

Alex stood. He stared at the television. Usually he was a quick thinker, someone who was solid and precise under pressure, but a paralysis came over him. The phone rang and Alex noticed that the local news had gone to commercial break; images of the hotel, Kate's car, and smoking debris, were replaced with smiling children decorating pink cupcakes in oversized aprons. His numb reaction returned: "That couldn't be Kate." Again the phone rang breaking into his daze.

Alex picked up the phone with a soft "hello." The other end was silent. "Who's there?" Alex asked, but received no answer. He then hung up and dialed the police.

The next three days blurred together with the same images: police uniforms, cups of coffee, and questions followed by answers followed by more questions. The police told Alex they were looking into every possibility. Kate's parents came down and were staying in a nearby hotel. The entire family was cooperating with police who had told the Strickland's and Alex that in a case like this the first forty-eight hours were the most important. So they all held their breath and waited, relying on the police, leaving the most critical events of their lives in the hands of strangers.

It was the third night and Alex couldn't sleep. He rolled over onto Kate's side of the bed, a territory he hadn't crossed into in over four years. He buried his face into her pillow. He could smell her shampoo, lavender and ginger. Her scent was still in the sheets. Alex had always wanted the right words to describe his wife's aroma but they always seem to elude him. He knew now. She smelled like home.

He wanted to yell, he wanted to cry, he wanted to hit something or someone, most of all he wanted to sleep. After lying in bed for another hour, he finally gave up. He put on his jeans and a gray sweatshirt, and left the house. He didn't drive, but just walked

down the road. The house wasn't far from one of those 24-hour diners. He decided to walk there and get some coffee, maybe a fried egg.

The air was heavy and it felt as if the dew would accumulate on his slow moving body just as easily as it beaded over the grass and the metal and glass of the parked cars. Alex hadn't been awake and outside before dawn since his sophomore year in high school. He ran track then and early morning runs were not out of the ordinary. His track coach was just as strict as the other teachers at his private school. St. Andrew's was known for its discipline and for its successful graduates. Alex had been a serious student in all of his classes except for one. Unlike many of the other students Alex did not come from a "religious" family. However, the Catholic school had the same requirements for all students, religious or not, extensive Bible classes included. Alex thought the bible stories were for the most part odd, and did not agree with his classmates who seemed to eat it all up with extreme fervor. His junior year he had Old Testament with Sister Mary Henson who was notorious for her bad breath and "feminist" readings of the word. During a discussion of Job, Alex had scoffed at the story. "If God is so great, why doesn't he protect Job," Alex asked. He drew stares but continued, "Why doesn't he stand up for him? He doesn't even care about the poor guy!" Sister Mary Henson walked to his side of the room. Her thick glasses made her eyes appear larger than they actually were, and Alex remembered noticing for the first time a freckle on her left eye. She leaned in, looked at him with compassion and an understanding of wild youth and said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." And without a step she moved on to assign the day's writing prompt and dismiss class.

Alex arrived at the diner as dawn was breaking. A soft yellow tinted the scene outside and all the colors changed to warmer versions of themselves. A candy apple red car in the parking lot looked burgundy and the light posts glowed a soft peachy tint, soon these colors would go back to the harsh versions they were normally. As for now they were softer, and more palpable.

As he ordered coffee Alex realized he hadn't thought about Kate the entire walk to the diner, and he felt a flash of guilt. But the memory of Sister Mary Henson, and the matter of fact way she told him God would "give and take away," couldn't escape his mind. Even though Alex had never decided what he thought of God there was no way in hell he would lead one of those tormented religious lives many of his old school mates had. The only thing he credited God for was giving him Kate. He told her often she was a gift from God, that she was his saving grace. He never thought about the literal meaning of these words, but meant them more as a passing compliment to his wife. Now for the first time, he understood what the Sister was telling him. He peeled back the foil top on his plastic thimble full of cream. The white mixed in with the black and made a swirl pattern that then formed into a light brown cloud. Alex put his nose down to the thick rim of the eggshell white mug and let the steam fog up his glasses.

"Something to eat hun?"

The rough voice of the waitress brought him out of a haze. "Uh, no, I don't have much of an appetite."

"My ex-husband used to say that when I asked him what he wanted for breakfast, but two waffles, three slices of bacon, and a scrambled egg later he was singin' a different tune. So what can I get ya?"

Breakfast reminded him of Kate; he missed their breakfast time together. “I guess a short stack and some bacon would be alright.” The waitress nodded and was off.

It was the first real meal he had eaten in four days. The hot maple syrup seeped into the pancakes, filling each bite with sugary sweetness. He had eaten every bit on his plate and drank four cups of coffee when his cell phone started vibrating on the table. It was already 8:15. He had been at the diner for over two hours.

“Alex, where are you, we’ve called the house, are you okay?” His mother seemed frantic on the other line; anything and everything threw her into a frenzy ever since she heard the news. “I’m fine, mother. I’m at the diner on 83, I was going to come over to the house first thing.”

“Alex, I think you need to come over here. The police called looking for you. I asked them if they found out anything, but, well dear, I think they want to talk to you. Why don’t you come and we’ll call them together.”

Alex’s pulse quickened. He scooted out of the booth, threw down a twenty and darted out of the diner. As he crossed the parking lot, he started to jog, first slowly but then he hit a stride and ran a quick pace all the way home. As he turned onto his street a stray dog ran up beside him. It must’ve been a Russell terrier mix of some sort and its short legs had trouble keeping up with Alex’s long stride. After two blocks the dog gave up and just stood and barked as Alex, now sprinting, made it home.

He decided to take his mother’s advice and go over to his parent’s house before he called the police. When he arrived at their home, he was surprised to find the Strickland’s there. They were all waiting patiently for him to arrive, as were an officer in

uniform and some plain-clothes detectives. The normally serene and quiet home was now full of people and they all looked at Alex with pity as he walked into the living room.

Detective Mike Herington asked to speak to him in private. “What is going on?” Alex looked at his mother confused by this strange impromptu meeting.

“Perhaps we could speak in the kitchen Alex? Would you like a cup of coffee?” Alex, shaky from the caffeine he had overdosed on, momentarily stared at the detective. “Uh, no thank you, but the kitchen is fine, sir.”

Herington was carrying a manila envelope; he looked down at the kitchen counter and gathered his thoughts. Alex leaned against the refrigerator; one of his mother’s fruit magnets poked him in the back. He didn’t try to move it.

The detective fidgeted with the edge of the envelope. It seemed like hours before the he spoke. “Alex, I need you to take a look at some of these photos.”

Alex had trouble understanding what he was looking at. Could this be real? He needed answers. He needed Kate.