

At Last

An experimental creative writing project

Season 3

Episodes 21 – 30

David

"If he keeps bothering you, fight back," his father told him.

"How do I do that," the boy asked.

"If he starts harassing you, pick up a rock," he reached down and picked up a rock from the driveway. He held it in his fist. "You remember. David picked up five smooth stones. You just need one."

"Then what?" the boy asked.

"Then hit Goliath right in the nose," he said swinging.

Sitting in class he remembered his dad's advice, his sermon, as he watched the clock ticking toward recess. The kid he complained to his dad about would be on him as soon as they hit the playground.

The bell rang for recess. Usually, for twenty minutes he'd have to avoid this kid. But not today.

"Hey," the kid said in the taunting voice tuned for playgrounds everywhere. "Are you gonna to run to momma?"

He held his ground against the little bully. That meant a crowd begin to gather. It was how it worked. It was playground politics, elementary entertainment. It was a proving ground.

"Oh, you gonna fight this time, cry baby?" the kid asked.

He kneeled down like he was going to tie his shoe.

"He's praying!" said a kid from the growing crowd. Everyone laughed. It was a good line. Witty. He picked up a smooth rock and clenched it in his right fist.

He struck first and hard. The kid fell back. There was a gasp from the crowd of kids. The little bully tasted his own blood. Then the stunned bully charged, and they wrestled. The crowd shouted and yelled. The boys fell and rolled around in the dirt. Soon they were both bleeding.

Finally, he pinned the bully down, holding his shoulders to the dirt. Blood was dripping from his nose, and he let it hit the bully's white t-shirt while the cheering crowd grew quiet.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

He kept him on the ground. Something changed in the bully's face. He looked like he was going to cry.

"Let's not fight," the bully said.

An adult hand grabbed his elbow and pulled him off the bully. The crowd scattered. A teacher had a boy's arm in each hand, hassling them toward the school building. As they were pulled, he opened his hand and the rock hit the sandy playground.

Sarah

Nobody walks in Albuquerque in the summer if they don't have to. The blocks are long, and when the sun is out, the pavement and concrete reflect the sun back up, making things feel even hotter.

She walked out of the high school and then down to the end of the block past a strip mall parking lot. Then she baked in the sun waiting for the light to change. It was the last day of summer school. She was doing everything she could to graduate early. She hated high school. She had always hated school. Maybe it was because of her parents.

She walked down a long block, past a gas station, and then an auto parts store. Another strip mall. There was a bar she passed every day, Paul's Monterrey Inn. She always wondered what went on in there. She just wanted to go in, to be in that darkness, not for the booze — she'd been drunk — but for the cool darkness. What was behind that door? Who drove those cars parked outside? Someday she'd know.

She was hot. She put her dark hair up on her head. She moved her books around. A man hung out the window of a car and yelled, stuck his tongue out and then said, "Hey, baby!"

"That's original, fuckhead!" she yelled back. With her free right hand, she extended her middle finger, her left arm clutching her geometry text book. The car honked and sped off.

She wrapped both arms around the book and finished crossing the street including the median strip. She knew her mother would be home. She'd be at the kitchen table. She did not want to see her. She did not want to deal with her. But she had put this off long enough. She could not sleep. She could not stop worrying.

They lived on Muriel Street. She thought that was ridiculous. It was Dorothy, Tomasita, Claudine, and then Muriel.

"What stupid names," she often thought. Why women's names?

"Maybe it was their secretaries or their grandmother's names," her mother used to say of the men who developed the neighborhood out of the desert.

"I'd like to think it was their mistresses," she'd say. "At least they got something!" She'd laugh. She hated her laugh. She'd say that Tomasita must have been hot stuff.

The house was small with two doors, the front door not facing the front at all but the driveway. There was a back door, but it came into the living room too. And even the side door was visible from a corner of the square shaped house. In the corner was the kitchen table where her mother graded papers. Even if she just wanted to slink in, she couldn't, every entry was visible from the kitchen table, which her mother called "the panopticon."

Sometimes she really thought her eyes would get stuck pointing up, she rolled them so often when she was around her mother and her stupid comments — about everything.

When she got to the door she stopped. She could see her mother through the curtains, right where she was supposed to be. Why did she have to be so beautiful and smart but so annoying?

“I guess she’s not as bad as most,” she thought. “But this situation is fucked up,” thinking of what she had to tell her mother.

She turned the handle and walked in. She tried to avoid eye contact. The door slammed behind her.

“Hello, honey,” she said not looking up. Then she did. “The door. Please. Slamming.”

“You could fix it,” she said.

“And you could not slam it,” she said back.

She felt herself rolling her eyes. She walked over and flipped on the couch.

“How was your last day? Did you get grades?”

“Yes. It was the last day.”

“Grade?”

“Yes. There is a grade.”

Now her mother turned in her chair.

“Why are we being a challenge today?” she said. “We’re done with geometry and what’s our grade?”

“Fuck Mom,” she seethed. “I am done with geometry. I got an A.”

She threw her text book on the floor.

Then she said, emphasizing “I” in the same way, “I am pregnant.”

Her mother laughed.

“Oh baby,” she said. “You are also very funny. Now stop being so dramatic. Congratulations. You did well.”

“I did,” she said. “And if he’s a boy I’m naming him Pythagoras.”

Her mother, almost as if she knew how her gleeful laugh at her daughter's wit was agonizing, laughed again.

But this time she wasn't annoyed at her mother. She was scared.

"Mommy!" she said, starting to cry. "Mommy, I'm scared."

A moment couldn't have passed between when she heard that pain and when she was holding her. It was a scrapped knee. A nightmare. That sound of her girl hurting and afraid made her move like lightening.

She held her as she cried and sobbed.

"Honey," she soothed. "What is going on?"

She pulled her away for a moment and held her shoulders and looked into her face. It was like looking into a mirror. The eyes were green. They looked, even with tears, like they were looking over the top of a wall.

"Tell me honey," she said. "What's wrong?"

"I think I'm pregnant, mommy," she said.

"Why do you think that?" she asked.

Now she was annoyed again.

"Look, I know you're not a real doctor but think about it," she said.

"Your period?" she asked.

"Mom," she said. "C'mon. I know my body."

"Have you taken a test?" she asked furrowing her brow.

"I just did," she said. "The area of a parallelogram may be calculated using the cross product of..."

"Now stop being funny!" she said sternly. "I mean a pregnancy test!"

"No, mom," she said and rolled away, burying her face in a couch pillow.

"Let's go get one," she said. "We're going to find out. Get up!"

They piled into the car and backed out into the street.

"Do you ever listen to anything other than R.E.M.?" she asked as they drove toward Juan Tabo.

*We were little boys
We were little girls
It's nine o'clock, don't try to turn it off
Cowered in a hole, open mouth
We in step, in hand, your mother remembers this
Hear the howl of the rope, a question:
Did we miss anything? did we miss anything?
Did we miss anything? did we miss anything?*

"You know I do," she said. "Are we really going to fight over music at this point?"

She made a right, heading the car south.

"Mom, we cannot go to Albertsons," she said. "Are you high or something? It's like right by the school. Jesus, Mom."

"Yeah, ok," she said. "I get it. You don't want the paparazzi to see us buying a pregnancy test."

"How can you be so smart about so many things but not the basics?" she lectured. "Why don't we just take the test in front of one of your seminars."

"Calm the fuck down, sweetie," she said under her breath. "Jesus. Just take it easy. Let's just work together on this."

She always said that. It was so weird because she was such a hippie. She always talked about them being a team. Like she was Vince Lombardi or something.

They kept driving down Juan Tabo.

"Ok, here," she pointed to a Walgreens.

"No," she said. "Keep going!"

Finally, they agreed on a pharmacy.

"Let's go in," she said. "Ready?"

"I'm not going in!" she said. "Are you serious?"

"Honey, if I was going in and you were just gonna sit in the car we could have gone to Albertsons!"

Her mother sighed.

"Fine," she said. "Mom's going in! Cover me!"

She just put her hands in her face as her mom disappeared into the store. She ejected the CD. And put in something else. She slid down in the seat and turned up the volume.

She's stole my karma oh no.

Sold it to the farmer oh no.

She's always looking at me.

She's always looking at me.

She's such a charmer oh no.

Her mother got back to the car with a bag and got in.

"We are not listening to this right now," she said and turned off the stereo. "Just some quiet."

She steered the car back and they didn't say anything until they pulled into the driveway.

They walked in and her mother put the bag on the kitchen table taking out its contents and unwrapping the package. There were two pen shaped objects.

"Is the second one for you mom?" she asked.

"Jesus, you never let up," she said with a sigh. "That's all they had was a package of two. Don't get me started with you. I'm being nice here."

"Yeah, okay," said walking toward her mother. "Gimmie one of those."

They headed to the bathroom with her mother behind.

"Are you going to sit on my lap?" she said.

"God damn, you are always on aren't you," she said. "Just get in there and pee on it. Don't miss."

The door closed.

"Are you really going to stand outside the door?" her muffled voice said.

"Just pee on it," she said through the door.

She could hear her making noises. And the urine hitting the water. Her mind kept going in so many directions. She had questions. Was she handling this the right way? How did this happen? How many times had she told her to be careful? Why wasn't she stricter?

"And what the fuck is he going to say?" she said under her breath. "What have you done?" he'd ask.

She knew they'd argue over everything about this just like they argued about her name, and her schools, and what their girl should be.

"Ok," her voice said. "I didn't get pee everywhere but it worked. How do you read this fucker, mom?"

"Come out here," she said.

The door opened.

"Will this thing tell me if it's a boy or a girl?" she said holding up the pen. "Better yet, will it be a Republican or a Democrat?"

"Just give it to me, Jesus Christ," she said taking it and walking back to the kitchen. "Let me see here."

"It's looking faint," she squinted at it. "It looks like..."

"You'd think by now the test would just say 'yes 'or 'no'" she said watching her mom squinting. "Who makes these, Polaroid?"

Her mother looked at her, and handed her the pen.

"You know your body," she said.

They looked at each other for a long moment. The older woman's mind raced. The young woman's mind seemed to stop. There was too much to consider. They truly loved one another; a love bigger than words. But they were as far from each another as two people could be, like one of them was on earth and the other one in outer space.

There was an old clock that had been in the house since it was first lived in. It was a loud clock. It ticked away filling the moment of hesitant silence. What would happen next? Was this a miracle of some kind or a disaster?

She stepped forward and they held each other.

"Oh baby," she said. "We'll figure it out."

"Mommy," she said. "I just didn't think it would happen to me."

Mary Jane

A second conversation with one of the main characters in my story At Last. Last time, in the chapter called Olwen, we chatted for a while using an app. This time, as I listened to music, she showed up in my mind. I was happy she did.

Her: So, you've been editing "the story."

Me: Yes, that's what I call it, "the story." I did what you suggested and started going back through everything I've written. My therapist is reading it through with me.

Her: Therapist? Why?

Me: I need someone else to at least tell me whether it makes sense. Who else I'd going to read this stuff? Nobody cares.

Her: Sometimes it does make sense and sometimes it doesn't (laughs). I care. I don't want you fucking it up, at least the parts about me.

Me: I was on a run and I couldn't help but think of you when I listened to this. (I start playing Mary Jane's Last Dance). It's one of those songs I've heard a million times but never really listened to.

*She grew up in an Indiana town
Had a good lookin' momma who never was around
But she grew up tall and she grew up right
With them Indiana boys on an Indiana night*

*Well she moved down here at the age of eighteen
She blew the boys away, it was more than they'd seen
I was introduced and we both started groovin'
She said, "I dig you baby but I got to keep movin' on, keep movin' on"*

Me: (I stop the music) I guess the lyrics are somewhat in dispute, you know, about what they mean. But she sounds so much like you. And I love the delivery of that lyric, "Keep movin' . . . on."

Her: I can see why you'd think that. Indiana. Kansas. Missouri. Wisconsin. I'm glad you made a point to go to Lebanon.

Me: I loved the trip. All the preachers on the radio. Country music. It's Trumpistan, forgotten America.

Her: I think you're on to something. When you forget people they despair, and despair leads to violence.

Me: It's true, out there and in the cities.

Her: But I don't think the song is about me really. As difficult as it was growing up there, I do have a fondness for places with water towers. Are we going to hear the rest of it?

Me: Sure. Yeah.

*Last dance with Mary Jane
One more time to kill the pain
I feel summer creepin' in and I'm
Tired of this town again*

*Well, I don't know but I've been told
You never slow down, you never grow old
I'm tired of screwing up, I'm tired of goin' down
I'm tired of myself, I'm tired of this town
Oh my my, oh hell yes
Honey put on that party dress
Buy me a drink, sing me a song
Take me as I come 'cause I can't stay long*

Her: You're a little obsessed with me, I think. I'm not sure it's a healthy thing. Remember, I don't exist, right?

Me: Sure, you exist. But where? I see you all the time, in a face I see, in a song I hear. This one just sounds like you, that night in the truck, with your boyfriend. "She blew the boys away, it was more than they'd seen." You didn't let that small town kill you; you killed it.

Her: I wouldn't say that. I built on what started there, on the family I never knew. That night changed everything. But I knew I had somewhere to go, I had someplace to be. I had a sense of urgency after that.

Me: You built an entire system of thinking about how to learn about culture then use story to transform it. I have been obsessed with the Aeneid – and the Book of Mormon; both are perfect examples of using narrative to rewire history. Virgil explained Rome using the same technique as Homer; Joseph Smith used the same technique as the Bible. It seems like you did that too, took the life you lived before you found out about your real family and remade yourself.

Her: The Mormons? That's crazy. So is having an imaginary friend.

Me: Yes. The Mormons. I think a musical with Brigham Young as Aeneas leading his band of exiles to Italy — well, Rome.

Her: (laughs) That's stupid. Unless you buy that insurance, you know, like The Producers.

Me: Yeah, but that plan failed. The Cohen brothers should do a blood-soaked version of The Producers.

Her: (laughs). It does have that *Simple Plan* kind of feeling. Yours would have Springtime for Mormons in Italy (laughs)

Me: Utah! Utah. I'm writing that down.

Her: I suppose I see where you're headed with "the story," even if I think the Aeneid musical thing sucks. But you are trying to characterize me – in every sense of that word. I'm not a character. You're running the risk of turning me into a romanticized cut out. I'm not something you can pin down and hold with a description. I sort of liked the chapter you called Camilla. I think people have the misperception that somehow women have just recently found their power; we've always had it. I sometimes feel like you're being sexist mocking my intelligence with that shit about what I think about westerns.

Me: You both would make fun of each other together with your daughter. That's the charm of it is that you were always mocking each other, even for your strengths. The three of you form a unit. I see you never letting up on each other. It's like that Johnny Cash song, A Boy Named Sue.

Her: My Dad loved that song. "I know I wouldn't be there to help you along, so I gave you that name and I said goodbye. I knew you'd have to get tough or die, and it's that name that helped to make you strong." It's true, that's a creative retelling of abandonment.

Me: But it's true, isn't it? We don't need a time machine if we have a good story to tell.

Her: Yes, maybe you're starting to understand what my work is about. And you capture my daughter's strength, or you have a sense of it.

Me: She got it from you. It's a fire. It's something that can't be put out. I admire it. I wish I had that, or had more of it.

Her: Why? Are you tired of screwing up, tired of goin 'down? (She laughs) Are you tired of yourself and tired of this town? Maybe the song is about you, not me.

Me: Of course. You know that. I haven't figured out what I am supposed to do and where I am supposed to go from here. We don't live forever. You and Camilla might, but I can't.

Her: I can't be your therapist, you know. I'm not sure what you're supposed to do. I can't help you.

Me: But you already have. You have been an inspiration to me.

Her: But wait, I thought you created me (laughs).

Me: Listen, you said it last time. You're real. "Real" is up for grabs. What is real? You are a part of me anyway.

Her: That's very sentimental of you. How sweet! (Laughs).

Me: I know you're capable of tenderness; it's not all sarcasm and toughness. I like the toughness but I like what's under that too. I think growing up the way you did gave you strength and courage but somehow you didn't lose your vulnerability.

Her: Well, you can't be my therapist either. You can try, and you can try to be God but it isn't going to work. I think what you're missing is that you can't control everything, even what's in your head. You can learn from it, but you can't make it do what you want. That's never been my point. That sort of thing requires force.

Me: But narrative is everything. Even you'd agree that whatever ontological solution we come up with it all depends on the story we tell. Nihilism? Fine. What are we having for breakfast? We still have to answer that question. Even if there is nothing out there or in here, we have to carry on, and that means coming up with a story. There is a fine line between narrative and outright force.

Her: Play something else. Maybe jazz. Maybe some John Coltraine.

(I start playing Righteously by Lucinda Williams, Live at The Fillmore)

Me: I heard this today too and made me think of you.

(She knows the song. She laughs and shakes her head, then rolls her eyes and looks at me).

Her: It's almost like your hitting on me now. Or something. This is way too sexy a song for right now.

Me: (laughing) Yes, it's a "me too" scandal; me harassing my character.

Her: That's good. But Lucinda Williams is good but not the best. Ann Ash stole this and ran away with it. Play her version.

(I find it and play it)

*Think this through
I laid it down for you everytime
Respect me I give you what's mine
You're entirely way too fine*

*Arms around my waist
You get a taste of how good this can be*

*Be the man you ought to tenderly
Stand up for me*

*Flirt with me don't keep hurtin 'me
Don't cause me pain
Be my lover don't play no game
Just play me John Coltraine*

Me: Wow. You're right.

Her: Her voice.

Me: And the guitars.

(We keep listening)

Her: Maybe you need to talk with your therapist about this. Is there anything female you won't hit on? (Laughs).

Me: I don't know. A light socket? Although, you know...

Her: (Laughs). Cut it out. You're absurd. This always gets you into trouble. Even I know that about you. You're smarter than that. You can't fall in love with a character you "created." Remember, I'm in that story you're writing.

Me: Am I writing you into my life, or myself into yours?

Her: I'm not sure either is possible. I'm not sure either is desirable. Both are ridiculous. I think you'll find more satisfaction from spending some time with something more practical than trying to figure me out. I'm already done. You can't add or take away.

Me: But I can learn from you – and Camilla. Remember, you said we have to become a victim; we have to become infected by culture. Maybe that's what I need to do. Maybe that's what I'm doing.

Her: (Smiling). A-ha.

Me: What? Uh huh?

Her: No, dork. Play A-ha.

Me: Oh, fuck. Yeah. Right. Perfect.

(I play Take On Me by A-ha)

*We're talking away
I don't know what*

*I'm to say I'll say it anyway
Today's another day to find you
Shying away
I'll be coming for your love, okay?*

Miss Jones

Scene is a small apartment in the kitchen. A man and a woman are sitting across a small table eating and drinking wine. The kitchen sink is full of dishes. He's wearing a coat but no tie. She's wearing jeans and a large purple sweater with beads. Her hair is long and piled up on her head. Music is playing. An instrumental version of Have You Met Miss Jones begins to play.

He: Hey, let's talk while we dance. I love this one.

He stands up and throws his napkin on the seat of his chair. He holds his arms open.

She: You are such a moron. No. I'm not going to dance. Sit down.

She drinks her glass of wine. He stands there smiling. They look each other in the eye.

She: Oh fuck! Fine.

She stands up and they waltz around the small kitchen. He tries to pull her closer. She pushes him a way.

He: Now this is a date. What were we discussing, again?

She: Oh, I think it was about what an ass you are. And how you lied to me — and your kid.

He: Yeah. Right. I lied. Yes. I did.

He spins her.

He: I'm sorry. But I was just lying because you shouldn't have asked. Who cares who I was seeing, especially the kid? The kid doesn't need to be mixed into my any of that. We had a deal.

She stops and puts her finger under his chin.

She: A lie is a lie. You are a liar. Just tell the truth. That was part of the deal.

She sits back down.

He: Alone on the dance floor again. Hmmm. Maybe there's someone else around here...

He opens a closet and pulls out a mop. He starts dancing with it and stroking its "hair."

He: Nice to meet you, Miss Jones. Oh, yes, I was in love once. But she didn't love me. She said I was a liar and an asshole. She hates me now.

He spins the mop around.

He: What's that? Oh sure, but I'll never love anyone like that again.

She's watching him and laughing. She gets up and grabs the mop.

She: Excuse me, miss, Jones, was it? Don't you have some homework to do?

She drops the mop and drapes her arms on his shoulders.

She: I never should have let you in here, dad.

He: Well, mom. We went and had a kid together. Now, you know, here we are.

They kiss each other just as the saxophone flares up. And they keep dancing until the song finishes.

He: Hey, let me put something else on.

She: Hey, she's sleeping

He: I know. But I'm sure she's heard every word.

He walks around the counter to the stereo and hits a couple buttons.

Just In Time by Frank Sinatra starts to play. She has her arms crossed, she rolls her eyes, smiles, and shakes her head.

He: Now. I think we should go to bed.

He takes her hand. They walk into the next room. She follows.

She: I hate you.

The song finishes. End of scene.

Just As I Am

She sat in the last booth in a long row of booths, the one right by the kitchen and the bathrooms. The light from the hallway back to the bathrooms was bright, but the booth kept her in the shadows.

She had a water glass, another glass full almost to the brim with a pale pink liquid, and a shot glass of whiskey.

It was a Wednesday night. She should be in school tomorrow. But she was hours from home at a bar. She kept thinking about how she'd deal with this and who knew. She'd been too mouthy about taking off like she did.

"Fuck this town," she said. "I'm leaving. I'm catching a ride outta here tonight."

It was big talk. But she followed through all the way to Kansas City, hitching a ride with the kid, Jimmy, who drove a delivery van to convenience stores.

"Sure," he said, "I'm heading for Kansas City."

The drive lasted forever and he wouldn't stop talking. He was a sweet guy, but she couldn't wait to get out.

"Drop me here," she said. She was in front of a gay bar called The View. He'd gone out of his way to get her there.

"Here's 10 bucks," she said throwing it on the passenger seat and slamming the door.

"You want a ride back?" he earnestly asked through the rolled down window. "I can come back by in an hour and then I'm going back to Lebanon."

"You do that," she said, "But without me. I'm never going back." He drove off.

She walked in and slumped down at that table. She knew she'd be ok there. She wouldn't be hit on and she'd be served. She and some friends had been here before when they snuck away from town. She decided she'd just take her chances. But she was afraid.

"Hey sweetie," the waiter said.

She ordered and now she was sitting with her rosé, water, and whiskey. She loaded the jukebox.

"That's my song," she said to no one but herself when Cowboy Junkies' *Sweet Jane* started.

"And that's me."

*You're waiting for Jimmy down in the alley
Waiting there for him to come back home
Waiting down on the corner
And thinking of ways to get back home
Sweet Jane, Sweet Jane
Oh Sweet, Sweet Jane*

She was in it now all the way. She was four hours from home. She had some cash but not much. She had some connections in the city, but not many.

"I'll be fine," she kept telling herself feeling her hair growing back on her scalp. It had been a few weeks since she shaved it off. And she reminded herself that she'd gone all the way to New Mexico when she wasn't even a teenager.

"I went all the way down there myself," she thought. "I can do this."

A Boy Named Sue started to play. Now it hit her. She all of a sudden missed home. And her dad. But it was home, her dad, and her family that made her run away. She drank the whiskey and followed with the water.

"Another one sweetie?" asked the waiter.

"Yeah," she said. "Another."

He took the glasses and she sipped the rosé. She discovered rosé last summer with her boyfriend. They drank it on the back of his truck. They watched the stars. It seemed like things could work, like she'd figured out how to manage herself to get through graduation.

Madonna's *Holiday* started playing. She loved watching Madonna. She wished she could be Madonna, powerful, confident. Loved. These were all the things she didn't feel.

"Here you go, baby," said the waiter. He dropped another shot of whiskey and a glass of water. She was feeling that pleasant static, that lowering of inhibition, that easing of the pain.

She sat like that for at least an hour until her music ran out. The place was starting to get busy. She had enough money for one more drink.

Someone sat down across from her.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked.

She looked up. It was her dad.

"No, it's not," she said.

"What are we drinking here," he asked. "Is that rosé? "

"Yeah," she said. "I love dry rosé, real light pink. "

"I guess you're in the right place for that," he said. "Whiskey?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Hey," he said to the waiter, "How about a couple of the whiskies. And two beers off the tap." He handed him money.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she asked.

"Hey!" he said. "That's my line. I'm you're ride home."

"How did you know where to find me?" she asked indignantly."

"Jimmy blabbed all over hell that he was giving you ride," he answered. "Telephone, telegraph, tell Jimmy. So here I am."

They sat there for a while.

"Hey, I gotta pee," he said. "I'll be right back."

He left. The drinks arrived. She was relieved in a way. But she was angry. She wanted to be a runaway. She wanted to be on a milk carton. She laughed at that.

I Ain't Never by Webb Pierce started playing on the juke box.

He sat back down.

"You hit the juke box didn't you?" she said.

"Well, what the hell," he said. "Why not?"

"Can't I have a fucking nervous breakdown without you?" she asked.

"Is that what's going on here?" he said, "A nervous breakdown. You know your grandma . . ."

"Fuck you!" she said. "That's not fair."

"What's fair, honey?" he asked. "You're four hours from home in a damned gay bar. "

"So what," she said "You're here too!"

"True," he said. "But I'm having a good time. You're pissed off. What right do you have to be angry, Jonah?"

"Don't fucking preach to me, old man," she said. "I like your music better than your sermons."

"But you need one don't you?" he asked. He took a drink of the whiskey. "An exhortation. A come to Jesus."

"I don't need God or Jesus," she said. "They need me!"

Just As I Am from the Red Headed Stranger started playing on the juke box.

"This is yours?" she asked. "Perfect fucking timing."

"Yeah," he said. "I love this album. And maybe they do need you. But you're not going to do much for them if you don't finish high school."

"I hate you so much," she said. "I hate my life!"

"I know," he said. "I do too. But you've got a future out of here, out of there. You're going to change things."

She started to cry but stopped. She found something inside, grabbed a hold of it and herself.

"How do I do that?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "But I can't wait to find out how you do it."

They finished their drinks. She felt like she was giving in, admitting defeat. Going back home with her dad was like crawling back.

"You never knew your mom," he said. "But she acted like she knew you. Like I've said, when she'd talk about how you'd grow up it was like she'd looked into the future."

"That's not enough," she said. She looked at him. "That's not nearly enough, but it's what I've got. You and her memory."

After that, they got up and walked out. His last song, *Am I losing Your Memory or Mine?* by George Jones started to play.

*Am I comin' or going, am I doin' all right?
Am I gainin' or fallin' behind?
I'm beginnin' to wonder if I ever loved you
And am I losing your memory or mine?
I'll get over you, oh, but I really don't want to
Am I losing your memory or mine?*

Mr. Shankly

*Fame, fame, fatal fame
It can play hideous tricks on the brain
But still I'd rather be famous
Than righteous or holy, any day, any day, any day*
Frankly, Mr. Shankly
The Smiths

*Scene: A hotel suite with busy men in suits on their phones with televisions on in each room.
There's a man sitting in a chair looking out the window with a notepad and a mechanical pencil.*

Young man: Congressman, sir, we think you ought to see this.

Congressman: What? What is it?

Young man: She's on. I mean, she's on TV. They say she's going to talk about . . .

Congressman: Yes? Spit it out.

Young man: You.

Congressman: Fuck. Well, where. Turn it on.

The television announcer is saying, "and now taking the stage is noted activist, socialist, and former wife of"

Congressman: For Christ's sake. Jesus. God. Ok. Fuck, well, turn it up. Why do they play this crap?

On the television a woman takes a podium. She's greeted with cheers. She pulls the microphone closer to her. She starts to speak.

Woman: Some people say a market will save us. Some people say that markets will set us free. Some people say even more than that. They say, some people, that being free is a market; they are the same, markets and freedom.

The crowd gets loud, cheering and booing.

Congressman: Fuck. Ok. Is someone recording this bullshit?

Young man: Of course, we've got it.

Woman: Do you feel free shopping for clothes? Do you feel free shopping for shoes? Do you feel free in a mall? Is that when you feel free? Tell me, do you feel free when you pay rent, when you pay your medical bills?

Crowd says, "No!"

Woman: Do you feel free when you get paid minimum wage for cleaning up after people? Do you feel free when you take three buses to work at your second job so you can feed your family? Do you feel free when they tell you will have to close tonight and open tomorrow?

Crowd says, "No!"

Woman: Is that what sets us free?

Crowd says, "No!"

Woman: Buying and selling is not freedom. The exchange of our dignity for survival is not freedom. This is a doctrine that is corrupt; it is a rhetoric that sustains a system that keeps you crushed under a weight of bills, and bullshit. Everyday!

The crowd cheers.

Older man: Fuck dude, they're giving her free airtime.

Congressman: Would you just shut the fuck up and listen. Fuck!

Men in suits are now clustered around watching the television.

Woman: Some people say this is what sets us free. But what really sets us free is connection. What sets us free is community. What sets us free is when we know we can count on each other because we are human, because we are people, not because someone has something to sell us.

Someone in the room makes a farting noise.

Congressman: I'll kill you motherfucker! Stop that!

He throws his pencil at the offender who, knowing it's owner's obsession about his pencils, hands it back.

Older man: Sorry, sorry! Jesus.

Woman: More important, and I want you all to understand this: your labor, your sweat, your work, your blood, your tears, and your heart should not be the price of your survival.

The crowd gets quiet.

Older man: Are we really just watching this right now?

Congressman: Shut up!

Woman: We are free because of what we can give, and we should only take as much as we can give. We know that what we want is that those that have a lot in our society should not have too much, and those that have a little, shouldn't have too little.

Everyone in the room is looking at the television and then at the congressman, who is still holding on to the notepad.

Woman: You are stronger than some people, than those people.

Older man: *(Quietly, under his breath)* We are those people. We are those people. She just fucking stole our message right there, in plain daylight. Fucking genius.

Woman: You are stronger than their power. You are stronger than their status. You, here today, have given of yourselves. And that makes a difference. We will win. We will win. We will win.

There is cheering.

Congressman: Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Turn it off.

Young man: We have it all down. We're working on a statement. We have lots of calls asking for comment already.

The congressman looks out the window. The television voice is talking about his relationship with the woman, about their daughter, about his campaign for President.

Man: I said turn it off.

Older man: Hey, listen here's what we've got worked up to respond. We've gotta go quick on this.

Congressman: Yeah, what? I hope you can set it to music.

Older man: "This rant doesn't reflect the views of people that I represent who work hard every day for their paychecks, save, and strive to get ahead. Nothing is free and hardworking people know that. The Congressman has worked hard to create policies that help working people get more value for their hard-earned dollars. As President he will..."

Congressman: Stop.

He's standing now, looking out the window.

Older man: What? What do you want?

Congressman: Don't issue anything. Don't fucking issue anything. Carry on. Do your jobs. I'm going downstairs for a drink. Who wants a drink? Let's go.

Older man: You can't let this go...

Congressman: I can do whatever I want. Just do what we were doing. Ignore this shit. Ignore it.

He puts his hands on the older man's shoulders and looks him in his eyes.

Congressman: You know, before all this, I was going to be a professor. Yeah. Tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. Students would look up to me and say, "Thank you Professor!" and "Will the Four Noble Truths and the Five Skandhas be on test next week, Professor?" Yep. That was going to be my life.

Then he puts on his coat and walks out.

Joseph

His roommate was camped out on the couch with the television on. He wasn't watching. It was C-Span airing the House of Commons.

When he walked in the door, he could hear Margaret Thatcher's voice.

"...namely, the Community's failure to agree a negotiating position on agriculture for the Uruguay round of trade negotiations..."

"I love you Maggie," he said as he walked in with books under his arm.

"She's not into you, dude," said his roommate, not looking away from his book. "You know she's fucking Pinochet, right?"

"She'd never do that," he said dropping the books on the kitchen table. "She's just using him."

His roommate laughed.

"You're ridiculous," he said, still not looking away from his book.

"Messages?" he asked his roommate.

"You know I never check that fucking thing," the roommate said. "I'm not going to be your secretary."

"Well maybe Fidel Castro finally called back about your solar powered composting toilet," he said.

The roommate laughed again.

"I love you, man," he said.

"....And I again emphasized that we would not be prepared to have a single currency imposed upon us, nor to surrender the use of the pound sterling as our currency...."

He went to the answering machine and hit play. The light was blinking.

Beep.

"This is the third time we've called about your residency issue..."

He hit the erase button.

"Hey, I was listening to that," the roommate said.

"Well I hate to ruin for you, but it's resolved," he said.

"Fuck," the roommate said, still reading his book, "I was hoping you were finally getting thrown out."

He shook his head and laughed.

"It was a pain," he said. "But you're stuck with me."

Beep.

"Hi, it's me," a voice said. "We have to talk. I think I'm pregnant."

He hit stop on the machine.

The roommate swiveled his legs to the floor and set his book aside.

They both were still. He had his hand on the machine.

"... while we fully accept our commitments under the treaties and wish to co-operate more closely with other countries in the European Community, we are determined to retain our fundamental ability to govern ourselves through Parliament..."

He hit rewind.

"I think I'm pregnant."

They looked at each other.

"The anthropology chick?" the roommate asked.

He nodded slowly.

"Dude, that won't work," the roommate said. "She's a communist!"

Neil Kinnock was now on the television's audio.

"...On the connection between currency and sovereignty, can the Prime Minister, who abandoned her own Madrid conditions before she put sterling into the exchange rate mechanism, tell the House what will be her conditions now..."

"Fuck," he said.

"Yeah, that's how it started," the roommate said.

"She probably isn't," he said. Then he was irritated. "This is probably one of your jokes. Did you put her up to this?"

"What? No way," the roommate said. "I wish I had. This is good!"

He stopped for a moment. It had been a while since that night. Two months? Six weeks? He did calendar math.

He walked into his bedroom and closed the door. He sat on his bed.

"This isn't for real," he thought.

He picked up the phone and dialed from memory. It had been a while. It hadn't gone well. There were fights. They didn't get along.

They hated each other. Well, she hated him.

He heard the rings. One. Two. Three. He almost hung up. Four.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," he said. "It's me."

"Well, so, you got my message?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did," he said.

"So I am," she said. "I'm pregnant."

Suddenly he was in Mrs. Lloyd's health class. It was 7th grade. He did a report on the effects of caffeine. They learned about the reproductive system. They took tests about it. He seemed to remember warnings about this. He thought of the diagrams. He thought about how they didn't show a bottle of wine or a martini glass or the room layout of a hotel.

He thought about his mom and dad. He thought about his grandmother. He thought about this woman he hardly knew being pregnant. He wondered if it — it — he stopped there for a minute. It. Was it his. He wanted her to be not pregnant. He wanted this to be a mistake. It was, he was sure. But he wanted to show that he cared about her, but she was not the first thing he thought about. And it wasn't the second thing he thought about either. The first thing he thought about before everything else he thought was about himself.

"So," he said. Then there was a pause.

He raked the soil of his brain for the right thing to say.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Please."

"Are you, ok?" he asked.

"Please"

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Please"

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Please"

"I'm sorry" he said.

"Please"

"What!?" he asked.

"Please"

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Please, stop talking!" she shouted into the phone.

Then there was silence. He sat down on his bed.

"Thank you," she said. "And I know you're wondering. I haven't been with anyone since that night. Nobody."

"But what about," he started.

"I don't love him," she said. "I didn't love him."

"Hey, so," he stammered. "Can I ask if you're, ok?"

"Yeah," she said.

"So, I want to do the right thing here," he said.

"You do?" she asked. "What's that?"

"I have no idea," he said.

She laughed. He felt close to her. She was so difficult to deal with. Now they had a common enemy. A problem of their own making.

"I don't know you," she said, "Except that I really don't like you."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Did you just roll your eyes?" she asked.

“Of course not,” he said. “I closed them and thought about our wedding.”

“Fuck You,” she said.

They both laughed.

“Can I see you tomorrow?” he asked.

“You’d better,” she said.

He could still hear the television when he hung up the phone and laid back on his bed.

“...Even when we get our own negotiating position, as I hope that we shall within a week, I hope that it will be on the basis that we have been negotiating for six previous meetings. We still have to have negotiations on the other proposals that we put up with all the countries. There is still a tough way to go before we get a conclusion, but the important thing — important for the welfare of all our people — is that that round meets with success....

Raymond

She was absorbed in an image. On the page it stood out starkly. Was it a symbol? Was it a sign? What did it say about the people that left it, scratched on a rock?

"Mommy!" the little girl yelled. "It's all wet now."

The little girl, playing not too far away had spilled milk all over her toys.

"Oh sweetie!" she said, rushing over from her books, grabbing a dish towel.

The interruption wasn't unwelcome. She'd been absorbed in the material for some time, searching it for clues, validation, evidence.

"Let's clean up this mess," she said.

"Clean up the mess!" the little girl repeated enthusiastically. As soon as it was, the phone rang. She answered.

"Hello," she said. "Oh yes, of course. I'll check. Thanks for letting me know."

The text she'd requested was ready. The library had gotten better lately about making reference material available remotely, via modem on the World Wide Web.

"Ok, sweetie," she said, moving some toys onto a clean blanket. "Mom has to check out the computer."

The little girl was mostly low maintenance, keeping herself busy, often talking to herself and her toys. She watched her mother move down the hall to the monitor. She always watched her movements. Sometimes she'd stare at her in a kind of awe or envy.

When she arrived, she sat down and flipped some switches. The computer annoyed her; he seemed to love it, spending hours testing its limits.

Often, she didn't know what she was doing and didn't care. She kept clicking and hitting return until she got what she was looking for. The mumming of the modem started and then made the abrupt and grating sound that meant it connected.

"You've got mail!" a male voice said. She'd heard it before. But a box opened up with blue names, a colon, and messages. She wasn't looking for this. It was his screen name, Laocoon. When he told her that was his name on AOL, she just shook her head. She didn't recognize the other name.

Achampneglass: We have Friday afternoon meetings down there... I don't usually go

Laocoon: It looked like it is a long meeting

Achampagneglass: I'm headed out. Were you still interested in hanging out?

Laocoon: Yeah. What are you gonna do now?

Achampagneglass: I don't know! I'm free as a bird! Ps, I drink way too much when I'm around you. What is that about do ya think...

Laocoon: Well I enjoy our time. I always think "we should do this more often."

Achampagneglass: Lowered inhibitions helps some part of it. We like each other — sometimes you can't get around that. Honestly even if she was ok with you being with other people, I would only see you as a very temporary thing before finding someone I wanted to be with long-term.

But I already know she wouldn't be ok with it. And I wouldn't either, if I were her.

Coffin is nailed shut.

Laocoon: I still would like to see you.

Achampagneglass: So I can berate you about your moral compass? 😊' cause I could do that all night long.

Laocoon: I like what has happened between us. And I don't want things to be weird. My intention is to ask you out next week with the expectation that you might say 'no'

Achampagneglass: The only way I'd go out with you again is if you weren't married or if she was ok with it. Neither of those things are going to happen. No dice. And I still can't believe that other people you've been with haven't been in my same moral position. It's sad to me, especially knowing her and that she was hurt by you being with others. Terrible.

Her heart was beating fast. Now she knew who this was on the other end of these messages. Everything else seemed to disappear. She kept reading those words:

"It's sad to me, especially knowing her and that she was hurt by you being with others. Terrible."

How the fuck did she let this happen? How could she have been so stupid to not see this unfolding right in front of her?

The little girl was on the floor, staring at her as she sat staring at the screen. She stared back. That lasted awhile.

She stood up from the chair and walked past the little girl to the kitchen and opened a drawer. She pulled out the biggest knife she could find. She opened the cabinets full of dishes. She stood there for a while looking at them, breathing hard.

She reached up and grabbed a bowl. She looked at the window. She could imagine the sound the bowl would make hitting the glass if she threw it. She could almost feel it shattering below. But she stopped.

She looked at her little girl. Then she looked at the bowl. Then their eyes met again. She set the bowl down and went to the phone.

"Hey," she said after dialing and a voice said hello. "I need a favor. A big favor. Would you be able to baby sit for a few hours?"

The voice responded.

"Yes," she said. "God. Thank you. In fifteen. Thank you! Bye."

She called in a favor. No explanation needed. She started packing some things for the baby sitter.

The little girl was quietly setting up some blocks.

"Mommy?" she said. "Am I going now?"

"Yes, honey," she said. "Nanny is coming to get you for a bit."

She kneeled down and then picked her up. She looked at her face as she held her.

"Some things are going to change, baby," she said. "We'll talk later. Right now, you'll be a good girl right, and go?"

"I guess," she said.

"I need you," she paused. "To work with me on this. We're a team. Me and you. Okay?"

She didn't wait for an answer. The baby sitter arrived and the girl was bundled off. She looked back as she walked out the door. She had a childish look of admonition.

"Don't look at me like that!" she said.

When the car was gone, she went to the windows facing a yard down below. The yard was just off the first floor near their parking spot. She pulled the curtains open.

She went to the boom box nearby and put in a CD and dialed the volume to 10.

*I go crazy when I'm without you
What have I done today
Just sat and watched the jets fly over
A car goes by*

*And the sun goes down
We talk about the town*

She unplugged the computer, monitor, and modem and walked them over to the window and pushed them out. They crashed into the grass below.

*Sue-Ellen looks so upset
This isn't the first time
And it won't be the last
Things going on behind her back
Oh they give you a heart attack*

Next, she went to the closet and grabbed his clothes on hangers and sent them out the window. Next, she emptied drawers. Then she started working on his books and papers. Then she sent toiletries and pictures out.

Two old guys were sitting on the porch of the neighboring house. Each had a can of beer in hand.

"Looks like we're getting a show with dinner tonight," one said.

"Goddam I miss those days," the other one said.

"I know, I know," the other answered back.

He pulled up and parked as papers were fluttering down.

"Oh fuck," he said. "Jesus Christ."

He jumped out of the car, as she came to the window with his Affe mit Schädel.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he yelled up at her.

"Cleaning house!" she yelled down. "Here's your fucking monkey!"

The figurine barely missed his head and crashed through the driver's side window of his car.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" he shouted.

"No," she said before closing the windows. "I just fucking found it!"

Weeks later, she said: "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record-player. The old guy gave it to us and all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?"

"Why Don't You Dance?" from Raymond Carver's, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

Raymond: Epilogue

He staggered into the bar holding what she called his “monkey statue.” Well, maybe he wasn’t staggering on the outside, but on the inside, he was still rocking back and forth. He walked toward the far end of the bar and put the statue down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet as the bar tender walked over.

“What the hell?” the bar tender asked.

“What do you think?” he said.

“All I know is you and she help me pay my bills,” he said. “Are we going to be listening to George Jones all night?”

“Well maybe,” he said. “Maybe.”

“I hope it isn’t for good,” the bar tender said.

“The words, ‘for good ’have nothing to do with this,” he said. “But yeah, I may have found the natural limit.”

He put a bunch of bills on the bar.

“You know we don’t allow animals in the bar,” the bar tender said.

“He’s not an animal,” he said. “He’s my business partner, and he needs a drink.”

The bar tender slid a pile of quarters, a basket of pull tabs, a pint of lager, and two glasses of brown liquid toward him.

“I hate whiskey,” he said. “So that better be Southern Comfort.”

“Marry me next time,” the bar tender said, “Of course it is.”

“Well, a southern man don’t need you around anyhow,” he said, walking toward the jukebox.

He flipped through the selections until he found what he needed. As soon as it started to play, he felt better.

He even laughed. It wasn’t George Jones.

*It's been a whole lot easier since the bitch left town
It's been a whole lot happier without her face around
Nobody upstairs gonna stomp and shout
Nobody at the back door gonna throw my laundry out*

Chapter 3

The clock showed 2:25 and that meant every student in the class was poised to leave. Yet, each of them had to look busy, as if they had no sense how close the bell was to ringing. They each had to secretly position books and back packs in a way that didn't betray that all they were thinking about was the steady swish of the red second hand over the white field, by the long and short black hashes and the big hand and the little hand.

He wasn't thinking about the three handed thing dancing on the wall, he was obsessed with the black squiggles on the white page in front of him. More than that, he was perplexed by the sticker on his paper, otherwise unmarked but for the words, "Outstanding work!" in loopy red pen. The sticker was a pink cartoon hippopotamus with stars and the words "You're the best."

The bell rang, and the class emptied out. There were buses to be caught. He'd walk home. It wasn't long before he was alone with the teacher, she sat at her desk and he sat at his.

"Everything ok?," she asked.

He stood up and walked toward her.

"What does this mean?" he asked pointing to the sticker.

He had spent part of the summer on a long road trip with his father driving across the country to Washington DC. They stopped, at his request, at every roadside museum and historical marker he saw. His father was patient, even encouraging of his son's interest not in the world's biggest ball of twine or the tallest roller coaster, but presidential libraries and obscure burial monuments.

"Well, that means you did a great job on this paper," she said, knowing as good teachers do that this was an important moment.

He'd started that year to shift away from fretting against the daily discomforts of childhood, the powerlessness, the friction of the seemingly arbitrary fiat of adults and toward fantasies about the future. And not just the future, but seeing himself in the future. All this seemed to start on that long trip. He decided he wanted to be a senator.

"But what job did I do?" he asked with 10 year old honesty.

As a boy inclined toward books rather than banter, he'd grown used to being called "smart" the way girls his age routinely got called, "pretty." This was different.

"You are a really good writer," she said.

"Writer?" he said. "My handwriting is bad. All I know how to write is, 'I will not disturb 7th period study hall. I will not disturb 7th period study hall. I will not....'"

"Not your handwriting," she interrupted. "It's what you wrote about chapter 3."

"My words?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"What I wrote?"

"Yes," she said. "Read it out loud."

He began reading his paper.

When I read chapter 3 of Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, I see several themes. The best way to explain these is to look at the chapter paragraph by paragraph. At the end, Steinbeck creates what is almost a poem that in fewer words expresses the point of his much longer book.

In paragraph one we see passive potential. In this paragraph the author spends his words on "sleeping life waiting to be spread." The seeds he describes are just laying around and passive but they have potential for life if they get picked up and dispersed. He says they are "all passive but armed" and he uses the word "appliances" twice to describe the seeds. He also uses the word "anlage," an unusual word that means "embryonic."

She stopped him.

"There you used research," she said. "You were curious. Keep reading."

I'm the second paragraph is the theme of the paradox of progress. The turtle appears, struggling along, frustrated here and there by obstacles. Here we see that the turtle does not give up and we see how his motion runs up against things that are immovable like the embankment. Steinbeck uses opposites in his language describing the turtles "humorous frowning eyes" putting two opposites together. Progress Steinbeck is saying happens up against hard objects and opposition.

"There," she said. "That's a concept. An idea. That's important. Opposites. They push. They pull. Go on."

The third paragraph and fourth paragraph use opposites too. The theme here is that in life, progress is helped or harmed by other people. In paragraph three, a woman in a sedan helps the turtle by avoiding him. In the fourth paragraph a man in a truck tries to squash him. Tom Joad earlier gets help from a man in a truck. So Steinbeck is using opposites to make the point that life is unpredictable but persistence in the end will prevail.

"And that," she said. "Persistence is your passion, your path. You learned something an applied it to your life." She looked at him and he finished.

In conclusion, all this drama with the turtle means new life. At the end of the book Rose of Sharon saves a man's life even though her own baby is dead and all along their trip people have died. This is like the oat seed being planted and her smile is like when the turtle's "horny beak opened a little." Steinbeck's message is that in the end even though life is full of suffering, life progresses and thrives in unusual and unpredictable ways.

"And there," she said. "You've applied what you learned to the world. It's good. It's good work."

"Who's that?" he pointed to two black and white pictures torn in half on her desk.

"Oh that's Sam, my husband," she said. "It's for his book. He's a professor at the university. He was getting in my nerves."

He walked home with the paper folded in a square in his pocket. He didn't share it with anyone. He kept thinking about the picture. He kept imagining it was a picture of himself, years ahead, torn in half on that desk.

"How was school today?" his mother asked. "Anything new."

"Nope," he said.

That night as a fight broke out between them and he heard things breaking and the screaming, he used the light from his calculator watch, under the covers and looked at the paper again.

"Outstanding work."

"What was work?" he honestly wondered. He jumped out of bed and loosened the lock on the window. He checked that his door was locked. He always wore socks to bed.

His stepfather had a gun in the garage, and he always had a plan to get out through the window. If the fight got bad enough, he figured he'd have enough time to get up and out the window. He'd timed it all out. He practiced. He made sure he had the paper tucked in his underwear. He'd take it with him for sure.