

Here, Kitty

Hays Blinckmann

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Here, Kitty

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For my friends who want something to read.

Forever and always Jan, Hugo and Max-
my fraternity.

“The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—”
Emily Dickinson

As of 2020, the top ten reasons books were challenged or banned, according to the American Library Association, included:

1. sexual content (92.5% percent of books on the list)
2. offensive language (61.5%)
3. unsuited to age group (49%)
4. religious viewpoint (26%)
5. LGBTQIA+ content (23.5%)
6. violence (19%)
7. racism (16.5%)
8. use of illegal substances (12.5%)
9. "anti-family" content (7%)
10. political viewpoint (6.5%)

Here, Kitty gladly took that as a challenge to incorporate most of those issues as content.

Chapter 1 - Dancing With The Stars

No one knows the day things will change—the moment when one's life will get pushed in a different direction. We wake up, open our eyes, and expect nothing more, nothing less than the day before. It's not until we look back and remember the details. Was the sun shining? Did the coffee spill on the floor? Was it a bad hair day? The ominous little signs that foreshadow life was about to alter irreversibly. In hindsight, events, colors, and feelings come back clear as day. But seeing the empty toilet paper roll doesn't exactly scream, go back to bed.

But then again, while change can be difficult and unpleasant sometimes, in the long run, it can be good. As Peter Wise was about to discover, getting to the good part can be a little strenuous, weird, and unpredictable.

That September day, Peter woke, as usual, noted the crispness of the fall air, and scratched his hair like a dog with fleas. He couldn't help it, Peter always had a dry scalp, and when the summer humidity abandoned him, his

skin shriveled and flaked with a vengeance. Why he still lived in Massachusetts and not the Bahamas was a needling conundrum. It sounded nice in theory, beaches, beer, and perpetual summer. But that would require motivation for change, which Peter decidedly did not have.

At 25, Peter wasn't unhappy with his life. If anything, he was complacent with it, which was good enough for him. His day was a scheduled monotony, and unlike his older brother, Charlie, Peter was okay with the lack of highs and lows. He wasn't looking for a better job, more income, or even an adventuresome existence. He preferred vacations on the couch watching old westerns versus throwing himself off a mountain on skis or driving a fast car. That would be his older brother, an investment banker who worked 80 hours a week in Boston only to abuse dating apps and drugs on the weekends. Charlie liked fine wines and Oysters Rockefeller, and Peter enjoyed Sal's Meat-a-palooza pizza and Miller High life, the champagne of beers. To each his own, Peter always mused.

But by Peter's barometer, he had his shit together. Just enough to keep his parents, Bob and Edie Wise, at bay, although they wouldn't let go of the wasted tuition they had spent on his first two years at Yale. Yes, he had gone to Yale, and by the third year, he didn't return. He didn't fill out the paperwork, didn't register for classes, or say goodbye to his handful of friends. He just didn't go back. Peter couldn't precisely tell anyone why. Unexpectedly, he said yes to Mr. Dins the owner of the Hillsdale Tennis Club when asked to stay for the winter. He had coached juniors all summer and thought, simply, why not? Then upon having said yes, at that moment, he made the decision not to return to college. Peter is not good at much forethought.

"GODDAMMIT!" Peter heard through his cracked bathroom window. It was Coach Clark, his landlord, downstairs. Peter peaked through the glass and saw garbage strewn all over the driveway. A bevy of greasy pizza boxes, various styrofoam take-out containers, and Gatorade bottles created an abstract portrayal of modern life on the driveway. Peter had forgotten to secure his trash can lid from the raccoons. Shit.

"I'll clean it up, Coach Clark, don't worry!" Peter shouted from the window.

"You better, you little pissant." This was a term of affection from Coach Clark, and Peter didn't take offense. Coach Clark had been his high

school tennis coach and Geometry teacher and had called his students pissants since the 80s when no one gave a damn. Coach Clark and his wife Lois, both retired, rented Peter the apartment over their garage.

With tufts of cottony gray hair coming from his head and the top of his flannel bathrobe and bare legs, Coach Clark began to pick up the garbage. He couldn't help but clean up the garbage. That was who Coach Clark was. A short, stout, little man with the backhand equal to a grand slam winner. He was perpetually grumpy with a sweet side underneath all the grouching.

Peter looked out the window again to see Mrs. Clark holding a handgun in her bathrobe and slippers.

"No, Lois, goddammit, put that away." Coach Clark said, annoyed but un-frightened by the firearm.

"I can get him!" Lois shouted shrilly and took aim at a deer chewing her tomato plants. But as soon as the deer heard the commotion, he jumped the fence out of their yard. Peter smiled and watched.

"No, Lois, look, he's gone already!" Coach Clark waved his arms.

Lois lowered the weapon and shook her head, her hair still in curlers.

"Stevie, you are no fun. What's the point of having a garden if I can't have a little target practice now and again?" Lois put the gun, which was only a pellet gun, in her fuzzy pink pocket and returned inside. Originally from Minnesota, Lois Clark enjoyed shooting the deer who ritually ate her vegetable garden in the ass. Peter stopped flinching at the "pop pop" sounds heard in the early morning hours.

"I am fun, old woman!" Coach Clark shouted at her backside and continued picking up Peter's garbage.

Peter thought about how much he liked the Clarks. They were way more interesting than his parents, who, right now, would be sitting in their breakfast nook eating egg-white omelets and discussing retirement packages.

He smelled a supposedly clean white-collared shirt, put it on, and combed his straight brown hair that he kept neat and trimmed. Peter had a tennis body, long, lean arms and legs, and he stood a good 6'3". People liked to compare him to a young Roger Federer, which wasn't so bad. His face was boyish, with a slightly crooked nose covered in freckles and wide green eyes. At work, the women and teenage girls flirted with him just for kicks. It made

his tips better if he flirted back. His last girlfriend was Susanne, an engineering student at Yale. She was pretty but, unfortunately, incredibly motivated. She had a one-year plan, a five-year plan, and a whole life plan. Peter had no plan, which was a point of annoyance for her that blossomed into a mushroom cloud one night when he did not want to see Bill Clinton lecture in the student hall. Once Upon a Time in The West was playing on TBS, and even though he had seen the movie a dozen times, it still sounded better than listening to a former leader of the free world talk about his vegan diet and the downfall of democracy. Suzanne dumped him immediately and said he would never get anywhere in life on a couch. He retorted, "But there isn't anywhere I want to go." Suzanne told any and every other female to avoid him. For Yalies, a lack of drive was like not having a pulse.

Peter threw some Gatorade in his Adidas bag and was ready for work. The simplicity of it made him happy.

Downstairs, Peter apologized again for the garbage. "Hey, Coach, sorry about that. Thanks for cleaning up."

"Listen, you little moron, I would have kicked you out for this, but Lois has a soft spot for you. God knows why," Coach Clark huffed.

"And you don't?" Peter gave him a bump on the shoulder.

Coach Clark ignored the remark. "Who have you got today?"

"You know, Mrs. Cantor thinks she's Steffi Graf but can't serve, and the new juniors."

"Anybody any good?" The coach couldn't help but ask. He would only ever admit to Lois how much he missed teaching tennis.

"Not up to your standards. Except me, I will always be the best."

"Ha!- You couldn't hit water if you fell off a boat, sonny boy. You're late. Now get going." Coach Clark turned and shouted, "Lois! Put that GD gun away!" Lois was in the window practicing her aim.

Peter grabbed his bike and headed down the tree-lined streets of Hillsdale. He liked his hometown for its quaintness. He never felt compelled to try city life. The term hustle and bustle sounded like a bad porn movie to him. Peter had grown up in quaint Hillsdale, 40 minutes outside of Boston. It was a small enclave, less put together than Belmont or Brookline, towns closer to the city. It was "out of the fray," his parents said. Peter liked being

out of the fray if the fray meant traffic and too many people on the sidewalks.

Hillsdale was exactly the type of town movies glorified. It had one main street with useless shops selling candles and Etsy type crafts. The hardware store still sold dollar items and the barber shop's special was Kennedy era crew cuts. There were old fashion parking meters that required quarters and the street lamps were adorned with whatever holiday was looming. Even though neighboring strip malls enticed with the Gap and a Panera, Hillsdale residents still got their brick oven pizza from Spaggio's and homemade ice cream from Scoop Du Jour. The movie theater had old, creaky seats that almost every teenager had attempted or received a first kiss. The streets wound out ward in a random pattern carved by horse buggies and cattle drives in the 1800's. Current GPS still confused Harbour Lane with Harbor way, and if you didn't know the stoplight on Elm was called the punishment light for taking too long, you didn't live in Hillsdale.

Someone played pickleball with your mother or dated your sister or was coached in little league by your Dad. There were two degrees of separation, not six, by the very nature of existence in Hillsdale. And no one minded. Hillsdale didn't embrace modernization although Uber had arrived unbeknownst to many. But that was a delightful convenience during the Christmas season and all the cocktail parties. It wasn't a tourist town, no antique-ing for urbanites or hocking of "Hillsdale Strong" t-shirts, because nothing had ever really happened in Hillsdale. Aside from a blizzard or two, Hillsdale remained humble, not looking for attention or accolades from the outside world much like its residents.

By mid-afternoon, the tennis Club had already dealt with the morning ladies. Mothers and semi-retired middle-agers who booked their lessons before a boozy lunch or school pick-up. There were the male retirees who thought they still had "it." They preferred single lessons to strut around in shorts left over from the nineties. Afternoons were mostly kids forced to get off their devices and exercise. The Club had always been popular in their little town. Especially in the winter with their indoor courts for those who wanted to work on their game to beat their summer neighbors on Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket. Peter's clients were pleasant, if not a little gossipy. He quickly learned not to take up not-so-subtle offers of seduction from the women. Word would get around.

In the beginning, just once, he had stupidly accepted Mrs. Cami Tinsdale's offer of an after-lesson lemonade. They ended up having sex standing up in her kitchen, which lasted all of 60 seconds. Peter liked the smell of her expensive perfume, but her manicured hands scratched his arms. After her make-up rubbed off, Peter just saw the sadness and desperation in her eyes. Mr. Tinsdale was 20 years her senior, and Cami was clinging to what was left of her youth. That wasn't Peter's problem. Never again, he vowed.

It was around 4 o'clock when Peter spotted the maroon mini-van. It wasn't unlike the others lined up dropping off pimply-faced teens. But it was parked off the side, and Peter swore he could see smoke inside. He squinted and made out two figures laughing. The driver got out, and Peter was momentarily mesmerized.

The driver was a teenage girl who looked around sixteen. She was extremely tall and stout, and her shoulders were too broad for her body. Her build reminded Peter of a swimmer. Her legs were thick like tree stumps, rock solid and straight. He wondered how someone could have been born without ankles. The unfortunate pink velour shorts were too small for her behind, and her floppy t-shirt printed with "In Your Dreams" on it made Peter laugh. The girl approached him. Her thick round glasses came into view and messy blonde hair amassed around her face as if a lion sat on her head. The girl was not attractive but not unattractive, more odd-looking in a fascinating way. Her body proportions were off, and it was a point of interest for Peter. She kept approaching, and Peter watched as she pushed her glasses up over enormous blue eyes. Her nose was piggy, a little too small for her face, probably why the glasses fell.

She stopped short of Peter and put her hand on one hip as if already annoyed. But he was used to that attitude from people.

"You a tennis coach?" Again she pushed her glasses up, and Peter noted she must have been about 5' 10", model tall. He thought of Maria Sharapova, his childhood crush. But this girl was no Maria Sharapova.

"Yes, can I help you?" Peter used his pleasing client voice.

"Yea, teach me how to play." It was a demand, not a question. Peter liked her sassiness already.

"Okay, have you played before?"

"No, why would that matter?" She stared hard at him.

“Dunno, just wondering if you’re a beginner or not. Kind of helps with the whole teaching thing.”

“I’ll be good, don’t worry. So can we hit, or we just talk or something?” She kept staring at him without blinking.

“Well, you have to sign up and pay inside,” offered Peter.

“I’ll pay with a credit card, ok? But can I hit now? I don’t like waiting.”

Peter was supposed to coach the under-twelve boys, who were obnoxious and spent the lesson making farting noises and hitting each other with their rackets. He’d let one of the assistant coaches take over, in other words, the high school kids who got ten dollars an hour for standing around.

“Yea, I don’t see why not. Meet me on court three.” Peter pointed to the court.

Without a word, the girl turned towards the office.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Peter had to shout behind her.

The girl stopped and looked back, “Kitty.” She said it like he was the stupidest person in the world for not knowing. Peter shook his head. His day just got more interesting.

Kitty returned to court three, and Peter noticed she had procured a racket from the Pro shop, an expensive one too. Dave, his buddy, must have made the sale.

“My name’s Peter, by the way.” Kitty just stared at him.

“OK.” She exaggerated the ‘kay’ sound, like how could she be bothered to retain this new information? Peter walked with her onto the court, chuckling, and began the basics. Swing from low to high, move your feet with your right foot forward, grip low on the racket, etc. Kitty listened intently, then said, “Got it.” She stood staring, waiting for him to go to the other side of the court, and Peter oddly obeyed.

He tossed her some easy lobs, and she hit them perfectly. Inches above the net, the balls came full force back to him. She began alternating corners and deftly hit the ball cart for fun.

After forty-five minutes, Peter liked what he saw. Kitty had talent.

“You’re pretty good,” he encouraged.

Kitty was gulping from a coke bottle and let out a belch. “Yea, I thought I would be. So again? Tomorrow? Pet..errrr.” She smirked at him and marched toward her mini-van. She didn’t wait to hear him say, “Absolutely.”

“Did you see that?” Peter asked as he walked into the Pro shop.

“Did I see what? You mean the girl who looked like Meg Ryan and Seth Rogan had a baby?” Dave didn’t look up from the register as he was sorting receipts.

David Dins, Pro shop extraordinaire and boss’s son, was never Peter’s high school buddy. They were the same age and grew up in Hillsdale but rarely saw each other during their formative years. The Dins’s owned the Hillsdale Tennis Club, and Dave was their fourth child. He was slightly but not overtly autistic. Without wanting to acknowledge Dave’s Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD in elementary school, his parents home-schooled him. He was low on the spectrum, they liked to whisper behind his back to others. Like when Dave asked Mrs. Tinsdale why she married a man who looked like Gandolf or questioned Bunny Ryan where the wrinkles on her face had gone because they had been there the month before. When they had to use his Autism as an excuse for his quirks was the only time it was acknowledged. Dave knew he was different and was unapologetic about it. His parents could do all the apologizing, he told Peter. If anything Dave had a self-deprecating manner, which like many other awkward young adults, ASD or not, suited him just fine. It was his choice to call out his eccentricities but not necessarily the right of others. And, like Peter, Dave was equally unmotivated with solving life’s problems which had nothing to do with his ASD.

Mr. Dins forced Dave to work at the Pro shop to get him out of the house. But secretly, Dave confessed to Peter, he liked his job. Otherwise, he would watch movies or play video games all day. His parents didn’t pay Dave, but he didn’t care because he dealt weed on the side for money. Then Massachusetts made weed legal, so Dave just stole the petty cash from the Pro shop.

It didn’t take long for Peter to get used to Dave’s oddities and grow to appreciate them. Dave rarely made eye contact and repeated questions often, but he was great with math and had done Peter’s taxes the past two years. He had extensive trivia knowledge about old movies, which they both had an affection for, and marijuana. When stoned, Dave’s pop culture knowledge was highly entertaining. “Peter did you know, Elvis was blonde as

a child?" No, Peter did not. Also, Peter and Dave were disappointments to their fathers, so there was that.

"She had a credit card, the number was number 4235-6754-2009, expiration 1/22, but I can't say the secret code. Kitty is only sixteen. I'm 25, and I still don't have a credit card."

"So her name is Kitty Kittrick? Sounds kind of weird. Wait, is being a Kitty better than being a Bunny? Like Bunny Ryan, who plays doubles?" Peter mused.

"Cats live longer than bunnies because they have fewer predators. To be a Kitty is better than a Bunny." Dave deadpanned and began re-sorting the receipts. Pete knew he would review them at least five times before putting them away.

Peter smiled and waited patiently, watching his buddy, who was absurdly fit for spending most of his time at an Xbox. Dave's muscles were chiseled, and he had that glowing platinum blond hair like his parents, former tennis stars on the B circuit. His face was lean and angular, and he had radiant light blue eyes. Peter thought the Dins's must have descended from Vikings. How cool. His fitness had to be genetic because Dave ate like a rat behind a Denny's. Peter loved watching the girls flirt with Dave until they realized something was off. Which also didn't have anything to do with his ASD, because Dave was gay. Peter knew it but Dave's parents didn't. Information like that might send them over the edge, Dave explained. Dave had revealed this fact when they were discussing porn sites. Dave liked HotMathMen.com and GamerGods.com because his kind turned him on. But then again, he went on Tinder because who was he to be so picky?

"Well, Miss Kitty Kittrick has peaked my interest," Peter told him. "She's a good player. Do you know anything about her family?" Everyone knew everyone in Hillsdale or someone who knew everyone in Hillsdale.

"Do I know anything about her family? Her name is Kittrick, so I assume her older sister is Nina Kittrick? Nina is our age and graduated from Hillsdale Prep with you in 2015. Nina invited me to her thirteenth birthday party because her grandmother felt sorry for me. It was well known I had no friends." Peter always admired Dave's honesty and lack of embarrassment.

Dave continued, "They live at 22 Oakland Drive, and I live at 44 Oakland Drive. Their parents were deceased before she and her sister moved here to live with their grandparents. The grandparents are now

deceased. My mother made them three lasagna casseroles and then stopped when they didn't return the Tupperware."

"That's sad about the parents, not the Tupperware," Peter replied.

"That's how it goes, I suppose. Wanna smoke? Everyone is gone." Dave held up a joint.

Peter followed Dave out the shop's back door, and they lit up the blunt.

"Mmm, Nina," Peter pondered out loud, never knowing if Dave was listening. "She was a shy girl who didn't talk much in high school. Kind of nerdy. She had glasses and blonde hair like her sister but not as big or tall. And she had a lot of acne. The kind of acne that makes you feel really bad for someone. She would have been pretty without all the acne."

"I didn't have acne because the autism was enough. God didn't want to pile it on too hard. That's what I heard my mom tell my dad." Peter coughed with laughter. Dave was the best.

When Peter got home, he was greeted by Coach Clark raking fall leaves in the yard. "You got a visitor," Coach Clark grumbled and nodded toward the driveway. Peter, pleasantly high, rolled his bike on the front lawn. He checked to ensure he was still wearing his sunglasses so Coach Clark wouldn't see his red eyes.

Peter looked toward the driveway and let out an audible groan.

"He never stopped being a little prick, ey?" Coach Clark offered. Coach Clark had once taught the visitor as well.

"Wish me luck," Peter said as he walked his bike up to the yellow Porsche revving in the driveway.

"Hey Chuck," Peter said to his brother, who was scrolling through his iPhone in the driver's seat.

"Don't call me that," Charlie said without looking up. His brother also had neatly cut hair; they got that from their father. Charlie wasn't as handsome as Peter, which made Peter a little too happy. Charlie had a round, soft face from their mother's side and a stumpy nose. Shorter than Peter, Charlie's gut toppled over his khakis from the fine dining and sitting at his computer all day. At 28, his youth was fleeting, along with his good manners.

"Why are you here, Charles?" Peter asked.

“Get in. We gotta go.” Charlie’s stubby fingers poked at the phone like it was an ATM.

“Where?”

“The hospital, numb nuts.”

“What? Wait? Why?” Peter was confused. Did he forget something, like his mother having brain surgery?

“Dad and Mom, you little turd, we have to get them.” Peter hated when Charlie spoke to him without any greeting, subject matter, or words that somehow explained the situation.

Charlie rolled his eyes, “Mom’s waiting for us, so toss your Hot Wheels and get in.”

“Not until you use actual words to tell me what the hell is going on. Are they okay?” Peter was getting anxious.

Charlie dramatically lowered his phone, audibly sighed with irritation, and said, “Yea, well, you know, the bleeding stopped.”

“What...” Peter sucked in his breath to withhold his anger and fear for his parents. “Bleeding?”

“The cut on Dad’s face.”

Peter realized Charlie wasn’t panicking, so it couldn’t be too bad. Slowly he said, “Cut from what?”

“When he fell down the stairs. Do you need a dissertation? Get the fuck in; I gotta be somewhere later.” Charlie revved the engine for no reason...again.

“When did he fall down the stairs?”

“Today, you idiot, and now Mom can’t drive them home.”

“Why?”

“Because of her twisted ankle...”

“And her ankle is twisted because...?”

“Because Dad fell on her at the bottom of the stairs.”

The thought of Lois’s pellet gun popped into Peter’s head. Maybe he should get one?

“Are they okay?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know because you haven’t told me anything.”

“They are old, Peter. Shit like this happens.”

Peter gave up and got in the yellow penis mobile. He thought about the leftover pizza he would now have to wait to eat and groaned.

“BOYS!” His mother cried when she saw them. As if her children had just saved her from a cave mining accident.

Charlie strode over to her, all business in his three-piece suit. Peter looked like a twelve-year-old in his tennis shorts. Tennis outfits weren't really hospital attire, he noted.

“Take off your glasses, darling,” Edie said. Peter forgot he was still wearing them inside, but they helped with the fluorescent lights. Damn, they were bright! He wanted to retort but kept his mouth shut. His mother, Edie, looked perfectly together with her neat graying hair in a pink ribbon, her signature Lily Pulitzer sweater, her pink lipstick perfectly applied, and an actual pink ace bandage around her foot. How did she get that? Were there rainbow options in the ER? That was something he would need to discuss with Dave later. His mother was sitting in a wheelchair next to Peter's father, Bob, atop a hospital gurney.

His father looked stoic in his dark blue crew sweater, gray hair perfectly combed, and tall, angular face like Peter's except for the bandage neatly taped over his right eye. He reminded Peter of the naval officer he once was about to give a command. Like Sean Connery in *The Hunt for Red October*, if his Dad had a Scottish accent, “Re-verify our range to target... one ping only.” Gosh, he was stoned.

“Dad, what happened?” Peter asked, trying to appear normal. He resisted the urge to salute him and ask him if he was going to defect. Naturally, his father turned toward Charlie to respond. “Tripped over the damn cat and flew down the stairs like Superman into your mother. Don't know why she was there,” Bob grumbled.

“I was coming up the stairs, darling!” His mother shouted like it was an inquisition. To be fair, their father always did have a passive-aggressive way of blaming everyone. Already Peter noted the accident was caused by one: the cat and two: his wife for being in the house.

“Damn, glass cut my eye.” Three: A glass. Trifecta.

“What glass?” Peter asked but was pretty sure he knew the answer already.

“You know, a glass....” His father looked at the window as if physically turning away was equivalent to answering the question.

“Perhaps a Martini glass in your hand?” Peter started to giggle, now able to fully imagine the scenario. His father was going downstairs for maybe his second or third cocktail, tripped over nothing- or perhaps the cat and his mother happened to be coming up the stairs. There was an Abbot and Costello feel to it.

“Now, Dad,” Charlie interrupted. “Don’t bother with the details. I’m glad you are all right.” And right on cue, Charlie absolved their father of any responsibility, the great enabler and kiss-ass.

“So, is everyone okey dokey, or should I call Great Willow and have the presidential suite made up?” Peter chirped. He was still a bit high. Great Willow was the local old folks' home.

“Peter, your humor isn’t very welcome.” His father warned.

“Ohh, tsk...,” his mother blurted. “We are fine. Just need a ride home, darling.” She had her Kate Spade handbag on her lap, the sure sign it was now someone else’s duty to get her from A to B.

Peter thought, “Mom, how did you get here?”

“Well, I drove, of course.” His mind struggled with how she got there with a twisted ankle, but he didn’t want any more information at this point.

“Well, Mom, Dad, chin up, all’s well that ends well,” Charlie again chimed. “I’ll leave Peter to get you back to the house. I’d drive, but my car only fits two, and I have to get back to Boston. Tonight we have a thing with Citibank.”

Bob brightened, “Oh, Citibank, Are they going to merge with....” Peter knew they’d be trapped there if his father and Charlie began discussing business. He was still thinking about pizza.

“Right!” he interrupted. “Let’s get your things and get going! Dancing With The Stars awaits!” Peter had no idea why he said that. It was a fun, non-sequitur that made his Dad squirm.

A nurse walked in, “Mr. and Mrs. Wise...” she was looking down at her chart. “You can go home now, and here are your prescriptions for pain relief. Mrs. Wise, please keep icing your ankle and be careful on the stairs. And Mr. Wise, I suggest you don’t walk into any walls tonight.” She chuckled a little at her joke, but no one else did. The nurse was pretty and petite, with her blonde hair in braids. She looked about Peter’s age and wore gold-rimmed glasses highlighting her heart-shaped face. Peter saw Charlie eye her like prey and felt automatically protective of the stranger. He

thought about a fuzzy bunny and sighed. Yep, still high. Got bunnies on the brain again.

“Now, Mr. and Mrs. Wise, do you have a ride home?” The nurse looked at Charlie and Peter, and Peter saw her faintly sniff the air between the two brothers. She could smell the pot on him. He knew it. He held his breath like that would take away any odor. Then he reminded himself he hadn’t been drinking. She kept her face down and didn’t look at the brothers. Yea, he wouldn’t want to bother with them, either.

“Right, O! Jolly, best be going now,” Peter shouted too loudly. Somehow Peter had affected an English accent in his paranoia, grabbed his mother’s wheelchair, and started swiveling her around. Time to get out of there.

Peter drove his parents’ Mercedes sedan home slowly, grateful it was still light out. His sunglasses had returned. His father grumbled to let him drive, but Peter gripped the wheel and deposited them safely back at his childhood home. “Mission accomplished,” he shouted. And again, his father gave him the side eye. Bob never was amused by his son’s antics.

“Dear, come in and have some dinner with us,” His mother cooed as she limped to the kitchen.

“No, dinner for me,” his father gripped. “Just going to watch Shark week and go to bed.” But Bob headed to the pantry where he kept his Martini fixings.

“No, Mom, that’s okay,” Peter said, “Do you want me to make you something? You really should get your foot up.” Edie looked gratefully at her son and raised her hand to his face. “You are such a love when you want to be.” She said sweetly, without sarcasm. “Go home. I’ll be all right. Can you just grab me an ice bag and a glass of Cabernet?” and she hobbled to the staircase. Peter got her settled in bed while his Dad sipped a martini in the downstairs den with sharks swarming his TV.

Peter left, closing the front door quietly. No one said thank you or goodbye, and Peter knew everything was okay. But life would be changing soon, and Peter had no idea, the clueless bastard.