*“Jacob, you can feel joy, even if you are dying,” my therapist Julia tells me. “Isn’t it true that we are all dying?”*

I just want to be happy.

I slowly lean back in my childhood bed, where I now spend most of the day, exhausted. The room is small, simple. My boyhood room emptied of my boyhood things. I begin to feel it, the depression, always waiting to suck me into its abyss.

“You can’t have me,” I silently whisper to it, “not without a fight.”

“How are you?” my mother asks, as she opens the door and walks in without knocking. She’s holding my medication and a small cup of water, which she hands to me. She walks with a slight limp. I look at her leg. Then I look away.

“Fine,” I reply, an edge in my voice. I take the medicine and avoid her eyes as I hand back the empty cup. I have an important meeting today, and I want to be past the sleepy feeling the pills cause as soon as possible.

She reaches for the only chair in the room and moves it next to the bed. I stare at the wooden legs of the chair. I call the chair *Deathwatch* because people who sit there are watching me die.

I glance at my mother as she settles into the chair, head bowed. She seems to be aging faster than I’m dying. She meets my eyes, smile wrinkles in her dark aged face competing with the frown lines. I try to push away my irritation at her for not knocking.

“I’ll have your breakfast in an hour,” she says, as she leans forward and pulls the blanket up around my neck.

One would think that where the blanket is on my body is where I wanted it, right? Annoyed, I push the blanket down.

My mother looks at me for a long moment as if she’s about to say something. She takes a deep breath, arriving at a decision and speaks as she slowly rises.

“Anna is coming by, you remember?” she says. I nod. “She called and said she’s running late.” I look at her, waiting. She smiles. “Timmy is also dropping by.”

I attempt to appear calm as the anger rises in me. My eyes lock on my mother’s, and I see fear of another outburst from me. She takes a deep breath as if preparing to confront me. Ready to fight back against her dying son.

Seeing the conflict in her eyes, I’m instantly deflated. I had promised her I would never hurt her again.

I turn away.

Moments later, I hear the door silently close.

There is something worse than dying, dying painfully.

\* \* \*

“A change in perspective allows you to let go of the thing you are resisting. It is the resistance that causes you pain, not the ‘thing’,” Julia says, shifting in her chair and adjusting her muumuu as she always seems to do after making a major pronouncement.

I hated Julia from the moment I laid eyes on her in the cramped home office that looks like what you’d expect from a wannabe hippie stuck in the 70s. She is actually too young to have been an actual 70s hippie.

“You don’t need a 180 degree change, just a slight change.” She purses her lips as if to indicate she has delivered the complete answer and is ready to move on to the next question.

This was the first thing she said to me six months ago after I spilled my guts for a half hour. I didn’t want therapy. What was the point? I had just found out I was definitely going to die. All options to treat my brain tumor had been exhausted. I was angry at God, at the world, at everybody and everything. This is what came out of my mouth for a solid half hour, the emotional pain I am in.

I’m not totally worthless. I have made somewhat of a name for myself with two dozen published papers on earth science. I have always eaten healthy and drank responsibly. Okay, that’s a lie. I ate like a pig and drank like a fish. But that’s just another example of why it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m dying of a tumor, not liver failure. What is the point of life if it can just be taken away?

My dreams have been filled with anger, and I started talking in my sleep. Unable to work, I have been living with my mother for over a year. The night she came into my room at the sound of my groaning, I had been dreaming of pushing away everyone I knew.

I opened my eyes, instantly awake as she leaned over me, concern creasing her face in the dim moonlight.

I pushed her. I don’t know why I did it. I love my mother, but I watched as she stumbled back, as if in slow motion, holding out her arms in an attempt to recover her balance but unable to move her arthritis stricken limbs fast enough. She tumbled to the floor, striking her head against the wall.

Something broke in me.

I shake my head at the memory.

“No, it’s not that simple,” I say.

Julia doesn’t answer immediately. Then she says, “Close your eyes.” She leans forward, the curls of her strawberry blonde hair bouncing. I comply. “Now, imagine your right eyebrow feels funny…imagine a tiny little twitch.” She waits.

We sit there quietly. Light traffic outside provides the soundtrack to our tableau.

“Your eyebrow now feels like it has the beginning of a tiny, tiny itch.”

I notice she’s switched into a commanding tone. I think I know what she’s trying to do, but it works anyway. I instinctively reach up and scratch it.

“Did it itch?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say reluctantly. I open my eyes and look at her. *A parlor trick, you got me, what is the point of all this?*

“I have quadriplegic patients who couldn’t do that. They can’t just reach up and scratch their eyebrow like you did.” She pauses and looks at me as if expecting a reply.

I think about what she just said. I try to imagine what it would feel like if I could not scratch the itch. She is trying to make me feel grateful. She is trying to brainwash me. Perhaps that’s not a bad thing.

“Don’t they have people that take care of that for them… Do things like that, I mean,” I say.

“Sure they do,” she says smiling. “And then you imagine the itching where it is not so easy to get to…perhaps your bum. So you decide to let that one pass.” She swivels in her chair deep in thought. “Do you know what joy is?” she asks, looking up at me.

“Of course I do,” I say indignantly. I feel restless, and I suddenly stand. Her eyes follow me with an unperturbed expression on her face. I like having the high ground as a defense to the serious head shrinking that is going on.

“Okay, what does joy mean to you?” she says.

I turn to look into her eyes. They really are beautiful. She is probably about ten years younger than she tries to appear. She could possibly be my age.

I still hate her.

“It means, well, to be happy,” I stammer. I suddenly turn and examine the items on her wall to hide my embarrassment. I can hold my own in a debate among PhDs, but one cute therapist has reduced me to a mumbling fool?

“Well, that would just be, happy, right? I am talking about joy. The happiest. When was the last time you felt joy?”

I think hard. Then I think harder. I’m glad she can’t see my eyes suddenly fill. *Never.* I blink back the tears before any slide down my face.

“I don’t have time for joy,” I say, turning around to face her. “I’m dying.”

She sighs as if trying to gather some patience. “Joy is something you can feel now. It is something you can feel when you have acceptance of your present situation…and are grateful.”

I think about what she says as I take my seat again. She does the adjusting the muumuu thing again. I’m now sure she wears the ugly thing, so her patients won’t hit on her.

I stare back at her. I’m angry with her. I had only planned to put in an hour to make my mother happy. Seeing a therapist to control my anger is the only thing I could think of to demonstrate I would not have another *incident*. My mother still limps from the fall. But, now this annoying lady is making me think.

\* \* \*

I must have dozed off. Before I open my eyes, I try to mediate. Julia tells me we only have this moment to do anything. Meditation helps me get in the moment. I take a deep breath, and as I slowly let it out, I consider the number *one*. I repeat the process and think about the number *two*.

I hear a soft knock on my bedroom door.

“Yes,” I say, expecting my mother. The door pushes slowly open, uncertain. I see the thick dark waves of her hair before I see her face. Why is Anna here so early?

I look at the clock on the wall. Three hours have passed, and I didn’t realize it. This causes a chill to go through my body.

It doesn’t matter. She’s here now. I have a chance to make something right. This is the reason I woke up (the first time?) in a good mood.

“Hey,” she says, forcing a smile.

I return her smile, as I try to regain my bearings. I want her to feel comfortable. This may be the last time I see her. I try to raise my right hand to gesture toward Deathwatch, but it won’t move.

Did I have a stroke? Am I still having a stroke? I take a deep breath. This sort of thing was expected.

Anna looks uncomfortably around the room.

“Please sit down,” I say a bit too forceful. I am afraid she will come up with an excuse to bolt from the room. After all, she’s the one who left me after I fell ill. I don’t want her to leave now because there are so many important things I must say to her. I know she feels guilty. After several sessions with Julia, I have been able to see some things from Anna’s perspective. I need to tell Anna that I forgive her.

“Please…sit down,” I say again.

She looks at the chair as if making a decision. We both silently wait for her to make up her mind. She sits and looks at me. “I missed you.”

Her eyes are kind. She has always been kind. I have not always appreciated her. Perhaps I have never really appreciated her, until now.

*We met three years ago. She, a young, up and coming early doctoral candidate with a small research grant, forced to take on me, an advanced doctoral candidate (and personal pet of the dean) as an assistant researcher because the funding for my grant fell through and I needed the money.*

*One day I came in to work and saw her sitting in her car crying. Thinking she was crying over some boyfriend I knocked on her car window and told her it cant be that bad. She rolls down her window and says “It’s you Jacob! I can’t stand to go to work today and deal with you, you hate me!”*

*I was floored, I had no idea what I thought was kidding around caused her to feel this way. I apologized profusely and did everything I could do to make it up to her. Not only did I not dislike her I actually liked her, a lot. Six months later we started dating, shortly thereafter we became intimate.*

*After I was diagnosed, I was a worse ass than ever. it is amazing she held on as long as she did. She eventually broke it off. I asked around, there was no one else. Then my brother Timmy tells me that he slept with her. He said it was after we had broken up, but of course I didn’t believe him.*

“I’m so glad you were able to make it,” I say, instantly regretting my accusatory choice of words.

She grimaces and leans forward, looking at the floor, her hair spilling across her face. She pushes it back with a familiar gesture as she looks up at me. Her full red lips part, as she is about to speak.

Now is the time. I am ready to tell her I understand why she left me. Before she gets too upset, before she starts to cry, I will cut her off and tell her I know she wanted to break it off with me before I became ill. I was much older than her. We were not a good match.

“I almost didn’t come today,” she says.

I have to bite down on the inside of my lip to keep myself from interrupting her. She stands as if suddenly infused with an inner resolve. She walks toward my bed and stands close to me. I can smell her sweet tangy scent. I want to press my lips against hers and tell her everything is okay.

“I miss you.” She pauses.

“What?” I ask. I can tell she is holding something back.

“But…”

I can see that without honesty nothing is real. We wait in silence.

“I am happy now,” she finally says.

I look at her in silence. I try to imagine where this can go that will end up anywhere that I had hoped it would.

“I found someone,” she says.

I am stunned. Somehow there is a difference between breaking up with someone and having that someone find another. One seems more permanent than the other.

“Someone that actually lets me love them,” she adds. I turn away. She senses my distress and reaches out, taking my right hand. “I’m sorry.”

I’m still unable to move my hand. I’m sure she can sense my lack of response to her gesture. I don’t explain. I let my silent rebuke serve, instead of words. Words would be worse.

She drops my hand and silently paces the room.

Of course she moved on, why would she want to be with someone about to die? I always thought the answer to the question “Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?” was “Why can’t I have both?”

I want to lash out at her. Sting her with bitter words. Julia has helped me see that fear is at the root of all my behavior. I will hurt you before you can really hurt me. Or, I will make you pay dearly for hurting me, so you won’t hurt me again. I know this, yet here I am, perhaps with only days to live, and all I want right now is to hurt her.

“Whatever…” I say, cutting myself off.

“I am sorry,” she says again.

I can hear the pleading in her voice. This is hurting her. But, you can’t demand forgiveness. You can only give it. Time is running out. She could leave at any moment. I need to forgive her. That was my plan today. Why can’t I act right? Why can’t I change?

I know people don’t change. Well, they do change, but you can’t change them. You can make them cower like my larger, younger brother Timmy made me cower.

I remember when I was a kid and I got a G.I. Joe action figure for Christmas and Timmy got a Six Million Dollar man action figure. He wanted them to work together. I wanted my G.I. Joe to have adventures on his own. Timmy took my G.I. Joe away from me. When I tried to get it back, he punched me. He kept punching me, until I stopped trying.

The mind races. Why is Timmy coming today? I need time to talk to Anna! He was supposed to come tomorrow!

“No, it’s okay…I understand,” I stammer. “Listen—”

A soft knock at the door immediately followed by a louder one interrupts me, as the door swings open.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Timmy says as he glides into the room, his eyes on Anna.

She looks at him like a trapped animal. He is taller than me and more handsome. His skin is darker than mine, and his jaw more chiseled. The ladies usually swoon.

“I thought you were coming later today,” I say, not bothering to disguise the irritation in my voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry bro, but I had to talk to you about something that really can’t wait.” He puts the back of his hand on his forehead as if he just ran five miles to get here rather than drove his expensive sedan. He stops as if remembering something and smiles at Anna. “Plus, Mom said Anna was coming by, and I wanted to catch her and say hello.”

I want to jump out of the bed and strangle him, but I’m sure you need two working arms for that.

Timmy looks around, takes a seat on Deathwatch, and looks expectantly at Anna. Anna looks at him with undisguised dread on her face, then back at me.

“I have to go,” she says.

“No, wait!” I say, lurching forward, reaching out with my left hand.

She looks at my immobile right arm, realization crossing her face. Her features soften.

“I really do need to go,” she says again, glancing at Timmy.

I lean back in bed, defeated. This is my last chance. How do I want this to end? I want her to be free. I want to be loved, not demand it.

“I am sorry… I just want you to be happy… Please forgive me,” I say as I briefly close my eyes.

\* \* \*

“Fine, I’m miserable. Change me so I can be happy,” I tell Julia on my eighth visit. I started seeing her twice a week because it was the only thing that relieved the mental pain.

Because of the medications I have to take, I can’t hold down alcohol. Alcohol was my friend. Before this happened, I drank a lot of it.

Julia leans forward, taking my question at face value rather than in the childish way I said it.

“You mention change. Do you think to be happy you would have to change?” she asks.

I stop and consider it for a moment.

“Well, yeah, if nothing changes, I will stay feeling the same,” I reply. I slouch in the chair she has for her clients, my chair. I look around the room. Her knickknacks and oddities that previously annoyed me now comfort me. A small wooden dreamcatcher hanging from the ceiling slowly spins by the window.

“Do you think someone could change you?” she asks.

I look at her. She stares back intently. I stare back at her incredulously.

“Isn’t that what I am here for?” I demand, trying to stare her down.

She meets my eyes and doesn’t look away. “Yes, but do you feel that someone, even say your therapist, can make you change?”

“Well…no, but…” I say at a loss for words.

She leans back. The muumuu is adjusted.

“Wait…” I start. I need to pin her down on this one. I don’t have time for years of therapy to discover all this stuff on my own. I can tell she senses my distress.

She momentarily looks away as she considers. Then she again meets my eyes. I return her gaze.

“Okay, let’s think over the past few weeks… Tell me something you have changed,” she says.

I instantly think of Anna. I was angry with her, but now, I am not angry with her anymore. In fact, I can’t wait to talk to her again, so I can tell her I forgive her. I tell this to Julia.

She nods her head as she listens. I can sense that right now, what I am telling her is the most important thing to her at this moment. It is no wonder I come back so often. If I could do the same for others, would they feel the same way about me?

“That’s an excellent example,” she says, nodding her head. “Now, let me ask you this. What made you change your mind?”

“You did,” I reply immediately. “You-you made me see how I was wrong.”

“So, if I tell you to change your mind, you will do it?”

“I don’t know, maybe…” I trail off. Even I don’t believe that.

“Okay,” she says smiling. “I want you to be happy. I want you to feel joy.”

I stare at her for a long moment. I am actually open to the suggestion. “Okay, so what if I really was open…to being happy, what would I have to do?”

This earns me another smile. She leans back in her chair and puts a finger to her lips as she contemplates. Then she raises her eyes to mine.

God, I wish I wasn’t dying.

“You have the first part. You are willing.” She holds up a finger. “We covered gratitude and acceptance previously. Now we need to cover giving.”

\* \* \*

I wake up. I notice Timmy is the only person in the room. I look at the clock. More than an hour has passed. I briefly wonder why Timmy would sit by my side for so long.

I try to move my right arm to see if it is working. It is not. I lean forward in the bed, supporting myself with my left arm. I don’t remember Anna leaving. I try to remember what the last thing I said to her was.

“How long was I out?”

Timmy slowly stirs as if he were asleep. “I don’t know, about an hour.” He stretches his arms out and yawns.

“What did I do, pass out? Did you think to call a doctor?” I demand, unable to control my anger. I recall Julia saying we are most angered by what we see of ourselves in others. I am unsure how that knowledge helps me right now.

“I called Mom. She checked on you and said let you rest, dang!” he says defensively.

I lay back in the bed, already exhausted. I just want him to go. This day has gone horribly, and I had looked forward to it all week.

I stare blankly at the wall and wonder if I will have the strength to ever see Julia again. I know I should tell my mother about my paralyzed arm, but she’ll want me to go to the hospital, and what is the point? If I did go, I would sign a *Do Not Resuscitate*. Just let me die. But, I really want to see Julia again.

“Hey, let me ask you something, bro,” Timmy starts.

I hate when he calls me *bro*, even though he is the only person in the world who can call me that and technically be correct.

He leans forward as if he is about to ask something gravely important. “What do you think the purpose of life is?”

We sit in silence. I don’t want to spend what is perhaps my last day of life dealing with his pretentious crap.

“Life is just something we do while we’re waiting to die,” I reply angrily. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I don’t really believe that, not anymore. I also don’t want to spend my last days angry. All I have is this moment—Julia kept telling me until I believed it—and gratitude.

Things didn’t go as well as I wanted them to with Anna, but I was able to say the words I wanted to. *I forgive you*.

“Man…” He pauses and rubs his forehead. “That’s screwed up.” He looks confused.

“Hey, listen, I really gotta ask you something,” he suddenly says, looking at me. “Something big.”

I’m not surprised. I’m relieved he’s finally getting to the point. Everything we do has a reason, and I know his reason for seeing me cannot be that he desires my company. I turn my head away from him and stare at the wall, wondering what it was I really wanted from Anna. Of course, I told myself I wanted to forgive her, but what does that really mean? What do I get out of it?

“Did you hear me?” Timmy asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“What?!” I demand, not bothering to turn around. “Just spit it out,” I say as I try to grab a hold of the elusive insight. Either he will tell me why he really came here or he won’t.

“Well…” he starts again. “I need money.”

I blink. “So? What does that have to do with me?”

“I’m sure you were planning to leave me something anyway…”

“Wait, what?” Now he has my full attention. I push myself up on my arm and address him over my right shoulder. “I was not planning on leaving you *anything*,” I say, emphasizing each word. I turn further to look at him, staring directly at the top of his bowed head.

He looks up at me, meeting my eyes with pleading in his. His confidence and bravado is nowhere to be found. “You have your life insurance, right? You could borrow some money against it, right?” he asks urgently.

I stare at him, trying to imagine how his request can be anything other than what it is.

“Listen, it’s not like you can take it with you anyway!” He holds his hands wide as if he is in a court making an obvious argument. He really is a lawyer, just passed the bar, but I don’t think he has yet seen the inside of a courtroom.

“That money is for Mom, to pay her back for this!” I jerk my chin as a gesture to encompass the room.

“I know, I just need some of it.” He rapidly rubs his face in his hands and looks away. If he just waits for me to die, he could get the money from my mother, but only I can get money from the insurance policy now.

“Get. Out!” I yell.

He doesn’t move. “I really need your help, bro,” he says in a voice barely above a whisper.

“You gotta be kidding me!” I try to turn and sit up fully. Momentarily forgetting my right arm doesn’t work, I involuntarily roll over, facing him. I look up at him in that awkward position. It is not fair I have to go through this. I just wanted to be happy today. I don’t want to be angry right now, but how can I help it?

There is a soft knock on the door, but it doesn’t open.

“Is everything all right?” my mother asks in a tentative voice.

“It’s fine!” we both call out in unison, repeating an old pattern.

I am aware that it is the second time today I have caused her to fear my temper. I briefly consider bringing my mother in to referee, but the thought of her probably taking Timmy’s side would send me further over the edge.

I use my left arm to grab the side of the bed and start to pull myself upright. It occurs to me I could be grateful, if I choose to be, for the ability to do that. Right now, I can feel joy. But, no, I am angry. I want to rebel. I have the right to feel bad if I want to.

I lay my head back and close my eyes.

\* \* \*

“Jacob…” Julia begins. I love the sound of my name coming from her lips. “Can you tell me why you want to be happy?”

I consider her question for a moment. “Because being miserable hurts,” I finally say.

She leans back. She does not adjust her muumuu. Today, it is a ridiculous daisy print.

“So…you only want to be happy…to avoid pain?” She cocks an eyebrow.

My head begins to hurt, trying to follow her train of thought. “Isn’t that the point of life? To avoid pain?” It immediately occurs to me that this is what I have always tried, and it doesn’t work, so what I said cannot be correct.

She looks at me as if to say “You tell me.”

I stand. Moving slower than I would have a week before. The tumor continually robs my brain of the ability to control my body.

“No, that can’t be correct,” I finally say, my back toward her, embarrassed by my naked honesty. “Fine, why do *you* want to be happy?” I ask, turning to meet her gaze.

She looks back at me for a long moment. “I shouldn’t say this… This is your therapy, not mine. But, under the circumstances…” She spreads her arms to encompass the room and my present situation. “For me, happiness *is* the point of life…right now.”

“Why do you say *right now*?” I ask, shaking my head in confusion.

“Because this is the only time you can be happy,” she says.

\* \* \*

I wake. Time lost again. I want a drink, but I haven’t been able to drink without throwing up for weeks. I need to see Julia. The last time I saw her she told me we had covered all the things I needed to know to be happy. The rest is up to me.

I can sense Timmy is still in the room by my bedside, sitting my deathwatch.

I open my eyes. “No, Timmy, I will not give you any money.”

“You don’t even know why I need the money.”

“Do you really think it will make a difference?”

“It might.”

“Fine.” I carefully rise up in bed. I realize I need to go to the bathroom. I carefully lean on my good arm and start to push myself out of bed.

Timmy reaches out and steadies me by grabbing my right shoulder.

“Seriously, what’s wrong with your arm?” he asks.

I look at him. His eyes look sad. He looks really troubled.

“I’m really dying, Timmy. This is what it looks like,” I say as I slide off the bed to my feet. I stand a moment to make sure I won’t fall over. Then I look to the door and calculate the effort to get to the bathroom and back. I think I will just make it and need another nap.

I glance at the clock. Two hours have passed since the last time I looked at it. I missed breakfast. I should be hungry, but I’m not.

“Did Mom bring my breakfast?” I ask. He nods. “And?”

“I ate it. It would have gotten cold. You were totally out.”

Anger seeps through me, but I push it back. I can’t eat anyway.

I enter the adjacent bathroom, close the door, and look around at all the slippery hard surfaces, noting that it is a deathtrap for a person in my condition. I could let myself slip and fall and end all pain. Of course, I should be grateful I have a modern bathroom to use. Intellectually, I know I should be grateful, but I don’t feel it in my heart right now.

I glance at my reflection in the mirror. I have a three-day beard, and my Afro is uncombed and uneven. I hadn’t planned to have Anna see me like this.

I glance away, unable to look any longer, and my thoughts return to Timmy. Giving him money will hurt him, not help him. My mother and I have done it out of fear of what will happen to him if we don’t. I then resent Timmy even more, but I have nothing to fear now, do I?

I know Timmy will never change, but I briefly wonder what it would be like if I just gave him the money. What if I am wrong about it hurting him? Not allowing him to stand on his own two feet?

I shake my head because I know that either way I would still resent him. The only way to not resent him is to not give him the money. I’m trying to spend my last days not being angry.

When I return, Timmy helps me into bed. I can sense he’s eager to finally tell me why he needs the money. Well, it’s a waste of effort because I’m not giving it to him.

“This opportunity will never come again,” he says as I slowly lay back on the pillows. I just smile at him. “I need a house, bro. My new girl Tina is pregnant, but she’ll leave me if I don’t show her I can provide.” He resumes his seat at the deathwatch.

Great, a new niece or nephew I will never meet. I miss him or her already.

“Why don’t you just go to a bank?” I ask.

“I need a down payment, and I’m in debt up to my neck. Listen, I know you’re still mad at me about Anna. That was over a year ago,” he suddenly says.

“That’s not it,” I reply softly. I feel so tired. I will probably pass out again soon.

“Well, whatever. I found a foreclosure that doesn’t have a ton of people already bidding on it. This is like a miracle.” He punctuates the words with excited hand gestures.

“Stop,” I whisper.

He stops talking suddenly, hands poised in midair.

“I’m not giving you any money,” I say as I look at him. His face is a frozen mask. “But, I am prepared to give you something else really valuable to me.” I can sense his brain calculating the value of what I am proposing. “My time.” I see the comprehension spread across his face. “You don’t know how important that is until you don’t have much of it left.”

Timmy sits back and lets out a sigh, disappointment written all over his face.

I’m sure he’s thinking about leaving. Something I wanted him to do even before he arrived. But right now, it’s the last thing I want him to do. I want him to stay. I have a gift to give him. I think it is a gift. I hope it is a gift. I need to do this because right now, I want to be happy.

\* \* \*

“Have you ever received something that made you happy?” Julia asks me. Her muumuu today is solid black, but it is made up of a light material that allows a bit of her body shape to show through.

I try not to stare. I think hard. The silence is punctuated by a small fan sitting on the floor. She considers the fingers of her hand interlaced in her lap as she waits for me. This is our way. It feels comfortable.

“I got a few promotions that made me happy…and there were some presents I got for Christmas and for my birthday,” I answer.

She doesn’t look up from her hands. “How long did that happiness last?”

Instantly, I know where this is going. However, I am curious as to when the muumuu will be adjusted.

“Umm, briefly,” I say hesitantly. She looks up at me. I see her eyes. They are beautiful. I involuntarily catch my breath. I have a mad crush on her. I’m sure it is a horrible cliché to fall for your therapist, but there it is. And it hurts.

“Can you remember a time when you gave someone a present or did someone an favor and it made you feel happy?”

I think hard. I have given presents before, to all the right people at all the right times. Did it ever make me feel good?

“I can’t think of a time. I mean I’ve given presents, sure.” I look down, embarrassed.

“What about when you did something to help someone?”

Again, I think hard. Nothing comes to mind. I lean my head down and scratch my forehead in frustration. I want to be away from here, but I cherish every moment I spend with her.

“I got nothing,” I say, resigned.

“Jacob…”

My heart melts a little more.

“I would like you to try to think of one time for me.”

*For you, I would do anything*. However, I am basically a self-centered ass who is hard pressed to think of anything I have done for anybody but myself.

“When first started living with my mother, before I got too sick, I cleaned the rain gutters on her house,” I finally say. I still can’t meet her eyes. You are supposed to do that sort of thing, but it did make me feel good.

“Did it make you feel good?”

I nod.

“For how long?”

I raise my head, still not meeting her eyes. “Thinking about it now, it still makes me feel good.”

Julia adjusts her muumuu.

\* \* \*

It takes about fifteen minutes, but eventually, Timmy and I are sitting on the front porch of our mother’s house, facing his car parked across the street. It is a beautiful morning. I wouldn’t have noticed if it wasn’t possibly the last morning I will ever see.

I fidget with my cane, using my good left arm. I tentatively stretch out my legs. The right one doesn’t respond well.

“What are we doing?” Timmy asks impatiently.

I look down and watch the ants crawl across the concrete. Amazed at my patience, I smile at the realization I have learned patience at the same time I have run out of the opportunity to exercise much of it.

“What do you think we’re doing, Timmy?” I say, not looking up. A long pause.

“We’re looking at my car.”

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” I look at Timmy.

He rests his head on his hands and closes his eyes. He is deep in thought for a long moment. “You want me to sell my car to come up with the down payment for the house,” he finally says. “But I can’t sell the car, it’s a lease. Plus, how would I get to work?” He looks at me incredulously.

I shake my head. “That’s not it,” I say. “Look at the car.”

He doesn’t turn his head. He stares at me with a tired expression on his face.

I reach over with my left arm and push his chin, so it’s pointing toward his car.

“What?” He doesn’t bother trying to conceal his irritation.

“Does it make you happy?” I slowly turn my body, so I’m facing the car. My right side feels paralyzed, and it is difficult to breathe. I need to make my point and wrap this up. I need a hospital.

“Sometimes…” he slowly says.

I sigh. “You don’t seem too happy now.” I try to take a deep breath. It hurts.

“What’s your point, Jacob?” he suddenly demands. “Are you going to give me the money or not?”

I turn to look at him. He doesn’t know how much effort this requires of me. “We always project happiness into the future. Remember that time you got the job at the law firm?”

An involuntary smile spreads across his face. Not only was that his first big job, but he also leapfrogged over me, his older brother, with a salary that was almost double what I was making at the time.

“But remember your car broke down on the way home?” I ask. “You were happy. I remember because when we picked you up from the tow yard, you were still grinning,”

“I don’t see your point.”

“You’re not stupid. I think you do get my point.”

He looks at me with undisguised anger suddenly flaring. “But tell the truth, you always thought I was stupid.”

“No, Timmy, that’s not true…”

“You could’ve fooled me because I was on the other side of it,” he says, standing.

I want to stop him, but something inside tells me the real gift I can give him is the opportunity to talk. “Okay, I’m listening.” I turn my face away, steeling myself for the onslaught.

Timmy turns to consider me. I glance up, meeting his eyes, and see pity on his face.

“I looked up to you, man… I just wanted my big brother to be my friend. But…” He brings his fist up to his mouth as if he can stop the emotion, the tears that suddenly fill his eyes. “You always hated me.”

“You know…” I begin, unable to stop myself. “Forget it!” I try to stand before I realize I can’t.

My dramatic exit thwarted. I am speechless. The truth hurts.

\* \* \*

“Jacob, I would like to return to your questions on happiness,” Julia says.

I look at her. She has high cheekbones, but her face is round, so her cheeks are a little chubby. Her eyes are slightly hidden when she smiles as she does now.

I glance at her muumuu. It’s the black one I like. I can see the curve of her breasts. I thought about her and her breasts last night. It’s so odd that what annoyed me before makes her endearing to me.

I glance at the dreamcatcher by the window. She’s a free spirit, a special person. I love that about her. The fan on the floor circulates the air. Everything in the room is normal. I am happy.

“Sure, I love talking about being happy,” I say as I carefully take my chair opposite her.

Concern crosses her face, and she starts to rise as if to help me.

I wave her away. “We knew this was going to happen.” I smile in my attempt to quickly change the subject. The worried look remains in her eyes. I feel an odd comfort at her distress over me.

She clears her throat and adjusts in her chair. She smiles again. “Let me ask you this, Jacob. What do you think blocks your happiness?”

I want to blurt out “any time I am away from here” because the time in this room is the only time I’m happy. Other times I just exist. I think quickly to formulate an appropriate answer.

“Anger…resentments…”

She immediately perks up and sits forward. Unconsciously, I mimic her posture.

“Resentments,” she begins, “that’s actually what I wanted to discuss today.” She picks up a pen and taps it on her desk, as she carefully phrases her next words with half-lidded eyes. “Can you think of a time when you had a resentment, a big resentment, that lasted longer than say…a week…and you later were able to truly let it go?”

I lean back in my chair and think hard. This is really important to her, and I want to please her. Right now, I feel happy. I feel like I could be happy for the rest of my abbreviated life. It takes a bit of an effort to cycle through all the resentments I didn’t let go of.

“Anna… We talked about her. Well, um, I held a huge resentment toward her. She didn’t treat me with the respect I thought I deserved, even though I was working under her.”

“And?”

“And now I don’t.” I try to think of something to add, but nothing comes to mind.

She starts to lean back, but changes her mind and leans forward. She looks down as if trying to concentrate on drawing something out of me.

I’m willing to have it drawn out, whatever it is.

“Tell me, Jacob. What exactly happened to the resentment? Did it just…fade away?” she asks, now looking at me.

I blink and try to think. “No, I forgave her. I realized I was wrong.”

“How were you able to come to that conclusion?”

“I looked at it from her perspective. I would have done the same thing if I were her. Plus, I was as ass to her.”

“Okay.” She leans back and adjusts her muumuu slightly. “Were you ever bullied?”

This is very unexpected, and I take a sudden deep breath and sit up. My mind instantly goes to my brother. “Well…yeah.”

She pauses before asking, “Have you ever bullied anyone, at all? Even a little bit?” She looks at me.

I meet her gaze. I have to be honest and look down in my embarrassment. “Yeah,” I say, in barely a whisper.

“Did you have a reason?”

I think about Timmy. Yes, I had a reason. A really good reason. I know now, as I knew then, it still doesn’t make it right.

“I’m sure there were others, but the one that sticks in my mind is my brother, Timmy.” I tell her of the taunting, the teasing, constantly making him feel less than. I would have gone on like that forever, but by the time Timmy was eight years old, he was bigger than me.

When I am done recounting my sins, I lean my head over the desk. I cannot lift my head. I feel like I will never be able to look her in the eyes again.

“Jacob.”

I can hear her leaning forward in her chair. I suddenly look up, startled at the thought she could reach across her desk and touch me. When I meet her eyes, she is not reaching out toward me, but she is leaning over the desk. I can see the concern in her eyes.

“I bring this up, so we can talk about forgiveness.”

I look down, slightly shaking my head. The shame from years ago hurts because I am feeling it right now. Then I feel the softness of a tissue as it touches my cheek, dabbing at a tear. I grab the tissue and lean back in my seat, my gaze still unable to meet hers.

“I am a horrible person,” I say.

“You are a human person,” she replies.

I hear her chair squeak as she leans backward.

“However, let us return to forgiveness. Jacob? Can you look at me?”

It takes a lot of effort, but eventually, I meet her eyes.

“Can you imagine a situation where you cannot forgive someone? A resentment you have held on to. Can you ever imagine forgiving that person?”

\* \* \*

Timmy and I sit in silence. I know I will not be able to move off of the front porch step without assistance from him, my mother, or an ambulance. I try to take a deep breath. I am only halfway successful. “Hey, Timmy.”

“What?” he asks, not looking at me.

“I do love you. I don’t think you’re stupid.”

“Could have fooled me,” he fires back, looking at me, surveying my condition. Then he drops his gaze.

“Whatever, man. I-I’m sorry… I know you’re not stupid. You passed the bar, for Christ’s sakes. You’re a lawyer!”

He looks at me again, his eyes searching for evidence of honesty.

I feel ashamed and drop my gaze. We sit in silence. Neither one of us knows whose turn it is to speak or what to say.

“You know,” Timmy begins, “I remember a time when we were not always fighting…”

“When was that?” I ask, not knowing the answer and not knowing what else to say.

“I don’t know…just before we always started fighting,” he says flatly, looking at his shoes.

What Timmy doesn’t know is that I always knew he was our mother’s favorite, from the time he was born. She tried not to let it show, but there it was. There were many incidents, but the one I have played over in my mind for years is the time Timmy and I were riding down the hill, sitting on a skateboard, and we ran into a parked car.

We ran home, and as our mother opened the door, Timmy started to cry, even though he wasn’t that hurt. My mother immediately scooped him up and took him in the house, wiping his tears. I walked in, pushed the door closed while holding my fractured arm, and sat on the couch. It felt like an hour before she was done giving Timmy an ice cream bar and putting him to bed and finally checked on me. Then she had to get Timmy out of bed, so she could take me to the hospital.

When Timmy enrolled in school, he had to go to special education classes. I teased him and called him stupid. I couldn’t make my mother love me, but I could take it out on him. I’ve always felt sorry for myself because he picked on me, but I forgot I’m the one who taught him how to torment.

\* \* \*

I feel I can now accept it. I am about to die. I could ask for help back to my bedroom, but I can’t bear the thought of my mother dealing with this by herself. Also, I want to see if they can somehow give me more time. I want to see Julia, one more time, to tell her she is a great therapist.

I slowly turn my head and look at Timmy. I don’t need to die with resentment. I can forgive. I can forgive, myself. Some things you know without needing your therapist telling you. Maybe that’s when you know it’s working.

“Hey, Timmy.”

“Yeah.”

“I think I can get ten grand…but you have to pay it back…to mom when I’m gone.”

He looks at me. “You mean that?” he asks carefully.

“Yeah. And…I’m sorry. For everything.” We sit in silence again. “Listen, get Mom…and call an ambulance.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” he asks, eyes on me.

“Go, go!” I say, waving with my left arm, batting him away.

My mother never loved me as much as my brother, yet she loves me enough to care for me as I die. This is why I hate my brother?

I’m disgusted with myself. That’s nothing new. I know Timmy will never pay that ten grand back. I’m just doing it to show him I forgive him. Mostly to make amends to him, so I can forgive myself. Better late than never. If I live another day to make that phone call, tomorrow will definitely go better than today.

Julia said I would find happiness doing for others. I wonder if this is what she had in mind? I would love to ask her.

My mother arrives and carefully squats down next to me, feeling my forehead.

“Mom, I need to go to the hospital. My right side is paralyzed.”

“Oh, baby!” she says, concern engulfing her face. She pauses and looks at me.

I meet her gaze. I know what she’s thinking. What is the point of an ambulance?

“I know, Mom. I just want a couple of more days…if they can…give me that,” I confess.

“I called. They’re on their way,” Timmy says, returning.

“Mom, as soon as I can, I’m gonna borrow against the life insurance policy to loan money to Timmy, so he can buy a house, but he has to pay that money back to you.”

She stares at me, unable to contain her shock.

“Of course, baby.” She looks at Timmy then back at me. “You boys are okay?” she tentatively asks.

Timmy solemnly nods. I manage a weak smile and a weak nod. Even with all that is going on, I think I see joy in her eyes.

It’s a good thing you only need now to be happy because now is all I have.

\* \* \*

I can sense light behind my closed eyes. I hear the sounds of a hospital room. I immediately think of possible brain damage. I calculate two plus two. Four instantly comes to my mind. I try for something harder…twelve times four. Forty-eight instantly comes to my mind.

I try to breathe a sigh, and it comes easier than any time in the past three months. I struggle to open my eyes.

I see the back of a nurse’s head. He turns around and is startled to see I’m awake. He leans over me and presses a button on the panel over my head.

I drift out of consciousness.

\* \* \*

“Jacob? Jacob?”

I hear my mother’s voice. I struggle to open my eyes. I’m tired, but I’m curious as to why I’m alive, and in what state I’m in. I force my eyes open, and I’m relieved to find I’m able to turn my head toward her voice.

“Mom?” It’s barely a whisper through my dry scratchy throat.

“It’s a miracle.” Her voice cracks with emotion as she leans forward excitedly touching my arm. “You were going to…die.” She stops and sniffles. “The doctor said we had nothing to lose. They operated and removed the tumor!”

I stare at her, unable to comprehend what she’s saying.

“What…what does that mean?” I manage to mumble.

She smiles with watery eyes. “It’s over. You’re going to be okay!” The water in her eyes finally falls down her face as tears.

I turn away and look at the ceiling. I don’t believe it. Mostly, I don’t want to dare to hope. It has taken me a year to slowly accept I’m dying. Hard fought acceptance that oddly, I’m now reluctant to just accept it was for nothing. But was it?

I look toward my mother. Her face is overtaken with her huge smile. It occurs to me I can finally make real amends to her, not just say I’m sorry. This thought warms me. I smile back at her.

I can feel joy right now if I want to. If I can’t feel it now, after learning I’m going to live, I’m truly hopeless.

My thoughts turn to Julia as I turn again to look at the ceiling. My heart starts to beat faster. Emotions surge though me. Hope, desire. Then, just as instantly, I am crushed. You can’t date your therapist. Actually, you *could,* if you stop treatment and wait two years. Of course, I looked it up.

I chastise myself because I should be thinking of my family. My brother. I still need to make that phone call to the life insurance company. I still need to show him I forgive him…and I need to continue to do whatever it takes to forgive myself.

Because I want to be happy. I want to feel joy.