

Praise for the *Normal Family Trilogy*

“ . . . has tender moments surrounded by hilarity, along with some truly wonderful one-liners: ‘Albert (his brother) had drolly remarked our mother was someone who preferred to burn her bridges before she got on them’; ‘Grandpa swerved up the lawn looking like Frankenstein in search of unsuspecting villagers.’”

Record Courier, Ohio (Normal Family)

“I loved *Normal Family*. It is tragi-comic at times, which is not always easy to do. And while I was reading it those around me asked what book I was reading because of the range of emotions it incited in me. It manages to be really good fun, and deal with deeper, more serious issues almost simultaneously.”

Amazon Review (Normal Family)

"This book is superbly written, and glows with warmth and intelligence."

Teresa Stepping, Author (*No One Ran to the Altar*)

ALL THE LIES WE LIVE

by Don Trowden

Volume Three
Normal Family Trilogy



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The volumes of the *Normal Family Trilogy*:

Normal Family, Volume One (2012)

No One Ran to the Altar, Volume Two (2016)

All the Lies We Live, Volume Three (2018)

Dedicated to Phoebe and Alan

ALL THE LIES WE LIVE

a novel

by Don Trowden



“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

Thornton Wilder

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

Out Here in the Future

I'm out here in the future. I don't know how I got here. Time just went. I'm not even sure I know where here is. Or where went went. I'm tired. I feel separate from it all. It's been a long journey that has deposited me here like a twig carried off by an indifferent stream. Here I am, out in the future, sitting on a wooden railing with the woman who chose to be my wife, waiting for the woman who had no choice but to be my sister. I'm turning eighty this week. Eighty. I feel more like ten. Or fifty. I've been half-awake this entire time and now here I am, out in the future, nearing the end. My brain knows I am here, and here lines up with then, but somehow I feel I'm mostly back there—a carefree child in a moon-flooded room, dog snoring on the edge of my bed. Innocence not yet lost. Am I nearing the end or just another beginning? How many beginnings do we get? Are we any different than the seasons, spinning in the Here and Gone and Here and Gone? I'll continue on. Life insists. My dead ancestors insist. I need to keep up. I'm not quite ready for my story to be over.

Lost at Sea

Friends and family were arriving on Vinalhaven Island to celebrate Henry's eightieth birthday. It was a perfect late-August day, the beach roses lining the shoreline set against cloudless blue skies. Henry and his wife Laura were seated on the railing next to the ferry terminal waiting for Lucy to arrive. Henry had not seen his sister since her husband died over a decade ago. She and Larry had done heroic work spreading literacy in remote African schools using donated technologies developed by ReadSmart. Henry's son Georgie had arrived on an earlier boat and was swimming at Lawson's Quarry with his wife Deepra and their son Lakshmi. Eliza and her husband were renting a house for the week on the nearby island of North Haven.

The yellow ferry chugged around the promontory, slowing in the harbor as lobster and pleasure boats steered clear of the churning wake. The ocean looked like a giant Tom Collins. Henry and Laura got up and pushed their way through the crowd of vacationers, who could no longer put off sad returns to mainland life. The Maine Department of Transportation staff, dressed in fluorescent yellow vests, had given up trying to

explain the car lineup rules to exasperated New Yorkers. Notable among these was the retired head of the New York City Transit Authority, who owned a summer home and had offered up simpler solutions many times, only to be dismissed by the locals. The ferry thumped into the dockside frame, cradled within huge black bumpers bringing it to a full stop. Lines were secured, ramp lowered, and down came the commercial trucks followed by cars and tourists dragging suitcases. Henry spotted Lucy, her straw hat lifting in the breeze as she reached for it with her free hand. She walked behind the other passengers, scanning the crowd for her younger brother. Two of the three children of Ned and Eve Pendergast had grown old, and seeing his sister reminded Henry how quickly time passes and how much he missed their brother, Albert.

“Happy birthday, you old geezer,” Lucy hugged Henry. “I doubt anyone came as far as I did for your big birthday bash.”

Henry pulled away to gaze upon this elderly woman who had once been the bossy girl in the dainty dress. He shook his head in bemusement, thinking about the long journey they had shared, eventually freeing themselves from the wounds of their upbringing. Lucy looked remarkably well for a woman in her mid-eighties. Her face was wrinkled from years in the African sun, and her eyes revealed the weariness of someone who has soldiered bravely toward the end of life.

Lucy flashed a mischievous grin.

“What?” Henry was hunched over and raised himself to meet her glance head on.

“It’s just those bushy eyebrows. You look like Winston Churchill. And that ridiculous hat!”

“What about the hat? It’s my favorite . . .”

“ . . . Are those fishing flies sticking out the side?”

Henry removed his floppy felt hat, which was the signature statement of his island attire. He was now almost completely bald. “It’s a fishing hat, you moron.”

Lucy backed off in the realization she had just arrived and already they were regressing. “I’m teasing. My, how sensitive you are!”

Henry saw Jim Williams walking down the ramp. He had been thrilled when his former therapist had surprised him by saying he would come to the party. Henry had sent the invitation as a courtesy notification, not expecting him to come. Jim had stopped practicing years ago and now lived in Dallas. He had been eager for a reason to escape the Texas heat and Henry’s invitation seemed like just the ticket. Henry and the doctor had become frequent correspondents over the years, sharing reading suggestions and discussing current events.

Henry stepped aside to intercept him before he was carried away by the crowd. “Jim, over here!”

The doctor approached and looked surprised to see Lucy standing there. “Don’t tell me,” his head jerked backwards in

happy surprise. “You must be Henry’s sister. I failed to make the connection on the boat.”

“I gather you two have met,” Henry was uncertain how he felt about his former therapist conversing with his sister.

Lucy’s eyes crinkled into a pretty smile beneath her hat. “I had no idea! It’s so nice to meet you, Jim. Henry claims you saved his life, which given how desperately he needed saving, I can believe.”

Jim laughed. Henry looked on with a nervous smile. Jim had always been handsome, but now in retirement seemed relaxed in a way Henry had not noticed before. Freeing himself from his patients and their problems must have been a huge relief. His closely-cropped afro was a shade of pewter that matched his eyeglasses. He walked deliberately with a barely perceptible limp. “Your sister and I had quite the conversation on the ride over. What an extraordinary life of public service she’s led.” Henry sensed some chemistry at work.

Lucy blushed. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I think it’s far easier being the patient than the doctor.”

“How was your trip?” Henry patted Jim on the shoulder.

“Not so great. I’m getting too old to travel. Most of the flights out of Miami and Atlanta were cancelled in advance of Hurricane Bart. So I was rerouted through Chicago to Portland.”

Lucy twisted her suitcase handle so it stabilized on the rough surface. “I’m glad I came to the States a few days early to see Sasha. She’s planning to come to your party, Henry, but the

latest forecast has increased the odds Bart heads up the Eastern Seaboard later in the week. I encouraged her to leave a day early if possible.”

“Who’s Sasha?” Jim asked.

“She’s our cousin *many* times removed,” Henry replied with sufficient haste that it was apparent there was more to the story. “She was a high-powered attorney in Manhattan for many decades, specializing in corporate law.”

“Sasha’s definitely not someone you want as an enemy,” Lucy added. “She reminds me of our mother, albeit a healthy version.”

Laura had been chatting with an island friend. She excused herself to join the welcoming party.

“Lucy! You look fabulous,” they hugged.

“You, too,” Lucy sensed how stressed Laura was given the commotion created by Henry’s week-long birthday celebration. Henry had insisted they eat out for his actual birthday so Laura could relax. A total of thirty family members and friends were arriving for the big event. Henry and Laura had purchased a small island home ten years ago. They had given up their Vinalhaven rental following Ned’s death so Henry could take a job in Portland. He had been unable to earn a living as a novelist and had accepted a marketing position for a refugee resettlement non-profit in Portland, which at the time was overrun by Syrian and Iraqi immigrants. The work was rewarding and better than his previous corporate jobs, as he finally felt he was making a

difference in the world. He had regrets. His first novel ended up being his last. After Ned died, and the accompanying depression that sidelined him for months, Henry was unable to muster the energy to complete his novel about love. Henry had become completely blocked after learning his first love Chloé was in fact his half-sister, conceived through his father's horrible rape of the servant, Louise. It was all simply too much to fathom. Henry and Laura needed to move closer to Laura's ailing mother in Portland, who came up just short of the century mark, her final years spent in a nursing home. Following her death, Laura and Henry bought their current island home, living among lobstermen on the hill overlooking the harbor.

Georgie had become the star of the family, achieving notoriety as a musician on par with the success of his namesake, George. His latest recording had been released to critical acclaim, *Urban Vibe* hailing Georgie as a key figure in contemporary American composition. Georgie was a tenured professor at Tufts University and lived in Cambridge with his wife Deepra, an oncologist at Dana Farber, along with their only child Lakshmi. Lakshmi had recently celebrated his tenth birthday and was the source of unmatched joy for Henry and Laura, their youngest grandchild. Georgie's career as a performer required him to travel frequently, leaving Deepra to balance her many life-and-death oncologist responsibilities with his schedule and the demands of raising Lakshmi. They had put off having a child as long as possible to focus on their careers.

The birth of Lakshmi when Deepra was thirty-six had strengthened their love, although in recent years Henry and Laura had become concerned about the growing tension they sensed in the marriage. Henry's daughter Eliza had married young (Laura would say too young) and had been a stay-at-home mother. Her husband was a New York City real estate developer and they lived in Greenwich, bringing the family full circle in a way not lost on Henry, their home less than a mile from his bomb shelter memories.

Laura wasn't a fan of Eliza's husband Dick, an ardent Republican who enjoyed tweaking his liberal mother-in-law whenever possible. If she had to listen to him complain one more time about his summer home taxes, or worse, the teacher's union, she would explode. Eliza and Dick had two teenage sons and their youngest son Nate had been in and out of rehab for heroin addiction and lived with his parents in Greenwich. Nate was back in rehab for the summer so would not be coming to the birthday celebration, which was an unspoken relief for parents and grandparents alike.

Henry was looking forward to the annual September fishing trip with Georgie and Lakshmi, returning to the same Maine fishing camp where his boyhood memories lived on. Henry was proud of his children and grandchildren and enjoyed his role as patriarch of the family. Raising a normal family was his crowning achievement and he slept well most nights. But he realized a life without regrets is a life not fully lived. This

realization always made him think about his grandfather. And his father, Ned. Henry had long ago given up his dream of becoming a writer, but he could not fully repress the lingering disappointment. Not helping matters, the arrival of his eightieth birthday had triggered an onslaught of memories of his father's final days. The way Ned would drone on and on when drinking about what a fuck-up he had been. And when sober not remember saying it. Back then, Henry had promised he would never end up like Ned, and he hadn't, but was now experiencing a new wave of regrets. Was this dream of becoming a writer, one he had shared as a boy with his grandfather, as far-fetched as Ned's crazy old heating experiment? Henry smiled remembering how Albert had hidden the contraption in the basement so the blind man could not get at it.

Seeing Jim Williams again brought Henry back to their emergency session twenty-five years ago, following the discovery that Chloé was his half-sister. Henry had raced out of his father's house that day after Christmas on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He drove off but had to pull over, screaming and sobbing, incapable of driving safely. What he feared most about his father was true. There was no way he could have imagined the way this ugly truth would entangle itself with the fate of Chloé. The old man had lived a life as a serial rapist and was the father of Chloé. Surely the gods were playing a cruel joke. But as Henry sat off to the side of the road pondering

whether he should go back or continue driving away, he realized it all added up. The servant Louise had seemed on guard around Ned back when Henry was a child. This also explained Chloé's sudden removal from Thornhill Academy. It was the reason Louise had not come to lunch when he was in Florida visiting Mary. It was why Chloé ran off after he surprised her on the dance floor, glancing at him with what felt like true love. It was the subject of the argument between his father and grandfather on their fishing trip in 1965. Henry leaned his head against the steering wheel and cried. He began dialing Laura's number but changed his mind; she would not understand nor could he reveal how he had been thinking about Chloé all these years. He screamed and pounded his fist on the dashboard. Who would look after the old bastard now? Henry scrolled through his phone contacts and came upon the emergency number for Doctor Williams, the therapist he hadn't seen in twenty years. He dialed the number.

Henry was so disoriented he had forgotten it was the day after Christmas. He groaned when he got the answering machine. The office was closed until tomorrow and Henry did not feel his situation qualified as an emergency necessitating the on-call service. So he left a message: "Doctor Williams, I'm not sure if you remember me but this is Henry Pendergast. I was a patient years ago. The one with the fainting problem. I'm afraid I'm having a breakdown after learning something horrible about my father. I need to see you. Please call me back as soon as possible.

I'm parked off to the side of Route One somewhere in Rhode Island and don't think I can move. I can't breathe." He hung up. A few minutes later his phone rang and he recognized the soothing voice of his psychiatrist.

"Henry, it's me, Doctor Williams. What's happened?"

"Oh, thank God, you're there," Henry blurted out, phone shaking in hand. "Something awful has happened. Something truly un-fucking-believable! I can't take any more of life's bullshit. My old man is killing me!"

"Calm down. Are you in immediate danger?"

"No, I'm pulled off to the side of the road. I'm alone. I don't think I'm safe to drive."

"Listen to me, Henry. I want you to sit back in your seat and close your eyes. Okay?"

"Yes," Henry was panting.

"Take several deep breaths. Concentrate on your breathing. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale again, Inhale. Relax, everything is going to be fine."

Henry did as instructed.

"Think of the Caribbean beach. The pelicans are diving for fish, there is a gentle breeze, yachts on the horizon, your wife is with you."

Henry was regaining control of his breathing. "That's better, thank you."

"Open your eyes. What do you see?"

"I'm next to an office park on Route One."

“Do you see anyone nearby?”

“No, it’s just me and the occasional passing car.”

“Do you think you can drive to my office if I stay on the line?”

“I think so.”

“I’m right here. You’re going to be fine. Just keep breathing deeply and drive slowly, the speed limit, in the right lane.”

Henry started driving. He saw that he was near the Wickford exit. He had no recollection of how he got here. He remembered screaming at his father and then he was having a meltdown alongside the road.

“How’s the driving, Henry?”

“Fine. There’s hardly any traffic.”

“I don’t want you to think about what happened with your father right now, do you understand? Turn on the radio and put on some classical music. Can you do that?”

Henry found WGBH on the car radio.

“Just keep driving and we’ll talk. Are you still a Celtics fan?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think they can make the playoffs this year?”

This seemed so jarringly trivial at the moment, but Henry managed to shift his attention and make small talk. “I kinda doubt it. Don’t you think they’re bad?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “Awful.”

Henry exhaled and steered the car slowly along Route One. He forced himself to drive faster to meet the minimum speed limit. "I like the new coach, though," he offered in full realization he was being manipulated for his own good. And it was working.

"Are you living in Maine?"

"Yes. On Vinalhaven Island."

"How's your family? Your children must be grown now."

Thinking about his children eased Henry's mind further. "Yes, thank you. Both kids are great, as is Laura."

"Not sure I ever told you, but I love Maine. Sometimes I slip away from the pressures of work and rent a cabin on Kezar Lake. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, it's beautiful out there. Like Switzerland."

"How's the driving?"

"Good. Much better. I think I'm fine now."

"Listen, I'm at home in Brookline but need to head into the office to catch up on paperwork and can meet you there. Do you think you can make it on your own now? There shouldn't be much traffic. I have my cell phone with me if you need to talk on the way."

"Yes, I'm feeling better," Henry released an involuntary sigh. "I'll call you when I'm out front."

Henry made the drive to Boston without incident. There was little traffic and he was able to find a parking spot on Beacon Street, as many Bostonians were away for the holidays. The day

was grey with a cold drizzle. A bum asked for spare change and Henry handed him the ten dollar bill Ned had given him the night before for pizza. He had never been good at ignoring those in need and could now relate with heightened sympathy. Making a donation on behalf of his father, who would never do such a thing himself, felt appropriate. It didn't seem that far a fall for Henry to be panhandling on the streets of Boston. He walked up the steps and rang the buzzer for the doctor's first-floor office. A few moments later, Doctor Williams appeared and greeted him warmly. Henry followed the doctor into his office, which looked unchanged from years ago.

"Would you like some tea?" Doctor Williams offered in his soothing voice.

"Yes, please."

"Earl Grey all right?"

"Perfect."

The doctor disappeared into the galley kitchen while Henry hung his parka in the closet by the front door. The curtains were drawn and the room felt safely closed off from the outside world. There were fragrant lilies by the door and poinsettias on the mantel over the fireplace. Floral wallpaper from the Victoria Era gave the room a cozy feel. This was a place of substance. Henry wondered what this brownstone had been in its heyday. Probably a private home, with one family owning the entire building. Perhaps a banker or a businessman and his family. Henry imagined the sounds of joyful children playing upstairs in their

bedrooms. Thinking about that lost innocence caused tears to well in his eyes. There were ghosts in this house and Doctor Williams was adding more with all his patients coming and going. Henry strolled to the mantel, feeling self-aware and vulnerable as he gazed at himself in the mirror. His eyes were red, cheeks puffy, dust balls perched atop his head. He looked awful. He brushed off the dust and wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his flannel shirt, attempting to compose himself before the difficult work commenced. Doctor Williams returned with Henry's tea and the two men sat facing each other in leather armchairs.

"It's good to see you again, Henry. I always liked you but felt we ended our sessions prematurely."

"Yes, I know. That was probably a mistake on my part."

"No, it's okay. Therapy is difficult work. Most of my patients run off when getting close to painful truths. We all do."

Henry sipped his tea and started sobbing. He placed his cup on the coffee table and asked if he could lie down on the sofa. Doctor Williams guided him there and sat to the side, notepad in hand. "Tell me what happened, Henry."

Henry heaved a sigh. "Do you remember the girl I mentioned to you in therapy, the one who suddenly vanished from my high school?"

Henry could hear the doctor shuffling papers in his manila file, scanning old notes. "Yes, she was your first love, I believe.

You felt abandoned by her right after you were separated from your father and mother.”

“Her name was Chloé. *Is* Chloé. I was deeply in love and never understood why she disappeared. Now I do.”

There was a pause as Henry let his vision swim within the waves of the drapes.

“Please, go on.”

“It’s so unbelievable, I don’t know if I can actually say the words.”

“You’re safe with me, Henry.”

“Well, I told you my sister Lucy accused our father of molesting her as a young girl.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

“And that my mother felt unsafe around my father with baby Albert, which was one of the reasons she kept running off.”

“No, actually I don’t believe you told me that.”

Henry sat quietly attempting to piece together his chronology of life events. This patchwork was disjointed as in a dream and he struggled to place each section in its proper place. “That’s because she didn’t tell me until shortly before her death. She said he came back from the war violent. Forced himself upon her. Fired guns in the house for no reason.”

“We now have a name for that: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Back then no one talked about their war horrors. They just lived with them and managed best they could. Many committed suicide. Anyway, I digress. Continue please.”

“I’ve been taking care of my father over these past ten years. Longer. All the crazy women in his life are dead and gone. He’s blind and lives alone. My brother killed himself . . .”

“ . . . Oh, Henry. I’m *so* sorry.”

Henry started whimpering. “Me, too.”

“What happened?”

“He was just too smart for this crazy world. He ended up all alone with no money, no one in his life. He came to stay with our father and shot himself on the beach.”

The doctor shook his head, a look of familiar resignation on his expression. He sat with head bowed, hands hanging loosely between his legs. He was fighting back tears. Henry knew this was the toughest time of year to be a psychiatrist. He supposed the doctor had patients out there right now he was anxious to hear from. Worried they might have already killed themselves over the holidays. He sat up straight, resuming his position of authority. “That’s horrible, Henry. I know how much you looked up to him.”

“Yes, and like the gods themselves, he was unworthy of that worship,” the words startled Henry.

Doctor Williams got up and walked to the mantel where he wiped dust from the poinsettia leaves with a graceful swipe of hand. It was a dismissive motion, loaded with symbolism, as if he wanted to wipe away all the evil from human existence. Henry could see his face reflected in the gilt mirror. He seemed to be struggling with what to say next. It was his job to provide

actionable advice, and this was a burden that weighed heavily on him at that moment. He turned and walked back, placing a comforting hand on Henry's right shoulder. "It's one of life's greatest ironies that the people who love us the most are oftentimes the ones who hurt us the most."

This was a truth so powerful that Henry sat in silence for several moments contemplating its significance.

The doctor sat down. "So, tell me, what does Chloé have to do with any of this?"

Henry closed his eyes and massaged his forehead. He felt a migraine percolating behind his right eye. He shook his head and chuckled at the absurdity of it all. "Well, you see, it turns out Chloé is actually my half-sister. My father raped my grandfather's servant Louise and Chloé is that child. No one knew other than my grandfather and father, plus Louise and Mary. I'm not sure if my mother knew, but suspect she did. It was just a tragic coincidence that Chloé and I ended up at Thornhill Academy together and fell in love."

The normally reserved doctor could not conceal his astonishment. He had heard a great deal in this office: satanic worship, animal sacrifice, horrific childhood abuse, multiple personalities—but this was something new. "This explains why your grandfather left his money to the servants."

"Yes," Henry rolled into the fetal position facing the doctor. "I came upon letters between my grandfather and father about this sordid matter. I'm not sure what the exact financial

understanding was between my grandfather and the servants, and doubt it was ever put into writing. They did everything possible to keep this under wraps.”

“So, you were visiting your father for Christmas when you made this discovery?”

“Yes. We were actually having a good visit. Watched sports. Talked as openly as we have in years. But then I found those letters, screamed at him, and raced off leaving him all alone.”

“What is it about you and the holidays?” the doctor managed a sardonic smile. “I mean, the holidays are tough on everyone but your life experiences seem to take the cake.”

“Ya think?” Henry grinned through his tears.

“I might suggest you avoid all holidays and family celebrations going forward, for your own well-being.”

“Can you give me a note to that effect? Or, failing that, a lifetime supply of Xanax?”

Doctor Williams smiled. “So tell me, Henry. How is your father these years?”

“Not good, near death. There are visiting nurses coming and going all the time. I can’t go back. I don’t think I can ever see him again. My father . . . the rapist! So much for childhood heroes. What a betrayal. What a fucking joke life is.”

“I imagine you were finally able to express anger at him?”

“I completely lost it, stormed out and then phoned you. I have never been so angry in my life. And no, it didn’t feel good. I hate feeling this way.”

“Listen, Henry. We are now well beyond where we were when you first came to me. Back then, I tried to get you to express anger at your father while there was enough time to make a difference in your relationship. To improve things for you. It sounds like you did improve your relationship over the years using whatever methods you could manage. But now, there’s no point being angry at him. He’s going to die soon, yes?”

Henry sat up, swung his legs around, and faced the doctor. “He’s almost ninety-two and blind. He’s very weak. He lost a great deal of weight after Albert killed himself. At times I think he has years remaining and then think he could die at any moment.”

“The most important thing now is to forgive him. His horrific betrayals are reprehensible. I appreciate how difficult forgiveness will be given all he has done to you, but you need to focus on whatever positives you can from your memories of the good times together. The last thing you want is to live knowing your final words were expressed in anger. I know it’s undeserved, but this is what true forgiveness is all about. This act is done for you, not him. He will be gone. You will continue on and need to be comfortable with yourself and how you handled this final betrayal.”

Henry sensed the doctor was right, but was still surprised by this reversal of opinion from years ago. But he could not deal with his father yet so thanked Doctor Williams and drove home

to Maine. He phoned Laura and told her what had happened. She could not believe what he was saying, but implored him to drive safely and get home soon. Henry spent the night in Rockland after missing the last ferry to Vinalhaven. He ate dinner at Café Miranda, one of his favorite restaurants. It felt good to be alone, to be in Maine, far from the chaos that was his sad life in Rhode Island. After dinner, back at the motel, he started to dial his father's number, but could not bring himself to do so. He showered and went to bed early. He was up at dawn to catch the first boat. While sitting inside the ferry, across from a happy family returning from their holiday break, his phone rang. It was a Rhode Island number he didn't recognize. He answered and was informed by one of the visiting nurses that she had found his father dead on the sofa that morning. Henry sobbed knowing there would be no forgiveness, no final farewell. This long complicated chapter was over. The ending had been nothing he could have envisioned. A truly horrific ending. One he would have to live with for the rest of his life.

For so many decades he had struggled to stay engaged with his father, unlike his brother and sister. He had clung to his early childhood memories of the loving father figure. Tossing the ball in the front yard. Driving to the liquor store, the post office, the barber shop. Being insulated from the pervasive sadness of his mother's depression. They were having such a good visit before the tragic discovery. Now he would feel guilty for the rest of his life. He would feel awful about his final words.

He was sobbing in public so got up and strolled outside onto the car deck to be alone. He slipped between tightly packed pickup trucks, islanders sleeping inside with children and dogs. He leaned out through a large opening on the side of the ferry. The wake was a beautiful churning of Coke-bottle greens and whitewaters. Henry exhaled. He was free now. He could feel a burden lifting. The old man was dead. Good riddance. He was ashamed of these feelings that coursed through him like the wake itself, but there was no denying them. The cold wind whipped against his skin as he hung over the railing with eyes shut. The steady hum of the boat was reassuring as they passed Owl's Head and headed out to sea.

Moving On

It was a cold winter day in Providence as the family gathered at Blackstone Cemetery to lay Ned to rest. Eliza whispered to Henry: “Who the heck are all these people? I assumed Grandpa wouldn’t have any friends given he was, like, *ancient!*”

Henry was feeling oddly sensitive to sounds. “Please dear, keep your voice down.” He hadn’t been to this cemetery since his childhood, when he and Albert had wandered off in the snowstorm following their mother’s attempted suicide. Now, here he was again, this time in late-February with patches of snow hanging on along the northern perimeter of the woods. Ned had purchased this plot decades ago for himself and Vicki, undoubtedly causing quite a stir in Hades when he added Bunny’s ashes to the mix. One man and two women. A kinky underworld threesome. How fitting. Lucy and Larry were standing on Henry’s right, expressions locked into a grimace, shaking hands with well-wishers. Henry had awakened in a foul mood that morning and desperately wanted to be done with this farcical ceremony. He had been discombobulated ever since his father’s death, made that much worse by the frequent appearances of his dead mother poking around inside his skull.

Eve had been an occasional occupier of his mind over the years, but was now pushing aside all voices in an apparent hostile takeover. Henry was beginning to think he was becoming psychotic. Lucy was upset when he had insisted they honor Ned's burial plans, which included a highfalutin luncheon at the University Club, where Ned's old squash buddy Monty Sprague maintained a membership. Compounding matters, the bar bill alone was likely to cost over a thousand dollars. Fittingly, the old man had planned a way to maintain his partying lifestyle even *after* the life had been separated from the style. Laura found this highly amusing and was doing her best to nod politely beside Georgie, as the line of grieving people marched through the mud. But she was worried about Henry, who had seemed oddly outside himself since the Great Shock involving his half-sister. At his father's request, Henry had read from Charles Algernon Swinburne's poem "The Gardens of Proserpine." One line in particular was important to the old man: "That even the weariest river winds someplace safely to sea." This particular weary river had at long last made its way to sea, transporting its share of dirty secrets while leaving behind piles of detritus. Henry and his sister had already commenced Operation Cleanout back at the house, where Ned's treasures were piled in dumpsters awaiting pickup. Henry's worst fear for today was that his mother would make an unwanted appearance and torment them all from beyond the grave. A vicious woodpecker had been assaulting Ned's house in recent days, drilling holes in the siding. Henry

had paid to fix the damage twice, but the determined bird kept pecking away. Henry was convinced this bird was Eve reincarnate. The way she stared at him as she drilled into the house that morning, while he sipped his coffee in the kitchen. He had felt a migraine coming on so went upstairs to take an Imitrex, only to realize he had forgotten to bring any. He rummaged through the medicine cabinet and found two Advil. Now, as Henry stood graveside, he was feeling oddly unsettled, the way he had felt during his wild teenage years when he dropped LSD for fun.

“He was a lovely man,” an elderly woman supported by a walker patted Lucy’s hand. “And such a *mahvelous* tennis player. I remember when we won the mixed doubles tournament at the Loons Club. Goodness, that was so long ago. We’re all dying off.”

Henry peered down the line and couldn’t tell if Lucy was grinning or biting her tongue. Her jaw was clenched shut, tension vibrating on her cheeks.

An older gentleman dressed in grey flannels stopped to address Henry. “So sorry for your loss. The thing I most remember about your father was how *precise* he was. He demanded precision in everything.”

Henry mumbled: “Especially when it came to mixing drinks.”

“My name is James Prentiss, by the way. I volunteered driving your father to his doctor appointments when Harold was unavailable.”

“Why, of course, thank you.”

“Not at all. The privilege was all mine. Your father was an extraordinary man. I feel fortunate to have met him. He was a fount of knowledge on so many diverse topics.”

“Clearly you only knew him for a short time. Those of us who know the full story see things differently,” Eve muttered from inside Henry.

“Excuse me?” the perplexed man looked as if he had misheard. Henry was fixating on the elderly gentleman’s face, which was starting to do strange things. His right eye was staring directly at Henry while the left one was wandering off on its own. His face seemed to be separating into two detached halves. There was a boogie clinging to a cluster of dark nose hairs above his lip. The boogie was staring at Henry through two beady eyes of its own. It was laughing at him, a jovial belly-aching laugh. It took everything Henry possessed not to reach forward and pluck it from the man’s nostril. Henry heard a voice outside mumble a little too loudly: “He certainly cared nothing for women.”

“Say what?” the elderly gentleman leaned in.

“Oh, you know, he was such a champion for women, groping them whenever he got the chance,” Eve spoke through Henry.

Henry clamped his mouth shut. He was not sure if he had actually spoken these words or just thought them. He was sweating, despite the cold temperature. The man moved down the line looking aghast as Henry hollered after him: "You have a giant cross-eyed boogie hanging from your nose!" A sea of startled faces turned in unison to gaze at him. He felt Eve galumph inside in that haughty way of hers. Meanwhile, the woodpecker had joined them all, merrily pecking away at a nearby tree.

A young woman stood out in the line of old folks. "My name is Patty. I was one of the visiting nurses who looked after your father. I learned so much from him. What a great gift to have known him," she started sobbing, expecting some form of commiseration from Henry, who was gazing at his mother hammering on the tree. "What a tragic loss, I'm so sorry for you all," she continued expecting a response. "The last of the Greatest Generation. They are all moving on."

Henry tried to keep his mouth shut but there was no throttling his mother now. "Yes, I find myself wondering whatever became of the German girl he raped in that oh so *Great War* you speak of. I imagine she was around your age."

She looked up puzzled. "Excuse me?"

Henry closed his eyes and then opened them again, expecting this to somehow change the scene. When he looked upwards, the sky began to spin and he felt a fainting spell coming on.

The flabbergasted young woman hurried down the line and whispered something to Georgie, who stared back at his father with concern. Henry was mumbling to himself, thinking how he should have mentioned the part about how much that German girl enjoyed her rape. “You should have told her *THAT!*”

“Mom, *puh-leez!* Leave. Me. Alone!”

“Are you okay, Dad?” Eliza gazed over.

Henry did not hear her.

Oh, crap! He saw Mrs. Dalglish proceeding down the line. She was one of the many women who had slept with Ned back when Eve was struggling to muster the courage to end the marriage. Eve was aware of Ned’s many affairs, but Dorothy Dalglish had been a close friend and Eve felt deeply betrayed. Eve had opened up to Dottie about her depression and suicidal urges. Henry found out about this betrayal on the day before his mother died, when she was reflecting on her life with a brutal honesty that left Henry wishing she had remained silent.

“Hello, Henry. I’m not sure if you remember me but I was a friend of your mother’s years ago,” the stooped lady wobbled in front of him. “You were just a boy back then.”

“Quite to the contrary,” Henry’s mouth opened, Eve driving. “You betrayed your great friendship with my mother by sleeping with my father. How could I possibly forget?”

“Pardon me?” she had a look of bemused bewilderment scrawled across her expression.

Henry's mouth opened again but now started talking in a higher pitch, shifting into the first person. "Yes, you were my only friend when I was at my deepest, darkest lows. You advised me to leave Ned, saying I was too good for him. Then you started sleeping with him before we divorced. The nerve. The appalling lack of integrity and character . . ."

" . . . My word, are you quite all right, young man?"

"Never been better. You see, I happen to know what awaits people like you beyond the grave and it ain't pretty."

Eliza was gaping at her father. She slipped off to get Laura, who arrived just in time to rescue her husband from the line.

Eve got in a parting shot. "That cheap perfume you used to wear. I could smell it on my husband. I can smell it on you now. Like cotton candy!"

Laura gazed into her husband's eyes and saw something was terribly wrong. "Henry, come with me. I think you're having a nervous breakdown." She grabbed him by the arm and they stumbled off to sit beneath the tree his mother was attacking. Bad choice. Henry looked up frightened, sweating. He adjusted his jaw, attempting to knock his mother out of his head, searching for his own voice. Eliza sprinted over and helped Laura guide him across the sloping lawn to their parked car. "You're exhausted dear. Just sit in the car with the window open while we finish up. Then we can get you some food. You look faint."

“I don’t want food! I need booze to expunge my father and mother once and for all!”

“Dad, did you take something this morning? Your pupils are way too dilated.” Eliza leaned in.

“I just took a couple of aspirin. Do you see that woodpecker over there? It followed us from the house. It’s my mother! See? She’s taunting me. See over there? LOOK!”

“Jesus, honey, lie down and get some sleep in the back seat.” Laura helped make him comfortable and then returned to the line with Eliza, doing her best to offer apologies for her husband who was “clearly not himself.” No kidding.

Henry sobbed as Laura guided him into the University Club for the reception. This was a place he remembered fondly from his childhood. The Thursday night buffet, back when he was a boy proudly watching his father play exciting squash matches. Going out for ice cream after every match. Lucy wanted to cry when she walked in, too, but for a different reason. The bar was under assault from the drunks who were ordering expensive cocktails. She strolled over to Henry who took a window seat along the far wall, so he could keep an eye out for his mother.

“What happened back there?” Laura touched his arm.

“My mother is what happened. Look out the window. See her?”

“She’s dead, Henry.”

“Ya think?”

“She’s dead! Are you high on something?”

“Look! She just landed on the oak tree across the street!”

“What the hell,” Larry walked over and helped form a protective circle to keep him hidden from the curious guests. “Is he having a breakdown?”

“I dunno,” Laura looked around, concerned.

Eliza sat next to her father and held his hand. “He told me he took some aspirin on the way out the door this morning.”

“Not the Advil, I hope,” Lucy had rejoined their circle, after pleading with the bartender to pour more slowly.

“Why?”

“Because I put some unknown meds in that bottle while cleaning the bathroom last night. I meant to Google them to see what they are. I didn’t want to toss them, drugs are so expensive.”

“And did you Google them?” Larry asked.

“No, I didn’t have time preparing for this farce of a funeral. Not even held in a proper church, but a bar!”

“Relax,” Larry said in a slightly hostile voice that made Laura wonder if he was finally cracking under the pressure of the family he had married into.

“I wrote down the pill numbers,” Lucy fumbled in her purse. She removed a slip of paper and typed the information into her smartphone. The look on her face didn’t bode well.

“Well?” Larry asked.

“It’s Lexapro, an anti-anxiety drug that can have bad side effects, especially if you take more than one tablet. Like hallucinations.”

Henry chimed in. “Bunny took Lexapro. I know the names of all the drugs those two took. I used to sit there for hours watching them, bored out of my skull. Lexapro, Diltiazem, Coumadin . . .”

“We need to get you to the hospital and fast,” Lucy was panicking.

“No, I don’t want to go! Mom is out there waiting for me. She’s vicious!” Henry was scratching a rash covering his right forearm.

“Your mother is dead, Henry. Has been for years,” Larry was mistakenly clinging to reason in the face of absurdity.

“Duh. I know *she’s dead*. But she’s come back as a woodpecker to torment me for letting Albert die. It was my fault! I should have saved him. She wants to kill us all. Today! Right here! Today is *THE DAY!*”

Lucy didn’t know what to do. She and her husband guided Henry out of the main room into an adjacent parlor and parked him in front of the fire. Larry disappeared and returned a few minutes later with two glasses of water, which he forced Henry to guzzle in rapid succession. “Lucy, just go mingle with the guests while I keep an eye on him,” Larry preferred tending to a lunatic over interacting with the assembled WASPs, who were the antithesis of his solid Midwestern upbringing. When Lucy

returned to the main room, she found Laura trapped within a circle of good ol' boys having a laugh. She joined them, sensing Laura needed help breaking away.

"... so then Bunny proceeds to down an entire pitcher of whiskey sours *by herself*," the bald man wearing the plaid bowtie chortled.

Another man picks up the story. "Later that night, Ned is racing around trying to find her, only to open the bedroom closet where Bunny is squatting on the floor buried in winter coats." The men laugh. "She couldn't stand up!"

"So what does Ned do? He leaves her there and goes home with Jane!"

Lucy grins and bears it.

"The next morning Grace finds Bunny asleep in the closet. Apparently Bunny didn't wake up until noon, which was when Ned showed up to fetch her. What a riot your old man was!"

"Yes indeed," Lucy offered.

"Quite the man," Laura chimed in.

"Where's your brother?" the bald man looked around the room.

"I'm afraid he's not feeling well. It seems he's been stricken with Lyme Disease and is suffering from temporary delusions."

"As in delusions of adequacy?" the man guffawed. "That was one of Bunny's favorite lines. God, I'm going to miss those two!"

Lucy and Laura managed to extricate themselves to go look for the club manager, who was keeping an eye on his staff as they brought out hors d'oeuvres from the kitchen. "Excuse me, but what time do you plan on closing the bar?" Lucy asked.

"The room has been reserved until six when dinner guests start arriving."

Lucy looked at her watch. The party still had four hours to go. "Is there some way we could end this sooner? My brother is ill and we need to get him home."

"Well, I suppose if you like, I could make an announcement that we must close at four to prep for another event."

"Could you?" she touched his arm.

"Hey, it's your party. But the drunks will be disappointed."

"We'll never see them again."

"How unfortunate," he replied sarcastically. "You know, we have a small bedroom for staff out back if your brother needs to lie down."

"Really? That would be helpful," Lucy replied.

"Just meet me in the kitchen and I'll show him to the room."

"I'll go get him," Laura offered. "You should mingle."

A young woman sauntered over eager to speak with Lucy. "Hi, my name is Bethany. I was the nurse on duty the morning your father died."

"Oh, hello. Nice to meet you."

"There is something I think you should know. He chose to die. I see it sometimes among the very old. His spirit was

broken. He kept saying he had messed up and it was time to go. Something happened that day when your brother was visiting, something that just tore your father apart. He wanted to die and did. Just like that. He looked at me with tears in his eyes, then shut them and slipped off to sleep.”

Lucy sighed. She was eager to move on with her life. To leave the horrors of her father behind. But this was so sad and she began to tear up.

“I’m sorry,” the young woman said. “I thought you’d want to know.”

“Yes, thanks for telling me. And thank you for looking after him.” Lucy hurried away for some privacy.

Laura brought Henry to the kitchen where John, the club manager, was waiting for them. “Follow me. The room is down this back corridor.” Laura held Henry’s hand as they walked through the bowels of this old Federal-era building, past the boiler room and down to a small bedroom with two windows overlooking the back parking lot.

“Just make yourself comfortable, Henry. I’ll let the staff know you are taking a nap so no one bothers you,” John plumped the pillows on the twin bed.

“Thanks,” Henry managed a weak reply.

“Rest up, dear. I’ll be braving it among the lovely guests,” Laura closed the door on her way out, shooting him a telling smile.

Henry took off his shoes and got into bed. An issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine lay on the bedside table. He closed his eyes, but was too wound up to sleep. He tossed and turned for a few minutes, then plumped up three pillows behind his head, attempting to refocus his meandering thoughts. He grabbed the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the only available diversion. The young model on the cover looked like a waif all gussied up in heavy makeup, purple and pink eye shadow elongated beneath her Egyptian-looking eyes. She was staring straight ahead with a look that seemed to say: "Take me and do whatever you wish." Henry let his vision swim in her eyes as he attempted to comprehend the perplexing storylines dancing around her on the cover: "How to Achieve Sex Goddess Status So Your Man Never Leaves You," "Breaking Up to Make Up," and possibly most perplexing of all: "Vaginas Under Attack." Henry's vision continued to swim in an uncontrollable manner, and he could not stop staring at the cover model, her eyes sucking him in. He was becoming aroused. He got up to open the door and gaze down the hallway. He was all alone. He took off his pants and climbed back into bed. He lay on his side, the magazine resting next to his face, his vision swimming within the confusing storylines and the Egyptian temptress.

He was startled to hear the door creak open, but saw no one there. He bolted upright in bed, concerned a ghost had entered the room. "Who is it?" he called out. No response. He lay back down, not sure where he was or what was happening. Suddenly a

tiny white sphinx jumped up onto the bed, her blue eyes penetrating deep into Henry's fragile core. It was a cat. A White Persian, how fitting given the Egyptian theme of Henry's current fantasies. The cat purred and rubbed herself against his forearm. Then she slinked over to the magazine, which lay next to Henry's face, and began dry-heaving. Henry didn't move, transfixed by this grotesque turn of events, the cat heaving and hacking for several slow-motion moments, eventually throwing up directly on the cover model's face. The cat shot him a look of jealous disdain, licked her paws, and jumped onto the floor disappearing as quickly as she had come. Point made.

Henry laughed, seemingly trapped within some Fellini farce. He picked up the magazine and walked to the sink, cleaning it off. He dried it with a paper towel, and then returned it to the bedside table. He got back into bed, attempting to process what had just occurred. He had the lingering feeling that this mysterious visitor had been his mother. Was there no escape? How many different forms could she take with her afterlife powers? He managed to doze off, waking an hour later feeling somewhat better. He got up to rejoin the party.

Henry was startled to run into his stepsister Kate in the front hallway, who had come to the reception but not the service. Kate lived in Providence and was working as a flight attendant for Delta Airlines. Henry had seen her a few times as adults, but had not seen her brother Will since Vicki's funeral. Will had been furious at Ned for the way he treated his mother and had severed

all ties. Henry was surprised Kate had showed up, but was happy to see her.

“Henry, are you all right? You look pale.”

“Hey, Kate, thanks for coming,” they hugged. “It seems I mistakenly took some of Bunny’s psychoactive meds, but I’m beginning to feel a little less whacked out.”

“Where are you off to?” she asked.

“I’m heading upstairs to walk this off.”

Kate followed him up the stairs and into a boardroom. They sat at the large conference table and talked for the first time in years. “It’s nice of you to come, Kate. You really didn’t need to.”

“I know. But I wanted to see you and pay my respects. I realize your father was no saint but he was good to me.”

“Even though he beat your mother?”

Henry’s bluntness surprised her. “That bothered my brother more than me. I never witnessed it so guess that made it easier to deny.”

“Well, I’m here to report it was true. Worse than that, turns out my father was a serial rapist.”

“Really? Why do you say that?”

“Partly because he told me things, partly because I discovered it in old letters.” Henry got up and walked to the window, checking the oak tree. He seemed relieved and came back.

“Things?” she asked.

Henry sighed, not really wanting to go into this with her. “What if I told you he raped Louise, the servant back in Greenwich. Remember her?”

“Get out! God, that’s horrible.”

“It gets worse. When I was a student at Thornhill, I fell in love with a girl who was removed suddenly from campus. Turns out that girl was the love-child of my father and Louise.”

“No . . . way!”

“I found out the day before my father died.”

She touched his shoulder. “God, Henry. That is just so messed up. What a freak show your family is.”

“To think, I almost had sex with my half-sister.”

“I don’t know what to say. Are you all right?”

“Not really. I spent the last decade caring for the father who rejected me and then this betrayal comes along as the final twisted act.”

Kate sat with fingertips jabbed into her chin. She seemed to be holding something back, which Henry sensed.

“What is it?” he gazed at her.

“There’s something about my mother I think you should know. She wasn’t well.”

“No shit.”

“I’m being serious. She was abused as a child.”

“How?”

“It’s a sad story. One I only learned when she was on her deathbed. My mother was frequently left alone as a young girl

with her Aunt Mabel. Mabel was not well. I could never get my mother to talk about this, but a few days before she died, she told me Mabel would extinguish cigarettes on her back as part of a game she called: “How much pain can you take?” She would playfully torture Vicki, threatening to tell her parents if she ever said anything. Mabel had wanted children, but had been unable to conceive, so resented Vicki’s mother. Vicki was tougher than most children and kept this quiet until Mabel eventually disappeared never to be seen again. But the damage was done.”

Henry shook his head in disbelief. “Christ. Well, I cannot say I’m surprised to learn this. Obviously something awful happened to her as a child.”

“I thought you should know,” Kate glanced at her feet.

“How’s your brother?” Henry asked.

“He lives in Bedford, New York. He ended up working as a hedge fund manager,” she smiled anticipating his reaction.

“No way! Why that anti-establishment hippie fraud.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t recognize him. He’s very conservative. Opposes gay marriage, goes to church. Honestly, we have so little in common I rarely see him.”

Meanwhile, back downstairs, Lucy hurried off to find Henry in the kitchen, but was intercepted by an old family friend, Mrs. Jennings. Laura saw this and offered to look for her husband. He wasn’t in the kitchen or in any of the downstairs rooms. She feared he had wandered off outside so put on her coat and

headed out to look inside their parked car. He wasn't there. A gaggle of Brown University girls skipped by, reeking of marijuana. She was tempted to ask for some but refrained. That damned woodpecker was back in the oak tree, pecking away. The sound was irritating and Laura found an acorn and flung it at the bird. "Leave us alone, Eve!" The woodpecker stopped pecking and gazed curiously at Laura in a way that convinced her this was her mother-in-law reincarnate. "Beat it, we have enough problems!" She picked up another acorn and flung it at the bird and continued doing so for several minutes until a police car slowed nearby. Laura realized she was acting insane. She tossed away the acorn, smiled sheepishly at the officer, and marched around the building and into a rear entryway.

Kate appeared from across the room and after exchanging a few pleasantries, informed her that Henry was upstairs and doing much better. Laura ascended the grand stairway, lined with portraits of past club presidents looking dour. The walls were oak panels with wainscoting, contrasting with the whiteness of the lineup of men. She found her husband sitting in an old ballroom that had been converted into a modern meeting room for business use. The Victorian-era top-hat cubbies had been left in place along the far wall, blending some of the history with the new appointments necessary for a contemporary city club. There were notes on the whiteboard from a recent Hasbro Corporation strategy session: growth markets, dying markets, flat markets. Henry was seated at the head of the conference table staring off

into space. Laura took a seat and he acknowledged her with a fragile smile. In her husband's hand was a coffee-stained yellow note. He looked wistful.

"Are you feeling better, dear?" Laura leaned in, her hand supporting her chin.

Henry returned from distant regions looking worse for the wear but better than when she had last seen him. He was drinking a cup of coffee and eating a tea cake. The yellow note lay in front of him. He sighed. "Yes, thank you. I'd be lost without you. You know that, right?"

"Indeed, I do."

"I'm relieved to be able to hide up here. This is a nice conference room, don't you think? How wonderful to attend a company meeting where there are no co-workers! Those drugs really whacked me out. I hope I didn't embarrass myself too badly."

"No, you were actually quite entertaining. I'm sure these people will remember this day for some time."

"Who gives a shit? Those fawning fools downstairs are just too much to bear. They didn't know the man we knew. It's all a huge travesty."

"I know, but let's just get through the day and end this sad chapter of our lives."

"It's been more than a chapter."

Laura smiled. "Have the drugs completely worn off?"

“Mostly. Although I’m feeling particularly aware at the moment. Kate just handed me this note she found in her mother’s desk after she died. She wanted to make sure I had it.”

Laura read the note, which was a list of goals. Goals to work on in their marriage—the marriage of Ned and Vicki. It listed on the first page: respect each others’ previous lives; fight less, talk more; don’t go to bed angry; drink less. On the flip side there was one final item, not a goal, but a thought Ned wanted to share with Vicki: “I’ve lost my children forever. There will be no getting them back.”

Laura handed the note to Henry, tears welling in her eyes. “That’s so sad.”

“I really shouldn’t be surprised. I knew this, but still seeing it in his handwriting makes it so real. Tragic. He did battle Vicki but she was deeply disturbed. He never came out and said so, but I sensed he was relieved when she died. And then he met Bunny, the love of his life.”

“You know he always loved you, Henry. But the damage had been done. He was incapable of navigating the tricky waters of his life. He consistently made selfish choices that delivered immediate pleasures, but irreparable damage. He was a sad figure, in some ways as tragic as your mother. Your mother at least built the life she wanted. Your father never did.”

Henry gazed up. “My father’s life was such a lie. Are we all liars? Is it a given that we cannot face the hard truths, so instead

invent make-believe lives that oftentimes hurt the ones we love?”

“Come on, now. That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

“I find myself wondering if my own life has been as big a lie as his. As my mother’s.” Henry rubbed his hand through thinning hair. His hairline had receded well up onto his shiny dome, a dome not as prominent as Albert’s, but still crafted by the same master designer.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, dear. Death always causes us to look inwards in exaggerated ways, and I doubt anyone cares much for what they see. But certainly you have not lived the life of lies your parents did, and you should be proud of yourself.”

Henry reached for her hand. “I see all those fools downstairs and despise them. But, truly, I should be thankful they looked after the old man, not knowing the truth. If they had known the truth, they would have abandoned him. As so many did over the years. It’s all so damned superficial, it makes me want to puke. I suppose the ironic truth is life cannot go on without all the lies. We cannot handle truth and never will.”

“Well, I have some good news for you. Lucy convinced them to close up at four, claiming they have another event. Do you feel up for an early dinner in the city?”

“Yes, that would be nice. Just the six of us. Maybe we can get Italian up on Federal Hill, and then drive by the old home on the way back to Narragansett.”

Stuck

It took Lucy and Henry four months to sell the old man's house, which they did at a deep discount in July. They were now free to walk away and get on with their lives. For Henry, there was still one pressing matter and that was visiting Chloé in Florida. He had phoned Mary in April to notify her of Ned's death. She had sounded relieved. That is, until Henry told her he knew the truth about Chloé. There was a lengthy silence and then Mary started weeping. Henry insisted on seeing Chloé as there was no longer any reason to keep them apart. They were blood relatives. It was clear Mary had not anticipated this moment, assuming the secret would be carried to her grave. She asked for time to think it over and discuss with Louise. A month later she gave Henry Chloé's phone number. He called her from Narragansett Beach the evening of the house sale. He was celebrating with a cold beer, saying a final farewell to Rhode Island. Chloé had been prepared to hear from him so their conversation went as well as could be expected. Nothing more than a few awkward pleasantries. She invited Henry and his wife to come visit in Delray Beach, but he wanted to come alone.

Henry's stomach was gurgling in nervous anticipation as he drove his rental car around front of the Grand Beach Resort in Fort Lauderdale, where he was meeting Chloé for dinner. The valet handed Henry his ticket and drove off for a nearby parking spot. Henry had fussed for days over a suitable outfit to wear for such a bizarre occasion—a reunion with your first girlfriend from forty years ago who, by the way, is also your half-sister. Talk about awkward! Henry had gone shopping for a suit that afternoon at a snooty Florida men's shop. There had been no available response to the sales person's question: "What kind of occasion is this for?" So Henry played it safe and opted for a seersucker suit with white shirt and his old Thornhill Academy tie.

Henry popped a chewable antacid and climbed the stairs leading into the grand foyer, where guests were chatting on sofas before a wall of oceanfront doors. He didn't see Chloé so continued through the lobby and outside onto the wrap-around porch overlooking the beach. There were chic couples dining at tables draped in white linens, tuxedoed waiters attending to them. Henry returned to the lobby and strolled over toward the less formal bar area, reached through the side door near the swimming pools. He pulled up short, spotting Chloé in conversation with an older gentleman at the end of the bar. He hung back to eavesdrop before she could see him. She had aged well. Her short hair was streaked with grey. She sat upright at the bar, in excellent posture, stirring a blue cocktail. She was dressed

in white slacks and a floral blouse, a string of pearls around her neck. Henry recognized his grandmother's Nantucket basket atop the bar. He remembered the basket from his childhood, and was comforted to see it with Chloé and not lost with so many other family treasures to his father's rebellion against material possessions. Had it passed to Ned, it would have rotted in the barn long ago. Henry did a quick re-tuck of his shirt and took a deep breath. He was uncomfortable in his new suit, unaccustomed to wearing a tie. He raked his fingers through thinning hair, straightened his tie, and approached.

"Hey there, stranger. Imagine meeting you in a seedy joint like this," he tapped her on the shoulder and she spun around and kissed him on the cheek. The combination of those blue eyes set against caramel skin was one of the rarest forms of beauty Henry had ever seen. He had forgotten how breathtakingly gorgeous she was. But now that he knew the truth about their relationship, he wondered if he had fallen in love with her because he saw hints of his father in her expression. In those same blue eyes. Her lips were thin like his father's, too. This thought gave him immediate pause. Good grief. This was a revelation he had not anticipated.

She had saved him a seat at the bar and introduced him to her friend. "Henry Pendergast the Third, this is Arthur Schultzel, the One and Only. A longtime family friend."

"Very nice to meet you, Henry," the elderly gentleman greeted him cordially.

“And you as well,” Henry shook his hand and seated himself next to Chloé, accidentally rubbing his elbow against her bare arm. “Excuse me,” he apologized.

“Not to worry, I don’t bite,” she whispered.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’m an old friend of Louise’s from the 1970s,” Arthur spoke. “I am aware of the tragic story that binds you two together and Louise asked me to come with Chloé. To make sure she’s all right, given the circumstances.”

“Honestly, I could use some support myself if you don’t mind,” Henry flashed that same smile Chloé remembered from high school. “Let’s face it, this is one very peculiar situation.”

“Arthur is more than just a family friend,” Chloé stirred her cocktail. “He’s responsible for Louise investing in Walmart and Microsoft when each company was starting out. And then he became like a father to me during some of the most difficult times of my life.” Henry sensed there was much hurt behind that statement.

The tanned gentlemen smiled. “Truth be told, Chloé is the daughter I always wanted. I never had any children of my own.”

Henry sensed Arthur had tagged along to be more than just a father figure or family friend. He could feel him sizing him up, undoubtedly concerned to make sure he was not interested in Chloé’s money, which had of course begun as Pendergast money. Henry hoped Arthur would leave the two of them alone so they could catch up in private. He had been practicing what he wanted to say to her, but had not anticipated a bodyguard. He

realized they knew nothing about him, whether he was well-off or poor. He felt the need to gain their acceptance so excused himself for a moment, fabricating an important phone call to his literary agent, who in fact no longer represented him. Henry had not done any worthwhile writing in over a year and his agent and publisher finally gave up on him. He wandered off toward the window overlooking the main pool, holding the phone to his ear while smiling back at Chloé who was watching from the bar. After a few minutes he returned looking preoccupied.

“Sorry about that, but I needed to call my agent who has been chasing me to deliver the final manuscript so we can get paid.”

“You’re a writer?” Arthur looked impressed.

“I’m working on it,” Henry felt like a fraud. “My first novel was made into an independent movie. Possibly you know it? *The Lost Child*?”

Chloé had been Googling Henry for years and knew a great deal about *The Lost Child*. She was eager to find out if she was the basis for one of the characters. She sensed Henry’s discomfort with Arthur’s presence and hoped her guardian would leave them alone soon.

Arthur needed to hear more, which Henry sensed. “My sister Lucy and I have been very busy lately taking care of my father’s estate. I had no idea how much work that entails.”

“Where did your father live?” Arthur asked.

“Please, Arthur. Lay off the inquisition.” Chloé could not hide her irritation.

“No, it’s all right,” Henry reassured her. “My father lived in Narragansett, Rhode Island. Do you know it?”

“Yes, of course. Lovely town. I once spent a delightful weekend at the Loons Club as guests of the Nelson Rockefellers. Do you know it?”

“Sure,” Henry replied. “We were members for years. I doubt I’ll maintain the membership now that my father is gone.” This was a bold-faced lie. There had been no club membership since Vicki died years ago. Ned had been too poor to keep it up.

Chloé cleared her throat. “Listen, Arthur. We have a dinner reservation on the porch in ten minutes. A reservation for *two*. ”

Henry played yet another bluff hand. “Oh, I’m sure we can ask them to add another person. Shall I go see if that’s possible?”

“No, no, I have other plans,” Arthur felt comfortable that Henry was not a gold-digger. They shook hands and Arthur at last left them alone. Chloé had tears in her eyes. “Give me a proper embrace you old lug,” her affection caught him off-guard as they exchanged an awkward grope. She held on a bit too long, in a way that felt wrong. Like a lover. He reciprocated with the distance of a happily married man. As her half-brother. It was an uncomfortable moment for Henry, who was having second thoughts about sending Arthur away so soon.

“Ms. Simmons, your table is ready,” a hostess appeared from the porch and led them outside. It was a warm evening, the sun

nearly done for the day, a few people taking one last swim beyond the blue umbrellas and chairs dotting the beach. Chloé had reserved the best table at the far end of the porch, set off in a quiet location beyond the noise from the bar. The outside lanterns were lit. There was a candle on the table and pink carnations. Henry thought of Laura and wished she were here instead of Chloé.

Chloé ordered a split of champagne and a dozen oysters for appetizers. There was a prolonged silence until the waiter headed off.

“I’m sorry about the interrogation, Henry. My mother is extremely cautious about any men interested in me for my money. She doesn’t trust me. Never has.”

Henry looked puzzled. “Yes, so I gathered. But I’m not just *any man*, but your half-brother. Louise knows me. Or knew me. Yes?”

“You probably would not recognize her. She’s become a social conservative and is deeply suspicious of people trying to steal her money. And given the unique situation of how the money came to us . . .”

“ . . . That could not be further from the truth,” Henry exclaimed. “I won’t lie, Chloé. I’ve thought about you for much of my life, even when I was happily married. Not because you have money. But because of the way you disappeared from Thornhill. I just could not figure out what happened. That is, until I read my father’s letters.”

“You’re lucky, Henry,” her expression sank into an unflattering frown as she gazed at his old school tie.

“How so?”

“You made a happy marriage and have children you adore. I have no one, just more money than I know what to do with.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” They were interrupted first by the busboy and then by the waiter who followed to take their entrée orders. Henry ordered the first item he saw on the menu, salmon, unhappy at the waiter’s unwanted intrusion.

Chloé continued, needing to get something off her chest. “Think about me for a moment, Henry. I was madly in love with you and then was made aware of the tragic truth when I was seventeen years old. I’ll never forget when Louise and Mary told me. It was just two weeks before we bumped into each other at Club Paradiso. That encounter was a horrible nightmare. You tapping me on the shoulder from clear out of the blue like that. So soon after I had learned the truth and realized I had no choice but to forget you. Why were you even in Florida?”

“Another sad story in its own right,” Henry sighed. “I was meeting my maternal relatives for the first time. It was just a coincidence.”

“My mother told me the truth because I kept refusing to go out with other boys, was not interested in meeting anyone else. After seeing you in the club, I went home and considered killing myself.”

“I’m so sorry, Chloé. In hindsight, I was suicidal back then, too. I just thought you didn’t like me. Decided to dump me for some inexplicable reason. I’m not sure whose situation was worse. All I wanted for so many years was to understand why. And you . . . you knew the truth. I didn’t. I guess I was the lucky one. Hah. God, what a mess,” Henry sipped his champagne.

“Henry, I loved you more than anyone on this planet. We were so happy together. And then just like that, we were separated for reasons I had no choice but to accept. It was all so unfair!”

Henry was beginning to regret that he had come. It’s true, you cannot go home again. You cannot go back to the way it was, ever. Some people and places are better left behind forever, never to be seen again. The memories are almost always far superior to the realities. But then again, this circumstance was unique. She was after all his blood relative, not just an old friend. It was important to bring her into the family, which was rightfully hers and had been unfairly denied all these years. He made more of an effort to connect.

“I remember that Nantucket basket so fondly,” he said.

She looked surprised. “Really? Where from?”

“It was my step-grandmother’s. Olivia.”

“I had no idea. Louise made it sound like it was something special she bought me.”

“Olivia used to keep mints in there when I was a child. I would practically beg for one like a dog and then she would

reach inside, with that lovely smile of hers, and reward me with one.”

“Would you like to have it?”

“Have what?”

“The basket.”

“No, not at all! I’m sorry, I don’t want it. In fact, I am so happy to see it is with you. My father would have ruined it for certain.”

“Don’t you think your wife or daughter might want it?”

Now that she mentioned it, he knew Laura would love to have an antique Nantucket basket. But he pretended otherwise.

“No, you keep it.” Henry leaned back as his salmon with wild rice and asparagus was placed in front of him. Chloé had ordered the duck demi-glace. The waiter left them in peace.

Chloé picked up her story. “Things only got worse for me over time. I was paraded around at debutante balls like a prized heifer. Mary and Louise were constantly setting me up on dates, which were awful. I finally married when I was just twenty-two—far too young—just so they’d leave me alone. My husband Fred was a good man, treated me well. He loved me very much. It was sad. Because I didn’t love him back. He could sense this and it tore him apart. He started drinking. Heavily. He became sullen and eventually lost his job in high finance. I could never tell him the truth about why I didn’t love him. How I only loved you. My half-brother who could never know the dreadful truth.”

Henry had not expected to walk into a tragic situation along these lines. His life back then had been difficult, but he had met Laura and fallen in love again. He had been selfishly thinking about himself and not Chloé.

“Did you never meet anyone else you loved, Chloé?”

She bowed her head in embarrassment. “No, just you, Henry.”

“I’m sorry, Chloé. That’s so unfair. I don’t know what to say.”

“I’d like you to say goodbye to me as a lover, with a proper farewell, and then help me move on to becoming your relative out in the open.”

He was not at all sure what she meant and she immediately saw this. “No, nothing like that, Henry. I just want a last kiss.” She leaned toward him and he obliged with a peck on the lips. He felt nothing special. She lingered, holding onto the kiss a bit too long. She could see the guilt on his face as she pulled away.

“I’m sorry, Henry. We shouldn’t have done that. My bad. I promise that won’t happen again. I just need closure with you.” She sat upright in her chair, smiling through misty eyes, struggling to be strong.

“So what became of your marriage to Fred?”

“We divorced a few years after we were married. He was devastated. In fact, I feel truly awful about this, but he took his own life five years later. I never remarried, decided that the happy memories I enjoyed with you, before I knew the truth,

were more important to protect than to form any new ones that would pale by comparison.”

Henry sat there doing his best to comprehend his father’s role in her personal tragedy and also in her dead husband’s. Actions have consequences, and his father’s reprehensible selfishness had unknowingly taken another innocent’s life on a battlefield far removed from the Ardennes.

She could see his face flushing with anger and changed topics quickly, reaching into her Nantucket basket. “Louise insisted I bring these photos for you. Look, that’s you with Louise at your fifth birthday party. You were so cute, Henry. Those chubby pink cheeks. That adorable sailor suit.”

Henry smiled looking at this forgotten photo. He had a vague recollection of it sitting on the marble-top bureau in his grandmother’s bedroom in Greenwich.

“Look at this one. That’s you and your father playing catch. And here you are as a baby, sleeping on your father’s stomach.”

The photos had the unintended effect of making Henry sad. These were memories from the good days with his father, before their split following the divorce. His father looked so happy to be with Henry. And Henry looked like the innocent child he was, safe and protected by his father. Henry surprised Chloé by passing them back, his face dipping toward the champagne glass as if trying to hide tears. She could see the pain on his face.

“I’m sorry, Henry. I thought you’d be happy to have these.”

Acknowledgments

When I set out to write what became the *Normal Family Trilogy*, I had no idea it would become a trilogy. It took me fifteen years from conception to completion, although I feel I have been subconsciously developing this work for much of my adult life. I have always needed to earn a living so writing had to take place in whatever free time I could make. What a wonderful challenge this has been, journeying through my imagination and spending so much time with the Pendergast family. Although I toiled alone for many years on this work, with the characters keeping me company along the way, I did benefit from the kindness of three people I would like to acknowledge. One of these people, Paul Barclay de Tolly, is one of my oldest friends, and he read each of the volumes in manuscript form and made the huge effort to provide me with helpful feedback. Another is Phoebe Louise Brown, who read manuscript versions and helped with the editing and copyediting. Last, but not least, is a fan who came my way on social media, a reader I felt was my target audience for the trilogy. Her encouragement has helped me gain needed confidence to press ahead. Thanks to Tracey Olson for being such a constructive and supportive reader, a bibliophile in the truest sense.

About

Don Trowden is the pen name for Caleb Mason. Caleb is the author of the non-fiction book *The Isles of Shoals Remembered* (1992), which captures the informal friendships of the many notable musicians, artists, and writers who summered with Celia Thaxter on America's first arts' salon during the Victorian era. The renowned composer Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian were regular guests, and Marian drew upon this experience following her husband's death in establishing the MacDowell Colony, which thrives to this day. The *Normal Family Trilogy* is comprised of three works: *Normal Family*, *No One Ran to the Altar*, and *All the Lies We Live*. The author thanks you very much for reading his work and encourages you to visit him on the Web at www.dontrowden.com. And hopes you can always manage to smile through your tears.