The Primrose Path
by TkN

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She tugged at her pencil skirt, smoothing out the invisible wrinkles. Inhaling a deep breath, Eliza Robbins walked through the revolving doors. Her right hand held a black portfolio containing all her life's achievements. She reached inside for a white envelope. "Room 282," she read. Taking the stairs to the second floor, she mentally rehearsed her "Tell me about yourself" story, an inevitable interview question. Room 282 was down the hallway. Eliza stood up taller and took deliberate steps forward.

She knocked.

"Come in," a man's voice answered.

She opened the door with a bright smile. The man stood up from his desk and extended his right hand forward. They shook hands.

"You must be Dr. Robbins."

She nodded, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Faraday."

He motioned her to take a seat opposite him.

"You have an impressive CV for someone recently out of medical school," he began.

Eliza was slightly taken aback. She wasn't expecting this opening. Her "Tell me about yourself" speech slipped out of memory.

"Why Oakland Hospital?"

"My reasons for moving here are personal. And your hospital is the only one in the area."

"Personal reasons", Dr. Faraday leaned forward, "are not very often cited for obvious reasons."

She smiled in response, "Then tell me this hospital's selling points. Why are you working here?"

Dr. Faraday squinted his eyes slightly, twirled his pen, and sat back. He resumed the interview, "Why do you want to specialize in pediatrics?"

"Illness and death are inevitable. But in adulthood, they are often the result of multiple poor life decisions. Children, on the other hand, are not set in their ways. They are malleable and resilient."
Dr. Faraday stared straight into Eliza's eyes, at the peculiarity in her answers.

"Dr. Robbins," he started. "Should you be hired for a second year residency here, my letter of recommendation would dictate the remaining of your career. I hope you place weight on this interview."

Eliza was quick to reply, "I'm sorry I gave you an impression of otherwise. I must stay in Merrillville. I must practice medicine. This is the only teaching hospital in the region. So I do take this very seriously. But Dr. Faraday, you must admit there are shortcomings in your department. In the past three years, you have not secured any research funds while the cardio wing is shouldering the hospital's reputation alone. Should you hire me, I have a research proposal I will submit to NIH."

Dr. Faraday strengthened his composure to not feel belittled under her attack, "What is the premise of your proposal?"

"I want to use transgenic technologies and tissue engineering to generate pancreas restricted progenitor cells and their subsequent maturation to functional insulin secreting beta cells as a strategy for the reversal of pediatric diabetes."

"I'm afraid we don't have the resources here to implement this research."

"My previous preceptor from Johns Hopkins is more than happy to be my co-investigator. This would require me to take leave for a week each month, if the project gets funded."

"You understand this would mean your daily practicum hours must increase."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that."

"Can you put together your proposal within a month? NIH's deadline is coming up."

"I have it mostly written. I just need to tinker with the details and write up a budget plan."

Dr. Faraday nodded, "Then consider yourself hired."

Eliza smiled, "Thank you."

"Your first day starts next week. Anna Jones will contact you with the details."

Eliza stood up, "I look forward to the upcoming year."

Dr. Faraday gave her a dismissive nod. Once Eliza was out of view, Nathaniel Faraday stretched back in his seat, placed his legs on the desk, and rubbed his temples. He knew at once that his new resident would bring him trouble. She, however, pinpointed his greatest
weakness and shot a straight arrow at it. Oakland didn’t use to be a teaching hospital. He worked for years to get his program accredited. In the process, he completely neglected research. Glancing over at the photo on his desk, Nathaniel sighed, realizing research wasn’t the only aspect he neglected.

Eliza left the building, fumbling through her purse to retrieve her phone. She called her last dialed number and was immediately greeted by a voicemail.

“Charles, this is my fifth time calling. I’ve moved to Merrillville. You can’t hide from me forever. Call back.”
Swinging her stethoscope around her neck and letting it fall above her white coat’s breast pocket, Eliza Robbins reported for duty. She glanced at her fellow residents, trying to mirror their excitement with a grin.

“Good morning,” Dr. Faraday began. “It’s nice to see everyone again. Oakland Hospital prides ourselves on effective patient care. So on top of chiseling your medical skills, I expect everyone to showcase bedside manners. A lot of medical complications can be prevented with good communication among the staff and patients.”

Dr. Faraday started walking down the spiral corridor, “We’ll officially start our tour. To your left is the resident call room. Precious naps are taken here.” Dr. Faraday paused as a few residents exchanged knowing looks before he continued, “The pediatric lounge is used for breaks between patient-care responsibilities. Up ahead is our NICU, which has space for up to 40 neonates. Around the corner you’ll find our library, which houses a large selection of medical reference books. Most students use this space for literature searches and study for exams.”

Dr. Faraday turned around to face his residents, “Your work areas are a floor below. This is where you read labs, x-rays, and hold conferences. Morning report is held every Monday through Thursday. An inpatient team presents a case and our chairman facilitates discussions with our faculty, residents and medical students. Any questions?”

Sensing the vast silence before him, Dr. Faraday started assigning mentorships, “Robbins, you’re on Perry’s service today. And don’t forget I want a draft of your NIH proposal by the end of this week, including the budget plan.”

Not waiting for Eliza’s response, Dr. Faraday gave out instructions to the remaining 19 residents. She quickened her pace to the floor below and met with Dr. Perry and his team.

“Dr. Perry, I’m Eliza Robbins, assigned to your service today.”

“Second year resident?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Please review the patient charts. We will do rounds in 30 minutes.” Dr. Perry then added in all seriousness, “I think there are still bagels and coffee next door. I would hurry if I were you.”

Dr. Robbins smiled, “Thanks for the tip.”
On their rounds, Dr. Robbins was quickly oriented to the patients and staff of Oakland Hospital. She, however, hadn’t warmed up to the countless animal murals aimed to make the pediatric department more child-friendly. In her mind, the paintings were pretentious, trying to cover up an unpleasant reality.

“Dr. Scott, who do we have here?” Dr. Perry asked as he smiled at his patient.

Dr. Scott quickly glanced at his tablet, “Patient’s name is Maddison. Age 16. She was admitted this morning due to high fever, nausea, severe headache, and stiff neck.”

Dr. Perry scanned the charts, “And what are these symptoms typically a sign of?”

“Meningitis,” Dr. Scott answered.

Dr. Perry continued his query, “In that case, what procedure would you recommend?”

“Lumbar puncture,” Dr. Robbins volunteered.

“Very good,” Dr. Perry confirmed. “Since you made the suggestion, please do us the honor, Dr. Robbins.”

Eliza Robbins hesitated a moment before ordering for a local anesthetic, needle, and bandage. She turned to the patient, “You will feel a slight pressure, but I assure you this won’t hurt. Now I need you to lie on your side and draw your knees to your chest.” Dr. Robbins located the lumbar region, rubbed it with iodine, and covered it with a sterile sheet. She reassured her patient one more time before injecting a local anesthetic to the lower back. Then, she inserted a hollow needle through the spinal membrane and into the spinal canal. After a small amount of cerebrospinal fluid was drawn, she removed the needle and covered the puncture site with a bandage.

Dr. Robbins smiled at Maddison, “You can relax now. It’s over. If you experience any headache or back pain, you can ask for a Tylenol. We’ll have lab results in a couple of days.”

Before heading to their next patient, Dr. Perry gave Dr. Robbins a pat on the back. Eliza Robbins, however, was not accustomed to this small congratulatory or encouraging act. She was used to cut throat competition, a silent survival-of-the-fittest routine. Here, she felt oddly out of place. Personal reasons, however, drew Eliza away from Johns Hopkins and into the inauthentically merry Oakland Hospital. At the end of her 30-hour shift, Eliza pulled out her phone and redialed her most recent contact. His voicemail greeted her again.

“Charles, at least send me a text. Let me know you’re okay. I’m not above breaking into your home.”
On her day off, Eliza Robbins went to Home Goods to pick up several items for her apartment. Among her finds were a cable knit throw blanket, two bookends, a fruit bowl, and several vases. She then drove to the other end of town toward an antique bookstore. While most people of her generation appreciated the convenience of online ordering and lightness of e-books, Eliza has always preferred getting lost in aisles of texts and fingering through yellowed pages. This time, she stopped in front of the Classics section and picked up several books from Hugo and Austen.

On her way home, she stopped by the flower market to pick up fresh hydrangeas. Her apartment was never lacking in flowers, even during weeks when she was barely home to appreciate them. As she arranged her flowers and put up her decor, Eliza almost slapped her own forehead in frustration. She forgot groceries. She hurried to her fridge for the pizza delivery number and dialed. While the other line rang, Eliza mused that she probably should save this number in her list of Contacts. Having placed her order for a pineapple pizza, Eliza walked over to her cupboards. She poured herself a glass of red wine, turned on Mozart, and plopped down on her chaise lounge. Reaching inside her tote bag, she picked up Les Misérables. No matter how many times she read it, Eliza always found herself immersed in the adventures of Jean Valjean.

After having finished her dinner of pizza and wine, Eliza went into her office to work on her NIH proposal. Having lost both her parents to type I diabetes, Eliza made the debilitating disease her main research focus ever since freshman year of college. She wrote countless theses, but none truly provided insights on the prevention of diabetes. It was senior year of college that Eliza decided she wanted to explore treatment options, and hence enrolled in the MD-PhD program at Harvard Medical School. Turning on her MacBook, Eliza felt slightly discouraged that after all those years, she was still miles away from a medicinal breakthrough. “Approach it from a new angle,” she reminded herself. “One is never truly finished with research.”

The more she typed about the prognosis and possible outcomes of diabetes, the more Eliza began thinking of her parents. Being an only child, all her parents’ dreams rested on her shoulders. She knew her parents were proud of her achievements, but Eliza always had lingering regrets for not having spent more time with them. She was always deep in textbooks and extracurricular activities. She always traded holidays with research activities. When one was not funded, she jumped at the next opportunity to submit another grant. It was her persevering attitude that kept her going with each setback, be that professional or personal. Eliza glanced at the clock. 10pm. She took off her glasses and called it a night. Turning on her phone, she read a new text message from her friend Allison:

*Were you able to talk to Charles?*
She sighed. Eliza tapped her “Phone” icon and called Charles. Unsurprisingly, his recorded voicemail began playing on the other line.

“Charles, if you really hate me so much, why don’t you change your number? I don’t know what’s worse: not knowing how to reach you or having you ignore me. Let’s meet and talk things over. You can’t hate me forever.”
4 – Maddison Paige

The moment she placed her pager in her white coat’s pocket, Eliza received a page from Dr. Perry. Twisting her hair into a tight bun, she ran down the hall and reported for duty.

“Dr. Perry, you paged?”

He smiled, “Maddison’s lab results are back. Take a look.”

She glanced at the documents and quickly concluded, “Both the bacterial culture and cell count suggest meningococcal meningitis.”

He nodded, “What treatment do you recommend?”

“I would administer vancomycin and ceftriaxone twice a day, intravenously. I would also advise family members to take ciprofloxacin as a preventive measure.”

“Great. Do as you recommended.”

Dr. Robbins excused herself to place the proper order. Two hours later, she received another page to report to Maddison’s room. When she arrived, she found Maddison undergoing epileptic seizures.

Dr. Robbins was quick to demand, “IV load lorazepam 0.1 mg and phenytoin 15 mg.” She added quietly, “Stay with me Maddison.”

“BP dropping,” a nurse announced. “Cardiac arrest. Code blue!”

Dr. Robbins started cardiopulmonary resuscitation, “Stay with me Maddie. Stay with me.” Despite her efforts, no pulse returned. “Push one of epi.”

“It’s been a minute,” a nurse reminded her.

Dr. Robbins nodded, “40 units of vasopressin.” With no sign of life returning, Dr. Robbins ordered, “Defib. Charge 200. Clear.” She administered the shock. “Come on, hang in there,” she muttered. “Charge again. 300. Clear.” Dr. Robbins kept increasing the voltage but no amount of shock was able to revive her first patient at Oakland Hospital.


With her shoulders slouched, Dr. Robbins walked out of the patient room. The smiling animals on the walls seemed to be mocking her. She walked straight out of the hospital, feeling sick to the stomach. Settling on a bench at the front entrance, Dr. Robbins
retrieved a small leather notebook from her coat’s pocket. Opening to a new page, she scribbled, “Maddison Paige.”

“I’m sorry.” Dr. Faraday sat down beside her, “I heard about Maddison.”

“It was a straightforward case, but she did not respond to the antibiotics. And what frustrates me even more is that all this could have been prevented if her parents had her vaccinated. How is it possible that the general public still holds reservations about vaccines?” She finally turned to look at Dr. Faraday, “How do we reach out and assure them vaccination won’t cause autism?”

“I understand your frustrations. The only comfort we have as health practitioners is that we’ve done our best and we can’t control every outcome.”

“Have we? Have we really? During orientation, you emphasized the importance of communication between staff, patients, and families. What we’re missing is communication with the press.”

“I agree. We should raise better awareness. This is something I can discuss with Public Relations. But Dr. Robbins, you have done your best.”

She did not respond.

He glanced at the notebook on her lap, still opened. “The journal of death?”

She nodded.

“I also started doing that during my internship year. I still do it, out of habit. But it doesn’t help relieve the pain any.”

She looked at him, “I don’t do it, Dr. Faraday, to lessen my pain. I do it so I can remember every medical mistake and not repeat them.”

He nodded. “I understand. But not every medical complication can be prevented, even when we learn from our mistakes. Dr. Robbins, sometimes you need to know that you’re not responsible for everything. It’s not your burden alone.”

She remained silent.

He went on, “Don’t try to shoulder everything. You will only break under the pressure. The department is organizing a happy hour tonight. I think you should come. Collegiality, after all, is very important.”

“I’m sorry, I have to finish my NIH proposal.”

Dr. Faraday smiled, “You and I both know that’s only an excuse. In case you change
your mind, we’re meeting at 6pm. Celestial Bar.” He added before leaving, “I really hope to see you there.”

She leaned back on the bench, took in a deep breath, and traced her fingers across the words “Maddison Paige”. Her first case at Oakland Hospital was a lost battle. Back at Johns Hopkins, she at least had the comfort of home to deal with her losses. Having resided along the East coast all her life, she felt like a foreigner in the Midwest. There was nothing for her here. She grabbed her phone, unwilling to believe the person she uprooted her whole life for would go on ignoring her. But once again, his voicemail echoed in her ears.

“Charles, I’m sorry. Let me apologize in person. Please call back.”
Celestial Bar was quieter than most pubs. Looking around, she found a small group of Oakland’s staff surrounding the darts.

“Eliza! This way!”

She smiled at Dr. Perry, who immediately greeted her with a question, “Do you play darts?”

She responded with a hint of mischief, “I’m only good when I’m angry. You might want to upset me first.”

Dr. Perry gave a laugh that was pure mirth. Eliza marveled at his ability to put work aside, to not let death and disease affect his lifestyle.

“You want a drink?” Dr. Faraday motioned at the bar ahead.

“Sure,” she followed him to the bar and ordered, “Tequila, please.”

“Scotch. Neat.” Dr. Faraday ordered. Turning to Eliza, he said simply, “Glad you were able to make it. But don’t expect a deadline extension.”

“I’m not counting on one.”

“Eliza, do you mind me calling you that?”

“Not at all.”

“Great. Call me Nathan.” He took a sip of his Scotch, “So what is this personal reason of yours for moving to Merrillville?”

“Another query and I’m going to make good use of the darts over there.”

“Ah, a touchy topic. What’s your favorite song?”

“Excuse me?”

“You see, there’s a band here that’s quite good. They take requests now and then. Since I seemed to have upset you, I thought I could offer a song as a peace treaty.”

“When do they play?”
“7pm.” He glanced at his watch, “So in about five minutes.”

“Boy band?”

“There are four guys. The lead singer plays the acoustic guitar. He’s quite good.”

“What’s their name?”

“The Koleos. Greek for beetles. I think they were having a wordplay on The Beatles.”

His answer startled her.

“11 o’clock. They’re taking the stage.”

Eliza immediately swerved her body to the direction Nathan pointed. Her eyes stared straight at the lead singer as he introduced their first song “A Sky Full of Stars”.

“Ah, great song.” Nathan looked over toward Eliza and became perplexed with the fiery in her eyes. She tightened her grasp around her glass, as if wanting to shatter it. He asked in a careful tone, “Eliza, do you know the lead singer?”

She ignored his question and walked straight to the darts. Dr. Perry noticed her approaching and handed her three darts encouragingly. She grabbed one and immediately threw it straight at the bullseye. Applause immediately erupted. Eliza reached for a second dart. It, too, hit the bullseye and caused the first dart to fall to the ground.

Nathan interjected her reach for the third dart, “Eliza, can I have a word with you?”

She turned to Nathan, evidently annoyed, “You’re not my boss outside of work.”

“Do you know Charles?”

His frank question halted her anger. She nodded mutely.

“They normally play for half an hour and then they take a short break. You can talk to him then.”

The anger in her eyes was replaced with unshed tears. Her reason for moving to Merrillville was standing only feet away. He moved closer to the microphone and interacted with the audience, “Hope you all had a good day today. Our next song is a request from Mindy. Hope you enjoy.”

Eliza reached inside her handbag for her checkbook and scribbled $500 on it. Turning to Nathan, she asked, “Can you hand him this? I’m leaving now.”

“No.” His response was firm, “I’m not your errand boy, Eliza.”
She stuffed the check back to her handbag and brushed past Nathan. He called her name but she ignored his pleas and continued exiting the bar. Once outside, she took a deep breath that wasn’t contaminated with alcohol and strong fumes. She spent months tracking down Charles. Now that she finally met him in person, she was clueless of what to do. She hadn’t considered a plan. Their e-mail correspondence stopped when she disapproved of his life choices. His silence killed her. Now, his presence oppressed her even more. Not trusting herself to drive, she started walking North. Then, she sprinted into a circular run for an hour.

Panting, Eliza stopped in an alleyway. She looked up to see the sign for Celestial Bar blinking its neon lights. She reached inside her bag for her car keys. The Toyota came to life and she shifted the gear to reverse. Backing out of her parking space, she suddenly became aware of someone standing next to her beams.

He walked to the passenger side, “Give me a ride.”

She turned to Charles, “That is no way to speak to your sister.”

“In case you didn’t know, Eliza, sisters are supportive.”

She waited for him to put on his seatbelt before driving away. “I gave up Johns Hopkins for you, Charles. At least listen to me.”

“Don’t you dare blame your career decisions on me. I never asked you to move.”

“Charles, you’re my only family left. Please listen to me. I only want what’s best for you.”

“I’m not committing a crime. I’m only doing what I love. Why is that so hard for you to get?”

“I respect your passion as a hobby, Charles. But take a good look at your life. You’re nearing 30 and you barely have any possessions. Playing guitar isn’t a viable career.”

“It makes me happy. That’s all you want, right? For me to be happy?”

“And productive, Charles.”

“Are you saying music makes no contribution to society?”

At the stoplight, Eliza fished her handbag for the check she wrote earlier, “Here’s $500 for this month.”

“Drop me off at the next block.”
“Stop being stubborn. You need help paying rent. Either you take my money or you move in with me.”

Charles gave Eliza a resentful look and snatched her check, “Don’t come find me again.”

She looked at Charles walking away. The carefreeness in his steps both assured and vexed her. She knew not everyone appreciated ambition and solitude like her. But she couldn’t understand how someone could live without direction. Charles was always in the moment, not caring about his past or future. A honk brought Eliza’s attention to the present and she drove on. Parked in front of her apartment building, Eliza finally let out the tears she blocked ever since moving to Merrillville. She felt like a fish out of water. Worse than that, her actions weren’t recompensed. Charles resented her.
Eliza Robbins balanced loose papers on one hand and a cup of coffee on the other. She knocked on Faraday’s door.

“Come in,” Nathan answered without looking up from his documents.

“Dr. Faraday, I have a draft of my proposal for you.”

He took the papers from her hands. She handed him his morning coffee as a silent apology for her attitude the night before. He accepted her offering and asked, “Do you want to talk about last night?”

Eliza took her seat. She let out a sigh before answering, “He’s my brother.”

“Charles?”

She nodded. “My half-brother. Last summer, I finally cleaned out my parents’ home. That was when I found my father’s journal and realized he had a son from an affair he had when I was three. I knew nothing of it. And I couldn’t ignore the fact. So I tracked down Charles.”

“That’s why you moved here?”

“I didn’t plan on it initially. I was just going to get to know him, maybe visit him once in awhile. But then I found out he’s barely making ends meet with his musical gigs. He refused my help. And next thing I knew, I was packing my bags and uprooting my life.”

“Eliza, you need to control this urge to make everything your responsibility. Charles is an adult. He gets to make his own decisions and deal with their consequences.”

“I took on Charles as if I took on a project. His inability to succeed became my failure.”

Nathan shook his head, “You have to realize that attitude is wrong. You also need to know we all define success differently. If you ask me, I think Charles is doing all right.”

“I think I’m being unfair to Charles. I cling to him to fill the void that my parents left me when they passed away. My father’s journal exposed an imperfect marriage filled with deceit. In some ways, I want to right his wrongs. And I thought my avenue for doing so is through Charles.”

“Did your father ever take care of Charles?”
She shook her head, “Not according to his journal. Charles was only mentioned twice. Once when he found out his mistress was pregnant and advised her to either abort or give up for adoption. Charles was mentioned again when he reached the age of two. That’s when his mistress wrote about keeping the child and naming him Charles Robbins. My father only mentioned sending her a sum of money. I don’t think he ever met his son.”

“I suppose your mother never knew?”

“She was oblivious. Even if it was a lie, I am glad she went away with no ill thoughts of her husband or their marriage.”

Nathan nodded, suddenly finding himself toying with his naked ring finger.

“Thank you,” Eliza said suddenly. “I rarely ramble on about my personal life. Sorry you’re the wrong person at the wrong time.”

“Don’t worry about it. The gratitude is mine if your research gets funded.”

“Speaking of that, I will need to trouble you to write your biographical sketch.”

“It’s quite embarrassing that my last sketch was from five years ago. More so embarrassing is that I won’t have much to add to it.”

Eliza smiled sheepishly, “I’m sorry if I came across rude during my interview. I think I half wanted to get rejected since I wasn’t too sure of my decision for moving here, and I knew my previous preceptor wouldn’t have a problem taking me back. For what it’s worth, I think you did a remarkable job developing your residency program.”

“Thank you. Coming from you, I gladly take the compliment. As for your moving here, are you sure yet of your decision?”

She laughed, “Are you afraid I might drop out of your program?”

“That’ll save me from updating my biosketch.”

“I’m going to take my time here and get to know Charles.”

“Very good. If I’m not wrong, today is your off day?”

Eliza nodded, stood up, and bid him goodbye.

She rang the doorbell to Charles’s unit.
He stared at the brown bags in her hands as he opened the door. Slamming it shut, he greeted Eliza, “I don’t know why you try so hard to be my sister. You barely know me.”

She didn’t answer him but simply placed the brown bags on his kitchen counter.

He followed her every action. Hands crossed, he tilted his head to one side, “Is it out of guilt? If so, that guilt is not your own. Why bother?”

She continued putting away the groceries, “You’re the innocent byproduct of their affair. I have no reason to punish you. You’re my relation, Charles. You’re my last kin. I can’t stand back and watch you struggle.”

“So noble,” he mocked.

“You can refuse my help but you can’t stop me from trying.”

He approached her, “So what? You’re gonna be my maid from now on?”

She laughed, “Dream on. I just thought you might enjoy a home cooked meal every now and then.”

“What’s the catch?”

She hesitated a moment before replying, “I want you to get a job.”

“I’m not giving up my music.”

“You don’t have to. You only play at night. I want you to get a daytime job. You have to at least be self-sufficient.”

“What job can I get with just my High School diploma? Waiter?”

“Sure. Anything that could help pays your bills.”

“So you’re no longer interested in being my bank account?”

“Charles, I don’t intend on staying in Merrillville forever.”

“Banking is quite advanced these days. You know we can do mobile transactions, right?”

“Be serious. I really want you to be on your own. What’s the point of pursuing your passion if you can’t make ends meet? I can only help you so far. I can only help you temporarily.”

“Fine. I can work at the same bar I play for. You don’t have to nag.”
Eliza smiled, “Good. Pasta for lunch?”

“No thanks. I already had instant noodles. Look, feel free to lock up when you’re done. I have to practice with the band.”

Eliza stood dumbfounded as Charles picked up his guitar and left. She stared at the groceries before her and fully understood the disconnect between her half-brother and herself. She realized, too, that Charles wasn’t a project, but a complex being with his own thoughts that rarely align with hers. In a resigned manner, Eliza turned on the stove and started boiling water for her pasta. While preparing her lunch, Eliza allowed her thoughts to wander to Nathan. She was slightly startled at their affinity, how effortless it was for her to forget he was her attending, to confide in him her family drama. This was certainly uncharacteristic of Eliza.

She helped herself to the kitchen table with her Mediterranean orzo pasta salad and feta vinaigrette. Mid-bite, she noticed a photo framed on the wall. It was a picture of Charles and his mother. She studied the features of this woman, the third party in her parents’ marriage. She was not exceptionally beautiful. She appeared happy, and certainly loving toward her son. The photo depicted an afternoon at the park, of a mother pushing her toddler on the swings. Eliza looked around the room but couldn’t find any photo of Charles with his mother at an older age. Her father’s journal only referred to his mistress as “S”. And Eliza, in her haste to reconnect with her kin, only researched Charles Robbins. She purposefully neglected to find the identity of S. Perhaps this was where she went wrong. It would be impossible for her to connect with Charles if she couldn’t allow herself to understand his past. She walked into his bedroom and located his photo album. Every photo was of Charles in his toddlerhood. Flipping through the album a second time, she noticed one particular pocket appeared heavier than the rest. She emptied the pocket’s contents to find two more photos laid hidden underneath the first. One was a photo of her father and S. He was kissing her cheek and she smiled brightly at the camera. She then took out the second hidden photo. Her breath drew an audible gasp. In her hands was a photo of S lying in a hospital bed while holding her mother’s hand.
Eliza frantically called Charles but he would not pick up. She came to Celestial Bar to search for him, but his band does not practice there. After inquiring with the bartender, she realized The Koleos was not scheduled to play that night. She got back to her car, not knowing where to head to, despite the small city limits of Merrillville. Back home, in moments of lost and confusion, she would head to the cemetery to visit her parents’ graves. But now, it was her very own late mother that caused her confusion. Her mother knew of the affair. Eliza couldn’t understand why her mother had not said anything or filed for divorce. She couldn’t understand why her mother, a marriage counselor, chose denial as a solution to her own marital problems.

A knock startled her. Rolling down her car window, she began apologizing, “I’m really sorry, Dr. Faraday. I’ll move out of the way.”

“You’ve been blocking traffic for about ten minutes now. What’s wrong?”

“Sorry again. You can take my parking space.”

“Do you like fishing?”

“Pardon?”

“It has a calming effect. The water, that is. I’m heading there. You can join me if you want.”

“How did you know to find me here?”

“I didn’t. I’m just here to get back my fishing license from Joe the bartender. Why don’t you park your car again? We’ll carpool in mine. I’ll be right back.”

He didn’t give her much of an option, but Eliza wasn’t about to object a fishing expedition either. When he came out of the bar, Nathan Faraday had a boyish look on his face. Eliza couldn’t help commenting, “You seem to come alive when you’re not at the hospital. Do you fish often?”

“Not often enough. Don’t get me wrong, I love my job. Most of it anyway. The doctor part I love. The paperwork that comes from being department head? Not so much. This is my way of relaxing, to get me through the drab.”

“So how often do you fish?”

“Once a month. Sometimes less. Have you fished?”

7 – Gone Fishing
“No.”

“I used to fish all the time in med school.”

“You had time?”

“Overnight fishing. Those were the best times.”

“So you enjoy solitude. What made you invite me to tag along?”

“You looked like you needed a distraction. How are things going with Charles?”

“I thought you said I needed a distraction.”

He smiled, “Then pick your topic of conversation. We have about an hour to go.”

“Why are you practicing in Merrillville?”

He glanced at her, “Personal reasons.”

She laughed, “I hope you didn’t cite that during your interview.”

He shrugged, “I was brought on to lead the department of pediatric surgery. There wasn’t much of an interview involved.”

“Personally selected for the job. That must feel nice.”

“You don’t have to envy me. I’ve seen your CV.”

She kept quiet and reclined her chair, “I’m going to take a quick nap. Wake me when we get there?”

He nodded. At a stoplight, Nathan pulled off his jacket to cover the sleeping Eliza. Even in her slumber, Nathan noticed the crease in her eyebrows and a slight frown on her lips. Her lack of tranquility told him that things with Charles were at an impasse, at best. The recollection of her recent disclosure of her personal life reminded him why he needed this fishing trip. He specifically rearranged his schedule for an afternoon off to find peace. Tapping on his steering wheel, Nathan knew allowing Eliza into his personal space was a huge mistake. Yet, somehow, it felt like the right thing to do when he found her distressed at Celestial Bar.
She walked down the pier and handed him his jacket, “I thought you agreed to wake me up.”

He stated matter-of-factly, “You needed the sleep.”

Eliza stretched out her arms and took in a deep breath of fresh air, “You’re right about the water. I think you should build a lake next to our hospital.”

“I run a department, Eliza, not the entire hospital. Besides, we’re more likely to invest in a new MRI machine than a manmade lake.”

She ignored his comment, “I wish I have a swimming suit.”

“That I don’t have. But I brought along a second rod if you want to fish.”

She sat down beside him and observed how he hooked the bait and casted his line.

“You’re ready?”

She stared at the worms, “I’ve touched a lot of gooey stuff, but always with gloves on.”

He laughed, “Should I hook the bait for you?”

“Well now, don’t take away half the fun. So you pierce through twice?”

“Yes, that should do the trick. Now, you want to cast the line using the same motion as you would to skip a rock across the water. You want to push this button as you release, and let go of the button when the line is casted to your desired depth and distance.”

She followed his instructions and casted her line to the left of his, “Now what?”

“We wait. Now and then, you might want to reel in very slowly to lightly jerk the bait, giving the impression that it’s alive.”

After a momentary silence, Nathan suddenly asked, “Have you ever found the idea of something is more beautiful than its actuality?”

She paused to think before answering, “I can’t say I have a personal example. But I have that very thought with a literary figure.”

He turned toward her, amused. The light accentuated his square jaw. He raised his eyebrows, “Who?”

She smiled, “John Galt. Have you read Ayn Rand?”

“Can’t say I have.”
“Well, John Galt was this ideal. The very name stood for perfection. When he was finally introduced as an actual person, I was so disappointed at how… human he was.”

He nodded, “I see. But Eliza, you don’t strike me as someone who believes in perfection.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“I always had this feeling that you tend to believe everything can be improved. And therefore, nothing is perfect.”

She allowed a minute to study him. She could count their encounters on one hand. And yet, Nathaniel Faraday appeared to understand her more than she cared to admit. Realizing he was under some scrutiny, Nathaniel sat more erect and straightened his broad shoulders.

Eliza resumed, “What prompted this question? Give me a more practical example of representation versus reality.”

“Marriage.”

She almost laughed, “You find the idea of marriage more poetic than marriage itself?”

He shrugged, unwilling to elaborate. She misunderstood his silence as an unwillingness to share a painful childhood. She began imagining Nathaniel Faraday came from a broken home.

Suddenly, she jolted back to reality, “I think I feel a tug!”

“Beginner’s luck! Now, make a quick and firm jerk backward and up. Good. Good. Now reel in that fish. Try to keep the tension on the line.”

“It doesn’t feel very heavy.”

“This area is normally inhabited with small fish.”

She lifted the fish to air and watched it struggle, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Let me remove the hook. We want this to be done fast to keep the fish alive.”

She observed his steady hands as he worked gently yet efficiently in freeing the fish. He smiled at her, “Do you want to do the honor?”

She held the fish in her hands and slowly dipped them into the water, finally letting go of the fish. She saw it swim away and circled back.
“I know this sounds crazy but I’m positive that fish is waving its fins at me.”

“Haven’t gone fishing a single day in your life until now and you’re suddenly a fish whisperer?”

She smiled at him, “Why do you fish? I understand the calming effect of water, but what’s the added bonus of fishing?”

“It quiets my mind. Don’t you find our minds wander too much and too long when we do nothing? Fishing keeps me busy enough to free my mind from wandering thoughts, but it’s not exhausting.”

For the second time, Eliza studied Nathan, who in her mind, did not appear to be someone who needed a hiatus from life. To her, he seemed completely in control of his life, has no worries outside of work’s logistics, someone who struck a perfect calmness.

He interrupted her thoughts, “We don’t have the budget for a lake, but I bet we have enough donor’s money for an indoor fountain.”

She smiled, “I’d like that.” Her hazel eyes danced with the sunset and shone brightly, “Thank you for letting me join your solitude.”
She couldn’t put her finger on it for a long while. Then, realization dawned upon her. His car smelled like the hospital. How uncanny. Whether by choice or convenience, Nathan’s car carried an antiseptic scent. For a man who sought out the lake once a month as a refuge from work, this observation startled Eliza. The scent of his car was an extension of his work. Glancing to the man behind the wheels, Eliza hesitatingly concluded he preferred his work environment than going home. The car came to a slow stop.

She turned to him as she opened the passenger door, “Thank you for dinner. I had a lovely time.”

He leaned over to kiss her cheek, “Good night.”

She closed the door firmly and waved goodbye as Nathan drove off. Although Nathan was able to distract her the entire day, Eliza knew it was time to face the music. When she reached Charles’s home, she heard music coming from his apartment. She rang the doorbell twice before a man opened the door for her. She smiled at him, assuming he was a member of The Koleos. Charles was behind him, holding onto his guitar. Noticing the distraught look on Eliza’s face, he asked his band members to leave. She smiled apologetically as each person passed her at the door.

“I had a lot of missed calls from you.”

Eliza chose to ignore her urge to demand why he never called her back. Instead, she took out the Polaroid of S and her mother and showed it to Charles.

He glanced at the photo, “Look, if you want to find out about my mother’s relationship with your father, ask my aunt. Leave me out of this.”

“Our father.”

“Pardon?”

“He was your father too.”

Charles hid his frustration in an even tone, “He was never my father. He never saw me. I didn’t know him. And I’m fine with that. You don’t get to live your rich life and then decide to interfere with how I’m doing when you get bored.”

“Is that why you hate me from the start? Because I had a father?”

“You should never have taken an interest in me, Eliza. What your father owed my mother
and me, your mother already repaid in full. You’re not obligated to do anything more.”

Holding onto a small scrap of paper whereupon Charles scribbled his aunt’s address, Eliza drew in a deep breath and rang the doorbell of Karen Smith.

“Hello,” Eliza began hesitantly. “I’m Eliza, daughter of Peter and Lea Robbins.”

“You didn’t need to say. You look exactly like your mother.” She opened the door wider, “Come on in.”

Eliza stepped inside, “I’m sorry to be bothering you so early in the morning.”

“How are your parents?” Karen asked as she closed the door behind her. Turning to look at Eliza’s crestfallen face, she muttered an apology, “Oh… I’m sorry. Just about everyone I know has passed. How did they go?”

“Complications with diabetes.”

She motioned Eliza to sit down on the sofa, “They stayed married till the end?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother was a good woman. I’ve always been sorry my sister got involved.”

“How did they… How did she meet my father?”

“Susan was a Broadway star in Chicago. Your father often does business in the city and he went to one of her shows. They had a nice meal afterward and things just escalated.”

Eliza cleared her throat nervously, “Did your sister know my father was married?”

Karen nodded and sighed, “I tried to stop her. But she said the heart wants what the heart wants. They kept seeing each other for the next six months. Then one night, she came home drunk and told me your father wouldn’t give up his marriage. They broke things off but then Susan got pregnant. Your father didn’t want to have anything to do with the baby.”

“How did my mom find out?”

“That was years later. Susan found out she had lung cancer. All those years of smoking caught up to her. She tried contacting your dad to arrange Charles’s livelihood. But it was your mother who answered the text. She flew out here that very weekend. What a sweet
lady she was.”

“When was this?”

“Charles was six then. You do the math.”

“What happened when my mother came?”

“Your mother asked if she could adopt Charles, but Susan refused. Even though I took care of Charles ever since Susan died, it was really your mother that provided for him. She sent us money every month. When Charles turned 18, I told him the truth and he made me promise not to accept anymore help. After months of us not cashing her checks, she eventually stopped sending them. Since then, I lost touch with her.”

Eliza nodded mutely.

“I know this is an awful lot for you to take in. My advice for you is to leave the past behind. Your folks’ problems aren’t your own. Just go live your life.”

“I feel like my whole life has been a lie.”

“Your parents were only trying to protect you.”

“Was Charles angry at my mother?”

“He was only six. Didn’t know a thing. We said Lea was Susan’s friend. Poor child was running around everywhere with a camera. He said since his mother was bounded to the hospital bed, he would be her eyes. So everyday, he showed her all the Polaroid shots he took. He also took a lot of photos with Susan so that he could remember her after she’s gone.”

“Did Charles always love music?”

“I can’t remember. But Charles was supposed to go to college for a degree in Biology. We just couldn’t afford his tuition so he dropped out after the first semester and formed a band. Then another band. He hasn’t found his break yet.”

Karen shifted in her seat, “I don’t know what your plans are but I’m glad to see you here. I’m not getting any younger and it’s nice to know Charles still has family.”

Eliza laughed quietly, “I’m not sure Charles considers me family.”

“That boy can be stubborn. But if he lets you find me, then you’re certainly someone he trusts.” Karen reached out to pat Eliza’s hands, “I can see that Lea raised a good girl. Are you in town for long?”
“I actually moved here.”

“Don’t get so wrapped up in the past, Eliza. You’re not young yourself. Go find a good man to take care of you.”

Eliza thanked Karen for her time and kindness in addressing her questions. She reassured Charles’s aunt that she would continue looking after him and that she had no intention of moving back to Baltimore. The ladies hugged warmly as they bid goodbye.

Eliza stopped Nathan’s track as he was on his way to the cafeteria, “I’ve been working at this hospital for two months and I haven’t been on your service once. Something tells me you’re purposely ignoring me.”

He glanced at her grip on his coat’s sleeve, “Your thinking that I’ve ignored you is the problem.”

She let go, “How do you mean?”

“I have been ignoring you, Dr. Robbins. I’m afraid I can’t remain professional around you.”

“Dr. Faraday, I’m sorry if I overstepped my lines or did something to upset you. But please be clear that although I moved here for personal reasons, I still value my training. I can’t possibly gain from this residency if the best attending isn’t willing to work with me.”

He looked at her helplessly, “Okay. You’re on my service tomorrow. Ask Williams for my files and catch yourself up to speed. You will be presenting at rounds.”

She smiled triumphantly, “Thank you.”

He watched her walking away and knew he was playing with fire. She was more than he could handle, but Nathan welcomed this change to his monotonous life. Throwing caution to the wind, Nathan liberated his qualms and began looking forward to working with Eliza.
Reaching inside his breast pocket, Nathaniel retrieved a small note. He creased it into tiny folds and held the note between his fore- and middle fingers. Without her fellow residents noticing, he slipped the note into Eliza’s palm. Without heeding the note any attention, she threw it in a nearby recycling bin and gave him an indignant grin. He quietly chuckled at her superior display of professionalism. They passed three animal murals and entered a patient’s room. Dr. Faraday smiled at his patient and turned to Eliza, “Dr. Robbins?”

“This is Olivia. 15. She was admitted with a rapidly growing abdominal mass in the last three months, which completely filled the left upper quadrant and epigastric regions. She has no history of trauma, abdominal pain, nausea or vomiting. Routine laboratory findings and erythrocyte sedimentation rate were also normal. Abdominal Doppler ultrasonography showed a vascularized, hipoechoic solid mass with necrotic foci adjacent to the left kidney, the spleen, and the tail of her pancreas. The tumor was compressing these organs and displacing the left kidney and spleen.”

Dr. Faraday glanced at his patient’s chart while instructing, “Book an OR for this afternoon. I want a literature report on all pediatric cases in the U.S.”

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to his patient, “We will remove your tumor, Olivia. You’re ready to say goodbye to the mass?”

“Gladly. I know I should be most concerned about my health, but I’m just honestly happy to be able to fit in my old jeans again.”

The medical team smiled at Olivia and proceeded to the next room. Dr. Robbins quickly began presenting before being prompted, “Matthew is 7. He has a past medical history of patent ductus arteriosus status post ligation, eczema and reactive airway disease. An ultrasound revealed mild appendiceal dilation with an appendicolith, without evidence of fluid or abscess. He subsequently had a laparoscopic appendectomy. The appendix was removed. Final pathology from the appendix showed acute appendicitis without evidence of perforation. Two days after discharge, he came back with nonbloody, nonbilious emesis as well as subumbilical abdominal pain. His X-ray showed diffusely dilated loops of small bowel. The last on call physician noted that Matthew has low urine output, tachycardia and was acutely diaphoretic and somnolent.”

“I want you to schedule an abdominal CT.”
“Dr. Faraday, I did the lit search concerning Olivia’s case. There are ten known cases of OMMH. It’s a rare tumor characterized with multiple omental and mesenteric nodules. Complete surgical resection is the only choice of treatment. It is sometimes followed up with tyrosine kinase inhibitors.”

“Good. I want you to scrub in for this afternoon’s surgery.”

“I also have Matthew’s CT.”

“Tell me what you see.”

“There’s a large amount of intra-abdominal free fluid as well as moderately to severely thickened distal small bowel loops concerning for ischemia.”

“What’s your recommendation?”

“Exploratory laparotomy.”

“Good. Schedule it immediately.”

Eliza stood facing Nathaniel. She gazed at him, trying to detect any change in his countenance. This was their first surgery together. This was her first chance to observe him in his natural habitat, the environment under which he thrives. But his facial mask hid the features she wished to observe.

His voice interrupted her thoughts, “Dr. Robbins, would you like to make the first cut?”

She nodded and held the scalpel steadily in her right hand. She glanced at him and he gave her a reassuring nod before she proceeded.

“Dr. Robbins, what do you see?”

“The midjejunum up to the ileocecal appear ischemic.”

“Right, there’s evidence for vascular thrombotic disease. No evidence of gross perforation. I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do at this time. Let’s close.”
“We’re not resecting the bowel?”

“No. We will have him intubated and re-evaluate the viability of the small bowel in 24 hours.”

“Should we start him on a heparin drip?”

“Yes.”

They walked out of their second surgery in steady strides.

He took off his surgical mask and turned to her, “Not a little bit curious about the note I handed you this morning?”

She disposed her scrubs and ignored his inquiry, “Let’s inform her parents.”

He nodded in agreement and they walked toward the waiting area. Nathaniel greeted his patient’s parents with a smile, “Mr. and Mrs. Reed, the surgery went very well. The tumor was completely resected without complication. Dr. Robbins will keep you updated on Olivia’s recovery. She should be able to discharge in a few days.”

The happy parents thanked Dr. Faraday and Dr. Robbins before immediately running to their daughter’s room. As the sounds of their footsteps faded, Dr. Faraday turned to Eliza, “Good work today, Dr. Robbins.”

She hastily spoke in excitement, “You get assigned the most interesting and rare cases. I wish we don’t have to rotate attending physicians.”

“You have to learn different styles, Dr. Robbins. And common cases don’t necessarily mean they don’t have challenges to learn from.” Then, he switched from a disapproving tone to one more tender, “Are you busy this evening?”

She stared at her watch and waited for the second dial to indicate the end of her shift. Satisfied that she was no longer clocking work hours, she finally replied, “I have a date with Hugo, but I suppose we can reschedule.”

“Hugo?”

“Victor Hugo.”

Nathan laughed with realization, “I’m sorry to be competing with the great Hugo. Dinner at Celestial’s?”
“Is The Koleos playing?”

“I believe so.”

Eliza nodded. Ever since she spoke with Karen, she hasn’t seen Charles. When S became Susan, she found it harder to ignore that Charles wasn’t merely a brother, but the child of a woman who once threatened her parents’ marriage. Her mother wasn’t ignorantly blissful, but chose to live with a blind eye.

“Are you okay with seeing Charles again?”

Nathan’s question brought her out of her reverie, “What? Yeah… I’m fine. Let me go change. Meet you in the parking lot.”

Nathan smiled as he looked at Eliza walking toward her locker room. His phone vibrated. Realizing that it was a call from Marie, he turned off his phone. He heaved in a sigh as he loosened his tie. Being with Eliza was both liberating and suffocating. Not being with Eliza was monotonous. Nathan decided, after little thought, that he was willing to gamble between feeling alive and dead. He would rather bear those chances over a stale dreariness that overtook his life before interviewing Eliza.

She placed her fork down and pouted at him while chastising, “I wouldn’t have pitted you as someone lacking in etiquettes. Texting in the middle of dinner?”

He looked at her with amusement, “Sometimes there are exceptions.”

She ignored him and turned to the stage where Charles began interacting with the audience, “The next song is a request from Nathan to Eliza.”

Eliza turned to Nathan and raised her eyebrows in query. He explained, “They have a texting service for song requests.”

She picked up her fork and played with her salad, “Sorry for having wronged you.”

“You know, Eliza, you are extremely careful in your medical recommendations. You made sure to look at everything from all angles. And I see that your research is no different. Your proposal covered as many RDoC domains as possible. But in your personal life, you tend to jump to conclusions.”

She looked up, “That’s a bold accusation from someone who only knows me for two months.”
“It’s only an accusation if it’s false. But if you agree with me, then it’s merely a careful observation.”

“I didn’t realize I was under such microscopic examination.”

He smiled at her, “After all, I must write an evaluation letter by the end of the year.”

Charles’s voice reverberated from the microphone:

*Cause I could live by the light in your eyes*
*I’ll unfold before you*
*What I’ve strung together*
*The very first words of a lifelong love letter*
*Tell the world that we’ve finally got it all right*
*I choose you…*

Eliza studied Nathan’s expression, trying to decipher whether his song choice was meant to carry a message on his behalf. Nathan extended his hand to reach for hers. Eliza pulled back and quietly stated, “Nathan, you’ve known me for two months.”

“Everything I do, everything I experience is intensified. I live very deliberately, Eliza, because of you.”

She found herself unable to respond. His powerful gaze did not intimidate her, yet she helplessly shivered under his fervency. She stood up abruptly and excused herself.

He ran after her, “I’m sorry.”

She turned around, “No, I am. I just… I just didn’t know how to react. You see, Hugo is familiar territory for me. You? I look forward to seeing you, but the closer you become, the more afraid I am.”

“Eliza?” Nathan asked apprehensively, “You’ve never been in a relationship?”

“My prom date was Tolstoy.”

He stepped closer and held her hands, “Don’t be afraid.” He brushed her hair behind her ear, “Let me take you home.”

She nodded mutely and allowed him to hold her hand as he led her outside of Celestial. The ride home was quiet. She turned toward him several times but no words escaped her lips.

He parked the car and announced in an almost regretful tone, “We’re here.”
She began taking off her seatbelt but froze in mid-action when he reached over and caressed her face. She looked up timorously. Their eyes met and he reassured her with a warm smile. She closed her eyes as he leaned in. The warmth of his soft lips as they met hers gave her an unexpected sense of familiarity. It was their first kiss. It was her first kiss. His tenderness promised her a world rich in colors, one she acutely desired to savor.

He planted a final soft kiss and whispered against her lips, “Good night.”

Still speechless, she left his car and fumbled for her house key. She closed the door behind her and touched her lips. A sheepish smile lit her face. She quickly reached inside her handbag for her phone and texted her friend Allison, “Allie, I think I’m in love.”
Eliza knocked and immediately entered before allowing Nathan any second to respond. He looked up from his desk and she promptly announced, “You owe me dinner.”

“Oh? What’s the occasion?”

“Score report is out. Top 7%.”

He smiled, “You got funded. Congratulations! This certainly deserves celebration. Inform your colleagues dinner’s on me.”

She smiled back, “I was hoping for a more private celebration.”

He nodded, both with willing pleasure and hesitating caution, “As you please.”

“Your choice for dinner. But afterward, I want to attend a symphony orchestra.”

“I’ll make reservations and order tickets.”

“Good.”

He laughed, “You gave away all your flower deliveries to our nurses. It appears I cannot give you any romantic gestures unless it’s a direct order from you?”

She smiled in response, “I do appreciate your gestures. But I can’t accept them while I’m at work, as your subordinate.”

He stopped her before she left, “When will you be heading to Baltimore?”

“Once every month starting next month.”

He nodded, “I’ll tell Anna to approve your new schedule.”

“Dr. Robbins, glad you’re on my service again. Who do we have here?”

“This is Eddie. 3 years old. He was presented to our ER with a painful 3cm mass on the posterior left shoulder, above the scapular spine. His father first noticed the lesion in the
morning and it gradually became more painful and started discharging clear fluid.”

Dr. Perry touched the swelling, “Eddie, does this hurt?”

The boy nodded.

“Dr. Robbins, schedule the OR. We will need to excise and drain the abscess.”

“Will this hurt?”

“Not a bit Eddie. You will be asleep the entire time.”

“Will I need to stay in the hospital for long?”

“I highly doubt that. You can probably go home later tonight.”

Eddie grinned. Dr. Perry reassured his parents that their son will be taken care of.

As they finished rounds, Dr. Perry pulled Eliza aside for a private chat, “Eliza, as a friend, I advise you to not get involved with an attending, particularly Nathan.”

She was dumbfounded. They have been careful to keep their relationship discreet.

“How did you…”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think anyone else in the hospital knows. I was at Celestial when he dedicated a song to you.”

“I see.”

“It’s your personal life, Eliza. I won’t say more on the subject. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

She nodded. Long after Dr. Perry left, she pondered his warning. She understood his counsel to not date her superior, but was baffled when he chose to heed warning against Nathan specifically. A buzz sent her back to reality. Eliza was checking her pager when a young boy ran straight into her.

“Whoa, slow down there. Do you know where you’re going?”

He took a step back, “I’m looking for my dad. You probably know him. Everyone knows him.”

She smiled at his presumption, “Your father must be a very important man.”

He nodded keenly, “Daddy is important, but I wouldn’t want to grow up to be like him.”
“No?” She asked in surprise.

“He’s too busy for me. I don’t think I want to be that busy when I grow up.”

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Dr. Faraday.”

Eliza’s smile faded and her face froze in an unreadable expression.
A nurse recognized Aidan and took him away to find Dr. Faraday. Eliza remained transfixed on the ceramic tiles until the beeping of her pager reminded her she needed to prep for surgery. All throughout Eddie’s operation, Eliza glanced at Dr. Perry.

“Dr. Robbins, do you have questions?”

“No sir.”

“You are excused from my OR.”

“Excuse me?”

“Dr. Robbins, you may go.”

“Did I do something wrong, Dr. Perry?”

“You can observe the operation from the gallery, if you choose to.”

She excused herself, threw away her scrubs, and immediately texted Allison, “He has a son.”

A new text appeared, “Single father?”

“I think so. He doesn’t wear a wedding ring. He never spoke of a wife. But then again, he never mentioned having a son either.”

“You’ve only known him for a short time. It’s natural you’re just beginning to know these things.”

Allison’s rational response calmed her. She knew, however, that she needed answers from Nathan himself. Eliza picked up pace as she ran down the stairs to his office. He let out an audible laugh when she appeared to have burst through the door. Caught off guard, Eliza did not know where to start her queries. Instead, she simply informed him, “Please cancel tonight’s plan.”

“What’s wrong? Are you not feeling well?”

Again, instead of asking him to address her assumptions, she told him, “You should go home to your son. He was looking for you.”

He avoided eye contact, “You met Aidan?”
Eliza finally took the seat facing Nathan, “You don’t have to introduce us. But one day, Nathan, I’d like to know you as you know me.”

He nodded, “Why don’t we have dinner together? You, me, and Aidan.”

She hesitated.

“Eliza, I’m not asking you to become a mother. It’s just dinner.”

She nodded, “Where is Aidan now?”

He smiled, “He’s doing homework in the library.”

“He complained you don’t have much time for him.”

“You should understand the nature of our work.”

“I do, but he doesn’t. You can’t expect your child to live with a nanny and not see his father.”

He understood her misunderstanding, but deliberately chose not to correct her false knowledge.

“Since I’m less important than you are,” she continued. “I’ll go to the library now.”

Before she closed the door behind her, Eliza informed Nathan, “Dr. Perry knows about us.”

“Does he?”

She silently observed him perusing an anatomy textbook. His fingers traced over the colorful muscular groups. He tried mouthing their complex names. His lips still in an oval shape, he looked up to see Eliza smiling at him.

“Can I join you?”

He shrugged, “It’s public space.”

She pulled up a chair next to him, “Have you talked to your father?”

Aidan nodded, “He told me he’s busy and I should go do my homework.”
“How is that coming along?”

“I’m done. We don’t get a lot of assignments. Does that change? When you grow up, do you get more assignments?”

Her smile widened, “Well, you do. But on top of school, you’ll have other responsibilities too.”

He turned his attention back to the anatomy textbook, “My friends all want to grow up. But I like being a kid.”

“I think that’s great. No point in growing up too fast.”

Surprised at her affirmation, he closed the book and offered Eliza a friendly grin, “What’s your name?”

“I’m Eliza.”

“I’m Aidan. Are you a doctor here?”

“I am.”

“Can you tell me what causes sudden weight loss and nausea?”

“That could be many things, Aidan. Are you experiencing this?”

Aidan shook his head.

“Someone you know?”

Aidan bobbed his head up and down.

“Why don’t you tell your friend to get a check up at the hospital.”

Aidan held a pensive look for awhile and simply stated, “I’ll ask daddy to check on her condition.”

Nathan hurried down the corridor and pulled his colleague aside. He whispered, “Perry, a word with you please.”

Dr. Perry swung around expectantly, “Faraday, if this is about your personal life, I’m not
interested. What you’re doing doesn’t danger our patients or this hospital in any way. You don’t have to worry about me overstepping my lines.”

“Paul, I know you think what I’m doing is wrong.”

“To hell I do. Look, Nathan, if you’re going to allow me to say what I really think, then back off. Break this thing you have with Eliza. She has a bright future. Don’t you ruin it.”

“It’s not a thing, Paul. This isn’t a fling.”

“You don’t have to answer to me, Nathan. Answer to Marie. And Aidan. Eliza, too. I had to excuse Eliza from my OR today because she was distracted. So Nathan, this affair is affecting her residency. If I find Eliza falling behind her peers, I will request that she gets transferred to another program.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Nathan smiled, “Eliza is a more than capable doctor.”

Dr. Perry reciprocated with a smirk, “You underestimate the power of heartbreak, Nathan. Add deceit to that and you could very well crash all her prospects. I advise you to tread lightly.”

Dr. Perry walked away indignantly, leaving behind a dejected Nathan. He has slowly realized the imbalance of his desires and his reality. Not coming home no longer meant his domestic life was nonexistent. His loved ones will soon pay the price for his selfishness. Taking off his stethoscope, Nathan resigned to reality. It was time to face his consequences. He walked into his office and thanked Anna for having looked after his son.

Aidan eagerly probed, “You’re ready to go, Daddy?”

“Just about. Now remember to be on your best behavior for dinner.”

Aidan pulled up his coat’s zipper, “But why we can’t have dinner at home?”

Nathan smiled as he put on his overcoat, “Eliza is my friend. We’re dining out to celebrate her recent accomplishment.”

Aidan tugged at his father’s coat, “But Daddy, I want to go home with you.”

Nathan picked him up, “We’ll go home after dinner.”

“No. Mom is waiting for us.” Aidan began kicking his legs in protest, “And I promised Eliza to ask you to check up on Mom.”

“What’s wrong with Mom?”
“I’m not a doctor, Daddy. But you need to come home.”

“Aidan, are you being truthful?”

The boy nodded firmly and started brimming with tears, “Something is wrong with Mom.”

Nathan gently dried Aidan’s tears, “Silly. There’s nothing to cry about. We’ll go home.”

Patting Aidan’s back, Nathan carried him to the closest elevator where Eliza was waiting, “Sorry, Aidan isn’t feeling well. We’ll have to reschedule.”

“I understand.”

She stood still as she witnessed the elevator doors closed before her. Nathan was whispering comforting words into Aidan’s ears. The endearing image both warmed her heart and turned her veins cold. A paralyzing fear started to spread throughout her body. Eliza feared Nathan was slipping from her…
Nathan paced back and forth at the nurse’s station, collecting his thoughts. When he finally mustered enough courage to face his estranged wife, he entered her hospital ward. Her eyes were closed.

Nathan flipped through her charts and muttered, “You’ve lost a lot of weight, Marie.”

She spoke with lethargy, her eyes remained closed, “I was hoping you’d notice that without needing to look over my files.”

He looked at her, “Your blood tests aren’t back, but it is most likely cirrhosis. You aren’t very high on the list for a new liver.”

She opened her eyes but attended to the ceiling instead of her addressee, “Do you always deliver news so directly to your patients?”

He approached her side, “Since when did you become a heavy drinker?”

Marie looked at her husband and remained silent at his accusation.

“I’ve arranged for time off. I can take care of Aidan. You don’t have to worry.”

“That’s not necessary. My parents have agreed to look after him. They’re picking him up from school today.”

“I may not be a good husband, Marie, but you should at least let me be a father.”

“You haven’t come home for so long, I just don’t know how to trust that you can put family first.”

He nodded mutely, accepting her lost faith in him, in their marriage, and in his ability to be a father. Nathan knew she was right. He had been selfish. He had yielded to his own passion and desires. He took her for granted. She was a safety net he didn’t think of rebounding to, but always knew was there should he needed it. He was the cause for her sorrows, the reason for her failing liver.

“I’m sorry.”

He left the room.

On his way out, Nathan bumped into Paul. The men nodded in silent greetings.
Paul’s gloomy expression brightened as he approached Marie, “Well if this isn’t my favorite senior from medical school.”

Marie’s voice was cheerful, albeit weak, “Good morning, Paul. Must you always greet me by calling me old?”

“Nothing but my love and respect for you, Marie.”

He pulled a chair closer to her bedside and continued, “I still think you would have had a happier life if you chose me.”

“Don’t be silly Paul. And why are you speaking as if I’m dying.”

Paul ignored her, “At least with me, you would still be a practicing doctor.”

“You know my decision to stay at home had nothing to do with Nathan.”

“Marie, I know how passionate you are about medicine. You gave up for Nathan because he wanted to be a medical hero. He had career ambitions that wouldn’t allow him to be a father. So you gave up your passion to be a proper parent for Aidan.”

“Whatever the reason behind my decision, I only know that I have never regretted it.”

“You still don’t regret choosing Nathan?”

She lied in response, “Why should I?”

“Sometimes, Marie, it’s better to not give your all for another person. Reserve some energy for yourself.”

She smiled at him, “Sometimes, Paul, it’s better to not live in the past. Go on a date already. You’re not getting any younger.”

He squeezed her hand and grinned slightly, “I’ll come visit you later. Stay alive for me.”

She called as he left her room, “I’ll try!”

Eliza held Aidan’s hand as she led him to Nathan’s office. He looked up in surprise and asked Aidan, “Where’s Grandma? She was supposed to pick you up.”

Aidan answered simply, “I walked here.”
“Eliza, could you arrange a desk for Aidan to do his homework? I need to call his grandma.”

She was about to argue his decision of rudely dismissing his son, but chose to quietly walk Aidan away. She felt Aidan’s hand trembled in hers and kneeled down to look him in the eye, “It’s okay, Aidan. Daddy wasn’t upset at you. He just had a long day.”

“It’s not about Daddy,” Aidan began sobbing.

Her hands gripped his more firmly, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“My mom is really sick.”

She couldn’t find her voice. She did not know how to comfort the child before her. His voice broke her anguish, “Paul Perry!”

She turned around to see Dr. Perry walking toward them. Her attending gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and took Aidan’s hand, “I’ll take care of the boy. Go do what you have to do.”

Before Dr. Perry was able to finish his sentence, Eliza already sprinted toward Nathan’s office. When she entered, Nathan was ending his phone call.

“Aidan told me his mother is sick.” She added in an uncertain tone, “How is your ex-wife doing?”

“Eliza…” Nathan walked away from his desk and toward her. He held onto her hands, “I’m still married.”

She sank under the penetration of his remark. Then, rage replaced her perplexity. She broke free of his hands. “How could you? How could you have kissed me when at night you lie in bed with another woman?”

Nathan shook his head, “No… I haven’t slept in my bed since we went fishing.”

She remained unflinching with this knowledge. Fury exploded in her hazel eyes.

He continued, “I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. You were a revelation, daring and bold. You recalled to me the life I once led. It started with admiration, then intrigue, then an instinct to protect you.”

“Protect me?” She screamed. “You made me become S, the other woman, the very notion of everything I hate.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” He knew his marital status was a repellent fact for her.
She was battling between the urge to run away and the longing for a proper explanation. He was toying with her heart.

“Marie and I haven’t been close for years now.”

She was staring at his hands, “You’re not even wearing your wedding ring.”

“I took it out for a surgery. Forgot about it. Then, it just felt unnecessary.”

“Your wife doesn’t say anything about it?”

“Marie and I met in med school. We were study buddies, lab partners. Marrying her was a safe choice. I think I did once love her. Or maybe it was the idea of love.”

“The ideal versus realization?”

“Who is John Galt?”

Under any other circumstance, she would have appreciated his reading of Ayn Rand following her recommendation.

“After marriage, Marie and I quickly grew apart. After having Aidan, she decided to be a homemaker. Since then, we had very little to talk about outside of Aidan’s wellbeing. What I loved most about her was her passion for medicine. When she gave that up, she also took away my love.”

“That does not justify your behavior.”

“I know I’m wrong, Eliza. I will tell Marie. After she gets well, I will file for divorce.”

“Don’t.” Eliza started walking away, “I am not your third party. What you do with your marriage is up to you. But leave me out.” She whispered underneath her breath, “We’re over.”

She ran out of his office, panting. Her breathing became shallow and she felt nauseous. Above all, she felt like a fool, a simpleton. He held her heartstrings like a puppet master. She was helpless, only capable of breaking free and plummet into devastation. Their dalliance was no more.
Charles watched as Eliza rummaged his kitchen for a bottle opener. She slammed cabinet after cabinet shut before giving up and turned to him. Her arm extended, holding onto a bottle of beer. He raised his eyebrows, pretending not to understand her silent request. She threw the bottle in his direction and opened up his freezer for a tub of ice cream. Mid-bite, he warned her, “I’m pretty sure that ice cream expired.”

She placed down her spoon in defeat. He handed her the bottle of beer, opened. She stared at the brown glass for awhile before jerking it out of his hand and chugging down the alcohol.

Charles crossed his arms, “Want to talk about it?”

His tone was factual and she couldn’t discern affect from his face. She slouched further in her seat and mumbled, “Fell in love. Found out he’s married.”

Charles was uncertain he heard Eliza correctly. But judging from her body language and dejected face, Charles could infer the seriousness of the situation. He pulled a seat next to her and opened a beer for himself, “Fill in the details?”

She almost laughed, “Do the details matter? It all boils down to one conclusion: I’m a third party.”

His response was almost a whisper, “Eliza, you’re a person. A complicated person with many identities. You’re choosing to ignore all that by labeling yourself a third party?”

Eliza knew his question went beyond her situation. Charles was thinking of his mother. She moved to Merrillville to connect with a brother she didn’t know existed; she did not expect to gain a personal perspective on an extramarital affair. She could not forgive S, and she likewise could not forgive the unwitting parallels in their lives. She knew, however, that her short affair has repercussions beyond her own life.

“Charles, I have tried thinking of my situation in an objective manner. I realized years from now, it isn’t my forgiveness that Nathan will be after. He must seek forgiveness from his son, Aidan. As I paralleled my path with your mother’s, I realized the true destruction of my father’s affair. My hurt was temporary. My mother was given a chance to deal with the affair and she handled it the best she knew how. I thought she was cowardly to have chosen denial. But in fact, she was simply protecting me. The only person to have suffered for years was you.” She touched his folded hands, “You didn’t have a choice in the circumstance.”
His neutral expression turned into pity, “The way I see it, Eliza, I’m more fortunate than you. I still have my aunt. You have no one.”

She smiled with reservation, “I don’t have you?”

He matched her grin, “You have me. But…”

She raised her eyebrows quizzically. He continued, “Let me take charge of my own life.”

Eliza let out a genuine laugh, “Oh Charles, who am to tell you how to live? As you’ve noted, I’m a lonesome failure.”

“You’re tough on me and tougher on yourself. Learn to let go, Eliza.”

“You are probably underestimating my ability to let go, Charles. After all, I dropped my entire life to move here. But what you’re asking… is to let go of my principles? I can never do that.”

“Then what are you going to do about Nathan?”

She spoke with confidence, “There’s only one right thing to do.”

Charles smiled and clinked their bottles, “Cheers?”

She put her arm around Charles and pulled him into a side hug, “You know, I am proud of you. You forge your own path. You’re now self-sufficient. You’re happy.” She let out a genuine laugh, “Heck, I’m envious of your life.”

He chuckled, “I think I like you drunk.”

She feigned offense with his remark and pulled away. He laughed at her reaction and finally admitted, “You’re a good sister, Eliza.”

She beamed from ear to ear, appreciating his acknowledgement. To the least, her move to Merrillville has not been all for naught.

He could hear her footsteps approaching, the sound of conviction echoed down the corridor. He could hear them slowed down and came to a momentary pause before his office door opened. Eliza Robbins stood facing him, in similar countenance as when he first interviewed her.

“Dr. Faraday, I’m turning in my resignation letter. I hope you will accept, without
questions.”

“Just one.” He stood up and walked closer to her, “Do you regret us?”

His peppermint breath warned her he had begun crossing personal boundaries. She stepped back. Her words were deliberate and slow, “Even if I will never love again, I am thankful for the lesson learned. Through us, I know that my own values rank higher than love. I can live without love, but I cannot live without principles.”

With desperation, he gazed searchingly into her eyes. They were masked with a resolve to not emote. His own voice was calm, “Marie's operation is tomorrow. I don't understand why you're listed as the donor.”

“My reasons are perfectly selfish. I want to atone for my wrongs. I took her husband's love and I wish to restore her of life.”

He resisted the urge to hold her hand, “Do you really think Marie and I can go on?”

She was resolute, “Yes. You once loved her. Aidan was born from love. You can find that love again.”

His voice was now but a whisper, “Do you think I could stop loving you?”

“Nathan, I may not be able to stop loving you. But I still choose my solitude over your love. Whether you can stop loving me is a purposeful choice you have to make.”

“Eliza, your actions... they're always governed by your mind. Have you ever yielded to your heart?”

She almost laughed aloud, “That is impossible, physiologically. The heart does not govern. It merely pumps blood. We, as humans, are a sophisticated species capable of decision making, capable of morals.”

“To you, I am an immoral man?”

“To me, you are a married man.”

Nathan closed his eyes, "I accept your resignation."

Ever gently, she entered Marie’s ward. The patient’s eyes were closed. Eliza sat down on a nearby chair and stared at Marie’s listless form. Soft tendrils framed her frail face.
“Marie, I want to let you know that you must go on living. Aidan needs you. Don’t leave him. Don’t let him down.”

She thought of her own mother, who was once in a similar boat as Marie’s. She was thankful her mother had steered a very different course. Perhaps her mother had a distinct will to live or a better support system. In an alternate universe, Eliza knew she could be Marie’s friend. After all, they had enough similarities to have fallen for the same man. Marie’s crestfallen features, however, denoted a woman in defeat. Her fighting spirit left.

“When your new liver regenerates, don’t abuse yourself with alcohol. I know I’m the last person to tell you what you should or should not do.” Eliza allowed her tears to fall, “And do not thank me. I will not be able to bear any gratitude.”

As soon as the door clicked close, signaling Eliza’s exit, Marie slowly opened her eyes. She knew, without anyone’s confirmation, that the girl who just spoke to her, who will be donating more than half her liver, was the very reason Nathan stopped coming home. She did not want to confront his lover, to acknowledge that an affair took place. Yet she knew comparing herself against Nathan’s mistress wasn’t necessary. Nathan had stopped loving her long before the introduction of a third party. She knew the only fair comparison would be against her old and current selves. She had forgotten how it felt to be in love. In recent years, the glue to her fallen marriage was ethics and principles. When her husband tossed both out the window, Marie found it unbearable to cope. Her sole solace was her son. But when he kept asking after an absent father, Marie drowned her sorrows with liquor. She hadn’t a friend in the world to call. When she decided to be a stay-at-home mother, Marie didn’t realize she was not only bidding goodbye to her career, but also her social network. Her friends moved on and she wasn’t interested in making new ones. There was Paul. There has always been Paul. But how could she reach out to him knowing full well he would misunderstand, or would rekindle hope that should never exist. If she called Paul, she would be committing the same sin her husband has. So she put her son to sleep and drowned her sorrows with liquor.
Marie held onto her son’s hand as the transplant coordinator explained the surgical risks she would be faced with. She wasn’t listening. She knew death was a small risk. She knew this might be the last time she gets to spend with her son. She didn’t need a medical expert to tell her what her chances are. What she needed most was some private time to spend with her son. She closed her eyes and tried drowning the voices away. She focused on the sweaty palm placed within her own palm. Her son was nervous.

When the medical jargon was over, Marie turned to Aidan, “Now be a good boy for Grandpapa and Grandmama. My surgery might take all day. You won’t be able to see me until tomorrow. And I’ll need time to recover, to heal. Do you understand, Aidan?”

Aidan nodded, “I’ll pray for you, Mom. You have to get well.”

She smiled, “That’s my boy. Pray for Eliza, too.”

“Why? She isn’t well?”

“Aidan, the surgery I’m having today is to give me a new liver. Eliza is giving her liver to me.”

“Eliza doesn’t need her liver?”

Her laugh was audible, “Eliza does. They’ll just take a part of her liver for me. So we both end up with parts of the same liver. Over time, our parts will grow into wholes again.”

Aidan tilted his head, trying to understand what sounded like a miracle to him, “You’ll grow liver like how trees grow?”

“I guess you can put it that way.”

“Then I will pray for both you and Eliza.”

Marie nodded and patted Aidan’s hand, “Now be a good boy and wait outside. They need to give me some more tests before the operation.”

Aidan planted a kiss on his mother’s cheek, “Sleep well and I will see you when you wake up.”
Nathan sat in the gallery as the anesthesiologist put Eliza under. Despite being in a room full of medical staff, she had never before looked so lonely. The surgeon made his first cut. Nathan felt queasy. While he was no stranger to blood, the helplessness he felt witnessing her bleed on the operating table was nauseating. No longer capable of resigning to his useless role, he stepped out of the gallery.

Crossing the family waiting area, he saw Charles sitting in a corner. Charles looked up, noticed Nathan, and sprinted toward him at full speed. Charles threw a maddening punch at Nathan’s left cheek and warned, “Should anything happen to Eliza, I am not letting you go with just a punch.”

Nathan wiped the blood on his cheek with the back of his hand.

Charles suddenly began apologizing, “I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t have.”

“Don’t be. I totally deserved that.” He touched his swollen cheek, “You sure deliver a good punch.”

“Is this surgery safe? I mean Eliza told me there are only minimal risks, but 60% of your liver? That sounds drastic.”

“We’ve performed a liver transplant with a living donor before. It should be okay.”

“She just had to make this, saving your wife, her responsibility too. Everything is her responsibility.”

“She wouldn’t be Eliza otherwise.”

“She told me not to blame you. No offense, but I think you’re the worst human being I know.”

Nathan nodded, accepting the just label.

Charles went on, “You’re worse than the man that fathered me. At least he was honest about being married.”

“You’re right. But Charles, I do want you to know that I love your sister. I never wanted to hurt her.”

“She still loves you. Saving your wife was not out of guilt, not her own guilt anyway. She was trying to redeem you.”
Nathan nodded, “Can you keep me updated on her surgery?”

“You’re leaving?”

“What Eliza wants… What Eliza wants is for me to wait on my wife.”

Charles shook his head and almost jeered in response, “Well you go do that.”

Five hours passed by. Even though he was waiting on news for Marie’s operation, Nathan could only think of the forlorn expression Eliza held in her unconscious state. Even though she was often cheerful, there was always an underlying sadness to her. He knew she was still coping with her parents’ deaths. She was still coming to terms with having a half-brother that once threatened her family’s joy. When these distresses hadn’t proper time to heal, he inflicted her with another, deeper wound. He didn’t mean to harm, but his deceit was deliberate. She gave him many opportunities to come clean, but he chose to walk the dark path. Because this primrose path of sin toward his own perdition was easier. He should have known from the start that he was merely heading toward self-destruction. Worse, he had pulled her along, had made her both victim and perpetrator.

Nathan turned toward the approaching footsteps, “Charles? What are you doing here?” His smile disappeared the moment he registered Charles’s dispirited expression, “Oh no. What happened? What happened to Eliza?”

Tears streamed down Charles’s face, “She’s… She’s dead.”

Nathan screamed, “What the hell happened in that OR?”

Charles shook his head in confusion, “I don’t know. I don’t know all the medical speak. They… They said about four hours into the operation, a vein partially tore off and started bleeding. They sewed it up but then they noticed bleeding elsewhere. She went into cardiac arrest. They did CPR and opened up her chest to massage her heart. But none of it worked.” Charles finally looked straight into Nathan’s eyes, “She died on the operating table.”

Nathan stumbled backward against the wall, “Tomorrow would have been her birthday.”
He held onto his father’s hand and remained rooted to the ground.

“It’s okay. Go on Aidan.”

He looked up to his father and expressed unease, “She’s hooked up to a lot of tubes.”

“Don’t be scared.” Nathan led Aidan closer to his mother, “These tubes help her recover faster. The one in her mouth helps her breathe. They’ll take it out in another day or two. This one is the NG tube. It goes through her nose and into her stomach to drain any secretions.” Aidan’s eyes followed his father finger to another tube down his mother’s body, “This catheter helps drain urine. And these three tubes near her stomach help drain fluid from around the liver.”

“Do you think she’s scared?”

“No, silly. Aidan, before you were born, your mother was a doctor. She has seen her patients like this before. It is not scary to her.”

“But how long must she stay here? When can she come home with us?”

“That depends on how well she is doing. It might take two to three weeks. Your mother is doing very well.”

“Her liver is growing?”

“Yes. Her liver is doing well. She will be fine.”

Aidan let go of his father’s hand and held onto his mother’s. He put on a brave smile, “You did amazing, Mom.”

Nathan squeezed Aidan’s shoulders and kissed his head, “You did amazing, too, for not causing your mom any worries.”

Charles held onto the ceramic urn that housed the remains of Eliza. Nathan took a deep breath as he started the boat’s engine to take them to the middle of Lake Michigan. The sky was an overcast. The wind picked up force. He slowed down the boat and turned to
Charles. Nathan gave him the signal that it was time. Charles opened the urn, reached inside, and gently held Eliza’s ashes in his palm. He spread his fingers open and allowed her ashes to scatter into the wind. After a moment, he positioned the urn toward Allison, whose tears had not dried. Her hands trembled as she spread Eliza’s ashes to the wind, unwilling to accept her best friend has passed.

Nathan held fast onto the steering wheel. His ears disregarded the sounds of the motor running and of Allison weeping. He instead heard Eliza’s confident voice challenging him during their first encounter, her compassionate voice when interacting with patients, and her laugh, which was rare but absolutely contagious. When she laughed, her hazel eyes lit up and a single dimple appeared on her face. Nathan looked around Lake Michigan, as if searching for her presence. Her burial site, her resting place, was once his source for solitude. Now, the vast water embraced and engulfed her spirit. From now on, his solitude will always carry her presence to comfort him.

He placed the documents on their kitchen counter. Without a glance, Marie knew what he was asking for: her signature.

She stirred her soup, “You're leaving me because I'm the reason that killed Eliza.”

“No, Marie. I don't blame you. Eliza fully understood the risks and potential complications.”

She added a pinch of salt, “Because I remind you of her?”

“You do, Marie. But so does everything I encounter.”

She finally met his gaze, “I've lost you, completely.”

“Marie, for us to work, we have to hold tight onto the past. But that isn't living. You deserve to have a better future. You deserve a man that loves you, not a memory of who you were or of who I was.”

“I’ve known all along that we drifted apart. But I held on because I didn't want Aidan to suffer through our divorce. Will you fight with me in court?”

“No. I will give you everything you request.”

He placed their house key on the kitchen counter. An engraved “F” danced in the morning light coming from the window. When they purchased their first home fresh out of residency, Marie wanted to mark the occasion with an “F”. Nathan thought it stood for “Faraday”, signaling their union in marriage and life. Marie attributed a second meaning -
“forever”. Now, she mused that the key really stood for “fleeting”. Their marriage, the home they built together, were but fleeting, transient passages of time.

“I guess this is goodbye.”

“Take care, Marie.”

Nathan walked out.

Charles sang into the microphone with a raspiness not before present in his voice:

Love me when I’m gone  
Everything I am  
And everything in me  
Wants to be the one  
You wanted me to be  
I’ll never let you down

He made eye contact with Nathan as he hoarsely enunciated:

Roaming through this darkness  
I’m alive but I’m alone  
Part of me is fighting this  
But part of me is gone

Nathan offered him a bottle of beer when he finished singing for the night. Chugging it halfway down, Charles stopped to ask, “I heard you resigned at the hospital. What are your plans?”

He took a sip of beer before answering, “I’m moving to Chicago. I don’t think I can remain here on a daily basis. It’s a small town. Every corner holds a memory. But I’ll be back every Saturday to visit my son.”

“What will you be doing in Chicago?”

He turned to Charles with a hint of pride, “I’m setting up a nonprofit organization to perform pediatric diabetes research. I’m carrying on Eliza’s work.”

Charles clicked beer bottles with Nathan and nodded his head in a congratulatory gesture.

Nathan reached over and wrapped his arm around Charles’s shoulders, “Stay in touch, Charles. Eliza really cared about you. And I’d like to be able to answer her when we meet
in the afterlife.”

Charles raised an eyebrow, “You believe in that stuff?”

Nathan sighed, “I have to believe in something to keep me going.”

“What’s its name? Your nonprofit?”

“Robbins Foundation.”

They smiled with understanding that Eliza still lives in their visions and innovations. Her death did not take away her aspirations or purpose. The dreams she began will now be carried on by Nathan.
About the Author:

TkN is currently pursuing her PhD in Developmental Psychology with a focus in Cognitive & Affective Neuroscience. When not conducting research or lecturing, she enjoys painting, writing fictions, reading novels, and capturing life through her lens.
Books by TkN:

*Tale of Ephemeral Street*

A story of hopes, dreams, and aspirations. A story of which purpose is to mirror life and its inhabitants – human beings. Can a soul which never leaves its home since the age of 13 resurrect? Can it find happiness despite its painful past? Can it find resolution despite its unraveling mysteries?

*Choice & Consequence (Coming Soon)*

A story of aimless dreams and realized visions. A story of chasing destiny and hiding from reality. Of collapsed principles and constructed values. This is the story of an ex-convict, a doctor, a nurse, an entrepreneur, a heart patient, and a student. This is the story of their quest to face the consequences of their choices.