

I.

*“Well, here we are.”*

*She clung to his hand so tightly, it was painful. John looked down at his daughter, but she was staring at the house. It wasn't huge. It was a typical New York neighborhood house. Two stories, three bedrooms. But it had a small yard out back, fenced in and backed up against a nearly identical house behind, and to either side. And there was a large, spreading oak tree in the small front yard, with branches that stretched out over the street, to intermingle with the trees on the other side of the street.*

*“New house?”*

*“Yes, Maggie. This is our new house.”*

*“Is Mommy here?”*

*John's heart broke, yet again, as it had nearly every day since his wife had passed away. “No, darling. Mommy's in Heaven. I told you, she watches over us.” His three-year-old daughter still couldn't comprehend why she couldn't see her mother anymore.*

*“I miss Mommy.”*

*“Yes, honey, I do too. But Mommy's in our hearts, okay? Why don't we go in and see our new house, okay Maggie?”*

*“Okay, Daddy...”*

\* \* \*

The wind brushed the leaves down the sidewalk. The rustling sound they should have made was muted by the window, and the hum of light conversation from the inside of the house.

The trees outside the house had mostly lost their leaves, leaving behind only skeletal branches, angling toward the sky. It was appropriate, really. The street looked so empty, and she felt empty inside too.

The house seemed the same. It was still the same physically. The layout, four rooms by four rooms. Two bedrooms upstairs, plus her father's study, and the bathroom. Downstairs, the kitchen/living room, the sitting room with the old fashioned console TV, and the downstairs bathroom/laundry. The oak tree out front was the same, more or less. A few less branches, but essentially the same as it was when she moved into this house when she was three. But that wasn't true either. It wasn't the same, not anymore.

“Maggie, dear,” Aunt Esther tapped her shoulder, and she turned away from the window. It was always strange to hear the remnants of her Aunt’s Florida drawl combined with New York speech patterns. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Maggie said, with a sigh.

“You’ve been crying again,” Aunt Esther pointed out. She hadn’t really been, just water leaking from her eyes. But it was apparently enough to make her mascara run, from the look on Aunt Esther’s face.

“I’ll go touch up my makeup,” Maggie promised, and headed toward the stairs. The mirror was better in the upstairs bathroom anyway.

Her uncomfortable black heels (purchased solely for the occasion) clicked on the hardwood stairs, and she entered the bathroom at the top of the stairs. She took the opportunity to study her reflection in the mirror. She *hated* wearing black. With her coloring, she looked unnaturally pale, and it brought out her myriad freckles. She wiped the black runs under her eyes, and began to reapply her makeup. Unfortunately, she couldn’t wipe away the dark circles around her eyes. Maggie Harris was 31 years old, but today, she could have passed for well beyond that number.

*If I’m honest with myself, I’ve been able to pass for nearly 40 for several years now.*

Makeup retouched, she exited the bathroom to find one of the guests waiting for it, an elderly man in a bow tie and suspenders, one of her father’s colleagues from Florida, so many years ago.

“Maggie, dear,” he rasped kindly. “Are you holding up all right?”

“I’m fine, Dr. Kinkaid, thank you.”

“Please, it’s James,” he said. “John was a good friend,” he continued unnecessarily, as he passed her on the way to the bathroom.

Maggie sighed, and wondered how in the world she was going to get rid of this crowd of old people. It wasn’t that Maggie resented them, exactly. They were grieving just as she was, but right now, she just wanted to be alone. She didn’t have anyone to talk to that was remotely close to her own age, and all her remaining friends had not shown up for the funeral, not even...

“Maggie, there you are,” her Uncle Phil’s voice derailed her train of thought. She turned and found him, big and burly, but with a yarmulke perched incongruously on his head. She’d told him he needn’t wear it, her father hadn’t been Jewish after all, but he’d quietly demurred and worn it anyway. How he’d managed to snare her southern belle very WASP Aunt was still a mystery to her. He engulfed her in a hug. “I was wondering

if you'd like to start asking these nice people to move along. This has gone on long enough, and clearly you need some space." Uncle Phil was a retired professor of psychology and human behavior. He'd often joked that he should have been a rabbi, which usually earned him a mild glare from Aunt Esther.

"Yes, please, thank you."

Uncle Phil led her into the kitchen area, where he tapped his glass with a fork, and the sound drew in the various small conversation knots that had gathered on the lower floor of the house. Maggie took a breath, and looked at the crowd. "I want to thank you all for coming today, both here and to the funeral. I know my father would have appreciated it. He had always said that...that the measure of a man was the number of his friends, and I think...I like to think that he would be touched by all of you coming out today. I know I am..." She ran down helplessly, and looked to her Uncle for help. He came to her rescue.

"I think what Maggie's trying to say is that she appreciates us all being here, but it's getting late, and she needs to start getting organized, so she can start packing up the house." He nodded, and slowly, the crowd began to morph into a sort of receiving line, which filed its way past her and her aunt and uncle. She had to endure shaking hands and giving hugs all over again, as if she hadn't had enough of that at the calling hours and then at the funeral.

But they meant well, and they all were upset at her father's death. Still it was a relief when the last of the guests made their way out the door, and Uncle Phil watched them down the stairs toward the street.

"I expected all the folks from the Goddard Center at Columbia to come, but it was nice of all those folks from Florida and Texas to come up. Dad hasn't worked down there in ages," Maggie said, as they began to wander around the house tidying up. Her Aunt managed as best she could with her cane.

"Well," Uncle Phil said, grabbing a couple of abandoned wine glasses from the coffee table and bringing them out to the kitchen. "NASA's a clannish kind of organization. And your Dad was pretty well known."

Maggie filled the sink and shrugged. "I guess so."

"Have you decided what you're going to do with all of his stuff once it's packed?" Aunt Esther's voice came from the sitting room.

Maggie didn't even want to think about that right now. There was so much. And what to do with the house? The house itself was a white elephant. The neighborhood she'd grown up in was essentially gone. Nearly every other house on the street had been converted to two-or-three family rental units. It was nearly the only house on the block that was still single family, and the lawyer she'd met with just before her father had died

had admitted he had no idea if there would even be a market for it, given the current financial situation. As for everything *in* the house...? “No idea, Aunt Esther.” She blew a strand of hair out of her face as she rinsed wine glasses.

“When did you tell your job that you’d be back?” Uncle Phil asked, looking at her with concern.

“I didn’t,” Maggie said, as unemotionally as she could, hoping not to provoke a discussion about her employment situation. She’d left Bunker Hill Community College at the end of the summer semester, and truth be told, she and her employer were both relieved when she’d gone. She’d put most of her possessions into a storage facility in Boston, and come back to New York to oversee the last few painful weeks of her father’s life.

Aunt Esther entered from the sitting room, carrying abandoned paper plates with carrot sticks and ranch dressing on them. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right here, Maggie? We’ve got that spare bedroom at our place, and it’s not far.” She set the plates down on the counter.

‘Not far’ by New York standards was a forty minute drive to the more affluent suburbs beyond the Bronx. Aunt Esther and Uncle Phil had moved out of the ‘old neighborhood’ years ago, thanks to Uncle Phil’s generous pension from Columbia, and his investments in his cousin’s diamond cutting firm. And Maggie had no desire to go spend a night in their artificial ‘McMansion’. “I’ll be fine, Aunt Esther. My old bedroom is fine. Dad left it pretty much the way it was when I moved out.” Maggie had been staying in a boardinghouse run by the hospital for families of terminally ill patients, and then briefly in a real hotel before the funeral.

“That was 10 years ago. Are you sure? The upstairs is probably full of dust, nobody’s cleaned it since your Dad went into the nursing home two years ago,” Uncle Phil protested.

Maggie reached into the cupboard and produced a clean wine glass, and poured herself a generous measure of the remaining bottle of Malbec on the counter. “Uncle Phil, I’ll be fine. I’m going to have a glass of wine...or two, and then go to bed. I’ll deal with all of this in the morning.” Making a dismissive motion with her hand that encompassed the entire kitchen and the house; she took her glass and went to the couch, gratefully taking the weight off her aching feet. “Thank you for helping me get this place into shape for today. Hard to believe how messy it can become even when nobody’s here.”

Aunt Esther joined her on the couch as Uncle Phil moved to stand behind her. “It needed to be done,” he said simply. Phil was like that. He just did things. Maggie liked him a lot.

Maggie directed her attention to her aunt, remembering belatedly that she was not the only one mourning a loss. “Are you sure you’re okay, Aunt Esther? I mean, Dad was your brother.”

Aunt Esther sighed. “It’s hard, Maggie. But it was time. John hadn’t really been with us for a year or so now. I’ve made my peace.”

Maggie nodded slowly. “Yeah, I understand.” But the affirmation of her aunt’s ease with herself left Maggie feeling uncomfortable.

“Still, it’s hard to see at the end,” Phil added. “Is there anything we can help you with, Maggie?”

“I don’t know,” Maggie admitted. She drained her glass, feeling a bit guilty about wasting good wine that way. “I guess at some point I’ll need someone to help me move some furniture.”

“I’ll see who I can find. What are you going to do with it all?” Uncle Phil asked.

Maggie really didn’t know, and this was a conversation she did *not* want to have. She loved her aunt and uncle, but she just wanted to be alone. “I don’t know.” She got up off the couch and went to the kitchen. She was being borderline rude, but she hoped they would understand. “Go on home, it’s getting late. I know you don’t like driving in the dark.”

“Are you sure?” Aunt Esther sounded worried, and Maggie felt even guiltier.

“Yes, please. I’ll see you tomorrow sometime, probably. Maybe I’ll come by for dinner.” The last was added as a sop to her conscience.

Uncle Phil helped Aunt Esther up off the couch. “We’d like that, Maggie. We haven’t seen nearly enough of you the last few years...not since...well.” He trailed off, showing discomfort for the first time. He cleared his throat and took Esther’s arm to break the moment. “Well, come along, Esther.” They crossed to the kitchen, and both gave her a hug.

“Thank you both for everything,” Maggie said, kissing Aunt Esther on both cheeks.

“Don’t you worry about it, dear. We’ll get through. You’ll see,” Aunt Esther promised her.

“Call us if you need anything,” Uncle Phil promised.

“I will,” Maggie assured him. She watched them navigate the steps carefully, and get into Uncle Phil’s Chrysler 300, which purred out of the driveway, leaving only

Maggie's dented Ford Focus behind. Maggie stood for a moment in the kitchen door, letting the cool fall breeze swirl the skirt of her black dress. She could hear the sounds of the city on the breeze. The banshee wail of sirens somewhere in the distance, the honking of horns and the general background noise that she'd grown up with. But even still, she could hear the rustle of the leaves down the sidewalk, and the creaking of the limbs of the oak tree.

Turning abruptly, she shut and bolted the door. She went back into the kitchen and poured herself a fresh glass of wine, hesitated a moment, and then took the bottle with her to the couch. She sat on the couch, kicking off her shoes and curling her legs up underneath her. The house was suddenly quiet, nearly overpoweringly so. She almost regretted sending her aunt and uncle away. The weight of the years and the not-quite faded presence of her father seemed to press in on her.

As the silence threatened to swallow her, she poured another glass of wine. The splash of wine into her glass seemed extraordinarily loud, and a chill ran up her spine.

She raised her glass. "Here's to you Dad, wherever you are. Bottoms up." She drained the glass, set it down and began to refill it. She stopped, bottle still poised over the glass, as she sighed and looked around the living room. "What the hell do I do now?"

The words seemed to echo around the empty house, but at the back of her mind, the memory of her father's voice came clear in answer.

*You pick yourself up and start again.*

Answering the voice out loud seemed perfectly natural. "Easy for you to say."

*Not everything is ever going to work perfectly, Maggie.*

"I know Dad. That's what you told me the day I got divorced." She sighed and finished filling her glass. She set the bottle down and leaned back on the couch. "So what the hell do I do now?"

This time, the only answer in the room, was the overpowering silence.

## II.

*The sound of a wiffle bat smacking a ball was suddenly loud in the park. An oversized wiffle ball rolled to Maggie's feet, and she looked down at it, bumping up against her pink sneakers.*

*A boy, about Maggie's age, maybe a little older, came running up to claim it.*

*"I'm sorry," he said. "Did I hit you?"*

*"No," Maggie said shyly. The boy was staring at her, seeming mesmerized by her flaming hair. "Can I play?"*

*Another boy arrived just in time to hear this request.*

*"She can't play with us!" the new arrival said.*

*"Why not?" the first boy demanded.*

*"She's a girl!"*

*"So?"*

*"I won't play with a girl."*

*"It's my bat and ball. I'll play with who I want. I want to play with her," the original boy said, holding out his hand to Maggie. "I'm David. What's your name?"*

*"Maggie," she replied.*

\* \* \*

David Greenberg hated airports. He had enough frequent flier miles on his points card for a trip to Europe, and he liked *flying*. But he hated *airports*. They were impersonal. They smelled of impatience, sweat and nerves. And mostly he hated the noise. He'd finally broken down and invested in a good pair of noise cancelling headphones, but then he couldn't hear his flight being called. A rather inconvenient downside, actually. But there was no danger of him missing his flight this time, since it was now three hours delayed, and getting out anytime soon did not look good. And of all the times for a massive storm front to hover over the Midwest, this was the worst time of David's life.

His flight out of Milwaukee had been delayed four hours, and he'd missed his connection by the time he'd arrived in Chicago. He'd been rebooked quickly enough; his premiere frequent flyer status had assured him of that much. But now that flight was delayed as well. He'd begged, pleaded, and threatened the agent at the ticket counter, but

they couldn't do anything. David involuntarily glanced up as lightening forked across the horizon of the window he'd camped out in front of.

Somewhere to his east, his best childhood friend was burying her father in the morning, a man he thought of as a second father himself. When David's parents had divorced, Mr. Harris had quietly and without fanfare become the main male role model in his life. And David was stuck in a fucking airport, in a plastic seat that made his ass hurt, and trapped in a room that made an airplane hanger seem quiet, with a family of six three seats down from him. They were well behaved, all things considered, but David's nerves were already frayed.

His cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket, and David flipped his headphones off, letting in the massive background noise that was the O'Hare Echo Chamber. The caller was his mother, and David had to press the receiver to his ear just to hear her.

"Hi Mom," David said.

"David?" his mom called loudly. "Where are you? You sound like you're standing on the freeway!"

"I'm in the airport, mom. My flight still hasn't left yet!" David enunciated into the phone. He ignored the family of six who was now glaring at him, as if he were solely responsible for the noise level in the terminal.

"Are you going to get out tonight?"

David checked his watch, it was almost midnight. "Probably not. I'll try and get out first thing in the morning. What time is the funeral?"

"10 a.m."

David sighed. "Unless I can get out on the first flight in the morning, I don't think I'm going to make it. Why don't you go to bed, Mom? If I get in tonight, I'll get a cab to the house."

"Are you sure, dear?"

"Yeah, I'm sure Mom. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Okay, dear."

David hung up, and put his headphones back on, and went back to his folders, studying the averages, on-base percentages, and RBIs of targeted minor-league free agents. But he couldn't focus on the numbers. All he could think of was the phone call from his mom two days ago.

*David was on his way out the door when the phone rang. He debated just leaving, he was late meeting Hank and Jim for beer and trivia at the bar. But he saw his mother's name on the caller ID and sighed.*

*"Hi Mom," David answered. "What's up?"*

*"Oh, good, I'm glad I caught you, David," his mother said. "You're not busy are you?"*

*There was something in her voice. "No, I'm not. What's up?"*

*"You remember John Harris, right?"*

*"Of course I remember Mr. Harris, Mom. What's happened?" David knew it had to be bad immediately.*

*"He passed away last night."*

*David sank into the armchair next to the phone slowly, and looked up at the framed photo on the wall. It was a picture of him and his mom, with Maggie and Mr. Harris, taken in front of the Ferris wheel on Coney Island.*

*"David?"*

*"Yeah," David said, swallowing hard. "I'm here. What happened?"*

*"Well, you know he'd been getting worse. I'm not exactly sure what the cause was, but it was certainly complications from his Alzheimer's."*

*"Yeah, I figured," David said. "Have you talked to Maggie? Was she there?"*

*"I've only spoken with Esther so far. Maggie came home a few weeks ago. I think they knew it was coming. The funeral will be on Tuesday."*

*It was Saturday. He had to go into work on Monday, there was no avoiding it. He couldn't miss the first free-agent planning session. But after that...he could get away. And he had some vacation time to spend. "Okay. I'll try and be there. Can you tidy up my old room for me?"*

*"Of course, David."*

*"I'll call you when I've got my flight info. If you talk to Maggie...tell her...tell her I'm sorry."*

*"Of course, I will David."*

David couldn't quite quantify his sense of loss. Both his parents were still alive, though he only saw his father, living in Florida with his unseemly younger third wife, having already discarded the younger second wife he'd left David's mother for, once in a very great while. But losing Mr. Harris seemed somehow worse than if his own father had died.

And Maggie...he couldn't imagine what Maggie was going through. Maggie and her father had been very close. When he'd first met Maggie, he'd asked her where her mom was. Maggie's simple reply of "in heaven" had touched David's four-year-old heart in a way he never could quite explain. The bond that Maggie and her Dad had shared was very special. David still couldn't quite wrap his head around the idea that Mr. Harris was dead. To him, Mr. Harris would always be the guy who taught him how to make a model rocket, how to drive a stick shift, and how to face a knuckleball pitch. Quiet, soft-spoken, but always there with advice and a tidbit of trivia. The last time David had seen him...well, that was a painful memory for many reasons. Mr. Harris' Alzheimer's had just begun to manifest itself, and David had been forced to call Maggie's Aunt Esther to warn her that her brother was beginning to deteriorate. It had been a painful phone call.

And then David had gotten caught up in work. The next time he'd gone home, Mr. Harris had been in the nursing home, and David had never quite found the time to go see him. He wondered how much of that was an excuse for his own cowardice. And then time seemed to slip away from him. Had it really been nearly three years since that fateful January visit to Maggie's old house?

David sensed motion around him, and emerged from his reverie to take his headphones off his ear. The airport was making an announcement. All further flights this evening were cancelled. Flights would resume in the morning. David groaned and grabbed his bag. Maybe he could find a room for the night, so he wouldn't have to sleep in the airport.