But I wasn't invited, so I decided to go to visit the grave a few days after the funeral. I bought flowers and sat at the grave and told the headstone about my new patients. I felt the weight of loss all at once at that grave, and that is why I had not visited another grave since that one, not until Celia.

I didn't buy flowers to go visit Celia's grave, because I bought a Snickers instead. Sitting there at the headstone, I split the Snickers in half, but then realized I'd have to eat both halves. So I did. I ate both halves of the Snickers bar, sitting there at her grave. I don't even really like Snickers; I had thought that once Celia died I'd for sure stop eating them forever. But I have actually eaten them a lot more since her passing—they taste like what it felt like to sit with her, and I miss that.

In total, I think I sat at her headstone for over two hours. It was a Saturday, I had nothing else planned that day. I told her about my week, about my new patients. I told her about my trip to see my brother. I told her about a girl I talked to on the subway. That girl had told me about her recent heartbreak, describing it as a burning surprise. I thought that was beautiful, and it reminded me of the way Celia used to be able to put things into words. I told Celia I wished I could put things as beautifully as she used to. And I told her that I missed her, that I was worried about you. That I was sorry for not coming to her funeral, but that I hoped she'd understand.

And when I was leaving that day, I saw you walking to her grave from the opposite direction. I don't think you saw me—we had parked in different lots, so you while I walked east to my car, you were coming from the south. You looked down as you walked, as though you were bowing your head to something or someone.

I watched you, from afar, as you knelt by her headstone. You had brought dinner to eat with her. I imagined that you told her how you missed the dinners the three of us used to have, but I know that you probably didn't tell her that. I still find myself making myself a main character in your life, even though I never was. I guess I wish I was, because if I had been a main character, if I hadn't just been a hospice worker, I might have been able to go to Celia's funeral. I'm so sorry that's not how things were.

I watched you for longer than I'd like to admit. There was something comforting to me, seeing the two of you together in that way. Once you had finished your dinner, you pulled something out of your pocket. I couldn't quite tell what it was from so far away, but I'm pretty sure it was a Snickers. You unwrapped it, and ate it, and I was so surprised,

but also not. Even in her death, you'd do anything for her, even what she didn't ask you to do.

I think I'm going to be taking some time off of being a hospice worker. It is a satisfying work, and I do love it. It has made me feel more peace about my own death, and that's almost why I need to quit. Being with the dying is calming, authentic, intimate, and loving. * But it is also difficult. I need to take a risk, to find a peace about life in the way I've found a peace about death. I also haven't been able to approach my work the same since Celia died. It's no one's fault, but it's the fact of the matter. But yeah, I am going to take some time off. I might even go back to school. I might never come back to this work. Maybe it's come time that this work, for me, is not how things should be.

I thought about coming up to you that day at the cemetery, to prove to you that Celia's death had meant something to me. That's what I was afraid of, that you would think her death meant nothing to me. No death means nothing to me, but especially not hers. But that would have defeated the purpose of skipping the funeral; it would have been a reentry point into your life, which I needed to avoid.

That's why I want you to know that this letter is not meant to be a re-entry point. It is meant simply as an apology, and also a bit as a thank you. Thank you for inviting me to dinners—and to funerals. I'm sorry I could only say yes to one—things should not be that way.

With Love,

Brady

III

Clark to Dani

To Savers' Management:

I would like to nominate Dani for employee of the month. When I came in for my groceries today, I saw a sign that said you take nominations for employee of the month, and I rushed right home to write this letter. I hope I'm remembering her name correctly—but I think Dani was the checker who helped me a couple weeks ago. I made a point to look at her nametag because I wanted to remember her name, but I didn't have my glasses. Dani sounds right though, and she looked like a Dani. She was the wiry blond girl. It was a Tuesday, and she told me she always works Tuesdays. That was probably why I had never seen her before—I usually come on Mondays. She had freckles. High school age. If Dani isn't the right name, then just know I am nominating the wiry blond high school girl with freckles who works on Tuesdays.

What you need to know is that my wife died a few months ago. We had been married 57 years. She was sick for a long time before she died, so it wasn't surprising. But it was terrible. Maybe it was so terrible because it wasn't surprising—it was a grief that lasted months, a grief that started before she was even gone, a grief that won't ever totally end. Maybe no grief ever really ends.

I haven't really known what to do with myself since she died. I've tried reading books—when she was alive, anytime I tried to read, she would just start talking to me, so I never made it very far in the book. So, I thought that without her maybe I would be able to finish a book. But I couldn't—I missed her interruptions too much. My missing her

interruptions was actually more distracting than the interruptions themselves ever were. And I've also tried watching TV, but I catch myself looking over at her now empty spot on the couch every time something funny happens because I used to love watching her laugh.

I have found, however, that cooking does distract me. It's the one thing I've been able to do since she died that doesn't leave me feeling despair. I went to the bookstore and got a new cookbook because it was too hard to cook anything from her old cookbooks. But I found that with a new cookbook, cooking really is an escape. I've just been slowly working through all the recipes.

When Celia's birthday rolled around—Celia was my wife—I knew it would be a hard day. Not only was it her birthday, but it was also the day we met. I knew I wanted it to be a bit more special than all these other days have been. So, I decided to cook something from one of Celia's cookbooks. I hadn't opened them since she died. She used to do all the cooking, right up until she was too sick to cook at all. Even then, when she had to stop cooking, she was still practically the one who cooked because they were all her recipes and her notes and she coached me through it.

She always hated how I chopped onions—I hadn't realized this until she was sick. But she would nag me about my onion chopping in her last months, and it struck me that up until she was bedridden, she had always chopped the onions for our meals. Whenever we had cooked something together that called for onions, she'd volunteered to chop them. I'd always assumed it was because she liked chopping them. But one day when she

nagged me, I asked her if she had been chopping onions intentionally all these years just because she didn't like the way I chopped them. She told me it was, and we laughed.

So, the morning of her birthday, I opened her old favorite cookbook for the first time since she died, and I found the recipe for her favorite peach-jam-glazed chicken breast. At the top of the page, she had written a list of different side dishes that paired well with the chicken. Seeing her handwriting pained me. She had written notes like these in all the recipes, so I knew I'd see her handwriting when I opened the book. But I didn't know how much it would hurt to see it.

I decided on green beans and rolls from her list.

Once I decided, I realized I didn't have any peach jam or any green beans. Everything else, I had. But for peach jam and green beans, I'd have to go to the store. So I got dressed, got in my car, and drove to the store. Once I'd parked and walked in, I realized I should have planned ahead and gotten green beans and peach jam the day before when I did my weekly shopping. This was going to be too hard. But I hadn't planned ahead, so there I was at the store on what was proving to be one of the most difficult days I have ever lived.

And I had known it was not going to be an easy day, but I don't think I had realized quite how difficult it would actually be. Right when I walked into the store, I saw birthday balloons. They were those really tacky looking ones—foily, with too many colors and ill-chosen fonts. Celia would have hated them—she always had a more muted taste, more minimalist. But I found myself aching for the ability to buy one for her. At the very least, it would have made her laugh, seeing me walk in the door with one of those

ridiculous balloons. I could picture it so clearly, her laughter, her saying, “You can’t be serious.”

I thought of the first of her birthdays that she and I spent together—the night we met. We met at a dinner party, Celia and I. One of my college friends, Marty, hosted dinner parties once a month with his wife. Celia was his wife’s cousin, and she had just moved to town, so they invited her on this particular night.

I never told Celia this, but when she walked in, it wasn’t like love at first sight for me. She always told me it was love at first sight for her, and it’s not that I didn’t immediately think she was beautiful—oh, she was so beautiful—but her beauty wasn’t what captivated me. There were plenty of beautiful women, so upon seeing her I didn’t immediately feel love at first sight. But as she talked, even as she just told us about the car trouble she had the previous week, she became so captivating to me. She always had this way of putting things beautifully, and it was the beauty of her words that made me fall in love with her. Love at first speech, I guess.

After dinner, we all went to the living room to have drinks and continue our conversation. Over dinner, we had mostly all been in conversation together, telling stories to the whole group. There were about 10 or 12 of us there, I think. When we moved in for drinks, we naturally split off into smaller duos or trios of conversation. I *knew* I wanted to talk more to Celia; by this point, she had completely captivated me. So I was careful to position myself close to her as the group migrated from the dining room, and luckily I found myself next to her, standing by the fireplace. Years later, she told me she had done the same thing—tried to position herself near me.

After just a few minutes of our talking, Karen—that was my buddy’s wife and Celia’s cousin—said loudly, “Wait a second! Today is the 7th!” And she turned to look at Celia. Celia blushed. “Is it your birthday Celia?” Karen asked.

“Oh, yes, it is. I didn’t want to make a fuss about it.”

There was a general uproar in the room, everyone surprised she had gone through all of dinner without bringing it up even once. I wasn’t surprised though. I could tell that she was not the type to demand attention. She was the type to earn it. I watched her as her blush grew redder at everyone’s fuss. Karen said that she would have made Celia a cake, of course, if she’d remembered.

Marty insisted that we all sing “Happy Birthday” to her. It was clear to me that she wouldn’t have ever asked for this honor, but that she didn’t necessarily mind it either. She didn’t mind attention at all, it was just that she wouldn’t ever ask for it. That was how she was all 57 years of our marriage. It was one of her best qualities, her comfortability with attention that was never twisted to be a need for it.

We sat her down in an armchair, gathered around with glasses raised, and sang her “Happy Birthday.” The whole time, she didn’t know what to do with her eyes, moving them quickly around the room, careful not to hang on anyone for too long. That is the tough thing about the birthday song when there is no cake: the person being sung to has nowhere to look when they can’t stare at the lit candles. All the singers know to look at the person whose birthday it is, but that person is lost without the cake. So, her eyes flew from person to person a bit desperately, but by the end of the song, they hung only on me. When I sang, “dear Celia,” her eyes locked on mine, and there they stayed.

After the song, there was laughter, and we all returned to our conversations. Except we had all shuffled around, and Karen cornered Celia in conversation, so I didn't get to talk to her any more that night. But the next day I got her phone number from Marty who got it from Karen, and I called her up the next week to ask her out on a date.

By the time her next birthday rolled around, she and I were engaged, and no one forgot about her birthday because I wouldn't let them. I threw her a surprise party, with decorations and cake. Actually, with two cakes, to make up for the first dinner party birthday I shared with her. From then on, for each of her birthdays there were two cakes. One always lemon—her favorite—and one that changed every year. Her birthdays were always happy, and for the most part, we were always happy too.

So, there I stood at the entry of the grocery store, thinking about all the birthdays I spent with Celia, stuck in this imagined moment between myself and my wife and one of those horrible balloons. People probably had to navigate their carts around me as I stood there motionless. I think I was just staring ahead with some blank look on my face. And I stood like that—practically catatonic—until Dani came up to me.

“Hello, sir. Can I help you find something?” she said, her voice gentle.

Her words snapped me out of it—out of the trance those balloons had put me in. But then I felt a tear rolling down my cheek. I hadn't even realized I was crying, and I don't know if she had realized it before she came up to me. I began to stutter a response, but I was distracted by the tear, and I had no words. I think that was when she noticed the tear, too.

“Oh my goodness, are you alright, sir?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I need peach jam and green beans.”

“Okay, can I walk with you to get them?”

She didn’t ask me if I was lost or if I couldn’t find them. I guess she knew I could find them, but that I was lost. She knew I needed company for that walk from the entrance to the produce section, and from the produce section to the jam aisle. I don’t know how she knew, but she did. Her offer was not the slightest bit patronizing, but it was an offer for exactly what I needed. I don’t know how some people can do that—offer others exactly what they need, especially when people don’t even know what they need.

“That would be very nice,” I told her. “Thank you.”

“Of course. What are you making?” she asked as we began to walk.

“An old recipe of my wife’s,” I told her. I hadn’t really talked about Celia in a while, not to another person. Most people had been avoiding the topic with me—my friends, my neighbors. Most people do that, they avoid hard things. It felt good to use the word “wife,” to use it in a normal way. To use it without “dead” in front of it or “passed away” after it.

“Is she a good cook?”

“She was. She was.”

What Dani did next amazed me. Most people here would focus on the loss, say sorry, ask how long she’d been gone. Some people are even bold enough to ask how she died—can you believe that? But Dani, Dani somehow knew that I couldn’t talk about losing her. Maybe she had put it together from the fact that I cried when I walked into the store, but she knew that I couldn’t talk about her death.

“Was this recipe one of her favorites?” she asked. It was seamless, the way she asked it. I was stunned. She was giving me a chance to talk about Celia, about the good parts of her life. About her *life*, not the *end of her life*. By now we were in the produce, by the green beans. I pointed to the ones I wanted, she picked them up for me. We did the shopping and the walking like this, without words about which one I wanted or where we were headed, so that all my words could be spent on Celia.

“It was. Peach-jam-glazed chicken with green beans and rolls. I have most of the stuff for it at home, but I decided on this recipe this morning, so I was missing a few things.”

“What made you decide to make it today, if you weren’t planning on it?”

“Today is my wife’s birthday.”

And I don’t know what I expected her to do next. That isn’t the kind of socially acceptable thing a widower should say to a young teenage grocery store employee who has been kind enough to walk him around the store and help him find what he needs after finding him crying by the birthday balloons. But it also probably helped things make sense to her.

There was a pause because she didn’t quite know what to say next, I think. So I found myself asking, without giving it a second thought (though I should have), “Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?”

Thankfully, Dani somehow knew I didn’t mean that to be creepy. It sure was a creepy thing for me to ask—an old man alone in the grocery store, asking the young clerk to dinner. But she could read me, she could tell it was only loneliness that was driving

me. By that point, I think it had been only loneliness driving me for a while. Still, though, she couldn't come over for dinner. She knew it and I knew it.

“Oh, that is very kind of you. I don't think I can though,” she said. She didn't offer a reason and she didn't need to. As soon as I had asked it, I knew it had been inappropriate. I think she saw me struck by its inappropriateness.

“Of course, of course,” I said. “I didn't even really mean that. I just, I just love the idea of sharing this meal with someone, and you've been so kind to me.” I held the apology in my eyes as I looked at her, and then retreated back to looking at the jam.

“I really haven't done much. And I'm sure you could find someone to eat with. Maybe rather than trying to find someone who has been kind to you, you could find someone who needs some kindness of their own.”

I didn't know what to make of this. It was really wise, but she was so young. I didn't usually think of the young as being wise. But I realized, sharing with another lonely person certainly would ease my loneliness. Showing kindness to someone else—it would be a selfish kindness, but it would be kindness. “I think you might be wiser than me,” I told her.

“Definitely not. I just think there's something good about loving things, and there's something even better about sharing your love of things. It sounds like you love cooking, and I am sure if you shared that, you would feel less lonely. And who better to share with than someone else who might be lonely?”

“What do you love that you share?”

“Ed Harker,” she said in a joking tone. “The singer. I just love him—and I love talking about him. It's silly, but it's the first thing that comes to mind.”

This was when it really struck me that this girl is just a teenager. But a wise one.
“Maybe I’ll listen to some of his music.”

“You should,” she said with a slight giggle. Then she paused and added, “Say, did you wife like cake?”

While we walked up front to a checkout line, I told her about how we always got two cakes for Celia’s birthday. At the line, she told me she had to go. I told her thanks, and she walked away.

I stared at the conveyor belt as it moved my jam and beans toward the checker. Up to that day, I think I’d felt like I was just moving along on a conveyor belt ever since Celia died. Inching slowly forward, but not doing it myself. I felt like nothing more than jam and green beans. But that day was the beginning of me feeling like more.

After I checked out, as I was leaving the store, Dani ran to catch up to me. She handed me a bag, and in that bag were two cakes from the grocery store bakery. They were both lemon. “Sorry, they were out of all the other flavors. But I’ve always liked lemon.”

“So did my wife. It was actually her favorite.”

I didn’t go home and make dinner. I don’t know why not. Instead, I went out to my car in the parking lot, sat there, and ate the cake. It must have been about 5 pm when I started eating. I stayed there, watching people go in and out of the store, until 7 pm when I saw Dani leaving the store.

I was finishing up one of the cakes—I don't know how I ate that much cake in one sitting. And Dani saw me. And she came up to my car. "Why haven't you gone home yet?" she asked earnestly as I rolled down my window.

"I'm not sure. I don't think I realized how long I've been sitting here."

"Do you have a way to listen to music in your car?"

"Oh yeah, a friend of mine had his grandson help me figure out Bluetooth."

"Great, can I cue a few songs for you to listen to? I'll cue Ed Harker, that singer I mentioned."

"That would be great."

"That way you don't have to drive home alone, you can be with Ed." She laughed after saying this, I think partially just to prove to me she was joking. I could tell she wasn't totally joking though, and I appreciated that. I appreciated that she could balance between a joke and a serious thought.

I handed her my phone and she cued a few songs. She handed it back to me, and told me that when I hit play the first song that would play is her favorite song by Ed.

"Thank you," I said. "For all that you've done for me today."

"Of course," she said. "Happy birthday to your wife." And then she walked away.

So, I hit play on my phone and started to drive home. The song played, something called "Photo Album." I've listened to it several times since that night, and each time I like it more and more. At my age, I'm not really one to listen to new pop music. Modern music just doesn't hit my ears the way it is supposed to, I think. But this song sure does.

In the chorus Ed sings, "You're the home I can't return to, but I'll hold the photo album close." As far as what the whole song is about, I'm not really sure. Or at least, I'm

not really sure what it's about for Ed. But for me, it is completely about Celia. It hadn't struck me until I heard that line, but I think that's why I hadn't wanted to drive home, why I sat in your parking lot for so long eating cake by myself: because I couldn't really return home. Celia had been home. I wasn't driving home anymore, I was driving to my apartment. That was sad, but it was true, and it felt good. It felt good to feel truth, even in a pop song recommended to me by a teenage grocer.

Since that night, I have started inviting neighbors over for dinner. I live in an apartment complex, so there is no shortage of neighbors. I've also started reaching out to old friends and looking into how I can get connected with people who need a meal so I can cook one for them, too. All in all, Dani's advice that maybe my loneliness can be cured by helping someone else's has stuck with me. For a teenage grocer, she was wise.

I have only been to the store on Mondays since that day, because I've found that Dani doesn't work Mondays. I am a bit embarrassed about how I conducted myself that day. Even though I would love to see Dani again, I don't want her to feel at all burdened to show much such kindness a second time. She did a lot for me that day—a lot more than just helping me find green beans and jam.

Celia will, for the rest of my life, be the home I can't return to. I sometimes make dinner and bring it to her headstone just so I can feel like I am eating a meal at home. But as long as I live without her, I am really just holding photo albums. But I guess in some ways I am now trying to build other homes with other people—as my loneliness is cancelled out by other loneliness, I find other homes. If homes are found in people, than we can surely each have more than one home.

On that day I met Dani, once I got home, I put the cake that I didn't eat in the freezer. I figure, maybe I can eat it next year on Celia's birthday. Maybe I can eat it with friends, celebrate her with some of the other people who I make home. Isn't that something they do sometimes with wedding cake—the couple freezes a slice to eat on their first anniversary? If they can do it, I don't see why I can't. And sure, I could just get a new cake next year, but I love that this one is from Dani. I don't know if I'll ever see her again, but I can hold onto that cake from her for a little longer.

So, please, make Dani your employee of the month. She is kind, wise, and patient. She knows where all the groceries are, and she seeks out people who need help (not just help finding groceries, but help in general). She was, in some ways, a home to me on that day. And sure, she might have a bit of an obsession with Ed Harker, but I think I do, too, now.

Gratefully,

Clark

IV

Dani to Ed

Dear Ed Harker,

I'm not sure if you'll remember me, but I hope you do. We met at your most recent meet and greet in New York. I was the blond teenage girl wearing a green dress and combat boots. I wore that dress because you mention a green dress in one of your songs. That seemed like a good way for me to show you I was a big fan without wearing a t-shirt with your face on it. We briefly talked about what inspires you to write your songs. Hopefully some of this rings a bell, but if not, that's okay. I just wanted to say thank you for that meet and greet. Not everyone gets to meet their idols, and I still can't believe I got to meet you. But ever since we met, I haven't been able to shake this unsettled feeling. I think it must be because I didn't get to tell you everything that I wanted to tell you, which is why I am writing. There was more I wanted to say when we talked, so here I am. I guess you could say I'm writing to finish our conversation.

Let's go back to the beginning of me loving you. The very first time I heard one of your songs was after my cousin gave me your album—your first release—for Christmas. Every Christmas, we do a gift pool so that we don't have to buy presents for everyone in the family. That year, my older cousin Lindsey had me, and she thought I'd like your music. I was at that middle-school age where I just wanted to be older than I was, when I would have done anything to make myself seem more mature. Listening to your album had that effect on me. Part of the reason it made me feel older was simply

that Lindsey had given it to me. She was a teenager at the time, so her gifting the album made me think that teenagers were probably listening to your music. I think the other part of it was that you were singing about things I was very far from understanding, like love and heartbreak. They were things I really wanted to understand but didn't. They were the kind of grown-up emotions children look forward to.

I think I was 12 at that time, and I had definitely never experienced love or heartbreak. I guess I still haven't, unless you count when I found out you were dating Kendall Jenner. I cried that night—cried and put on your first album and listened to “Never Together” because I think it is your saddest song. I would even argue it is one of the saddest songs ever. For some reason I feel betrayed whenever I hear you are dating someone new. In my head, I know you're not mine and never will be, but in my heart, I guess I feel like you do belong to me somehow. Like because I belong to you, you must belong to me, too. I guess I feel like if you knew me you would fall in love with me; I already know I love you.

To really explain to you what you mean to me, you need to understand what school has been like for me. I've never been very popular at school. I have friends—please don't think that I don't have friends—but I just don't have very many of them. My friend group consists of four girls, and I love them all, but not a single one of us is a “popular” girl. None of us have ever had boyfriends, only one has had her first kiss. We just aren't the popular girls, and that's okay. But it does make life a bit more difficult.

I don't particularly look forward to going to school because of this lack of popularity. I imagine that if I was popular, school might be fun. School might even be an

ego boost for me if I was popular—it might even be fulfilling. But without popularity, it is a neutral space to me. I don't get bullied really, so it's not negative, but not positive either. It's where I go to learn, and see my friends, and worry about whether or not what I'm wearing is cool enough, and attempt to look pretty for whatever boy I have a crush on (none of them are as good as you though). School is a place where I just try to get by, and usually I do.

I think—at least on some level—I'm known at school as the girl who is obsessed with Ed Harker. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing, but it certainly doesn't make things easier on me. Whenever you release new music or your name is in the news, people always ask me about it. They'll mention it to me casually as though I have some special authority on the subject: "Hey, I listened to the new Ed Harker song. It's really good." I guess I do have some sort of special authority. Like I said, I do feel like I know you. And I've always watched every last interview of you, so I can usually tell people fun facts or give them an idea of what you've said about a given topic. I think that's the part of this reputation that I love—the part where people assume I have a special authority on you, the part that spurs conversations about you with people I wouldn't normally talk to. The part that draws people to me, from time to time.

The part I don't love as much is the whispers about me that I know must be out there. Once when I went into the locker room after P.E. to change, I heard someone behind a row of lockers saying, "Well she's just *so* into him, ya know? Like not just his music, *him*. It's kinda weird, right?" I hung there, hoping that the second girl would not confirm what the first had said, but of course she did. She agreed passionately that my passion for you was weird. I slipped out of the locker room silently so that they wouldn't

know I overheard, and I stood in the hallway, still in my gym clothes, taking a deep breath.

I didn't quite feel like crying—I wasn't going to let something like that make me cry. But I probably could have cried. I think if one of my friends had seen me standing there against the wall, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, and she asked me what was wrong, I would have started crying. I had that almost-cry feeling where you know you're going to full-on cry if anyone asks you what's wrong. A dam that's about to break, but only if someone takes the time to speak kindly to the dam. So, yeah, that's the bad part of this reputation—the part where people say things about me behind my back that almost make me cry. I don't mean to seem crazy, but I guess I still do. That's the part of this obsession that pushes people away from me.

Sometimes I wish I was more capable of subtly loving things. For some reason, when I love something, I just *really* love it. It consumes me. It happens with everything. When I discover a food I like, I eat it everyday until I tire of it. When I watch a movie I like, sometimes I will watch it again that same day just to get more of it. Then I will watch cast interviews, read articles about it, sometimes even search for fan fic. If I read a good book, I will go on to read every other book by that author. I am not a casual lover of things, which is why I guess I am not a casual lover of you. I just don't know how to do it. I think it's mainly that I don't understand how love can be casual at all. If there's anything I've learned from listening to your songs, it's that love, when it is actually love, cannot be casual. And I guess that's why I love you so intensely.

Weirdly enough, I think there was a time when I was *almost* popular, and it was because of you. In middle school, when we all wanted to be older than we were, it was cool to be a non-casual lover of you. Everyone talked about you the way I still do, everyone had posters of you in their locker, everyone discussed your talk show appearances together. And then somehow it quickly became uncool; it became the kind of thing that girls whisper about in the locker room. I didn't get the memo when it became uncool, and I guess that's what sealed my fate. But for a little while there, I thought my love of you was going to make me popular. Like the inverse of that almost-cry feeling, I had a feeling of almost-joy.

Here's how it happened: I had a conversation with Marley, one of the popular girls, about you once. We talked about how we both feel like we know you, even though we don't. We talked about how we each read your tweets obsessively. I have notifications on so that every time you tweet, I see it right away. I really admire how open you are on Twitter—and other social media sites—because it makes me feel like I know you. And that's what Marley and I started to bond over in between classes: how we both felt like we knew you. We would talk about what you wore to different red carpets, gossip about your dating life rather than the dating lives of our peers, send each other memes about you. That's what really made me feel like I was maybe going to become popular: that Marley would text me after school.

Then summer hit—the summer between 7th and 8th grade—and I didn't see much of Marley. We texted here and there, but it died out by July. I ran into her at the pool once in late July and we talked, but it was brief. I felt like popularity was slipping through my fingers, but I had hope that when we got back to school, we'd get back to the

same place. You had an album scheduled to come out that August, and I could not wait to talk about it with her. And it was more than just a desire for popularity that made me want to talk about it with her; I also just enjoyed doing so. I valued her opinion on your lyrics, trusted what she had to say about your dating life or fashion choices.

But when we got back to school—a week before your album was scheduled to come out—I asked her at lunch if she was excited, and she said, “Oh, I didn’t even realize he had new music coming out! I guess I’ve kind of outgrown my Ed Harker obsession, ya know?”

What she said wasn’t mean, necessarily. It wasn’t outright rude, and she didn’t call me any names. But I think it would have made less of a cut if it had just been mean. If she had just been outright rude and called me a name. It would have been easier to swallow cruelty than it was to swallow this comment. This comment was just so casual. It is one thing to be a casualty of something grand, but here I was, a casualty of the casual. How could she not have even *realized* you had new music coming out? Looking back, I’m sure she had realized it. I’m sure she was planning on listening to it in secret when it came out. But I guess she had a social savvy that I lacked. She could sense that it was soon going to become uncool to love a celebrity as much as we had both loved you. She knew that it was wise to tone down how much she talked about you, to stop looking at your Twitter while at school, to not post about your new music videos when they came out. She knew something I didn’t—really, that’s the line between the popular and the unpopular, isn’t it?

That day I lied to Marley and told her I had mostly outgrown the obsession, too. I said that I only knew about the album because my mom had said something to me after

hearing about it on the radio. It was a painfully stupid lie—one that she could easily have called out with one look at my locker which still contained a poster of you. It was the most foolish kind of lie. But I told it anyway.

You do a lot of growing up in middle school; more than I think people give middle schoolers credit for. But some people do the right growing up, and some people do the wrong growing up. Evidently, loving you and then outgrowing it was the right growing up to do. But I don't ever want to outgrow my loves. Sure, they may change, but I never want to completely outgrow them. I don't think I will ever grow up enough to be a casual lover of things—or to be casual enough to hurt people with comments like Marley.

I work at a grocery store, and sometimes they have me restock the tabloid magazine that sit at the checkout. Usually I do this late at night, when we are almost closed, because most of the lines are clear for me to do it then. Whenever you are on the cover of one of the issues, I take a second to read whatever it says about you. I have to do this quickly so that my boss doesn't notice. But it's important to me to do this. After skimming the article, I can usually tell when they've just made it up and when it's true, just because I know you. I know what you would and wouldn't do. Thus, I know what you've done and what you haven't done.

For instance, I know you would never break up with someone over text—I'm certainly all those articles about you and Kendall's breakup were simply rumors. And if I deem an article fake, then I restock the issues backwards so that people can't even read the headlines. In this small way, I feel like I protect you somehow. Not that you need my protecting, but I like to imagine that there is something small I can do for you in return

for all that you've done for me. On the other hand, if I deem the headlines real—especially if it says something about you winning an award or releasing new music or wearing a great red carpet look—then I restock each magazine with great care. I am careful not to bend the pages. I place them in the most visible shelf. And this is the small way I do you a favor. Again, not that you need a favor from me, but I often feel like you deserve one.

So that was one thing I wanted to tell you when I met you, I wanted to tell you about how I try to curate the magazine headlines that customers at the grocery store see. I also wanted to tell you about an interaction I had recently with an old man at the grocery store. I haven't seen him since, but I've been wanting to. The day I met him, I found him crying at the entrance of the store; I didn't notice the tears until I approached him. At first, I just thought he was standing there and that maybe he was lost. That's why I went up to him at first. But once I realized he was crying, I wanted to try to make him feel better. I walked with him through the store, and I found out that it was his wife's birthday—his dead wife. I didn't really know how to deal with his grief, so I just tried to treat him normally and kindly. I really wanted to make him feel better. I asked him to tell me about her.

I left him at a checkout line and went to get him two cakes. He had told me that he and his wife always used to get two cakes for her birthday—some kind of inside joke. All we had left was lemon, so I grabbed two of those, bought them, and caught him on his way out to give them to him. He seemed really appreciative.

When I left the store at the end of my shift—several hours later—I saw him sitting in his car. He had told me he planned to go home and make dinner (he had come to the store for a few last-minute ingredients), but there he was, in his car. It looked like he had eaten a whole cake. I knew I didn't need to go talk to him, but I felt really compelled to. So, I went up to his car, and we talked, and our conversation ended with me cueing three of your songs for him to listen to on the way home. The first one I cued was "Photo Albums." I guess I thought maybe the lyrics would remind him of his wife; she's like a home he can't return to. Later, I became afraid that that might have made him too sad. After the fact I wished I hadn't cued that particular song.

But then, last month I actually won employee of the month, and it was because of a letter he wrote about me. In his nomination, he specifically said he liked that song. Your words are so versatile.

I've been asking myself why I didn't tell you any of this when I met you. Looking back, when I met you, I think what made it hard was how sterile and mechanical the whole thing was. It was a well-run machine, which makes a lot of sense, given how many people there were to meet you. But it made me feel a bit like a cog in a machine—I was in and out of the meet and greet so fast. It was efficient, but at a cost.

I guess meeting you kind of shattered my fantasy. It was a harsh reality check. You were nice during the meet and greet, of course you were. But it was just so quick that it was disappointing. And your interest in me was only as long as my allotted three minutes. And you didn't say anything about my green dress—the one I wore as a subtle reference to your song. That was a very unfair expectation for me to have, that you'd say

something about the dress. But I had hoped that you would. And when we took pictures, they were so rushed—and they only allowed one pose per person. I had actually planned three poses. I wish I had picked one of the other ones because I feel like I look awkward in the one I went with. But then again, I probably would have felt that way no matter what.

After my time was up, it felt like I was immediately whisked to the door. I understood why, but it just felt sad, I guess. I had such expectation for the meet and greet—I had a countdown going; each morning when I went downstairs for breakfast I would tell my mom how many days were left until I got to meet Ed Harker—and then it was just over. Months of anticipation had culminated to roughly three minutes in a cold room with a man who was pretty nice. Honestly, the whole thing made me feel a little foolish. I, of course, knew that you weren't going to suddenly fall in love with me or tell me that you wanted to spend more time with me; I guess I don't know what I expected more than what I got. But I do know that I did expect more than what I got, and I think it's just because I thought I'd get to tell you more about what you mean to me.

We got one good picture at the meet and greet, which I have had printed and framed to hang in my room. Every time I look at the picture, it reminds me of that song, "Photo Albums." I love that song. When I see that picture of you hanging on my wall, it makes me think of that line: "You're the home I can't return to, but I hold the photo albums close." Because the way I used to imagine you, you were like home. The words that you write and sing are carved into my consciousness; I find myself singing along to your music sometimes when I don't even realize I'm doing it. I've been a fan of yours for so long that it would feel unnatural to say any other name when someone asks my

favorite singer. You have always felt so familiar to me, which is why I think you feel like home.

But honestly, ever since the meet and greet, you've felt less like home. And it's not that you did anything wrong when I met you—you were perfectly kind, polite, engaged. But you shattered what I had imagined in some ways, I guess. I had always imagined that you'd take a special interest in me if we met, and that didn't happen. Realistically, I know that was foolish of me, but it was just what I thought to myself. Again, you didn't really do anything wrong, I think I had just built up my expectations too high.

So, ever since that meet and greet, you've felt more like the "home I can't return to." You can't be for me what you were before I met you. Which is probably why I have been holding that photo so close. Maybe I finally get that song.

When I started writing this, I guess I thought I just wanted to tell you about the grocery store magazines and the old man. I thought that this unsettled feeling I've had since the meet and greet is just because there were things I left unsaid. But maybe it really goes back to the fact that you weren't nearly as familiar as I thought you'd be. Maybe it's that I have loved you a little less ever since I met you, and that is probably best. Reality has made me a casual lover of you in a way. I'm not sure reality always crushes expectation, but it often does—that was my lesson here. The real world is built for people who love casually.

I felt like I knew you until I met you and realized I didn't. I felt like meeting you would change my life until I met you and it didn't. And none of this is a bad thing, I don't think. I think it's best. But surely, it's not easy to admit.

I feel less unsettled now.

With Love,

Dani

V

Ed to Frances

Frances,

You might not even keep up with me or my work anymore, but just in case, I wanted to send you a letter. If you listen to my newest interview—on a podcast called “Digging Deeper”—you will hear that I talk about you. I didn’t want this to catch you off-guard because I know how you always hated surprises. It’s a really brief part of the interview, but still, I thought it would be worth reaching out. I have also just been wanting to reach out to you recently, so here I am. It’s been too long since we last talked.

My publicist always requests a transcript of interviews that are coming out to approve before release—we arrange for this in a contract before we even record. I’ve never been all that great at this PR stuff (maybe you’ll remember that one interview where I accidentally spilled the beans about J-Lo and A-Rod’s breakup...that was a nightmare for my publicist). Of course, for live interviews this transcript thing isn’t possible, but any time it is possible, a transcript is requested so that it can be reviewed before the episode comes out. If there is anything undesirable in it, we request that it be edited out.

On one hand, this is really nice. It means I can speak a bit more freely in the interview. But on the other hand, it makes me feel a bit ridiculous. First, because I think it makes me seem like I’m not mature enough to simply speak for myself. It is as though I’m a child who needs to be coached and censored. And second, it makes me feel ridiculous because it is a reminder to me of just how famous I am. Most of the time, I

can, to a degree, block out how famous I feel. I don't particularly like fame, so most of the time, I try to forget about it. But when I'm reminded that someone has to read the words I say before they become public, it makes me realize that I do have a wild amount of fame. The fact that someone has to pour over my words before they come out means that someone else is—or a lot of someone elses are—going to pour over them once they *are* released.

But I am not writing you simply to tell you how I feel about this bizarre practice of reviewing transcripts. I am writing because I mention you in this particular interview. I'm sure that is not something you'd anticipate, so I wanted to give you a heads up and a chance to approve the transcript. I know we haven't talked in a really long time, so I just didn't want to catch you off guard. This may be the one time I'm actually really thankful that a transcript was requested.

My publicist has reminded me (many times) that fans will probably try to seek you out from this interview since I used your real name. Only your first name, but it is your real name. If you don't want that attention, I will have them bleep out the name or something. I can even have them take my whole mention of you out altogether, if you'd like. Just let me know what you are comfortable with, whatever it is. My intention in this is truly not to drag you into something you don't want to be dragged into.

Here the portion of the transcript that includes you:

INTERVIEWER: So, what were you like growing up?

ED: Oh, shy. I mean, I wasn't the shiest kid in class or anything, but I was far from the class clown.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. And how did you go from shy to singing sensation?

ED: Hmmm. I think it had something to do with Frances.

INTERVIEWER: Frances?

ED: She was a friend of mine when I was a kid. She lived down the street; our mothers were friends. We grew up together, I mean, and she was far from shy. I think some of that rubbed off on me, thankfully.

INTERVIEWER: How do you mean?

ED: I don't really know. I guess she always just drew me out or something, and eventually, I was drawn out even when she wasn't there. She, like, made me more loudly myself, and after a while, I didn't need her in order to be loudly myself.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have an example of this?

ED: Hmmm, yeah. Like, when we were kids, she used to get all the neighborhood kids together for talent shows. I would have never thought that sort of thing was fun, like I never would have suggested that to do on a summer afternoon. But just because I wanted to play with Frances, I always did them. There were never winners to the talent shows, but after they were over, she'd always tell me in secret that she thought I had won. Little things like that, I guess, made me more confident. And not only was she the one who instilled confidence in me from that young age, but she was the reason I wanted to be more confident in the first place. Because I wanted to be more like her.

INTERVIEWER: Are you still in touch with her?

ED: No, no. I'm not really in touch with many people from home. I wish I was though.

INTERVIEWER: When would you say you fell out of touch with everyone from home?

And why?

ED: I was just busy, I guess, once I moved out to Nashville. Distance is hard on relationships—we all know that. None of my relationships could bear it, I guess. For a little while they could, but not for long.

INTERVIEWER: Not even Frances?

ED: Not even Frances. She came to visit me once in Nashville, the first year I was here. I remember playing my first album to her and getting her thoughts. She told me she loved it, and I felt like a little boy who'd won one of her talent shows. In a way, I think that was what gave me the confidence to release the album; before I had her stamp of approval, I was really nervous about the whole thing. We grew up together, and she's always been like a sister, so her approval really meant a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Are any of your songs about Frances?

ED: Oh, you know I'm not big on talking about the inspiration for my songs. Some things are better kept secret.

INTERVIEWER: It can be a secret between you and me...and all of my listeners. Don't worry, we're good at keeping secrets.

ED: I don't know...

INTERVIEWER: Just this once?

ED: I don't know if I should say this.

INTERVIEWER: You should.

ED: Well, there is one about Frances. “Photo Albums,” off my first album. It was the first one I wrote for it, actually.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that is my *favorite* from that album. Wow, Frances must be very special to you. Heck, I’d even say she’s special to *me* because of how much I love that song.

ED: **nervous laughter** Yeah, that has always seemed to be a song people are drawn to. I feel like it’s because everyone sees someone different in it. Like, I got a letter from a fan recently, and she told me that she recommended that song to a man she’d met who just lost his wife. I hadn’t ever thought about the song in that way—as though it was about grief over a death. But I listened back to it and realized just how much sense it makes in that context.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, that’s incredible. What is the meaning you intended in the song?

ED: See, that’s something I’d actually rather not say. I don’t want to ruin it for anyone by putting a stamp on it that implies there’s a certain way to listen to it. Because there’s not.

INTERVIEWER: Fair enough. Do you find that a lot of your inspiration comes from real people in your life? . . .

And from there the conversation became more broad. I inserted my nervous laughter into the transcript—that’s not something they typically include on the written transcripts they send, even though it is something that often makes its way into my interviews. For the rest of my interview, we talked about my songwriting in general, talked about what inspired my upcoming album, talked about if I write melody or lyrics

first. You didn't come up again, which I was thankful for, but you were on my mind the rest of the interview. After the mention of you, I sound a bit more distant throughout the whole thing. Almost like your name is still on my lips, like I want to say it again but can't. Like it was weighing down all the rest of my words because I just wanted to talk about you more.

After the interview, I realized that I have never even told *you* that song was about you. I guess I always thought that if you ever listened closely to it, you'd be able to tell. In fact, I guess I always thought that you must have realized it when I first played it for you on that trip you took to visit me in Nashville. But, in retrospect, I guess there's a chance you have no idea it's about you. So, I want to explain.

I know the song sounds like a love song. I'm sure that many listeners will think that just because it's about you, that means I must be in love with you—or at least, when I wrote it, I was in love with you. But that really wasn't what I thought when I wrote it. You've always been like a sister to me more than anything, so it's a love song in that way, but not in the romantic way that most people probably interpret it.

It was one of the first songs I wrote for that album. I actually wrote it on the plane to Nashville when I moved. I don't know if you remember, but I moved a week after we graduated high school. I was always pretty amazed at the fact that we remained friends all through high school. I mean, I know that we weren't as close in high school as we had been as kids, but I was always so thankful that we remained friends. With you cheerleading and me in choir, we were bound to find other friends who better fit us, but you were always a comfort to me, and I was always glad we still had a relationship all

through high school. Even if we weren't the best of friends, it was special to me. You were always special to me.

On the plane to Nashville, I found myself missing home. I had hardly even left home, so I suppose it was strange I was already missing it. But the move hadn't really felt real until I was on that plane, by myself, with just three suitcases, a backpack, and a guitar case to my name. For whatever reason, my missing home quickly turning into just missing you. In a lot of ways, you were home to me. The embodiment of home. I guess that's what childhood friends are, a living home.

I often look through the camera roll on my phone when I'm on a plane because it's something I can do without Wi-Fi. I use it as a chance to delete old photos and clear up some storage. But as I sat there scrolling through photos, I found myself hanging on every one of you. The pictures of us at prom, in completely clashing colors because we weren't each other's dates. A group photo of us at a football game that made me smile because we all just look so young and happy—like we were characters in “Friday Night Lights.” I felt the woman in the seat next to me watching me do this, scroll through the photos on stop on all the ones of you. I think she wanted to say something to me but noticed that I had earbuds in, so didn't. I imagined that she was going to ask me if I was missing a girlfriend. I was glad she didn't—I didn't want to have to explain that I was missing you more than I missed my girlfriend at the time, but in an entirely different way. In that way where you were a manifestation of home. I began to wonder if you and I would fall out of touch—now, of course, I know that we did.

I knew, flying on that plane, that we had already been the closest we were ever going to be. And it was just going to be more and more distance from that point on. And

that was so suddenly disturbing to me: that you and I were, as children, the closest we'd ever be. It was the kind of realization I had latently known all along, but it was still so shocking to me when I first realized it. I think maybe those realizations are the most shocking—the ones you've known all along but also have somehow never known.

When I realized that, I scrolled back to the most recent photos in my camera roll and clicked on the one of you and I in our graduation caps. Our moms teared up when they took it. I almost did too, and I actually did tear up there on that plane. Because, again, I had a realization of something I'd known all along: graduation was the last big life event we'd ever share. Sure, if we stayed in touch, I could share things with you going forward, but we'd never actually *share* anything like that again. I made that photo my phone background right then, which felt strange. If anyone at home had seen that I'd done that—especially you—I would have been mortified. But I had that safety of knowing that I was far from home, and that anyone who saw it wouldn't think twice. I suppose that's one of the good things about missing home when you're far from it: no one can judge how it is you're missing home.

And looking at that photo, now my background, I suddenly found myself writing the lyrics to that song. I pulled my notebook and a pen out of my backpack—I hate all the shuffling on planes when you need something out of the bag even just under the seat in front of you, so this should be evidence of how powerfully inspiration struck. I intentionally made the song out to sound like a traditional love song because I know love songs sell the best, and I was already thinking ahead to my career. And also because making it a love song almost made it easier to write—if it wasn't *totally* about you, I could get the words on the page a bit easier. It was never really a romantic love song. It

was that different kind of love, the love you have for the people who are home to you. The love you'll always feel for that person, even as you grow more distant. The kind of love I felt for you then, and honestly, still do now.

When I finished writing it, the plane was about to land. I looked back at the lyrics and smiled. I knew it was the best song I'd ever written. I knew it was going to set the tone for the rest of the album I was hoping to write—and did end up writing. Originally, I had thought some of the songs I wrote in high school would make their way on my first album, but once I wrote that song, I knew that none of them were good enough. Once I made you my muse, there was no going back.

I titled it “Photo Albums” because of what inspired me to write it and because of my favorite line from it: “you’re the home I can’t return to, but I hold the photo albums close.” That day I held that photo of you close because I owed so much to you.

When we landed and I took my phone off of airplane mode, I had a text from you wishing me good luck with the big move. It felt very natural, that you'd texted me. I suppose at that point it was still natural for us to text. Now, if I texted you, I don't even think you'd recognize the number because it's changed so many times since then. When you get famous, you need to change your phone number a lot, and there are only a handful of people you remember to update on the changes. You slipped through the cracks of one of those changes, I guess. But I still have your number—my contacts transfer each time. I'm sorry I haven't kept you updated.

That day, when I saw your text, lit up against the background of our graduation photo, I was so happy. It made me feel that the move was the right move for me, even as it took me farther from you.

Just a couple of months after that, you came to visit me—the visit I mentioned in the interview. Well, I guess more accurately, you came to Nashville with your mom and sister because your sister was touring Vanderbilt, but you spent most of your time with me. We weren't quite the kind of friends who would take trips just to visit each other; we hadn't been for years. But we were still, at that point, the kind of friends who saw each other when they could. And we had a good time, didn't we? That was when I played you the album, or at least what I had of it. I still don't know why I didn't tell you then and there that "Photo Albums" was about you. I guess I was afraid that you'd think it was a confession of love, no matter how much I explained to you that it wasn't. Looking back, I think you would have understood, because I have to think that you must have felt that same love for me, that love that has already lived out its biggest swell.

We stayed in touch sporadically after that. When I came home for Christmas that year, our families got together to carol. I remember you made me sing a solo carol for everyone before we left to go around the neighborhood—I sang "Mary Did You Know?" I looked at you while I sang, because your little smile gave me confidence. By then, I had been performing wherever I could whenever I could in Nashville—I should have been over my stage fright. But singing in front of family feels different than singing in front of a crowd. And singing in front of you felt especially different, both because I knew you'd always encourage me and because I needed that encouragement. Yours was an encouragement I knew I'd always have, but I knew it would fade as we grew more distant. By then, it already had faded, when compared to what it was like when we were kids. But even as it faded, I needed every piece of it that I could get.

That Christmas was one of the last times we spent substantial time together. The next Christmas I didn't make it home because I was so busy; by then, I had signed with a label and released my first album—the one with “Photo Albums” on it. I remember you Facetimed me the day after the album came out to tell me how proud you were of me. I wished then that we still lived on the same street, that I was performing in a talent show in your backyard. We also texted on that second Christmas, reminiscing the caroling of the previous year. I remember feeling so much less homesick because of that small text exchange, since that was the first Christmas I had ever spent away from home.

The Grammys fell a couple months after that Christmas; I was nominated for three and I won one of those, Best New Artist. It was so surreal; it still is. I don't think that kind of thing will ever really set in for me. I texted you from the Grammys afterparty when I got a selfie with Taylor Swift because I know how much you like her.

You called me the next day to tell me congratulations on my award and (mostly) to ask me what Taylor was like. I told you all about it, and then we just kept talking. I think that was actually the last time we talked. There was a slight disconnect between us then, I think just because my world was so far from yours by then. Several times during the call, I used music industry terms that I forgot a normal person wouldn't know, and then I had to backtrack to explain it to you. I boasted about meeting a big producer, forgetting that you probably hadn't heard of him. You told me a little about your job, but then your lunch break was ending, so you had to go. I had forgotten that people only have certain lunch breaks built into their 9-5 days. So we said goodbye and hung up for what I think was the last time. I guess that was probably the last time we were really in contact until now.

A few weeks ago, I was home visiting my parents. It's been a couple years since I've come home and tried to visit anyone other than my parents; at some point it just became too much to try to decide who to see. But while I was home, I drove past your house. My parents still live in their old house, so any time I visit, I end up on our old street. The street where we rode bikes and drew with chalk and put on talent shows. And when I drove by your house, I saw a "SOLD" sign in the yard. Looking back, one of my parents might have mentioned to me that your family was selling the house, but I guess I hadn't given it much thought. But when I saw the sign, saw that your house was actually no longer your house, I was taken aback. For some strange reason it felt like you had violated our relationship, by selling the house. I know that it wasn't *you* who sold the house, it was actually your parents, and even that should not have felt like a personal betrayal at all, but in the moment, it did feel like a betrayal. It felt like the one thing that bound us suddenly no longer did.

I've always been fascinated by how, in our own neighborhoods, we refer to houses by who owns them. Like I'm sure there was a time before I knew to call the Miller's house the Miller's house, but it feels like that's always been what I've called it. Or when I hit one of the mailboxes in the neighborhood, when I called my mom I said, "I just hit a mailbox next door to the Winters' house." I didn't call her and say, "I just hit a mailbox at 224 S. Roslyn St." We know houses by who calls them home. And that house that has always been yours suddenly isn't anymore.

It feels impossible to fathom that I won't ever enter that house again. I haven't been in that house for years, but there was some certain comfort in knowing that it was

still the same, it still held your family. I think that's why people love their hometown, because it can feel like nothing has changed even when things actually have. But now you, the embodiment of my home, no longer calls that same place home. I just don't know what to make of that.

I guess when I wrote the lyrics "You're the home I can't return to," I meant more that you were the home I wouldn't return to, not that I actually couldn't. But now, I can't. I mean, I still can, I guess, but not in the same way. Not without that house on the street we shared. Now those lyrics *really* mean something to me. More than before.

I think that might have been why I brought you up during the interview in the first place—because you've been on my mind so much. Your house, or what is not your house anymore has been on my mind. I've just been thinking about how I've lost you, even though I haven't really had you since we were kids. There's something especially tough about that kind of gradual loss of a person.

I wonder what it would be like if we hadn't gradually lost one another, and honestly, I don't think I'd be standing where I am. After my move, we were never going to be as close, but without my move, I never would have made it this big. I needed you and your encouragement to get here, but I also needed this distance to get here. That's tough.

Sometimes before a concert I feel like a little boy about to enter your backyard for a talent show. And I think I subconsciously look for someone in the crowd who looks like you for some kind of surrogate encouragement. I know that sounds weird, but it's true. I look for a blond girl with a small frame, and then she becomes you.

Anyway, let me know what you think about the podcast. No pressure if you want them to cut it out. I'm actually really, really glad that you came up in the interview—it gave me the perfect excuse to write. It feels funny that I need an excuse to write you, but I guess I feel like I do. I really hope to hear back from you, and I hope we can talk soon.

With all my love,

Ed

VI

Frances to Grace

Hi Grace,

I'm Kyle's new girlfriend. You probably already know that. I know who you are—or I guess, I know what you look like—from Instagram. Based on yesterday, I'm guessing you know who I am from social media, too. First, I'm sorry for how long this DM is going to be—I swear, I'm not in the practice of sending DMs this long. I'm writing mostly just to apologize for the awkwardness of yesterday and clear the air between us. Not that there is really anything to clear the air for, necessarily. But I guess I just feel like there is. And I also do have a question for you. But I'll get to that.

The first time I looked at your page was after my first date with Kyle. I liked him, so I Instagram stalked him that night, and I found you. He never deleted his posts with you, so you weren't very hard to find. I can't fully explain why the fact of my liking him made me want to look at his social media more thoroughly than I had before, but it did. I guess it was just that I wanted to know everything about him—even more than what he'd just told me on our date. I wanted to see what kinds of things he did with his friends, if he ever posted pictures with his family, what photos he thought he looked good enough in to post. Things like that. But as I scrolled his page, I quickly realized that the most interesting thing I could find was who he had dated before—what his type was. You were the only girlfriend he had pictures up of, so you were all I had to go off of.

Looking at those pictures, the first thing that struck me was how pretty you are. That's probably fairly typical of looking at someone's Instagram—first just noticing how

they look. But there were also other things I could find out about you based on your account. You work out a lot—I could tell that from your “Gym” highlight. And you have a lot of friends—that I knew because of your extensive tagged photos. In those ways, you and I are pretty different. I never work out, and if I do, it’s a run outside, not a trip to the gym. And I don’t really have a large number of friends as much as I just have a few really close friends. My tagged photos are more sparse than yours.

But I could also easily tell that we do have a lot in common. You’re blond like me, even almost the same shade of blond—it looks like you get highlights, too. We were both cheerleaders in high school; we both like to read. You’re a big Ed Harker fan; I actually grew up with him, so it’s always weird to me when I see he has fans. But over the years, you’ve posted pictures at not one but *two* of his concerts. This made me feel weirdly connected to you; even aside from Kyle, it’s like Ed is another man we have both loved over the years. In different ways, sure, but we’ve both loved him nonetheless.

There’s even this one dress you have—the yellow fit-and-flare dress with little flowers—that I used to own, too. It looks like you wore it to a wedding once in the summertime, a wedding you attended with Kyle. I wore it to a wedding that same summer, but of course, I didn’t go to that wedding with him. I didn’t even know him. I don’t think I took anyone to that wedding, but I probably wished I had a plus-one to bring. It was really striking to me—that we own the same dress, and we both wore it to a wedding. But you got to wear it with him before he and I had ever met. It made me insatiably jealous, made me imagine him telling you that you looked pretty in that dress that I always thought I looked pretty in, too. When I cleaned out my closet a few weeks after this social media stalking, I got rid of that dress. I told myself it was because it

didn't fit quite right anymore, but deep down, I knew it was because of you. Because I knew that the next time I wore it, it would make me think of you. I knew I'd feel a touch of insecurity every time I wore it from then on.

I think I spent more time looking at your page that night than I did looking at his. He hadn't told me anything about you at that point—after all, this was right after our first date. But I felt like I could learn so much about him by looking at you. You were like the archetype of who I had to be to be his girlfriend, I guess. But also, I knew I somehow had to be different than you because clearly, things had ended between the two of you.

I felt like I especially had a lot to learn by looking at the photos of you two together. I could see the way he looked at you and the way you looked at him and I began to wonder if that was something he and I would ever share. * The way his arms effortlessly fell around your waist, the way your smile looked so real because it was one of those smiles that takes up a person's whole face, the way all your friends commented their love on every picture of the two of you. "My favorite couple!!!!" one comment said. I hated that, seeing you two being called a "couple." Kyle and I weren't even a couple yet, but I felt like we were going to be. From that first date, at least on some level, I knew we were going to be, and I shuddered at the thought that that's what you two once were.

At that point, when I first looked at your page, you couldn't have had any idea who I was; again, Kyle and I weren't even officially dating yet. I imagine that the first time you saw me was when Kyle first posted me, which was after we'd been officially boyfriend/girlfriend for a couple of months. I think it was when we went to play top golf as a double date with my best friend and her boyfriend. Kyle posted a picture of us posing together that my friend had taken. We were posed with our golf clubs, and the lighting

wasn't great. But, we did look really happy in it. We were both smiling those whole-face smiles.

I wonder what you thought of me when you saw it. You might not have even known Kyle was seeing someone new until he posted that. You might have not even cared. You might have totally moved on by that point, so seeing the picture didn't faze you at all.

But you also might have been totally devastated to see him with another girl, one who didn't look all that different from you. You might have felt a pain in your stomach at the way his arms were wrapped around me—not unlike the pain I felt at the old photos where his arms are wrapped around you, but also a very different pain at the same time.

Maybe you are more mature than I am, so you didn't even bother looking at my page when he posted it. Maybe you didn't even see his post because you have his posts muted. But I doubt that. I think that even a mature, evolved, completely-over-it girl couldn't help herself. I think on some level it's like a compulsion—the need to see what our exes are doing. Most likely, I bet you clicked on my profile, and probably felt a ping of shame as you did so. But not a ping strong enough to stop you. And then you scrolled through my page—not for long, but for long enough. You scrolled until you felt embarrassed that you were doing so, even though no one else would ever know. Then you closed out of Instagram, cleared it from your phone history to hide the crime that wasn't even a crime.

Later the night after he posted that first picture of us, I scrolled through my own Instagram account, trying to see myself through your eyes. I pretended to be you—a person I don't even know—and tried to see how I viewed myself. As you, I thought,

Wow, this Frances is a slut when I saw the picture I posted from Hawaii in a yellow string bikini. As you, I thought, *Wow, Frances is full of herself* when I realized I posted three pictures in a row of just myself. As you, I thought *What does he see in her?* It's strange, how vicious I became when I tried to see myself in the lens that I imagined you saw me through. I don't know why I made your mind so cruel when I imagined it. Maybe because I was jealous of you, maybe because it made it easier for me to reconcile the fact that the man I was falling in love with had broken your heart. I wanted to imagine that he wouldn't break the heart of a nice girl, which meant that you couldn't be a nice girl to me. If I thought that he would break the heart of a good girl, then I would be petrified that he would break my heart. So, through my jealousy, I made you out to be a villain.

I began to think that last thought to myself a lot: What does he see in me? I don't think I'm an insecure person—in fact, I generally think I'm pretty confident—but the thought of you made me insecure. Or rather, the picture I painted of you in my mind as a judgmental, vindictive ex-girlfriend made me insecure. That picture of you as judgmental did make me less insecure than a picture of you as a kind, normal person would have, but it made me insecure nonetheless. But also, on some level, it was the thought of you in general. The thought of you, out there, as a girl who Kyle once loved, made me insecure.

There's this one picture of you and Kyle at the beach, and I found myself obsessing over it. It's in Florida, so I imagine that you two flew there together. That made me want to scream, the thought of Kyle on an airplane sitting next to you. I don't know why, but something about picturing him boarding a plane with a different girl, that got to me. Not like boarding a plane is some intimate act, but I guess it does kinda feel like it is. In the picture you both have wet hair, like you'd been swimming, and you both look

sunkissed in the best way. Your hair is messy, but messy in the way that it looks intentional. You've got overalls on, over a bikini, and Kyle is just in his swim trunks. To me, it was a photo that seemed to scream that you two had loved each other. It became my late-night indulgence to look at that photo. I'd look at it and think, *This is something that they did together.* * It was tangible. It was evidence that he hadn't always been mine. I was practically sabotaging myself by looking at it, but I couldn't stop.

I soon began to more deeply compare myself to you. The comparisons from Instagram weren't enough; I was becoming insatiable. I found your LinkedIn because I wanted to know what you do. You move around jobs a lot; I've worked at the same place for five years. That made me feel like I was better than you, even though it doesn't really mean anything. I figured out that the most recent picture you posted of yourself didn't have as many comments as the most recent picture I'd posted of myself. I let that make me feel better about myself. As I thought these ugly things about you, I felt their ugliness, but I couldn't stop thinking them. They were satisfying me somehow, satisfying a hunger I wish I didn't have. It was almost like fast food: I sometimes crave it so much despite the fact that I know I shouldn't and that I will feel sick after I eat it. For the record, it did usually make me feel sick to think these things about you. Once, on one of my worst days, I even scrolled through a PDF of your college's commencement ceremony program from the year you graduated to see if you graduated with honors. You did—you graduated cum laude—which made me shut my computer. This wasn't helping anything—I knew that.

Eventually, Kyle and I talked to each other about our past relationships. I heard about you. He told me how the two of you met—at a yoga class. Like in a rom com. I *hated* that. One of my favorite movies is “He’s Just Not That Into You,” and Scarlett Johansen’s character (who I’ve never liked very much) is a yoga instructor in it. Suddenly you became her in my mind, and it made my weird combination of jealousy and superiority grow bigger. Kyle told me that the two of you dated for a year and a half, and he eventually ended it because he just thought your lives were heading in different directions. He said it was really hard—to end things with you—but that he knew it was right. This pained me a bit, because it solidified to me that you are a nice girl, and that he broke your heart anyway.

I thought that was so vague: “heading in different directions.” I asked him more about it, asked for more detail, and he didn’t really have anything more to say. I’m not always one to pry about that kind of thing, but I wanted to for you for some reason. It made me sad for you, that after a year and a half that was all he had to say to you. I would have been furious if I were you. It almost made me shudder, picturing you being told it was over because you were “heading in different directions.”

And it wasn’t that I didn’t believe that was how Kyle felt—I believed that really was the whole story to him. To him, it was just a gradual falling apart of what the two of you once had. That is the worst kind of end to a relationship: when what is gradual for one person has to then become sudden to the other. He told me that you seemed surprised by the breakup, which surprised him. He thought that you both felt the distance, but as he was talking to you, he realized you didn’t. How is that possible, for two people in one relationship to experience it so differently? I suppose it is true of every relationship that

I'm in that the other person experiences it entirely differently than I do because they are a different person. Every relationship is a lived experience for two different people, who see it entirely differently. What Kyle saw as slow distancing you saw as the natural progression of a relationship.

The fact that he ended things with you like this didn't make me doubt him or think less of him, but it made me sad for you. It wasn't fair to you. And weirdly, I almost want to apologize to you on his behalf, even though I really have no place in it. It was fair for him to be able to end it; it wouldn't have been fair for him to stay with you if he didn't actually have feelings for you. It's just hard, imagining that. I am, of course, glad things ended between the two of you because otherwise he and I would never be together, but part of me wonders if it was *actually* right that things ended between the two of you.

In a way, I guess the whole thing made me doubt me. I was so worried that Kyle was not seeing out relationship in the way I was seeing it.

He told me that the moment he realized he wanted to break up with you was on that Florida trip. The one I'd obsessed over. It struck me then that the photos weren't the whole story. Later that day, I looked back at the photos I still had of me and my ex. I knew the whole story behind them—knew that we fought after that one dinner, knew that I told my best friend I didn't know whether my ex was 'the one' after that date. But in the photos, we looked happy. It looked effortless. We looked so in love, and we weren't. If we were—if we *really* were—we'd still be together. And the same goes for you and Kyle. If you two were really meant to be, there wouldn't have been an end.

Kyle and I have been together for seven months now. He's told me that he loves me, and I know I should feel secure in the relationship. And I do, I do feel secure. But there's something about him that keeps me on my toes, I guess. You must understand. In fact, you might be the only person who understands; isn't that strange? There are things we probably understand about each other—about Kyle—that no one else does.

Here's what I mean when I say he keeps me on my toes: The other day we were driving and went past one of those ax-throwing places where you can pay like \$40 for an hour of flinging axes at a wall. I made some comment about how I didn't really understand the appeal, and this completely shocked Kyle. He was simply astounded that I didn't understand. He told me he loved to go to places like that and do things like that. He seemed unable to comprehend why I would think it was a waste of money. Not at all like he was mad at me for thinking so, but just that it was incredulous to him that someone wouldn't love throwing axes. It was suddenly as though that was the most important thing in the world to him. And I guess that's really it: I sometimes feel like I can't understand what is important to him.

Was he ever like that for you? Did you ever feel like you didn't know him—but not just that, did you ever feel like you might never know him? Or did you only feel that way at the end, when it set in that he saw things so differently than you?

I saw you yesterday. That's what really prompted me to write—because I saw you. We were at the grocery store, in the bread aisle. As soon as I walked into the aisle, I noticed you. It was surreal because at first it felt like seeing a celebrity: here was this person who I had thought about, looked at photos of, heard stories about, compared

myself to. There you were, in the bread aisle. Suddenly, after months of being like a figment of my imagination, you were real. You weren't just a photograph from Kyle's past, you were a person who had to grocery shop.

I almost waved to you. It was so silly, but I almost waved to you, because for a second, I forgot that I don't know you and never have. We've never met, and there's never existed an admission between us that we know who the other is. But I almost waved, and I think you did, too. After we made eye contact for one split second, I saw your hand twitch on the handle of your cart—I saw you almost wave, too. Mutually, we forgot how we knew each other, or rather, how we didn't actually know each other. There in the bread aisle, we forgot that we were strangers who had just fallen in love with the same boy, and we almost waved. But quickly, we each retreated our eyes to the floor. You pushed your cart past me and exited the aisle.

I was getting English muffins when I saw you; Kyle asked me to pick them up for him. I noticed that you were getting English muffins, too—the exact ones that he had asked me to get. I began to wonder whether he had gotten you hooked on these particular whole grain English muffins. Or worse, if you had gotten him hooked on them. I began to wonder if he thought of you whenever he ate one, or if you thought of him whenever you did. I began to picture your mornings together—that is painful, the thought of your shared mornings—when one of you toasted two English muffins and you eat ate them together. In my imagination, you're both laughing as you eat them.

It didn't occur to me then that maybe you both just happened to like the same kind of English muffin. Maybe you never even ate them together. Maybe it didn't matter whether or not you did, because now he was asking me to pick them up for him, and he

and I would probably eat them together. He'd toast two, and one would be for me. His mornings were mine now, even if they were once yours. And maybe when his mornings were yours, you two didn't laugh. Maybe that's why his mornings are now mine.

This morning when he did toast two English muffins for us, I actually asked him more about you. I told him I was pretty sure that I saw you in the bread aisle. He told me he hadn't seen you in a while, that he hoped you were doing well. He didn't mention whether or not the two of you ever ate these English muffins together, and our conversation quickly moved on from you. I think it's probably best that I don't know the answers about the English muffins; some things don't need to be discussed. I guess that's why I didn't tell him that I almost waved to you.

I've been stuck thinking about that almost wave since yesterday—just a twitch in both of our hands. We don't know each other, that's why we didn't wave. But I think in a way, we do. Falling in love with the same man—I hope it's safe to assume you once loved him—we must know each other a bit. On some level, I think we do actually know each other quite well. Since yesterday, I have found myself wondering if I should have waved.

They say you are the average of the five people you spend most of your time with. So, in theory, if a person spends most of their time with their parents, their two best friends, and their boyfriend, then they are one-fifth mom, one-fifth dad, two-fifths best friends, and one-fifth boyfriend. I've always liked this idea. But I think I would argue it's more that you are one sixth each of the five people who you spend the most time with. That leaves one extra sixth—I think that sixth is for all the other people who you *used* to

spend the most time with. Because we aren't only impacted by who we spend time with now, but who we've spent time with over the years. By that logic, there was one point of Kyle's life where one sixth of him was you. And now, one sixth of him is me. But there is still that part of him—a portion of that miscellaneous sixth—that is still you. And if he and I don't last, a small part of the him that falls in love with another girl will be me. In him, we both exist, and I think we both always will. More so than our blond hair, or cheerleading past, or fashion taste for yellow floral dresses, the thing that I think we have most in common is the way we both exist in Kyle. So even though we didn't wave in the bread aisle, I guess I do feel like we've met. Or at least, I've met you. I've met you because I know him. And really, I guess that means I should be thanking you.

And here's where my question comes in. Kyle told me that he heard you'd be at Abby and Ryan's wedding, and now I've been thinking about that, too. Do we wave at the wedding? Will Kyle introduce us? I'm guessing he won't. And realistically, I know we shouldn't wave. But I know, yet again, that I am going to want to. And if you want to too, maybe we should.

I guess, at least a little bit, this message is a wave. So maybe this can count. It can be both hello and goodbye.

Best,

Frances

PS: I don't look at your Instagram anymore. In fact, when I found your profile to send you this, I realized I had forgotten your username. I used to have it memorized because I looked you up so much. I'd say that's progress.

VII

Grace to Henry

Henry,

It has been a while. A long while. How are you? I hope you are well.

You probably never wonder how I am, but I'm good. Mostly good. It's been a rough few months for me—I switched jobs and don't like my new one (but it pays better). I haven't dated anyone since my most-recent ex (which was a year ago), and he seems to be in a happy relationship. Which is fine, but it certainly doesn't make things easier for me.

And actually, that's why I'm writing you—because of Kyle, my ex. It's been brought to my attention that he and I will actually be going to the same wedding next month. An old mutual friend of ours is getting married, and he invited both of us, and I just found out that we are both going. Which is not going to be easy. Not that I'm still into him, but it's just embarrassing to think about going to the wedding alone while he gets to bring his beautiful girlfriend. I saw her the other day in the grocery store and she's even more gorgeous in person. Believe it or not, she's actually the one who told me, in a lengthy but kind message, that we are both going to this wedding. So that's why I'm writing you: I was wondering if you'd be my plus one. I'd be able to brave it all so much better if you would.

I know this must seem so out of the blue because we haven't talked in so long, not since high school. And one of the last real conversations we did have was me rejecting your invitation to prom. Doesn't that feel like a lifetime ago? But when I was thinking of

who I could ask to go to this wedding, I thought of you. You and I were never particularly close—and I know I ruined the friendship we did have—but you came to mind for me as who I would most want to take to the wedding. I think it's that you always made me feel sufficient, like I never doubted whether or not I was enough with you. And that has been how I've been feeling since my breakup—like I'm not enough. Like I will never be good enough for anyone. But as I have been talking myself out of that, I often find your voice as my inner-monologue. Words you said to me in high school are still a comfort. Isn't that strange?

In high school, we were just friends from class, nothing more. You weren't someone I ever would have told secrets to, but I always knew that if I did, you'd keep them. I guess on some level that's why I feel comfortable asking you to this wedding. Because even if I'm just embarrassing myself by asking you, I don't think it will change how you see me at the core.

One day in particular from sophomore year comes to mind when I think of you. We had a few different classes together my sophomore year, so I don't remember exactly which class it was. I just remember that you were in it, and we sat near each other. We weren't even really friends. I mean, I guess we were, but we were probably more accurately acquaintances. We were just the kind of friends who texted each other about class assignments, occasionally about something funny that happened during class. Nothing more. But also, nothing less.

On this particular day, there was a fire drill. It was sunny out, so it was actually kind of fun that we all got to go outside. Every class had their assigned part of the

parking lot to go to, and ours was on the farthest corner. You and I walked together—talking about the test we had coming up in one of our shared classes. It felt almost foreign to be walking with you outside because you were an inside-of-school friend. I don't think we had ever been outside together before, except for maybe waving on the walk into school or something.

To get to our corner of the parking lot, we passed my mom's class. She smiled at me, and said hi, and told me to fix my hair.

"I always forget that your mom works here," you said.

"Oh, yeah."

"Do you like that?" you asked so earnestly. "Seeing your mom at school, I mean."

"Not really," I said. I had never told anyone that, but that was only because no one else had ever asked. I was thankful that you asked, and thankful that you and I were actually talking about something other than class because I did really like talking to you.

"Why not?"

"She and I, we're not very close. A lot of the time I feel like she thinks higher of her students than she does of me."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true. You've got a lot going for you. But I'm sorry that's how it feels."

"That's nice of you to say. It's really okay."

"Well, I'm sorry anyway," you said. "And for the record, your hair looks fine. It's windy, you can fix it once we're back inside."

I hadn't even realized, but I'd been messing with my hair ever since we'd seen my mom, just because she had said something about it. At that point in my life, I don't think

I had yet realized how deeply I internalized every little comment from my mother. And I know she always meant well—she was just trying to help me by telling me my hair was messed up. But when she had said it, and whenever she said anything to me, there was just something in her tone. Something like disappointment. I’m sure a lot of moms can tell their daughters to fix their hair without disappointment seeping into their voice, but my mom never could.

“Oh, thanks,” I said, dropping my hands from my hair. We made it to the right spot in the parking lot, and we went back to talking about the test.

I was glad to be talking about the test again, instead of my mother. I was glad you still wanted to talk to me about the test, glad you still wanted to talk to me at all. It felt so profoundly normal, being friends with you like that. That was how you made me feel so sufficient—by just being normal to me. You didn’t treat me special necessarily, but we treated each other like equals. And we treated each other like we wanted to talk to each other.

I never tried particularly hard with you because I knew there wasn’t a reason to. But I think that was the beauty of it. Neither of us had to try hard at our friendship because it was hardly a friendship. That was what made it so impactful, the effortlessness. I was good enough for you without even trying to be. You wanted my help on homework even though I had to ask you for help sometimes too. You talked to me before the bell rang at the start of class instead of looking at your phone, even though I never had anything particularly interesting to say, even though there were probably things on your phone that were far more interesting than me. We even had inside jokes, but they were never forced, and they never got old because they just didn’t come up that often.

They were simple, occasional, not-all-that-funny inside jokes. And that was what made them the best.

At the end of that semester, around registration you asked me what I was taking next semester. You said you would try to get our schedules lined up again. That meant a lot to me. That was the kind of thing that made me feel sufficient. And I think it was just a lot of little moments over those couple years that made me feel like enough. And as I got to know you more and more, as we did get to spend more and more time in class together, that validation from you became more and more important to me. I felt like if I was enough in your eyes, I was enough overall. “You’ve got a lot going for you,” you had said. I started to say it to myself then, too.

And then, of course, you asked me to prom junior year. By then we were a bit closer—we had planned study dates (that I didn’t consider at all to be *date* dates) outside of class. We were better friends than we had been the year before. So when you texted me asking me to study on a Wednesday night for the test we had that Friday, I didn’t think much of it. I said yes to studying, and you offered to come pick me up. When you got to my house, I went outside to find you standing there with a sign asking me to prom. I’m sure there was some kind of pun on it, but I don’t remember what it was, I just remember being mortified. Because I only saw you as a friend. And it was sweet—so sweet of you—to ask me, but I didn’t want to go to prom with you. I had plans to just go with my friends, my close friends, which wasn’t you.

I saw your sign and in it I saw our friendship shattering. Whoever started that tradition of the big promposals should have thought twice about it. Because rejection sucks for everyone even when there isn't a big, decorated posterboard.

I told you no, gently. At least, I hope it was gently. And I hope I made it clear that it wasn't that I didn't like you, it was just that I didn't see you in that way. I didn't know you well enough to feel that way about you. And while I liked you as a friend, I wasn't prepared to cross a line into any more than that—I felt like we had hardly even crossed into being real friends.

I saw your face crumble when I did. I saw the regret flash over your eyes. I knew we weren't going to stay friends after that—knew we wouldn't study together again. Had we been close friends, our relationship might have been salvageable. But as it was, we didn't stand a chance. From then on, things would be drastically different between us. I wouldn't be able to ask you how you thought the test went on Friday—I even felt that change. That was honestly what made me the most sad: I wouldn't get to debrief that test with you. That was what I loved doing with you, and suddenly with a posterboard, it was gone.

It had been simple: you were the boy whose class schedule lined up with mine, whose number I had so I could text about homework, who slowly but surely became the friend who made me see what I had going for me. And then it was complicated: you were the boy who liked me more than I liked him, who got turned down in my driveway and then had to drive home with a bent posterboard in his trunk.

When I went inside the house to my mom after the failed promposal—we didn't go study after that, of course—she asked me what was wrong. I explained it to her, or at least I tried to. As I did, I saw a certain disappointment flash in her eyes.

“You could have just said yes to him, you know,” she said before I was finished. “Prom is harmless.”

“Prom is *not* harmless,” I said, ever the sassy teenager. But I still think I had a point—it wouldn't have been harmless. “I just didn't want him to get the wrong idea, you know?”

“Are you expecting someone else to ask you, is that why?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Hmmm,” she said, thoughtfully. It was that “hmmm” that kept me up that night, more so than the whole situation with you. The “hmmm” had been very judgmental—biting even. And I just couldn't get it out of my head. It was like it was stuck in my ears, like somehow my ears couldn't swallow it.

My mother clearly thought that I should've said yes to you. I had always known she was disappointed in me. But it was on that night that I realized just *how* disappointed she was. I guess I had always assumed that she was disappointed for all the typical reasons a mom would be: I crashed my first car, I hadn't done great on the ACT, I spent more time on my phone than I did reading, I sometimes talked back. But it was then that I realized she was even disappointed that I didn't have a prom date. I didn't think moms could be disappointed in their daughters for things like that, but I guess they could.

She was a high school teacher, as you know. So she must have known that prom wasn't harmless. She must have known how people talk about who is taking who, about

how serious the whole thing was to high schoolers. And maybe that's why she was disappointed in me, because she knew that just about everyone else had a prom date, she knew it was serious to not have one. And I didn't have a date. But I could have—I could have had you—and that got to her.

That night I realized I was never going to please her. At least, never completely. Because it wasn't just one thing about me that disappointed her, it was everything. To her, I had nothing going for me. That's what that "hmmm" felt like: a vibration resonating in me, murmuring that I had nothing going for me, not even a prom date.

So maybe that's when your voice, saying, "You've got a lot going for you," became my mantra. I saw clearly that my mom didn't think that, so I needed to cling to someone who did. And you were that someone. In fact, more than anything, that whole night just solidified to me that you were that someone. I knew that you were probably sad that night, and I was too, because I had hurt you. But I had come out relatively unscathed. Don't get me wrong, I was most definitely sad, and I felt terrible, but honestly, I think I took a little satisfaction in that rejection. A little bit of me was happy that you liked me enough to ask me to prom, even though I had said no. Even if I didn't reciprocate, it was nice to know that you felt that way about me. That's selfish, I know. But the posterboard promposal was proof that you really did think I had a lot going for me. And I needed proof of that, especially as "hmmm" rang in my ears.

I've thought about reaching out to you several times before this. Once in college, I almost asked if you wanted to go to a sorority formal with me. And whenever I see that you've posted on Instagram, I consider messaging you. Because you've been one of the

few people who always gave me confidence, you've been on the tip of my tongue for years. I just have never pulled the trigger.

I met Kyle, my ex, at a yoga class. The whole thing was kind of a fairy tale, quite honestly. Until it wasn't—at least until it wasn't for him. I was still feeling like a princess with her happily ever after—for the first time ever—when he ended it with me. It was sudden, and it was painful.

Right after he broke up with me, I made the mistake of calling my mom. Things had gotten better between us, and I guess I just thought that we were at a point where she could be a comfort to me. And I think she tried to be a comfort, at least she tried harder than those years before when I rejected your promposal.

But I could still tell that she was disappointed in me, disappointed that I had lost Kyle. She had *loved* him; she always raved about how proud she was of me for picking a good one. Maybe that was one of the reasons I liked Kyle as much as I did, because through him, my mom was proud of me. I realize how sad that is.

So when I called with the news of my breakup, I could tell she wanted to comfort me. She told me everything was going to be OK. She told me there were lots of fish in the sea. She told me he had made a mistake—that was one of the biggest compliments I'd ever received from her, I think. But a couple “hmmm”s slipped in while we talked. A couple moments I felt, even over the phone, that she was disappointed in me for losing Kyle. Which just made me disappointed in myself. Nothing had changed, and her hum was still capable of making me question everything, which made me feel pathetic. In fact, I think I felt more pathetic over the phone with her than I did when Kyle has actually broken up with me.

And then your voice crept back into my mind, even though it had been years. “You’ve got a lot going for you.” I realize that the fact I have clung to those words this long is pathetic in itself. But it’s just the truth, and it’s the reason why I would love to go to this wedding with you.

Writing all of this, I guess maybe I have a pattern of letting other people determine my self-worth. It’s probably problematic that it’s your voice—not mine—that has been my source of confidence all these years. My confidence is fragile, I guess. Honestly, I think part of the reason I am writing you this at all is because if you just reject me—finally reject me—I’ll be forced to get rid of that voice of yours in my mind. Forced to face myself. And if you don’t reject me, well, that will be even better.

I realize that the night you asked me to prom was the last time we really talked. We had to talk from time to time in school, but we were never friends again, and we never really talked. We went back to being classmates, just less friendly than before. And that made me sad, but it was okay. Unlike junior year, we didn’t align our schedules for senior year, and I saw less and less of you.

I hope none of this has come across as selfish—I really don’t mean it to. I don’t want it to sound like I’m just using you as a plus one. I guess I am trying to use you as a plus one, but it would mean more than that to me. In all honestly, I’ve wanted to tell you all of this for a long time, tell you how those little words you said to me have helped me over the years, and this wedding is an excuse.

I guess now I am the one with a posterboard. Asking you to a wedding, this time. I know it might not be all that attractive of a proposal, but I'm hoping you at least think about it. Because I think you've got a lot going for you.

Yours (hopefully),

Grace

VIII

Henry to Anne

Dear Anne,

The words are simple, but the sentiment is not: I want you back.

I've been thinking about whether or not I should write you for a couple of weeks, and clearly, I've decided that I must. I know this must seem so out of the blue, but for me, it's not. For me, this has been something building inside of me since about a month after the breakup.

I've decided to write this all down rather than call you because I don't want to forget anything. And I also don't think I would be able to handle it if you hung up on me. I imagined that: calling you, starting to tell you that I want you back, and then hearing you hang up the phone. The thought of that hurts too much to risk the reality of it. I know that there's a possibility you might just not read this, or you might start reading it and then stop. You might shred it, or ask a friend to read it, or it might just get lost in the mail. But because it's a letter, I at least won't *know* what happened necessarily. I won't have to face a click followed by a dial tone. And honestly, I'm a bit of a coward, because it is also a huge comfort to me knowing that I won't face any interruptions from you; I won't even have to face the sound of your breath on the other line. I can at least get everything written down here and imagine that you will read it all. I can send it and wait, and even though the waiting will be brutal, it will not be as brutal as sitting on the phone and praying you won't hang up.

Please know that I am going to be brutally honest in the pages that follow. Not at all because I want to hurt you, but because if we do get back together, I want it to be better. After our first breakup, when we got back together, things were so much better. And I think that was because it allowed us to be more honest with each other—the worst had happened, and we’d found our way back to each other. It helped us to understand one another better, I think. That is why I want to be honest here, so you can understand me. Because if you understand me, and if I can grow to understand you as deeply as I’d like, we can stay together this time. If there is a “this time.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about what it was like when we broke up and got back together the first time. When you broke up with me that time, I don’t think I was necessarily surprised. We were tumultuous. I think we each had a lot to learn, and largely, we learned it.

I never told you this full story—not even after we got back together—but the night you broke up with me, I went to the pool in my building and swam laps for almost two hours. This was not at all like me; I was not a swimmer. In fact, I’d never even used that pool before. But I felt like doing something with my body—doing something hard—would make me feel better. And the water would consume my tears. I am not a crier, but I cried that night, and something about how a pool allowed my tears to fall into a larger body made me feel so much better. I cried for a lot of things: for the fact that you were no longer my girlfriend, for the fact that I wouldn’t be able to call you when I thought you were the only thing that could make me feel better, for the fact that we wouldn’t be able to go on the date I had planned for that weekend. That all made sense. But I also cried a

bit because I knew you were right about everything; I knew we weren't good for each other at that point. I cried and swam and let the two acts become one.

And from there I started swimming most days. I didn't cry again after that night, but it was as though swimming was my substitute for crying. The empty nights that had been filled with you, I filled them with chlorine and exhaustion instead of filling them with tears.

And then when we got back together, I kept swimming. I liked the habit; I liked what it did for me emotionally. I liked how it felt like I could wash everything away in the pool. Once we were back together, I remember you making a comment to me one night when I told you I had swam that morning, something like, "I don't remember you being a swimmer," and I told you I had just recently picked it up for some reason. That was a lie; I knew the reason. It was because I got used to the pool consuming my tears—consuming me—and I guess I was still addicted to that feeling of being consumed by something that was totally outside of me.

Looking back, us getting together after that first breakup was a blur. It happened at that party when we first saw each other. Some lame house party—I don't remember any of the details, not even whose house it was. It was the kind of party I didn't really want to be at but would gladly go to so that I didn't have to face an empty Friday night. Especially after a breakup, empty Friday nights are the worst. I got there a while before you, I think. In fact, I remember that I had gotten there way too early—it was awkward for a little while before more people showed up. I felt like a nuisance until the crowd started to form, like I wasn't wanted there if I wasn't part of a larger crowd. I think that's what it often feels like after a breakup—like you're not wanted anywhere.

I remember being really thankful that you hadn't shown up. I knew you had probably gotten the details of the party, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to take seeing you. I knew seeing you was going to hurt. But I also think part of me had gone just because I wanted to see you. It was a weird feeling: hoping you wouldn't come but also hoping you would.

But then of course you did come. You walked through the door, and it felt like we locked eyes as soon as you did. I'd been subconsciously glancing at the door every time it opened, but I was surprised that your eyes somehow immediately found me, too. I think we both felt it when we saw each other like that; we both felt that intense familiarity, felt like this breakup couldn't last because of that familiarity. It was the closest real life has ever been to a rom com for me. In that moment when we locked eyes across the party, everything around you went blurry and all I could see was your face.

After the brief eye contact, I retreated back to my conversation. You were flooded by friends, the ever-interesting new arrival. I don't really remember how we ended up talking at all, but we did. That familiar pull between us somehow got us out on the back porch, alone. You asked me how I'd been. I told you fine. I asked how you'd been.

"Honestly, not great," you said. "I miss you."

"I lied when I said I'm fine."

"I didn't believe you anyway."

And then, just like that, we were back together. That very night. We'd been missing each other, then we saw each other, and then we didn't have to miss each other anymore. It was that easy. And things between us were easy for a while after that. We

clicked differently that second time around, I guess because we had each learned a lot. Because we had missed each other and actually realized what we were missing.

And then a year later, I decided to break up with you. I know when I ended things with you it was a surprise. It surprised me, too, a little bit.

As foolish as this is going to sound—and as bad as this is going to make me look—I think it came down to you meeting Jack. As you know, Jack is one of my oldest and closest friends. He was the most important person in my life who hadn't met you yet. And so when he and his girlfriend came to town to visit, I was so excited for you to meet them. I think I had put too much pressure on it, but it was a very important thing to me.

The four of us had a game night at my place, which I'm sure you'll remember. They were staying in my guest room, so you were the only one who had to actually come over. When I answered the door for you, my heart was beating so fast. I was so nervous, and I didn't know why. All the rest of my friends loved you, and so did my parents, so why wouldn't Jack and Lucy?

In all honestly, the night was pretty fun, barring a few moments of awkwardness just because I hadn't seen Jack in a couple of years since he moved and because you had never met either of them before. The games were fun, especially Taboo. When we played Taboo, I remember being really proud of how much you and I were on the same page. I remember thinking, *If this doesn't prove to Jack how compatible I am with Anne, nothing will.* I know that is silly, but I thought it.

When you decided it was time for you to go, I remember you kinda grabbed my hand under the table to get my attention. Then you leaned in and whispered that you thought

you should go, and I told them. I remember feeling their eyes on us as you grabbed my hand and whispered how you did; it seemed like they thought something felt off, which made me feel like something was off.

I walked you out, and we kissed goodnight before I went back I to join my friends. Once I got inside, we played a couples more games and chatted about the evening. I was really anxious to hear what they thought. I hadn't been anxious while we were all hanging out, but once you were gone, I found myself obsessing over what they thought about you, over how they thought the night had gone. Then, when we wrapped up a game of Yahtzee that we'd decided would be our last, Jack said to me, while cleaning up the dice, "So how long have you two been dating?"

"Oh, almost a year now, I think."

"Woah, that's longer than I thought. And so you really like her?"

I laughed a bit. "I wouldn't be dating her if I didn't." They laughed a bit, too.

"What do you guys think of her?" I asked expectantly.

There was a very slight pause here. I think when I looked back at that night later that week, I stretched that pause out. Realistically, it was probably just a few seconds, but each time I looked back to this interaction, those few seconds became longer and longer. Now when I look back at it, it feels like it must have been eons.

"She's really nice," Jack said. There was a general head nod at this from Lucy. A head nod is not necessarily the kind of support you want from your friends when you ask them if they like your girlfriend. You want enthusiastic yeses, maybe even a pat on the back. That might be a little over the top, but I just know I was hoping for something more over the top than head nods and "really nice."

When I asked for more details on what “really nice” meant, neither of them had much to say. “Come on, just say it. Clearly you’re not saying all that you thought.”

“I just always pictured you with someone bolder. I don’t know.”

“But she really seems great,” Lucy chimed in.

“Yes, yes she is great,” Jack said. “Just, not the kind of girl I always thought you’d end up with.”

His comments were simple, and not totally negative. But they were far from positive, too. We went to bed not long after this. When I got in bed, I couldn’t fall asleep. Nothing about you had changed. Nothing about us had changed. But I knew that I was going to have Jack’s voice in the back of my mind the next time I saw you: he always pictured me with someone bolder. I went for a swim the next morning, and I couldn’t swim it off like I’d hoped. By then, I’d been swimming things off a lot. But I couldn’t wash off “really nice.”

The day I broke up with you, I wasn’t really planning on doing that. Like, I hadn’t gone to bed the night before thinking that I would wake up and end things with you the next day. It was probably about a month and a half after that game night. And I had been loosely thinking about ending it since that night, but never seriously. I liked you too much for it to be serious. But I also, evidently, didn’t like you enough to push Jack’s voice out of my brain.

Then, that day on my way home from work, I stopped at the dry cleaners. There was a woman picking up her dry cleaning, too, and she and I chatted for a little while. She was really friendly, and she was not bad looking at all (remember: I’m trying to be

honest). I don't think you could really call our conversation flirting; all we talked about was the weather, what clothes we were picking up, and the Italian restaurant next door. But I found myself thinking, *Wow, there are women out there like this. I'm not dating the only good woman there is.* Because I felt like that sometimes—like you were the only good woman left. Like there were no other good options in the world for me. But that day, at the dry cleaners, I realized that there were at least some good options for me out there. Whether or not that good option was this particular woman, there was a comfort in knowing that women like her existed out in the world and more specifically, at the dry cleaners.

And she was bold. She was who I imagined Jack imagined me being with. There was no sense of shyness about her. Not that you're shy, but there's almost an aura of timidity about you. Like, you always liked to look like you were reading a book or something in public, even when you were really observing everyone around you. You liked the safety of that, and there's not anything wrong with that, but it is not bold. And where you weren't bold, this woman was. She wore bright colors—brighter than I'd ever known you to. She talked loud—louder than I'd ever known you to. And she showed an immediate interest in me—more than I'd ever known you to, honestly. She was like the sprout of the seed that Jack had planted.

So, I did it—I ended things with you. I called you when I got home and told you we needed to talk that night. It both was and wasn't an impulse decision. You know the feeling? When it's something you've thought about doing, but when you actually do it, it feels like you are being more impulsive than you've ever been before. That conversation

wasn't easy. I don't want to rehash it here other than to say I'm sorry for it. For how it went and the fact that I did it at all. At the time, it did seem right to me.

I think I first realized that I missed you about two weeks after the breakup. Not that I didn't miss you immediately after I ended things, but it was a simple feeling then. It was a feeling I could write off because it was just the feeling people have after a breakup. That initial feeling of missing you felt more like a generic loneliness than anything. And I was able to wash it off in the pool. I would swim, and the generic loneliness would sink off of me and to the bottom of the pool. But then, when I was at work one day, the missing you really hit, and it was more complicated. It didn't feel generic anymore—didn't feel like a feeling anyone would feel. It was a feeling that was stuck to me.

It hit when I was giving a presentation at work—the one I had been working on around the time we broke up, pitching a new campaign to our biggest client. It went really well, but in the middle of it, I felt like I needed to throw up. It must have been my nerves. I had to excuse myself about halfway through the presentation. I said I just needed to use the restroom and told them to brainstorm any questions they had for me while I was gone. Then I went to the bathroom, threw up, and came back to finish the presentation like nothing had happened. At the end, they said they loved my ideas. I was so relieved.

Immediately when I got back to my office, I found myself wanting so badly to text you. There were a lot of people who I wanted to tell the good news that the presentation had gone well, but I you were the only person who I wanted to tell about the nervous interruption. I wanted to tell you the good news, *and* I wanted to tell you the

story about throwing up. Because I knew exactly how you'd laugh at it—I could picture your laugh, the quiet one when you hear something that you know is funny but also grosses you out. In that moment, I craved that familiar laugh.

After that day at work, when the missing became a craving, I tried to combat it. I hoped maybe it was just a craving for dating in general, so I got a dating app. I let my roommate Zane do the swiping for me because that felt like too much for me to take on myself. Then I let him do the messaging for me—again, I didn't feel ready for that. In retrospect, it didn't make a lot of sense for me to think I was ready to date when I couldn't swipe or message. But I guess I just thought that it would be alright in person if I could just get to that point.

Zane very quickly had a date set up for me. After just a day of his swiping and messaging on my behalf, he texted me that I was getting drinks with a girl at 8pm Thursday. I was actually excited. I think it was mainly just hope that I'd get to quench the craving. I had convinced myself that all I was missing was dating, even when I knew deep down my craving was specifically for you.

I had a really hard time picking out what to wear for the date. Every nice shirt I owned, I had worn on a date with you at some point. The navy checkered shirt was what I wore on our first date, so that one was absolutely out. I wore my favorite green dress shirt that one night when we went to a nice dinner and then got drinks at that one rooftop bar. The yellow one I wore when I met your parents. The one with paisleys I wore for our first anniversary. My dark red one I wore when we went to see that one play—do you remember that? During intermission we got drinks, and then you spilled your red wine on

me, but luckily, I was wearing that dark red shirt, so you could hardly see the stain. It's still stained.

So, I had absolutely nothing to wear. Or rather, I had lots to wear, but I had nothing to wear that didn't somehow remind me of you. And the whole point of this was not thinking about you, not missing you, not craving you. I tried on one shirt of mine for the date—a light blue polo—that seemed nice enough, and at first, I didn't remember ever having worn it with you. But then, when I saw myself wearing it in the mirror, I realized that I wore it one a date with you once, when we first started dating. Probably our second or third date, the one when we went mini golfing. I sat down there, on the floor in front of the mirror, wearing just that shirt and my boxers. I stared catatonically at my reflection. I couldn't do it—I couldn't go on this date.

But then Zane came in, pulled me up off the floor, and lent me one of his nice shirts. A shirt that finally wasn't stained with you like all of mine were. And he sent me out the door—the date was at that bar down the street from my old place, so I walked there. When I got there, I saw the girl waiting for me; I recognized her from the pictures Zane had shown me. Before the date, Zane showed me his messages with her so I knew what they had talked about. She was a schoolteacher—third grade, I think. She had moved to town fairly recently. She had brown hair. But, most notably, she wasn't you.

We talked at the bar for about an hour. She was painfully boring, and she checked her phone several times while I was talking. You never did that—I had all of you attention whenever you were with me. I always appreciated that about you. She also kept cracking her knuckles, which I hate. I always told myself I would never date someone who cracked their knuckles. On our first date, the guy at the table next to us cracked his

and you leaned in to say to me, “I hate when people crack their knuckles. I just don’t get it.” That was when I knew I wanted to go on a second date with you. Can you believe that? It was something as silly as that, but that was what solidified you for me. And it was also what solidified for me that I could not go on another date with this girl.

When I got home, Zane was so eager to hear how it went. I told him about her checking her phone, the knuckles, how boring her stories were. He said I just wasn’t over you, so I was being too picky. He was probably right, but I was starting to think there wasn’t anything wrong with that. I was starting to think it was best that I wasn’t over you.

And then the next day, I went to the drycleaners, and that girl was there again. The bold one. This time, I was single. I could ask her out. And, as much as I don’t want to tell you this, I did ask her. I was still in denial that it was you I was craving, so I asked her to dinner. And she said yes. Her name is Stella, and we started dating. I liked her a lot. One date turned to two, which turned to three, which turned to her becoming my girlfriend. And I liked her—I really did.

But last week I got a letter. From a girl I knew in high school, Grace. Grace was always nice. In fact, I had a little crush on her in high school. I even asked her to prom, but she said no, and that was the end of that. We were never friends in the same way after, and we haven’t talked really at all since then, definitely not at all since high school.

She wrote me a letter asking me to go to a wedding with her. In another life, this is something I would have considered. But in this life, my first thought when I got the letter was, *I can’t go because of Anne*. And once I had thought that thought, I realized that technically, I couldn’t go because of Stella. Stella was my girlfriend, not you. So it

was because of Stella that I couldn't go, not you. But in my gut, I knew it was because of you. It was because I was still in love with you.

I broke up with Stella the day I got that letter. And right after, I went for a swim. It was my longest swim ever. I realized that I hadn't been swimming for a while; I had felt so consumed by all the stress of missing you and then dating Stella and then getting Grace's letter. What I needed was to be consumed by water instead.

Since that day, I've been thinking about writing you this letter. Now what I want, more than anything, is to be consumed by you in the way I've been consumed by the pool.

So here's my offer: would you go out with me again? On another first date? I even have it planned. I heard that Phantom of the Opera is coming to the theatre downtown—I know you've wanted to go to that ever since you saw it as a little girl. I've listened to the soundtrack for it a couple of times, and one of the songs always makes me think of you: "Think of Me." I guess I think of you so fondly that I don't want it to just be thinking anymore.

What do you say? Phantom of the Opera, next weekend? I'll even hold your hand when the chandelier drops.

With All My Love,

Henry

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Anne to Brady Research

The first story in the series is from Anne, who is writing to a man she met on the subway. The two of them are strangers and haven't met again since this encounter, but she still always thinks about him when she's in New York. The first way I tied psychology research into this story was as part of the plot: how the two initiated their conversation. In a study titled "How Strangers Initiate Conversations: Interactions of Public Trains in Germany," Pütz (2018) found that conversation was most typically initiated by strangers on trains during unexpected delays. Pütz (2018) observed people on trains, and he found that problems with the transit broke down the barrier to conversation between strangers. He theorizes that this phenomenon is not only because strangers may have questions for one another in these cases, but also because of how these cases uniformly focus passenger attention. He writes, "So while disruptive events increase the likelihood of conversations as a way of making sense of a situation, they also lower the barriers toward conversations because they provide travelers with a legitimate reason to talk" (Pütz, 2018, p. 434). People are more likely to talk to one another on public transit during delays because they have questions, but also because they know what the other is thinking about.

Thus, in the story, I decided to have Anne and Brady meet on the subway during a delay. Part of Pütz's theory hinges on the fact that passengers' uniform focus of attention is what makes conversation in these situations easier, which is why I had both characters look at their watch right before the conversation begins: this small action cues to both

Anne and Brady that the other person is thinking about the delay. Thus, initiation of conversation is easier.

Another piece of research that helped in the plot construction of this story was an article by Kleiman et al. (2015) entitled, “Perceived responsiveness during an initial social interaction with a stranger predicts a positive memory bias one week later.” Their findings in this article highlight that a positive reaction to self-disclosure to a stranger predicts greater positive emotion during an interaction. They write, “Our results indicated that when participants perceived that their conversation partners reacted enthusiastically to self-disclosures (i.e., perceived responsiveness), they experience greater enjoyment and more positive emotion during the interaction” (Kleiman et al., 2015, p. 339).

However, this positive reaction is not limited to immediately after the interaction. The researchers also found that perceived responsiveness leads people to positively remember interactions with strangers a week after the interaction. Thus, the positive response to perceived responsiveness endures over time.

So, because of this article, I decided to include self-disclosure and perceived responsiveness as an important component of Anne and Brady’s conversations, making it more likely that Anne would remember the interaction and look back at it so positively. Anne is writing this letter long after their interaction, so I wanted some basis for why the interaction has always stuck in her head. She even says, “I fondly remember what it was like to meet you.” Based on Kleiman et al. (2015), I decided that self-disclosure would be a reasonable justification for why this is. It is important to note that Kleiman et al.’s (2015) article studied this phenomenon using small talk, not the intense self-disclosure present in the story, and their study only tested if the positive emotion surrounding an

interaction extends a week after the interaction, not long after. For the purposes of the story, I extended both factors beyond the scope that they studied in the article. It seems reasonable to me to believe that an interaction with a stranger that involved much self-disclosure—beyond just small talk—would make a positive impression for even longer than the week that Kleiman et al. (2015) found. Therefore, this provides a subtle yet plausible justification for why Anne looks back so fondly on the interaction with Brady.

APPENDIX B

Brady to Clark Research

This letter features Brady, a hospice worker, writing to Clark, the widower of one of Brady's patients. Over the course of the letter, Brady describes his mistake of getting too close to the couple, and he apologizes for turning down Clark's invitation to Celia's funeral. Going into this story, I had very limited knowledge of hospice workers, but I thought it would be an interesting relationship to explore. Thus, I was heavily guided by research for plot development and for Brady's thoughts and feelings.

The basis for the plot in this story came primarily from an article by Sanders et al. (2012), titled "Exploring Professional Boundaries in End-Of-Life Care: Considerations for Hospice Social Workers and Other Members of the Team." In the article, the authors explore the relational boundaries that exist—or do not exist—between hospice social workers and patients/families. They write about how the relationship is "time-limited" because of the nature of the job, and the relationship is also often emotionally charged because of the nature of the job.

In order to more deeply explore this relationship and the boundaries that should exist in it, Sanders et al. (2012) did four case studies. I incorporated two of these into the story. The overall exigence for the letter—that Brady is writing to apologize for getting too close to the couple and for not coming to Celia's funeral—is based on the first case study in the article. In that first case study, Sanders et al. (2012) follow Kate, a hospice worker who crossed boundaries with her patients. They note that poor boundaries often come because of genuine concern: "In Kate's situation, her poor boundaries originated

out of genuine concern for the family and her commitment to assisting the family in all aspects of the journey toward death” (Sanders et al., 2012, p. 15). So, in the story, I had Brady’s poor boundaries stem from his personal affection for Clark and Celia. He writes that he started and continued staying for dinner because of how much he liked the couple, and from this affection stemmed a concern for them. This concern is even present before he begins staying; out of his concern, he cries on his way home from his first meeting with them.

Additionally, the plotline of Brady declining to go to Celia’s funeral comes from the first case study in the Sanders et al. (2012) article. The authors discuss that poor boundaries can create unreasonable expectations for hospice social workers, and the negative impact of these expectations can be exacerbated when they are not met following a death: “When patients die, the social worker must shift focus on the next case. If they have become ‘like family,’ it can cause the caregiver to feel abandoned in their initial stages of grief” (Sanders et al., 2012, p. 16). In the case study about Kate, the authors specifically mention that Kate attended the funeral of her patient, John, which led John’s wife Gail to believe Kate would continue to be a part of her life, even though this was not necessarily true. Thus, I decided to frame Brady’s letter as an apology for turning down Clark’s invitation to Celia’s funeral.

Further, Brady’s self-disclosure about his father’s death comes from Sanders et al.’s (2012) findings that self-disclosure can contribute to the inappropriate crossing of boundaries. In the second case study by Sanders et al. (2012), they discuss Mary, a hospice social worker who was assigned to the case of a child. In this case, the authors highlight that Mary’s own self-disclosure crossed boundaries that fostered a relationship

that was inappropriate for the situation. They warn against the self-disclosure of hospice workers. So, in the story, I chose to have Brady share about losing his father because that seemed like a realistic self-disclosure line for him to cross.

This self-disclosure is also supported by another article titled “Burnout and death anxiety in hospice social workers” by Quinn-Lee et al. (2014). In this study, Quinn-Lee et al. (2014) used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to explore how burnout and death anxiety impact hospice workers. For one thing, their findings indicated that personal experiences with death was a motivator for entering the hospice work field. Hence, Brady’s own experience losing his father not only acts as an important self-disclosure moment in the story, as addressed above, but it also acts as a realistic motivator for entering the field.

Another finding in the Quinn-Lee et al. (2014) article that helped drive the story was that there was a decrease in death anxiety among hospice social workers overall, though they do tend to become more aware of death and how unpredictable life is. Therefore, throughout the story, I tried to give Brady a low-anxiety attitude about death. This is most present in the scene in which he responds to Celia’s question about whether he is afraid of death by saying, “Honestly, no. Something about this work, I don’t know what it is, but it has shown me how peaceful death can be. Painful, sure, sometimes. But peaceful. I guess I just feel equipped to die.” Further, in an article titled “The Psychological Experience of Hospice Workers During Encounters with Death,” DeArmond (2012) had a similar finding that hospice workers feel peace about death, emphasizing that this is a common attitude among hospice workers.

In addition to providing support for Brady's sense of peace, DeArmond's (2012) article guided his thoughts. What was especially valuable about DeArmond's (2012) article was the free-text comments from hospice workers that she included in the article. Two of these were even incorporated directly into the story (indicated by asterisks in the text). First of all, in the story Brady says, "I don't provide care as much as I provide presence," which was based on a line in DeArmond's (2012) article ("I do not provide care but presence") (p. 287). Additionally, at the end of the story, Brady writes, "Being with the dying is calming, authentic, intimate, and loving," which is a direct quote from DeArmond's (2012) article (p. 286). In these instances, I incorporated these direct quotes to best capture how Brady's work impacts his attitudes, as based on these interviews from real hospice workers.

APPENDIX C

Clark to Dani Research

Following the hospice care story, I knew I wanted Clark's letter to be a story of him encountering a kind stranger. After looking into several articles about bereavement, I found one that helped me formulate the context of this encounter: an article by Carr et al. (2014) titled "Do Special Occasions Trigger Psychological Distress Among Older Bereaved Spouses? An Empirical Assessment of Clinical Wisdom." In this article, the authors examine whether special occasions have a unique impact on grieving individuals who lost a spouse. They surveyed widowed individuals and compared their results to a control group of married individuals. From these samples, they took several measures including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and yearning. Ultimately, the authors found that "among bereaved spouses, a range of psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, yearning, despair, and loss-related anxiety are significantly higher during the months of the late spouse's birthday, June, and January, relative to other months of the year" (Carr et al., 2014, p. 118). They found these results were only significant within the year of loss. So, because I wanted to frame Clark's story around an expression of grief, this article inspired me to have it take place on what would have been his wife's birthday. Therefore, his public expression of grief is especially psychologically sound because it takes place on Celia's birthday.

Additionally, one question that arose for me as I wrote this story was: Would the warning that Clark had for Celia's death (i.e., the fact that she was on hospice and her health was deteriorating) impact his grief experience at all? I found a second article for

this story that addressed this question, titled “Psychological Adjustment to Sudden and Anticipated Spousal Loss Among Older Widowed Persons.” This article—written by Carr et al. (2001)—looks at the complex impact of sudden death as opposed to anticipated death. Ultimately, they found that neither sudden nor anticipated death is necessarily better or less distressing, but that warning can impact the grief experience. They write, “Prolonged periods of anticipating a spouse’s death are also not generally deleterious, but they do seem to increase anxiety for both men and women and yearning among men only” (Carr et al., 2001, p. 246). I was most struck by this idea that for men grieving the loss of their wives, yearning is increased because of anticipated death. In the study, yearning was measured with items like, “have you had painful waves of missing your spouse” or “have you found yourself longing to have your spouse with you” (Carr et al., 2001, p. 240). I brought this sense of yearning into the story at several points. One example is at the beginning, when he writes about missing her interruptions while he reads and her presence while he watches TV. Another time it comes in is at the end, when he discusses that he hasn’t really been able to return “home” since the loss of Celia. Finally, I would argue that the main incident in the story—when Clark freezes and begins to cry at the store—is an instance of yearning.

APPENDIX D

Dani to Ed Research

Just as the relationship between a hospice worker and the family of their patient was striking to me, I was interested in exploring the relationship of a fan and a celebrity. Particularly, I was interested in a parasocial relationship (PSR), which is essentially when a consumer of media feels as though they are in a relationship of some kind with a media figure, and this relationship manifests for the consumer much like a typical social relationship would. So, I decided that the letter from Dani would be a fan letter to her favorite singer, Ed Harker. To formulate the plot of the story and what drives Dani's PSR, I sought out several research articles on PSRs.

One trend I found among the articles was the role of social media in fostering PSRs. The first article that became instrumental in this letter was "Celebrity's Self-Disclosure on Twitter and Parasocial Relationships" by Kim and Song (2016). Kim and Song (2016) performed a study on the relationship between how much celebrities self-disclose on social media—namely, Twitter—and the PSRs formed by fans. After performing a survey of undergraduate students who follow celebrities on Twitter, Kim and Song (2016) performed an analysis to determine how interactions on Twitter impact the relationship. They found that "celebrities' self-disclosure on Twitter enhances fans' feeling of social presence. That is, when celebrities share their life and directly communicate about these experiences, fans tend to feel as if those celebrities were socially present in their life" (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 574). An earlier study by Stever and Lawson (2013) had similar findings, reporting that Twitter is a powerful tool for

celebrities to communicate with fans and as such can fuel PSRs. Therefore, in Dani's letter, I made sure to include that she followed Ed on Twitter and felt like she knew him more personally because of this.

Additionally, an important element of PSRs is that the person who has one toward a celebrity feels like they *know* the celebrity and understand the celebrity on a deeper level. In a literature review about PSRs, one trend noted by Giles (2002) was that a person with a PSR feels like they have a deep understanding of the celebrity. He writes, "A key element in the user-figure relationship is the extent to which users are able to make person, or character, judgements about the figure" (Giles, 2002, p. 291). A person with a PSR toward a celebrity likely feels they can make judgements about them. In the story, Dani writes that she flips magazine covers around when she thinks they are spreading lies about Ed; thus, Dani believes she can judge what is true about him and what isn't because she feels she understands his character. Another interesting point brought up in another article—by Giles (2002)—is that discussion of a figure with peers may impact the development of a PSR. This is why Dani's discussion of Ed with Marley makes such an impact on her and is so instrumental in the formation of her PSR with Ed.

Finally, the last major article that impacted this story (and the previous one) was, "Leave Britney Alone!": Parasocial relationships and empathy," by Scherer et al. (2021). In this article, the authors examined the role of empathy concerning both people with PSRs and people who judge others with a PSR. Findings from this article actually played into both Dani's letter to Ed as well as Clark's letter to Dani, offering a deeper explanation for why Dani might have been so caring toward Clark. Based on self-report data regarding PSRs and empathy, Scherer et al. (2021) "found that the higher an

individual is in empathy...the higher they are in self-identification of a PSR” (p. 136). Thus, empathy and the likelihood to have a PSR are correlated, so it makes sense that Dani—who does have a strong PSR—would also display high empathy. Therefore, this finding offers support for Dani being as empathetic as she was toward Clark.

Further, another finding from Scherer et al.’s (2021) article was “that people hold biases toward those who have PSRs” (p. 136). In the story, Dani faces bullying at school because some of her classmates think it’s weird how much she likes Ed, which is backed up by this finding. People, especially those low in empathy, are biased negatively toward people with PSRs, explaining more about why Dani faced social ridicule for her love of Ed.

APPENDIX E

Ed to Frances Research

Because of his celebrity status, I thought it would be interesting for Ed to write to a childhood friend who he has since grown apart from. For this story, I wanted to find research on cross-sex friendships dissolution, but much of the research available focuses on cross-sex friendship dissolution *as a result of romance*—either unrequited between the friends or romance for one of the friends with someone else which acts as a barrier to the friendship. However, for the story, my goal was to highlight a totally platonic relationship, unimpacted by either of these types of romance.

I struggled to find any research specifically on the impact of distance on cross-sex friends. Thus, I ended up applying research on same-sex high school friends transitioning to college, even though the story is about cross-sex high school friends transitioning to the next life stage. In an article entitled “Best friends forever?: High school best friendships and the transition to college,” Oswald and Clark (2003) explain their findings regarding how friendships shift over this large transition. They collected survey data from college freshmen in order to determine how these relationships change. Ultimately, they found that there are significant changes to best friendships because of the transition from high school to college. Interestingly, they found that proximity did not necessarily impact the deterioration of friendship as much as communication did. They write, “Individuals who communicate frequently are more likely to remain best friends and do not report the decrease in satisfaction, commitment, rewards, and increased costs experienced by low-communication friendships” (Oswald & Clark, 2003, p.194). Therefore, though distance

is mentioned as a factor in the story, Ed also clearly stresses the fade of communication between him and Frances that marked the end of their friendship. This failure to communicate does, ultimately, act as the thing that ends their friendship.

The other research that was instrumental in Ed's story was about homesickness. In the story, homesickness plays a vital part—even the lyrics he writes about Frances, “you're the home I can't return to, but I hold the photo albums close,” are clearly an expression of some kind of homesickness. The most interesting article I found on homesickness was written by Stroebe et al. (2016), titled, “Is Homesickness a Mini-Grief? Development of a Dual Process Model.” The article explores what clinical concern there should be about homesickness, and they ultimately argue that homesickness is like grief: “We propose that [homesickness] is a grief-like phenomenon, similar in terms of underlying processes, manifestations, and consequences to those associated with the death of a loved person” (Stroebe et al., 2016, p. 345). Evidently, they believe that homesickness and grief are largely the same. The two emotional experiences include many of the same challenges, and after reviewing research, Stroebe et al. (2016) determine that it is best to define homesickness as a “mini-grief,” saying it is “a negative emotional state primarily due to separation from home and attachment persons, characterized by longing for and preoccupation with home, and often with difficulties adjusting to the new place” (p. 350). In light of this, the overlapping meaning of Ed's lyrics between stories makes even more sense. The lyrics Ed wrote about homesickness resonate for Clark in his experience of grief, and this highlights the parallels of the two experiences.

APPENDIX F

Frances to Grace Research

In this story, Frances—who is now dating Kyle—writes to Kyle’s ex-girlfriend Grace. The inspiration for this story came largely from a research article that I found on “retroactive jealousy.” The authors of the article, Frampton and Fox (2018), define retroactive jealousy as a phenomenon that “occurs when a person feels troubled by their partner’s previous romantic or sexual relationships that existed before the current romantic relationship began” (p. 2). I found this to be a fascinating concept because it is a relationship that seems underexplored to me: the connection between two people who date the same person at different times.

Frampton and Fox’s (2018) article on retroactive jealousy, titled “Social Media’s Role in Romantic Partners’ Retroactive Jealousy: Social Comparison, Uncertainty, and Information Seeking,” looks primarily at retroactive jealousy as it is connected to social media. The researchers interviewed 36 participants on how social networking impacts their retroactive jealousy and then identified trends in the responses. They identified factors leading to retroactive jealousy, namely “digital remnants, social comparison, and uncertainty,” and they also identified strategies for managing this jealousy that were both offensive and defensive (Frampton & Fox, 2018, p. 4).

Given the findings of these authors, I thought it would be particularly interesting to have Frances’ letter sent via and focused on social media, and I used the interview findings of Frampton and Fox (2018) to guide Frances’s internal thoughts. All three of the factors that lead to retroactive jealousy were present in the story. First, digital

remnants motivate what makes Frances jealous in the first place. Frampton and Fox (2018) define digital remnants as evidence of former relationships present on social networking sites, and they write, “These digital remnants of a relationship may trigger retroactive jealousy by reminding people that there were other romantic partners before them or making these thoughts or images more visceral” (p. 5). In Frances’ letter, it is old photos of Grace and Kyle that make her jealous in the first place, and one particular photo of them at the beach is what prompts her to really spiral into jealousy. For this tie-in, I even used language from an interview response in the story. Frampton and Fox (2018) write, “One female participant (21) in our study noted that seeing photographs on social media made the previous relationship seem more real to her: ‘This is what they looked like. This is something that they did together. It gives you something tangible to think about’” (p. 5). Similarly, in the story, Frances writes, “I’d look at it and think, *This is something that they did together.*” Thus, digital remnants are a clear cause of her retroactive jealousy.

The second cause of retroactive jealousy that is addressed by Frampton and Fox (2018) is social comparison: “Several participants suggested that they compared themselves on a variety of dimensions, including academic history, employment, hobbies, and grammar” (p. 5). So, in the story, Frances does a lot of social comparison of herself to Grace. Things like hobbies (working out), employment (Grace who moves jobs a lot v. Frances who doesn’t), and academic history (Frances mentions that she looked up Grace’s college graduation program to see if she graduated with honors) come into play in the story. Further, Frampton and Fox (2018) found, “Participants also indicated that they made comparisons not just individually to the ex-partner but also to the ex-

relationship as a whole” (p. 5). This is certainly present in the story as well. Frances experiences a lot of doubt relating to how her relationship with Kyle compares to Grace and Kyle’s relationship.

The last factor discussed by Frampton and Fox (2018) is uncertainty. They write that “uncertainty leads to jealousy, as people worry that their relationship will not live up to a partner’s past relationship or that their partner is not ‘over’ the ex despite a clear end to the previous relationship” (Frampton & Fox, 2018, p. 6). Frances most definitely exhibits a level of uncertainty. In the article, a participant is quoted saying “What if we don’t take pictures like that?” in relation to uncertainty (Frampton & Fox, 2018, p. 6). I gave Frances a similar sentiment—she says things like, “I could see the way he looked at you and the way you looked at him and I began to wonder if that was something he and I would ever share.”

In addition to factors leading to retroactive jealousy, Frampton and Fox (2018) identify strategies for managing the feeling, which are also present in the story. First of all, Frances asks Kyle for more information about his relationship with Grace, which relates back to a strategy identified by the researchers. They found, “Participants indicated that one of the main ways to manage retroactive jealousy is to gather as much information as possible about a partner’s ex and the past relationship” (Frampton & Fox, 2018, p. 6). Thus, the conversation Frances mentions in which Kyle tells her more about the relationship is an important step to managing her jealousy.

Another strategy implemented by Frances is disparaging exes. Frampton and Fox (2018) also found, “Participants suggested that when they are jealous about a partner’s romantic history, they search for the partner’s ex on social media to find things to dislike

about the ex” (p. 6). In the story, Frances does this: “As I thought these ugly things about you, I felt their ugliness, but I couldn’t stop thinking them. They were satisfying me somehow, satisfying a hunger I wish I didn’t have.”

Yet another strategy for dealing with retroactive jealousy identified by Frampton and Fox (2018) was avoiding information seeking, which is hinted at the end of the story by Frances’ post-script that she doesn’t look at Grace’s Instagram anymore.

Finally, the fourth strategy that the authors discuss is what they call reframing: “Several participants described reframing jealous thoughts by telling themselves that their partner’s former romantic relationship is ‘in the past’ and that they ‘can’t change the past’” (Frampton & Fox, 2018, p. 7). They quote one participant in particular who mentioned that she looked back at her own previous relationships and remembered that they weren’t always as happy as they look. This is evident when Frances writes, “We looked so in love, and we weren’t. If we were—if we *really* were—we’d still be together. And the same goes for you and Kyle.”

The other research element tied into this story was the similarity between Frances and Grace. Several times, Frances mentions how similar she believes Grace and her to be—both regarding looks and some other personality factors. A research article titled, “Consistency between individuals’ past and current romantic partners’ own reports of their personalities” by Park and MacDonald (2019) found, via a study of self-reported personalities, that current and ex-partners do tend to share some similarity. They write, “the present findings provide evidence that people’s new partners tend to have a degree of similarity to their previous partners, suggesting that people consistently engage in relationships with a particular type of person to at least some extent” (Park &

MacDonald, 2019, p. 12795). This is why I decided to make Frances and Grace out to be so similar in the story. Frances writes a lot about how the two of them seem very alike, and this makes sense given the fact that they both date the same man who, according to this data, likely has a particular type. I took the opportunity to make these similarities physical as well as in personality, but the article speaks primarily to personality similarities.

APPENDIX G

Grace to Henry Research

Going into this story, I knew I wanted it to involve a casually-close friendship from high school. Initially, though, I did not see this relationship involving romance. However, upon reading “Unrequited love: The role of prior commitment, motivation to remain friends, and friendship maintenance,” by Clark et al. (2020), I decided that unrequited love would be a very interesting theme in this story. In this article, Clark et al. (2020) examine whether previous friendship commitment mediates friendship maintenance after a declaration of love by one person that is not reciprocated by the other. That is, they test whether a person’s level of commitment to a friendship prior to a declaration of love determines if the two stay friends after the unreciprocated declaration. Through this research, they developed a model for friendship maintenance after a “pursuer”—the one feeling the unrequited love—makes a declaration of romantic desire toward the “rejecter.” They write, “Our initial results confirmed that higher commitment to a relationship before an unrequited love episode predicted engaging in more friendship maintenance behaviors after the episode” (Clark et al., 2020, p. 304). This fit perfectly into the framework of the story I was going for: a casual friendship that was not maintained. If I made Grace and Henry out to be casual friends—who knew each other from class but not much outside of that—and then made Henry confess feelings to Grace that she did not return, the end of their friendship would be an example of this research. With little commitment, an unrequited love episode would result in an ended friendship between the two.

Further, I wanted the basis of Grace and Henry’s friendship—as well as Henry’s unrequited love—to be backed by some research. Overwhelmingly, psychology research has found that familiarity increases attraction, and this goes for both friendship and romantic relationships. In “Familiarity Does Indeed Promote Attraction in Live Interaction” by Reis et al. (2011), researchers begin by reviewing much of the research about how familiarity increases attraction. Their experiment on the phenomenon focuses on same-sex pairs, and their explanation for this is that “interactions between previously unacquainted opposite-sex strangers are often dominated by concerns about dating and sexual attraction” (Reis et al, 2011, p. 560). They wanted to test the phenomenon focusing more on friendship. Ultimately, their results were that increasing familiarity increases attraction, even independent of sexual attraction. In the story, then, it makes sense that familiarity between Grace and Henry increased attraction for both of them. The difference, however, was that this became romantic attraction for Henry while it remained platonic for Grace.

APPENDIX H

Henry to Anne Research

For the last story, I went into it knowing I wanted it to be Henry's declaration that he wants Anne back. I intentionally included the part about Anne's breakup in the first story because I wanted the final letter to be able to connect back to the beginning in this way. I also felt like if they already had an on-again/off-again relationship, it would be more plausible that some kind of reconciliation and "getting back together" would be possible. Thus, I wanted it to be their second time getting back together (or at least, their second time trying—I purposely left it ambiguous as to whether or not this reconciliation would come to fruition).

All this considered, I chose to incorporate research specifically on on-again/off-again relationships, as well as research relating to the general dissolution of romantic relationships. For on-again/off-again relationships, I found an article entitled, "On-Again/Off-Again Dating Relationships: What Keeps Partners Coming Back?" by Dailey et al. (2011). This article was very instrumental in the formulation of the context of Anne and Henry's relationship. Through a survey of 274 undergraduate students that included both closed- and open-ended questions, Dailey et al. (2011) identified trends in on-again/off-again relationships, particularly relating to why couples rekindled after a breakup. The most commonly cited reason for getting back together was "lingering feelings," which is why Henry speaks so much about his lingering feelings for Anne (Dailey et al., 2011, p. 423).

Further, Dailey et al. (2011) found trends in how renewals were initiated. “Although few dissolutions were mutual...almost half of renewals were mutual” (p. 429). Thus, in the story, both dissolutions were one-sided (i.e., Anne ended things the first time around and Henry ended them the second time around). However, the first renewal—which is described in the story—takes place because they run into each other at a party and *mutually* decide to get back together.

Dailey et al. (2011) also evaluated benefits and problems with renewing a once dissolved relationship. According to the survey data, the two most common benefits reported were “future relationship knowledge” and “new perspective about relationship or partner” (Dailey et al., 2011, p. 427). This is why Henry writes things like, “After our first breakup, when we got back together, things were so much better. And I think that was because it allowed us to be more honest with each other—the worst had happened, and we’d found our way back to each other. It helped us to understand one another better, I think.” He clearly sees knowledge and perspective as a benefit of rekindling the romance.

I also incorporated research from a different article to determine Henry’s reasoning for breaking up with Anne. In an article titled “The Dissolution of Intimate Relationships: A Hazard Model,” researchers Felmler et al. (1990) use a longitudinal investigation to examine why breakups happen. Their findings were that time spent together, perceived alternatives, racial similarity, and perceived social support from family and friends were the most important factors in determining whether a breakup was going to happen. Perceived alternatives and social support were the two factors that I incorporated into this story. Felmler et al. (1990) found, “Among the exchange variables

examined here, comparison level for alternatives was found to be the strongest predictor of the rate of relationship breakup” (p. 27). This means that the strongest predictor of breakup was whether a person felt they had strong alternatives for a different relationship. Thus, in the story, Henry finds himself captivated by and later dating Stella, the woman from the drycleaners. This is meant to be him finding a desirable alternative. Additionally, Felmlee et al. (1990) write, “In the present study, in fact, perceived support from partner’s friends and family was the most highly significant predictor of the rate of relationship breakups for ongoing relationships in the multivariate analysis” (p. 27). So, that is why in the story, a comment from Henry’s friend Jack is what sets off his idea to break up with Anne. With these two factors combined, according to Felmlee et al. (1990), it makes sense that Henry would decide to break up with Anne.

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