

A Selfish Life

Family Drama

By

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One

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Modra's eyes sprang open to the complete darkness of her bedroom. Her heart felt heavy. She took a few deep breaths hoping to relieve some of the anxiety weighing heavily against her chest.

“Deep breaths . . . deep breaths,” she coached herself, squeezing her eyes shut as she turned her head on the pillow. A tear escaped and ran down the crease at the corner of her eye. She wanted to sleep, not think, but her mind was running wild.

She closed her eyes again and turned over, willing herself to sleep. Moments later she found her mind running again, chasing her fears of guilt and tormenting her with the threat of a lifetime of regret for choosing to remain childless. Tired and frustrated at still being wide awake, she moved closer to Kevin hoping his warmth would help.

With her forehead against his arm she became painfully aware of every breath she took and the compression of her heart as the anxiety filled her chest cavity allowing her only a small reprieve with every short shaky breath she released. There was a stalking fear in her soul that one day she would look back, when

she was too old, when it was too late to change her mind, and regret this day. Her fear was not a “Modra fabricated phenomenon” Kevin, her husband, credited to her guilt ridden Catholic upbringing, but from having bore witness to her friends and their bodies as they changed. She witnessed as their clocks ticked and they became subject to that instant hormonal ravaging drive to have a baby. Although, at thirty-eight, Modra had yet to experience that need—she feared that it would someday sneak up and consume her.

With her eyes closed and her mind still racing, she debated whether it was time to give up on sleep and allow it to elude her once again. She looked longingly at Kevin, who slept peacefully next to her as her mind raced, piling up feelings of anxiety from unwanted thoughts. She began to wonder what their daughter would look like; for some reason, Modra always assumed she and Kevin would have had a daughter had they had children. Then, she began to wonder whether they were making a big mistake. *But, how do we know? Is it too late? How does anyone know?* She tortured herself again and again with all of the “What ifs?”

Remnants of a recent dream lingered in her subconscious, wanting to surface, adding to her anxiety; it had something to do with an article she’d read over breakfast the day before. The featured story had been about families that chose to have upwards of two children. In the article, the main subject had five

children and was pregnant with a sixth. Modra's first impression of the sprawling family portrait on the cover was to consider whether it was selfish to have so many children. She had tried to put herself into the woman's life as she read the article wanting to feel something in the way warmth or nurturing, but all she felt was wonder at how a husband and wife could broker their time amongst two, much less six, children and still remember the other exists.

She studied the picture of the featured family on the cover for several minutes before finally reading the article. The very pregnant woman stood poised with her five young happy children and her handsome husband as they sprawled all around her. She seemed perfectly content and proud of her brood, leaving Modra to wonder whether she should be jealous of the woman's strength and capacity. But instead, she felt a touch of guilt for having shamelessly searched the woman's face for signs of fatigue or resentment or something along those lines. *How? How does she find time to exhale?* Was Modra's only concluding thought on the article as she'd placed the magazine in the recycle-bin.

As she lay in bed wide awake rethinking the article and the conflicting emotions it left within her, she tried to forget her dream. The dream, she believed, had been an unconscious reaction to that very article, and decided that both, her reaction to it and what she took away from it were not normal amongst

women. Most women would have read it and admired the love and cohesion the family exuded. Most women would have read it and been left with warm nurturing feelings for the mother, but not Modra, she was left with sympathy and angst for her.

Her thoughts on the article forced the suppressed dream to the surface. As the dream materialized and began to come back to her she recalled seeing herself among all those children as they vied for her attention while calling her mommy—the memory caused her heart to beat faster with panic. She recalled going through the motion of trying to assemble the five young vibrant boys into the perfect peaceful pose that graced the cover, and could now clearly recall the chaos as she arranged child after child, feeling as though it would never be done. Another wave of anxiety washed over her as other fragments of her dream came together. She recalled finally being in position for the shot when she happened to glance at the man standing beside her, he was the same man portrayed on the cover. In her dream, he had been her loving aloof husband, yet she recalled feeling a strong resentment towards him. She'd resented him for going off to work every day, where he could have grown-up time and grown-up conversations while she got to stay home and clean up spilled milk and poopy diapers—yes, she thought, *I am most definitely not normal.*

The perspective of the super-sized families interviewed in the article obviously affected Modra in ways she still couldn't

comprehend. Perhaps it was the nurturing façade of the women, or was it the fact that she felt inadequate for not seeing the need within her to be a mother.

Besides glorifying the super-sized family, there was an especially snarly comment in the article that pricked Modra as she'd read it that still bothered her thoughts today. It was the insinuation that life meant nothing without children and the suggestion that a family was not a family without them. Modra believed the comment unfair and unnecessary. She reached over and squeezed her sleeping husband's hand and thought, *we're a family just you and I.*

Once again tired of the mental game her mind was using to torture her, she let out a deep breath and looked over at the clock on her nightstand allowing a few seconds for the time—2:58 AM—to finally come into focus. *Ugh! Too early to get out of bed,* she thought. “Please, please, please!” She pleaded with frustration, as she attempted to muffle her annoyance with her pillow before pulling the blanket up over her head, hoping in vain that sleep would magically come.

Sadly, Modra realized that she no longer needed her mother badgering her for grandchildren to make her doubt her decision. Her own thoughts were enough to drive her mad or pressure her until she changed her mind. She saw her manicurist's face flash before her, asking in her Mandarin accent, “You married fifteen years already.” This part was a statement, not a question. Then

she asked, “Why you don’t have babies?” Modra could still see the woman’s face as her smile faded and a look of concern replaced it. “Is something wrong with you?”

Why does everyone assume something is wrong with me? She wondered. Modra squeezed her eyes shut to erase the image. She should have seen it coming. Every time someone asked how long she had been married, the follow up question was always the same.

Kevin mercifully let out a snore causing Modra’s attention to shift away from the memory of her manicurist’s concerned glare.

“Maybe if I lie here with my eyes closed without moving...crap!” She stopped herself and exhaled loudly “I’ve tried that. It doesn’t work, and neither does talking to myself!” She concentrated on slowing her breathing and relaxing her body.

Not yet ready to get out of bed, she lay flat on her back and stared at the darkness. She imagined her mind, probing like a finger at different subjects. She thought about her life with Kevin, their fifteen year wedding anniversary, kids, home, NO KIDS, and then her disappointed mother’s face, all flashing by like a still-frame visual compounding the pressure in her chest. She absolutely hated feeling that way, but as today, the day of Kevin’s vasectomy, arrived anxiety was all she could feel. In fact, her life had become dominated by anxiety and guilt day-in

and day-out. At that moment the feeling was so intense that she felt as though someone were sitting on her chest making it difficult for her to breathe.

She leaned back against the headboard and let her thoughts drift back in time. It was already a couple of months since her family tore into her, and yet the wounds from those two days felt painfully fresh on her conscience and weighed just as heavily on her heart as the day it all happened. Modra believed it an injustice that her family mistook their well-intentioned considerations and turned them into a forum for their judgment. However, because her family was the way it was, close-knit and opinionated, both she and Kevin had felt no choice but to tell them about their life choice. They had somehow foolishly decided it would be best, out of respect for her parents, to break the news in person. In hindsight, it hadn't been their best decision.

The fear of telling her parents was paralyzing for her. She began preparing what to say and how to say it several weeks in advance. She had ultimately decided that just coming out and saying it: *Mom, Dad, Kevin and I have decided that we are not going to have children. We've tried in earnest for ten years and have decided to accept nature's ruling* would be the best method. During rehearsal, she would make her statement with confidence and determination. But then, she would undue her success by not shutting up. Inevitably, and very typical of

Modra, she would cower to her own guilt and tagalong one form of justification after another making her look weak and unsure. Each and every time Kevin would shake his head and place his hand over her mouth, reminding her that she need not say more. *What was it he would say? Oh, that's right. "Babe, you need to wait for their reaction and then respond accordingly. Don't give them more than you need to."* Kevin would ultimately find that it didn't matter how much or how little information they gave them, their response would still disappoint him.

Conversely, Modra wasn't surprised at all by the outcome of their visit. The expectation of tradition that Elena had of her daughters had been engrained in them since they were little girls. Modra understood that her life choice would appear shallow and insubstantial to her mother; that was in conjunction to the fact that historically she has never been quick enough to react to either of her parent's or her sibling's verbal challenges. The fact was that she always left herself vulnerable to their verbal assaults.

On the subject of children and not having them, she lacked the strength, courage, and conviction to defend herself, which she squarely blamed on her Catholic upbringing. Modra's conscience was laden with guilt and fear—it was always either her fear of regret or fear of guilt that guided her decision process. Without Kevin and his support, Modra would have caved to the pressures of her family that night or conformed long before.

Kevin, on the other hand, never having been on the receiving end of Modra's family, kept insisting that she was worrying about nothing. He had been naively confident that her family would be nothing but completely supportive. Kevin had even gone as far as to reason that Elena and Ray, Modra's parents, already had a sufficient number of grandchildren and that they couldn't possibly care about having more. Consequent to that visit, Modra doubts that her husband will ever again underestimate her family and its wrath.

Modra took advantage of Kevin sleeping soundly next to her, letting her eyes examine him as she wondered whether he would have been as relaxed and nonchalant if it had been his parents who were the demanding ones. Of course they weren't, and telling them was not even a concern for him. His family was quite a bit more on the left side of the flexible scale than Modra's would ever be. There was, to be sure, a small amount of disappointment when they heard the news, but nothing more. Their reaction had been the exact opposite of her family.

It seemed as though it had all just happened yesterday, but two months had already come and gone since that wretched visit. Adjusting her pillow behind her back she propped herself up and got comfortable as she went down memory lane. *The entire day had been a bad omen*, she recalled. It had started with some confusion at the airline ticket counter regarding the spelling of their last name which ultimately cost fifty dollars each, a ticket

re-issue, and a booking on the very next flight. Then, Modra had been randomly pulled out of the security line for a detailed pat down and inspection of her carry-on luggage. Kevin stood by waiting for her to be done with her pat-down feeling sorry for her. Once they had finally made it to the gate and it was time to board, they were notified that their flight would be delayed due to mechanical issues. And then, when they were finally en route, the turbulence was so severe that Modra wasn't sure whether her anxiety or the turbulence was the cause of her nausea. And of course, when they hit their cruising altitude and she was more than ready for a glass of wine to help with the anxiety, the pilot came on overhead instructing the flight attendants to remain seated for their own safety. *The minute we landed, we should have turned around and come right back home.*

When they arrived in Wenatchee, Washington, Modra's luggage never made it onto the carousel- apparently it was lost. Every time something went amiss, Modra would declare, "This is a bad sign Kevin. Maybe we should postpone telling my parents until after it's done." But Kevin wouldn't have it. "Stop it Mod. We're already here." He'd say to her lovingly. "Your family loves you. Most importantly I love you." He'd say as he caressed her hair. (He always touched her hair, her face or the small of her back. Once he admitted that he loved knowing that she was his and that by touching her it kept it real.) "Nobody is going to care that we chose not to bring another kid into this

world. Your folks have plenty of grandchildren and your brothers and sisters have enough nieces and nephews for all of us.” He had looked into her eyes with every bit of confidence in the world, “trust me babe, you’re just over reacting again.” He said brushing a brown strand of hair away from her eyes.

Since that visit, Modra has on occasion wondered if Kevin had become disillusioned with her family. In the past, he saw how the family network filtered through the “happenings” and “events” of the family and actually thought it was pretty neat the way everybody chimed in, “It’s a family democracy!” he declared once upon a time. He has since learned that it is not as neat when it’s your “happenings and events” everyone is weighing in on.

Her sister Mikaela had been the first to weigh in when she said, “Modra, of course you need to have children. *It* is the best thing for both you and Kevin, not to mention your marriage.” Modra listened to her younger sister’s advice and offered no response. She had none because she was of the exact opposite opinion, but had no worldly idea as to how to begin to defend it. Too many of their friends were empty- nester-divorcees. Somewhere in the shuffle of their lives, after raising their children and sending them off to college, they looked at their husbands across the silence of their now empty home and realized that the only thing they had in common anymore had just gone off to school. With more and more relationships

deteriorating around them, Modra privately credited her happiness with Kevin to their childless status and knew better than to express her views out loud to her siblings.

Had she not worried about what her family thought of her, she could have ended their meddling years ago, instead she had stood in her parent's home like a spider caught in its own web. The entire night went like a bad dream and she couldn't help feeling as though she had been backed into a corner. Of course, that was because she had such different beliefs from her siblings that anything she said as self-defense would be misconstrued and become more harmful to their cause than helpful. On many occasions she's wondered why, or from where, she acquired such different values from her siblings. They were all raised in the same household, by the same parents who, after 48 years, still had a strong marriage. Their parents promoted strong Catholic family values, values that required getting married and having children.

Mikaela's retorts continued throughout their visit; she said things like, "I mean, if you're not going to have kids, then why bother getting married at all?" With pursed lips, Modra stood feeling defeated before her younger, and smaller, sister. Her mind had glazed over what she was saying as it vividly entertained an illusion of her boldly responding, "*Maybe because I was young when I got married and I didn't know that Kevin and I would enjoy our life together so much that we just*

wouldn't see an added benefit to our life from having children. Is that so wrong?" But at the time, it didn't seem like an argument that she could muster up the courage defend—the words never left her lips. *Argh!*, she grumbled, *I need to learn to defend myself.* Modra rolled over in bed knowing that her mental regurgitation of that visit was only exasperating her further.

During their visit, every one of Modra's siblings felt compelled to share their disapproval, whether it was warranted or not. *Family is hard*, she thought to herself rubbing her eyes with the palm of her hands. She drew a deep breath, letting it reach deep inside for the knot in her throat before letting it out in a long slow exhale. Her eyes stared at the darkness above her in despair. "*Two months since that visit.*" She whispered, "*two months have not been long enough.*"

Every time she recalled the disapproval on their faces she wanted to crumble and cave in. That visit truly challenged her will and left Modra on the verge of tears for an entire day until they were back home and a panicked Kevin talked her off the "ledge" reminding her that her family was entitled to their opinions, but at the end of the day, they were the ones having to live with their decision. As far as Kevin was concerned, he was sure of what he wanted and had no fear of guilt or regret.

Aside from Elena, the other source of Modra's anxiety was her older brother Rick. His words were cruel and left the deepest

wounds. Rick was self-righteous and determined. He thought of himself as the dominant male in the family—the self-proclaimed patriarch. He began his oration by establishing his credentials, “I have been married for twenty years to the same woman. We have two wonderful children, and we go to church together every Sunday as a family.” *God he is so pompous sometime.* As he spoke, all she heard was blah, blah, blah. He continued, “You know that I’m usually an easy going guy who would rather stay out of your business,” *What crap!* There is nothing easy going about Rick, and that day, he had really laid into her.

The memory of him cornering her in their mother’s kitchen, away from Kevin, triggered a rush of anxiety and anger that fed her body with adrenaline. At that point, with adrenaline pulsing through her, she knew there wasn’t a prayer she would be going back to sleep. Her eyes were wide open to the darkness around her, but her mind was still stuck on that dreadful family visit, and her brother Rick. She groaned in frustration and rolled onto her side bringing her knees into her chest. Rick, wouldn’t leave her thoughts, she could still hear him, “I don’t know how it is that you are so different from the rest of us, but you need to remember who raised you and what values are important in this family. Do you think that living a selfish life is meaningful? What are you thinking making mom suffer like this?” It was obvious he had no intention of letting her speak, “Your life is meaningless without children and everything that you are will be

gone once you're dead. *Regret* is the only thing that you are going to get out of this ridiculous empty life choice of yours." He had been about to turn and walk away, when he paused and added, "You better hope Kevin never leaves you, because if he does, it's only going to be you, lonely you." He looked at her as if he were trying to see something in her eyes and said, "What type of woman doesn't want children?" With obvious disapproval he turned and walk away leaving her speechless and so emotionally fatigued that she had to scout for Kevin and leave. Kevin had been in the midst of his own discussion with Julie before Modra had taken him by the arm and rescued him. Later, when she told him what Rick said, Kevin seemed shocked and angry. He had clenched his jaw so tight, she was afraid he might burst the newly visible blood vessel that ran down the side of his neck.

It would definitely be some time before Modra or Kevin could forgive, much less forget the memory of Rick or Elena's harsh words. In all fairness to her mother, Modra rationalized, she never saw it coming. Two of her three daughters had grown up, gotten married, and had given her grandchildren. How could Modra blame her for expecting the same from her eldest daughter?

It had taken Elena no more than fifteen minutes upon their arrival for her to skillfully turn the conversation to the subject of grandchildren. She began with the traditional Elena-patented

covert-data-mining operation. “We could start with a glass of wine to relax . . . or is champagne in order?” Her eyes had bounced back and forth between Kevin and Modra with anticipation and excitement.

“A glass of wine would be just perfect.” Kevin responded curtly to make it clear that they were not pregnant and there was so no need to celebrate or further pursue the subject.

Elena intentionally caused her entire body to slacken as she exhaled out loud with what seemed an overwhelming force of disappointment. Then, in her “whisper” voice she said, just loud enough for everyone to hear of course, “I’ll just put this back on the rack until your next visit.” She paused, looked at the champagne bottle, then as if it were an afterthought she wondered out loud, “Hmm,” exhaling dramatically, “the champagne may no longer be good anyhow.” Modra still recalled the flagrancy with which her mother held up the Champaign bottle and actually looked for an expiration date and said in a guilt inducing tone, “I have been waiting for so long to open it. Oh, look at all the dust around it, how embarrassing.” This she said in an all-out Elena over dramatic fashion.

As she reflected on that evening, Modra could still clearly recollect her mother’s instant change from the welcoming hostess to the disillusioned mother/wannabe grandmother. She and Kevin were definitely partly to blame for her behavior; how could they have missed the misleading message their impromptu

visit must have sent. They had been caught off guard by the way Elena had welcomed them home with such exuberance, immediately overwhelming them with her happiness and excitement. She had continuously emphasized her excitement over their “sudden” need to visit.

After all of their preparations, it had never once occurred to them that their sudden need to visit the family could be misconstrued as an announcement of a coming baby rather than the exact opposite. It wasn't until Elena expressed her disappointment that Kevin and Modra had come to realize their mistake. Modra could clearly remember standing in her mother's living room as her mind raced a million miles an hour, processing her mother's reaction to their not being pregnant, and then freaking out when she considered how much worse her reaction would be when they actually told her they were never having children. It broke her heart to know that she would be breaking her mother's heart again that night.

Her heart still races and her palms still sweat when she thinks of her mother's fury. Ray, Modra's father, had stood silently by his daughter and son-in-law without saying a word. He, too, had been rendered speechless by his wife's dramatic display of disappointment. He would only shrug his shoulders and place his arm around his daughter in an attempt to remind her that, as in the past, her mother's fury would pass. She considered her Mother's small 4'9" stature and wondered why

she allowed her to make her so nervous, and it startled her to see how much she seemed to intimidate her father as well. When Elena called out from the kitchen, Modra was certain she felt his arm stiffen before finding the courage to excuse himself and make his way to toward her. *My mother is a sly calculating lion caged in that small frame*, she shivered as the image of her father's apprehensive walk lingered.

“Ray, can you come help me with the wine glasses? I was ready to pour champagne, not wine.”

Kevin only shook his head and rolled his eyes at Elena's guilt layering ways. He then took his wife into his protective arms, brushed her cheek with the back of his hand and said, “I love you babes. All I want in my life is you. Be strong, it will all be over soon.”

Modra had been freaking out by then but Kevin either couldn't see it or he refused to acknowledge it. She had stood quivering in his arms wondering if he truly didn't understand how much worse this would soon become. Elena's reaction so far had been solely from them admitting they weren't pregnant, they hadn't even told her they were never going to give her any grandchildren.

She vividly recalled the look of annoyance he directed at his mother-in-law. He must have had to employ every ounce of patience with Elena that night. His color had changed to a hue of red, his eyes had become a stormy gray, and his jaw was

clenched so tight, he had actually complained of a headache the next day. His six three slender frame towered over Elena, but she never cowered. She nipped at his heels at every opportunity with snide comments embedded in smiles and pleasantness. Kevin coped with Elena's nipping as he would a pestilent pet by ignoring her guilt inducing and manipulating ways. She held absolutely no sway over him.

Once Elena was out of earshot, he whispered into his wife's ear. "Babe," Modra could still remember the way he had used his soothing voice to broach the subject, "we need to tell your parents now before the rest of the clan shows up." Modra remembered wanting to throw-up the minute those words left his lips. She had hoped they could wait until after dinner, once everyone had gone home. It was bad enough to confront their mother, but to deal with the whole clan seemed suicidal! She preferred her siblings heard the news after they were safely back at their hotel, or even better, on their flight home.

"Kev," she whispered wanting to negotiate her way out of their self-induced duty, but the determination on his face worked against her resolve and she fell apart, and whimpered, "I've changed my mind." She fumbled keeping her gaze on her hands as they held his, "I've decided I'd prefer if... I would much rather we just not." "She had chickened out."

Thinking back on that moment, she now wished she would have pressured Kevin harder. They should have dropped the

whole thing and not said a thing until after the vasectomy and everything was final. Instead, they opened Pandora's Box and have been plagued with guilt and regret since that visit. *My family is truly inexhaustible*, she admitted to no one but the darkness.

"No. We need to get this over with now. I can't wait any longer; we need to tell your mother." He held both of her hands and faced her as he spoke, hoping to reassure her. Sometimes Modra finds herself replaying his words trying to remember his exact tone, wondering if there was a hint of pleasure in there. And if there was, who could blame him for wanting to spite his mother-in-law, especially one as fierce as Elena.

"God, this is hard. She is going to be so disappointed." Modra whispered to Kevin who kept the resolve in his eyes as he took her head in his hands and kissed her forehead before enveloping her in his protective arms. "But I know you're right, if we tell them now it will be easier to tell the rest of the clan when they get here. Mom is the hardest part."

Every time she reflects on that day and how much the fear of disappointing her mother had paralyzed her entire being, it made her sick all over again. *I can't believe how much I worry about disappointing her! I'm thirty-eight. I need to get over it already*, she scolded herself.

The fear of telling her parents that she and Kevin would not be giving them grandchildren caused some curious things to

happen. Modra's stomach had turned and tied itself into a knot like never before causing stomach issues for weeks to follow. The worst of it occurred as she stood in her parent's home preparing herself for what needed to happen next and a feeling of desperation washed over her as she suddenly realized that any argument she made for remaining childless would fly in the face of the family core values. There wasn't a thing she could say to defend herself lest it be incendiary and provoke her mother's wrath further. Despair had completely engulfed her. Modra could now see the defeat she had felt on that day; she had lost the strength she needed to argue her side before it had all begun. If it hadn't been for Kevin who stood so firmly by her side she would have conceded her own core feelings and given into the pressure.

No one made anything easy on them that evening. By the time the last word left Modra's lips, there was nothing but anger and disapproval on her mother's face. Modra saw her mother's emotional shift and hated that she looked at her with the same look of displeasure she had endured when she was a young girl, a young girl who admittedly would contradict her mother's wishes from what clothes to wear to what school to go to. Of course, Modra wasn't doing this to spite her mother, but it was obvious that Elena believed just that. It was total and complete deflation that Elena so brilliantly expressed the minute Kevin confirmed they were not pregnant. And then, it became total

chaos on top of total deflation the minute they explained the true purpose of their visit—NO GRANDCHILDREN, EVER!

The appearance of disapproval and anger slowly dissolved as Elena regrouped and regained her composure. With a blink, the anger in her brown eyes disappeared and complete composure was re-instituted. Silence hung in the room and no one dared to be the first to speak. Modra casually sipped her wine as she studied her mother's face waiting for a sudden outburst of anger or something. Instead, Elena excused herself saying she needed to step away from the situation for a moment; however, what Elena actually did was excuse herself so she could call in the re-enforcements. She called Julie, her favorite daughter, first.

Julie later recounted to Modra that Elena had called her sobbing and told her that she felt robbed and heartbroken. According to Julie, she had actually pleaded with her to come over right away and talk some sense into her oldest sister. And so, as the family grapevine notoriously goes, Julie called Ray, Ray called Mikaela, and Mikaela called Jose. It took all of twenty minutes for the Mejia clan to cross the Wenatchee River and arrive at Ray and Elena's door step to join forces and uphold their mothers will.

“Hey sister!” Julie's bubbly personality had burst into the room. Casually, she walked over to Kevin and gave him a hug as she asked no one in particular, “What's new?”

It still irked Modra to know that she had known knew exactly what was “new” and had chosen to enter the room pretending to be completely oblivious.

“Hey!” Modra responded reaching for her sister and giving her a kiss on the cheek. At the time, Modra had been thrilled and relieved that Julie, her favorite sister, was the first to arrive. She had foolishly believed that she could count on her to be a fair mediator—she would be sorely disappointed.

Julie has always been Modra’s favorite sister; of course, it’s the same free spirit and easy going personality that also made her their mother’s favorite-go-to-faithful-daughter. Julie is a ready and willing fighter for your cause, if you get to her first. She has strong beliefs that mirror their mother’s as do the rest of the siblings, but she can also be persuaded to use common sense and genuinely tries to see things from other’s perspectives. She had been Modra’s only potential ally, up until the point when Elena got to her first.

“New, nothing’s new.” Kevin quickly chimed in to let Julie know he would be there and wouldn’t allow any ganging up on Modra. He wasn’t as excited about Julie’s early arrival as Modra was. She wasn’t supposed to be there for another hour and he had planned it that way to allow Elena and Ray plenty of time to process the news. Frankly, the turn of events gave him a bad inclination. He had rightly suspected that Julie had been summoned by Elena and was in on her plot. “So Julie, Why do

you ask?” he’d said as he crossed his arms and stood in a defensive pose. Sadly, Julie confirmed he had been right the minute she glanced at Elena for encouragement.

“Well,” Julie began, brushing off Kevin’s, thus far, unprovoked attitude, “If nothing is new, then why does everyone seem so edgy and irritated?” She was digging in and Elena’s grin said she approved. Her eyes glazed over everyone in the room, as if waiting for a response, and then stopped on her father willing him to contradict Kevin’s denial.

Ray shook his head; he knew a storm was forming in his living room. “I’m going out for a walk.” he said without looking at Julie.

Modra had become confused over her father’s sudden departure. Her heart sank to the floor as she watched him leave the room. She could still picture herself watching him walk away from her, hoping he would glance back so she could get a measure of the disappointment in his eyes, but he spared her that.

“What’s new?” Elena said with all the politeness in the world. She had been pretending to be busy setting the table in the dining room across from the living room where everyone then stood. All eyes were on her at that moment dreading what she was about to say. Even Julie’s face had given away her concern. “Well, I’ll tell you what’s *new*.” She said condescendingly as she polished a butter knife with her hot breath, “your sister Modra has decided she’s not *interested* in having children. *That’s*

what's new.”

Modra felt Julie's eyes turn to her as if waiting for her to speak, but thankfully Kevin came to the rescue. Both Modra and Julie noticed Kevin's body stiffen in response to Elena's words and he then retorted, “*We, Elena, We* have decided.” He pointed at himself and Modra, wanting to make his point crystal clear, but Elena seemed to miss it. “Elena, Modra and I decided together. This is what we both want.” The glare he directed at her as he spoke actually made her hesitate—Elena never hesitates. Kevin's gruff tone towards her had obviously thrown her off balance.

Until that day, Elena had always taken care to be nothing but “sugar and spice, and everything nice” towards her sons-in-Law. The daughters-in-law got an all-together different treatment, but the sons in law were cherished. Even on that day, when her son-in-law was accepting co-responsibility for a decision she strongly condemned, she refused to allow him any responsibility. For the first time in fifteen years Kevin was getting a sense of why his wife referred to her mother as Mighty-Might.

Elena paused for a moment then put down the knife, “Oh Kevin, you don't have to defend Modra on this. We already know how selfish she can be. She's been that way since she was five.” It had surprised Modra that Elena could believe that somehow she was able to bewitch Kevin into arbitrarily agreeing

to a childless lifestyle. She was also surprised that Julie had stood by and said nothing in her defense. In the end, it didn't matter; Elena had more to say and nothing Modra or Kevin said had any effect on her opinion. Her disapproval became more and more obvious with every word, "I can't imagine what your parents will say when you tell them." She was again directing her scorn toward Modra, "you'll be disappointing his mother as well, have you thought about that?"

"Elena, stop it." Kevin said breathing flames. "We flew here to tell you that we decided *together* not to have kids as a courtesy, not to let you." Thankfully, Kevin never finished what he was going to say, Rick and Mikaela, Modra's older brother and younger sister, interrupted as they walked in the front door.

"What? Why aren't you having kids?" Mikaela asked looking perplexed.

And so the evening went. Total chaos erupted. The only exception to the night had been her father. He later, and privately, came to the hotel where she and Kevin were to stay the night. They were sitting at the bar nursing their wounds with a Manhattan in hand when her father walked in, with worried eyes, searching for his daughter. When he spotted them bellied up to the bar, his lips gave a hint of a smile and he began walking towards them.

Modra noticed Ray's reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He was charging towards them as if on a mission.

“Oh god.” was all she could say as she reached for her husband’s leg and gave it a squeeze, begging him to turn around and look. A worn look flashed across Kevin’s face when he noticed Ray before he replaced it with a forced smile. He liked Ray a lot and hated to make a bigger mess of their relationship by continuing the conversation. Despite everything, he liked his in-laws and would prefer to continue to have them as friends rather than enemies.

Ray gave them both a hug when he saw them and mumbled, “Boy, after that, I was sure I’d find you guys here.” He patted Kevin’s shoulder and sat in the empty seat next to Modra, putting her between them. “I’ll tell you, this is exactly where I would be too if I were you.”

“Yeah, that was hairy today.” Kevin admitted sounding weary.

She could still remember the tattered look that hung around Kevin that night. His five o’clock shadow cropped up around his strong jaw and his blue eyes were a deep glossy blue from all the traveling and arguing they had done that day, not to mention, he had been on his second Manhattan by the time Ray showed up.

“I think hairy is putting it politely.” Ray said, summoning the bartender with his hand as he spoke. He ordered his traditional drink, which was a shot of the best tequila the bartender had to offer. Modra cringed when she saw the brand, but said nothing. Her father is a sipper. He believes that a good

drink should be sipped not shot down. Unfortunately, good tequila is rarely carried in hotels and restaurants, especially in Wenatchee Washington, making her father's sipping difficult to watch.

When his drink finally arrived, he gratefully accepted it and took an immediate sip as if it would help calm him. He had obviously come to say something, but instead of just saying it, he chose to sit for a few minutes, perhaps still formulating how to say what he had come to say. She didn't know what to expect. Her father sat swirling his drink, unaware that he was causing his daughters stomach to turn with anticipation. She can still picture her father's brown leathery fingers wrapped around his glass as his eyes focused on the clear liquid swooshing within. The creases that run across his forehead, just below his widow's peak, had formed and become deep from thought.

The silence between them had become almost too much to bear, especially for Modra. She wanted to jump in and break the silence; what she really wanted to do was to justify herself to her father in hopes of lessening his disappointment, but a look from Kevin stopped her. It had been as though he knew what she was preparing to do. His blue eyes glared at her and said, "*You need to wait for their reaction and then respond accordingly. Don't give them more than you need to.*" So she anxiously sat and waited for her father to speak first.

"This is your life," Ray finally said, mercifully breaking the

silence, “and your life is *your life*.” His tone was stern as if wanting to emphasize the importance of his point. “You’re the ones that will have to live with whatever decisions you make.” Ray didn’t look up from his drink as he spoke, “I’ll be the first to admit it. I have five kids and to be honest, I don’t believe that kids are all they’re cracked up to be.” He lifted his eyes from the bottom of his glass and looked at Modra. He gave her a loving smile that brought tears of relief to her eyes. When he reached over and placed his calloused hand over hers, it was as though the water main had broken. “Mija, you’re always worried about what people think. Stop that. You’re a good person and you have a good husband. I want you to learn to just live your life and be happy.” She nodded at him as the tears streamed down her cheeks. She was so grateful that night for her father’s support, and even now in bed, two months later, her eyes were welled and tears were again running down her cheeks.

Like a surreal painting embedded in her thoughts, she recalled the beautiful visual of the trees on her father’s cherry farm as they’d driven in towards her parent’s home that evening. The trees were silhouetted against the moon. They had seemed lost in despair with their leaves all gone and their naked branches weighted down by big white icicles. Modra now thought of them as a beautify misery. And later that same evening, as they had driven away with their shattered spirits, she stared at those trees again and noticed the way the wind bent the branches this

way and that—yet they never broke. *It's hard now*, she remembered thinking, *but like those cherry trees, spring will come again.*

Her thoughts left her family and traveled to the woman she'd met on the flight home that very next day. Kevin had sacked out the minute he was in his seat; grateful they would again have the state of Oregon between them and Modra's family. Modra took the center seat between Kevin and a woman in her late forties who introduced herself as Carol. They spent the greater of the two-hour-long flight engaged in conversation about food, people, and, of course, the ever-constant rain that drenches the city of Seattle. Modra had genuinely enjoyed the distraction that their meaningless conversation provided until the point at which it segued towards the inevitable subject of motherhood.

"I hope I'm not being too personal, and please feel free not to answer, but I just cannot help being curious about your age." Carol's eyes had appraised Modra as she spoke.

"Oh, of course I don't mind." Modra said thinking nothing of it, "I'll be thirty eight in April," And in traditional Modra fashion of providing more information than was requested, she leaned back and added, "This sleeping beauty is my husband Kevin." Kevin was completely out with his mouth hanging open as the occasional light snore escaped. Modra smiled, "that whole action he's got going on," she said as she pointed at him with her

thumb, “*that* is the direct result from a visit with my family.”

Carol leaned forward, peaked at Kevin, and smiled. “Wow, they really did wear him out didn’t they?” Modra responded with a big nod. Carol then sat back and began reading the on-board flight magazine provided by the airline; Modra took that as a cue and assumed the conversation was over so she opened her book and began reading when the woman spoke again, “Do you... do you have children?”

Modra froze. She didn’t look up from the book though she was no longer reading. The way Carol had asked the question, it seemed almost as if she actually debated whether she should ask the question at all. Carol’s hesitation and tone had come across as though she were aware of the turmoil occurring within Modra, wanting to warn her through her own experience, though realistically there was absolutely no way that could be.

The subject of parenthood seemed to be dogging her and she wondered if there was some sort of garlic necklace she could wear to fend it off. Modra hesitated wondering how or if she should answer the question. She closed her book and placed it on her lap, stalling as she tried to think of a way that to answer the question without eliciting any additional follow up questions. Understandably, she wasn’t really interested in going into an explanation with a complete stranger about why she and Kevin had decided to remain childless. So, with that in mind, she was inclined to ignore the question; however, she was inexplicably

curious about the woman's reason for asking such a personal question in the manner that she had.

For years Kevin and Modra have been assaulted with questions about whether or not they were going to have children. The questions were usually asked in an accusatory brusque manner, but there was something different about Carol and the way she had asked the question that hadn't irritated Modra as much as it had intrigued her so she decided to answer her. *The difference*, she now thought to herself with a clearer perspective, *was that Carol's question was laced with what seemed like a large dose of angst and regret, similar to myself and what I had been feeling.*

"No." she said replied to Carol without elaborating further.

"Oh." Carol replied in a different tone that Modra couldn't quite grasp its full meaning. "Are you newlyweds?"

Modra recalled the way that Carol had kept her eyes on her while she waited for her answer. *Kev, please wake up and rescue me*, she'd thought, but when she had quickly looked over at him, he remained dead to the world.

"No, not...I guess we're not...newlyweds, I mean." Modra said trying not to sound annoyed by the direct interrogation. "We'll be married fifteen years on April 5th." *Now why did I feel the need to tell her exactly how long we have been married?* She scolded herself. In a valiant effort to change the direction of the conversation, she asked Carol, "how about you? Do you have

children?” *Ugh!* Modra now thought as she sat up in bed, *I can't believe how badly that backfired.*

“Wow. You’ve been married for fifteen years and you have no children yet?” Carol’s tone was like a fire alarm—run, run, run!

“Wow, yeah.” Was all Modra could muster. She had been caught by surprise. She felt as though she were being condemned by the total stranger. It turned out that she was, though Carol had been fighting her own demons and now, looking back, Modra could allow that her reasoning was justified. *She didn't want me to make the same mistake she had made, she thought, but what seemed to escape Carol, and still escapes everyone else, is that my regret and my guilt comes from my not wanting to have children.*

“I’m sorry. I’m transferring my issues to you.” Carol closed her eyes and dropped her head into her palms. Her eyes looked as though she had already lived through a hundred years of loneliness with no end in sight. She said, “I don’t mean to get into your personal life.” She seemed to pause and gather her resolve before she continued, “I’m forty-eight.” She placed a small hand on her chest, “I flew to Seattle to spend some time away and clear my head.” She looked at Modra kindly, “Up until four months ago I had been married to the same man for close to twenty-three years.” *Why she is telling me this,* Modra had wondered as the woman continued, “I loved him and I

thought he loved me.” She adjusted her seat belt and dropped her voice so only Modra could hear. “We didn’t have children.” She paused again before looking over to see if Kevin was listening. When she saw that he was still asleep, she continued. “It wasn’t that we couldn’t have children. It was that he didn’t want any.” She took a deep breath and let her shoulders drop when she exhaled, “How could I have been so stupid?”

Modra knew that if she just stayed quiet the conversation would end faster, but she simply couldn’t help herself. She had to ask, “So you actually wanted children?”

“And now more than ever.” She said giving Modra a sad smile.

“Ouch.” Modra said unable to stop herself again from asking a follow up question, “So is that why you are no longer married?”

Carol’s eyes welled up and it seemed as though she couldn’t find her voice. Modra saw the distress her question caused her and immediately offered a sincere apology, “I’m sorry Carol. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” Modra felt horrible after asking such a deep and personal question. Here she had fought with her entire family the day before for interfering in her life and then she turns and does the same thing to perfect stranger.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I’ll most likely never see you again. And if my story can help you do what you need to do before it’s too late for you, then all my tears are worth it.” She said as she

placed her pale hand over Modra's beige hand. "Our marriage..." she paused to find her words and push the knot in her throat down, "our marriage is over because he's having a baby with a younger woman."

"Oh." Modra found herself having to process what she had just heard, "Wow. I am so sorry." She was completely lost for words. *Oh god. Modra thought, who are you? Are you working for my mother?* She looked around the cabin at the other passengers to make sure her mother was not on the flight. *Why on earth are you telling me all of this?* She thought looking over at Kevin wondering if he could ever hurt her that way. *No, she thought, he's not that kind of man.* Modra politely glanced at her watch wondering how much time she had left imprisoned in her seat. This was torture, but how to get away from it?

Carol must have noticed her discomfort. Suddenly she seemed embarrassed and said, "Oh. I'm sorry, perhaps I shouldn't be sharing so much personal history with you." The genuine quality of her apology instantly made Modra regret having glanced at her watch. Carol's large green eyes were surrounded by thick brown eyelashes remained focused on Modra as if keen to her discomfort. She added with determination, "it's just that...well, when you said you were, or is it that you're turning thirty eight?"

A minute of silence passed and Carol kept her gaze on Modra.

“Oh,” Modra said realizing she was expecting an answer, “I’ll be thirty-eight in April. April seventh is my birthday.”

“Right, you did say April.” She exhaled, “you said thirty-eight and then no children, well,” she said shrugging, “it just made me think of me and well... I really am sorry.” She was whispering again, “I just can’t believe that he’s having a baby with another woman after I had asked him for one for so long.” Her tears returned. This was obviously a fresh wound, lying on the surface.

“It’s alright.” Modra assured her and once again, against her better judgment, she allowed her curiosity get the best of her and asked, “So he just changed his mind from one day to the next? You were married for what was it twenty three years and he woke up one day and said he’d changed his mind?” Carol nodded to confirm as Modra continued, “Is it possible ... to change your mind? I would think that a person either wants to be a parent or not—Period. I can’t imagine that you can make yourself want something that doesn’t interest you.” Her own biggest fear is that one day her body will have a mind of its own and demand what it can no longer have. This fear and her guilty conscience are the reason she privately worries about the consequence of not pursuing a baby at all costs and through all means. Luckily she had been lost in her own train of thought and completely missed the queer look Carol gave her for her comment.

“I wish I knew, but I don’t know the reason that caused him to re-consider being a father.” She said slumping into her seat again. “All I know is that it’s *not* too late for him and *it is* for me.” She shrugged. “I’m forty eight and I just can’t tell you how incomplete I feel right now. Every time I see a baby my body just goes crazy.” She looked at Modra apologetically, “I know I sound crazy but I swear my hands tingle and my heart races. It’s like that feeling when you have an adrenaline rush and you need something to satisfy it. You get excited to get something, but in my case I don’t have the option anymore. It’s too late.” She said as her lips pouted and quivered with sadness, “it’s just so cruel.”

Oddly, Carol’s miserable situation had left Modra feeling guiltier and more ashamed than she had from the events of the prior day. She felt callous and simple minded because as Carol’s thin bottom lip had been quivering from the pain she felt, Modra had sat in her seat thinking that Carol should be glad to be childless now that she’s was going to be divorced. A child, in Modra’s opinion, would have made it more painful and would have complicated the divorce further.

With that, the pilot came overhead thanking everyone for their business. As she deplaned, Carol turned to Modra in the aisle and said, “It’s very important that you do whatever it is that makes *your* life complete because there are some regrets that stay with you forever.”

Now, lying in bed, she couldn’t help but wonder what Carol

had meant when she said *complete*. What did *complete* mean to her? Who gets to set the standard? Is it those who say that if you don't have children you exist in a void? *Why do those people have such big soap boxes and such loud voices?* She wondered.

The socially expected *standard*, as Kevin and Modra had gathered, was that individuals either move forward as a group with their peers (be single, get married, have children, retire, travel, then die) or, like an out-of-control Ferris wheel, they get flung out without a pause, and the wheel keeps spinning without them.

A few years back she and Kevin had decided to make a list of all the events they would miss out on by not having children: baptisms, graduations, Little League, PTA, etc. They never thought they would have to make a list of friends to give up, but as the years passed and their friends had children, they inevitably lost touch. It was life at a fork: The masses go right, a few go left, and only a few of those that go left do so by choice.

She groaned against her thoughts. *Why are my thoughts here again?* She asked herself. *Why am I so afraid of what I believe is right for me?* She thought wishing she could stop thinking about it all. Her eyes darted around in the darkness, visiting every corner of the dark bedroom as her thoughts went from one memory to another. Her over active mind reminded her of little sports cars coming from all directions, all racing toward each other for maximum impact.

“Great, I’m one of those women who freaks out with age.” She said feeling exasperated, making herself roll over so she could bury her face in the pillow. “Is this it?” Modra asked the emptiness around her, “Am I starting menopause at thirty-eight?” She said and wondered if insomnia was an indicator.

Kevin let out a half snore before turning over. Modra stayed as still as she could hoping she hadn’t woken him. After a few minutes when his snoring resumed its stable rhythm and she felt confident that he was still asleep, she was again able to relax her own breathing and let her mind wander again.

The word “selfish” parked in her thoughts bringing back, once again, that dreadful night when Kevin and Modra mistakenly believed they had an obligation to tell her family in person. Modra recalled being pulled into her mother’s bathroom by Mikaela as she’d said, “I keep running through what your life will be like in my mind and I just want to make sure to tell you what I see so that later in life when you’re longing for children and it’s too late, I won’t feel regret for not having been honest with you.”

The small petite figure of Mikaela’s 5’3” stature doesn’t due her lions roar any justice. She was built with a strong personality and it serves her well in life. She always says what needs to be said never bothering with falsehoods or delusions.

“I just don’t understand how you can be so willing to lead such an empty life. Do you realize that for the rest of your life

there will be nothing but the echoes of your footsteps to welcome you home every day?” without waiting for a reply, she continued, “Have you honestly considered how all of your life accomplishments will essentially be meaningless because they will benefit no one but you, and they will die with you.” There was so much sincerity in Mikaela’s voice that Modra had a difficult time being angry with her sister. She hated her words but understood her genuine concern—and, as a matter of fact, YES! She had thought of that, but decided not to respond, allowing her to continue, “Your only purpose in life will be the shallowness of you and the selfish life you’ve chosen.”

Modra had been willing to allow Mikaela to say her peace without losing her temper until she muttered that last sentence. Modra was tired of being accused of being selfish—she was everything but selfish. Selfish, in Modra’s view, would be to have a baby when she knew she would be happier without one.

“Mikaela, have you not heard a word we’ve said all night.” Even then, with all the anger and frustration Modra felt inside, she struggled with how honest to be when defending herself. “We’ve done nothing to prevent ourselves from having children, we’ve been trying for ten years, but it hasn’t happened. It’s just not meant to be for us.”

Mikaela looked at Modra with disbelief in her eyes, “Oh, don’t give me that, you have options. You’re just choosing to play dumb and pretending that In Vitro and other options don’t

exist for you”

Mikaela had the truth of it and Modra couldn't rebut. She and Kevin had both decided against all alternatives because they both sincerely hoped to remain childless. The whole charade of trying but not succeeding was for the sake of Modra's conscience; after so many years of trying, they were both pretty sure they wouldn't succeed without the help of the medical industry, but Modra wasn't prepared to admit this out loud.

Julie, the youngest of the three sisters, used a different tactic. She chose guilt and fear over labeling. “Have you thought about what would happen if one day, god forbid, Kevin died young and left you here all alone to dwell on how much more full your life would be if you only had children to come see you?” Julie's large hazel eyes, her pouty lips and soft brow had oozed concern as she spoke. “You are seven years younger than he is. I mean, it is possible.”

Julie, of all people, had truly managed to put Modra over the edge. She was the one sister who should have been supportive and understanding. Instead, she used their mother's method of guilt and fear to wear Modra down into submission. As she thought about all of the opinions and advice she and Kevin had received throughout the years, either from friends or perfect strangers, Modra suddenly found herself overwhelmed by the sensation of being in a pressure cooker.

“*What!*” She turned onto her back and rammed the pillow

into her face. *“What is driving this mental madness? I don’t understand. We’ve talked about this and I know I’m ok with all of this.”* She tossed in bed again as a new fear washed over her and she began to worry that her unconscious was trying to tell her something. She had to pause and take a deep breath because she knew she was standing at the door of a nervous breakdown and all that needed to happen was for the door to crack open.

“No . . . no, no.” she assured herself, “No second thoughts and no nervous breakdowns.” She wanted to laugh or scream, do whatever it would take to get rid of her thoughts.

She turned and watched Kevin while he slept wishing she could be just as peacefully asleep right next to him. Defeated, she leaned over and left a kiss on his forehead. She slid her socks on, padded across the bedroom on the hardwood floor, through the hallway, and down the stairs where she stopped to look at the travel photos that hung along the wall. With every picture she passed, she couldn’t help but wonder how a baby would have changed it all. When she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, she looked around and took in their home.

“We would have to move.” She said, letting her eyes travel around their home. “We have an entertaining home not a family home.” She wondered how differently the home would be furnished if there were children occupying it and looked around picturing toys strewn about the living room, bottles, pacifiers etc..., when she realized she was attempting to picture a baby in

their already established life.

The architect of their home focused on the entertaining potential of the home. He gave a generous amount of square footage to the main floor, making it an open floor plan and placing it on top of the garage, providing a sweeping view of the vineyards below. The entire area was one huge rectangle with fourteen foot ceilings and large windows surrounding the room. The kitchen and dining room sat at the far end of the room from where she stood, while the living room happened immediately at the bottom of the stairs. The most inspiring and beloved part of the home happened to be the wide wraparound porch that hugged the entire home and provided an area for respite.

“Yes mom, this is not a suitable home for a baby, and we are not suitable parents.” She said to the memory of her mother.

Shaken by her own admission of being unsuitable parents, she slapped her hand to her forehead and shook her head. *What am I thinking? There will be no babies and no selling of this home. And, Of course we would make suitable parents... if we had to.* Disappointed in herself again, she focused her attention on the kitchen and marched herself into it, but she still couldn't escape the memory of the day her mother first saw the home and declared, “This is a beautiful home, but it's not practical for children. You won't be able to see your daughter playing in the front yard from your windows” Elena had stood along the wall of windows on her tippy toes trying to look over the porch to the

grass area below.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, I can’t think about this anymore. I need to let it go already.” She said deciding that she needed to be stern with herself. “Mod, stop all of this madness right now and focus on making the coffee.” She exhaled, regrouped, and turned her attention to doing just that. Unaware that she was doing it again, she took the coffee scoop and scooped it into the tin canister and declared as she poured the first scoop into the coffee filter, “Anyway...It’s too late.” Second scoop, “I’m too old.” Third scoop, “today’s the vasectomy, I’m out of time.” But with every re-affirmation of her and Kevin’s decision, something from within her whispered back, “*are you sure?*” Finally, she closed the coffee pot lid and told herself to just stop thinking about it.

As she reached for a coffee mug, she looked outside the window just over the kitchen sink, and noticed that the fog had made its way up onto the porch and was peeking back at her. “Good morning.” She toasted with an empty mug before turning and making her way to the coffee pot where she stood before it, willing it to brew faster with her stare.

It would be a typical Healdsburg spring day: brisk in the morning, full sun by midday, and cool fog again by nightfall—just the way she liked it. For a few moments she lost herself in a simple thought about the weather until the scent of vanilla coffee brought her back. Modra poured herself a cup of delicious hot

coffee and added a teaspoon of raw sugar before allowing herself a sip. As she stood holding her hot cup in both hands, she looked around her kitchen and living room, but ultimately decided she would enjoy the early morning on the porch with the fog.

Never an early riser, she decided it would be a good idea to take advantage of being up before Kevin and getting her thoughts in order. “Today is going to be hard enough to get through,” she reminded herself. “These foolish lingering thoughts need to go away.” It killed her that she couldn’t figure out where all of the indecision was coming from. In the last ten years she had marsh mellowed a million times between wishing she would just get pregnant to appease everyone, and praying night and day that she never became pregnant. Now that the ten years were up she had expected to be thrilled—she didn’t get pregnant. She should be sleeping soundly through the night, but she’s not. Instead she’s wide awake in her kitchen at 4:30AM waiting for the coffee to brew and talking to herself.

“Alright Mr. Fog,” She said to the thick white mist that faced her from the other side of the window, “we need to get to the bottom of this together.”

Healdsburg’s natural beauty had always been therapeutic for Modra; its peacefulness allowed her mind to wander down the hillsides to the Russian River Valley where her thoughts could roam around freely until they untangled themselves and made more sense. Today especially, she was sure the porch

would be the best place to sit and think about the meaning of her recently acquired insomnia. She poured the rest of the coffee in a carafe and placed it on a serving tray along with the cut glass creamer and sugar bowl. As she picked up the tray, she took one last look at the darkness on the other side of her kitchen window and hoped that the solitude would work its magic on her conscience. *I want to cry. Why can't I just find the tears? I need to cry... if only I could... I know it would relieve some of this pressure.*

She absentmindedly made her way through the kitchen, balancing the serving tray with one hand and opening the door with the other. She propped the door open with her foot and reached back for the blanket that was draped over the chair. Finally, with tray and blanket in hand, she made her way out the door and onto the porch.

A sigh of anticipation escaped her as she faced the six redwood rocking chairs that lined the porch and faced the Russian River down below. She walked the length of the porch and went straight to the chair that sat to the far left of where she had stood. As she was about to set the tray down, she considered the blanket that was threatening to roll off her arm and onto the tray. Then, she eyed her target, the small square table between the rockers, and decided that a bargain was in order. She said, "If I don't spill a drop, it's a sign that it's going to be a good day". Carefully, she bent her knees, rather than lean forward,

and kept the blanket from falling forward as she placed the tray on the table. When she realized what she was doing she conceded, “Ugh, no longer just talking to myself, now I’m turning to superstition too.” Her eyes examined the tray, looking for an out of place drop of cream or coffee, hoping deeply that she wouldn’t find one. When she was sure nothing had spilled, she breathed again and said to the fog, “well, at least that’s one good something to hang on to today.” A few minutes later, when she was wrapped in her blanket with her lukewarm cup of coffee in hand she caught a glimpse a full moon dimmed by the fog. *And that’s another good something to hang on to.*

Everything seemed perfect. She took a deep breath and allowed her senses to enjoy the blend of vanilla coffee and crisp fresh air. Her eyes wandered over the natural landscape of Healdsburg. She loved mornings like this when all she could see were the shadows emerging from the depths of the fog, and all she could hear was the breeze as it blew and whirled the fog around before depositing it right back onto the porch. Nature relaxed her. She could already feel the pressure slowly leaving her body. A movement caught her attention. She searched the darkness and spotted a small silhouette that had popped out just below the porch. It was a deer that appeared out of the blackberry bush. Modra kept her eyes on it as it made its way across the small creek just over their driveway toward a distant neighbor’s yard. She watched it until it blended into the

darkness and disappeared.

As twilight began to brighten up the world around her, she envisioned the fog as a magician on nature's stage. Grapevines in the distance began to emerge from behind a curtain of white, and appeared to march up the slow rolling hills in perfect formation. The beautiful curves of the hillsides gradually became visible against the distant twilight sky, exposing the solitary dark images of scattered gnarled oaks. She listened intently to the silence around her, hoping to hear the Russian River as it wound its way through the valley below, but she heard nothing, nothing except a light breeze whispering to the trees and . . . footsteps. Startled, she looked to the far side of the deck for the source. It was Kevin. He was walking towards her with his arms crossed and a look of concern.

“Hey sleepy head.” Modra said trying to sound livelier than she felt.

“Hey babe, I missed you. You weren't in bed.” he stood over her for a moment and eyed her conspicuously, wondering what she was doing out of bed so early in the morning. He had never been able to coax her out of bed before six-thirty and yet here she was, on a rocker, with coffee and all the fixings—and it wasn't even five yet. It all made him wonder how long she had been out here, not to mention, his curiosity about what it was that had her out here so early in the first place. He leaned over, gave her a kiss, and then reached for her coffee as he said, “Happy

birthday babes. I was going to surprise you and make you breakfast in bed but you're not in bed."

"Oh." Modra said as she reached for his hand. "I would have really enjoyed that." and gave him a weak smile.

"You couldn't sleep again, could you?"

Modra thought about lying, but realized how ridiculous that would sound being that she was wide awake and sitting on a rocker so early in the morning. "What gave it away?" She asked with a smile. "I'm still not interested." She said before he even said it.

Kevin had been trying to convince her to take a sleeping pill to help her sleep through the night, but she didn't believe it was necessary yet.

"I hope I didn't wake you," she said feeling a bit guilty about all the tossing, turning, and grumbling she had done before forcing herself to give up on sleep and get out of bed. Modra reached out and gave his warm hand a squeeze. "What time is it anyway?" she asked. Part of her was happy that he was out there with her, and the other part was wishing that she had a little more time by herself.

"You didn't wake me. My hand was searching for you and when it didn't find you lying in bed next to me, *it* woke me," He said as he wrapped his robe around a bit tighter. "It's just about to be five." he said, raising an eyebrow as he emphasized the morning hour. "You're a couple minutes shy." he paused, "So..."

how long did you mentally torture yourself this morning before you finally got out of bed?"

"Hmm." She chewed on her bottom lip, "five sounds awfully early." Again, she wondered whether she should answer honestly or lie just a wee bit and spare herself his disapproving look, but alas, she didn't see a point in being deceitful. She answered, "I'm pretty sure I tortured myself for at least a couple of hours before I finally gave up on sleep and came out here." *There I go again, probably too honest and too much info.*

"Are you holding up ok or is there anything new you'd like to talk about?" he asked, already pretty sure she was chewing the same bit over and over torturing herself, but somehow, because today was the big day, he hoped she had found some sort of internal resolution. He also wanted to check in and make sure she wasn't having second thoughts. They only had a few more hours to go before they had to absolutely accept their childless fate.

Unfortunately she caught the underlying emotion in his tone, "You don't have to worry. I haven't changed my mind." She said, trying to reassure him as she took back her coffee.

Kevin tilted his head with shame feeling uncomfortable for worrying about himself and said, "I'm not worried about that, Mod." He responded a bit rough, though she could hear the relief in his voice. "I'm worried about you."

She knew he was being sincere as she watched him take the

rocker next to her. Kevin is not a selfish man, if he thought for a moment that having a baby was important to her, he would have been encouraging her to have one, but he knew her battle was with her conscious and he was afraid she would submit to it. Modra let him think for a moment as she examined the way his red flannel pajamas sat a bit short, leaving his pink ankles exposed to the cold. He looked adorable with his big size thirteen slippers sticking out like planks balancing the tall slim 6'3" tower of a man.

“Honey, I’m fine. No, I’m not going to cave into my family. I mean, I’m obviously having some internal issue with all of this, but I believe it’s unavoidable because it’s just the way I’m wired.” She said. Her eyes were growing watery with frustration. “Apparently this intense irrational anxiety is my penance for going against the grain.

Kevin wholeheartedly disagreed with her. He had a hard time comprehending how his wife could draw so much guilt from doing something she believed to be the best thing for her own ultimate happiness. “Sweetie, this is not a penance. Your anxiety is pretty rational, especially for someone coming from your family. *This* is all your mother’s doing. She has screwed you girls up with the power of guilt. I will be sure and thank her the next time we see her.” He added, “One day you’re going to look back and laugh at all the things you worry about.” He said, shaking his head.

Modra laughed agreeing with him, “You’re right. I know my mother has inculcated us with heavy doses of guilt.”

Both Julie and Mikaela share Modra’s tendency to over think and over worry about the most meaningless occurrences in their lives. Not surprising, making life decisions that contradict their inherent family values are almost paralyzing for them. They must first wade through the “what if’s”, and then they must decide if their decision is worth being plagued by the perennial guilt of having disappointed their mother.

“So you really don’t know what’s keeping you up, or are you doing one of those Mod things,” he waived his pointer at her accusingly, “you know, where you’re afraid to talk to me about it so you just try to figure it out on your own?” He sat forward in his rocker waiting for her response.

She rolled her eyes at him as she said, “Ok, I know I’ve earned that reputation, but you already know that I’ve learned to tell you what’s bothering me.” It was a lesson she learned the hard way. Had she told Kevin earlier in the relationship that she was unsure about wanting to have children she would have saved herself years of guilt. “Truthfully, if I knew how to get rid of this guilt or if I at least knew what exactly was causing it, I wouldn’t be out here right now. I would be in bed waiting for my husband to bring me breakfast.” And then, wanting to change the subject, she awkwardly marveled, “I can’t believe I’m thirty eight today.”

“My dear, you are one year closer to your glorious forties!” He proclaimed, enjoying himself giving her a hard time about her age. Seven years ago, when he was her age, she would razz him all the time about being so close to forty, “the beginning of middle-aged” she’d tease. Of course, she was just thirty-one at the time. “I swear you’re catching up quickly.” He said as he gave her chin a squeeze.

He looked at her eyes and saw that his efforts to make her smile were failing; he knew when his wife was flashing him a forced smile. He understood the feeling of anxiety she felt, especially with the kind of pressure her family was placing on her. Hell, he was anxious, and it wasn’t his family. None the less, he didn’t want her to continue to sit out here alone just dwelling on it. If he let her, she would sit out here mulling everything over and over again until her fears and anxieties avalanched her. He needed to be around her if only to remind her she wasn’t alone.

“Can I stay out here with you?” He paused and smiled at her, “I promise to be very, very quiet.” He gave her a wink and ran his index finger down her cheek softly.

Her body shuddered slightly in response to his touch. Embarrassed, she pretended it didn’t happen, but he caught it and smiled at her before leaning over and giving her a soft kiss. Needing to get her thoughts in order, she tried not to melt into him as she had last night so she composed herself and said, “I’d

love it if you joined me.” deciding he would bring much need company. “You are, however, going to have to get another coffee mug from the kitchen. I thought you’d be sleeping so I didn’t bring you one.” She said, studying his face.

Modra was always impressed with Kevin and the way he took everything in stride. He never worried about the things that were out of his control. As she now looked at his face, he seemed at peace with everything. Still, she wondered how he was holding up inside. Was he as sure as he appeared, or was there something going on that he wasn’t sharing? Although, she had to admit that his sleeping pattern certainly evidenced that he was faring quite well. She thought of last night when she enviously watched him sleep and thought—*yeah, he’s doing fine.*

With a big grin he stood and pronounced, “I can do a coffee mug!” and walked towards the kitchen with a bounce in his step.

She watched him walk away from her and thought: *He’s the same handsome man I married fifteen years ago, though he now has gray hair and a few new lines defining his face—I think they make him strikingly handsome—I am so glad that I have him and that we’re growing old together.* She kept her gaze on him until he walked through the open kitchen door and then went back to her thoughts feeling warm inside.

Kevin had his own reservations about the day’s big event, but they weren’t at all about guilt and regret. His reservations were more about the fear of Modra changing her mind before it

was done. He would be glad when it was all done and over with. In a few more hours he would have the vasectomy that would put an end to the possibility of an accidental, last minute, pregnancy, not to mention an end to his viable sperm. Modra's family would have to give up the argument that they, Kevin and Modra, could conceive if they would just use In Vitro fertilization "and implant several fertilized eggs them back into her uterus." The thought of several eggs taking, made him shudder. *Boy, they are just missing the point completely.*

"I just want to warn you, I'm afraid I may be a little high-maintenance today," Modra called out, thinking it was only fair that Kevin be warned about her restlessness. "I won't be much for conversation."

Kevin was fishing in the cupboard for a coffee mug as he hollered back, "Honey, today promises to be emotionally taxing regardless of how prepared we are. You can be as high-maintenance as you want. I will talk to the wall if I have to, but I do want to be out there with you and keep you company."

"Thank you," Modra replied gratefully.

Feeling a chill, she pulled the blanket over her shoulders, wishing she had worn her robe. She looked at the blanket wrapped around her and let her memory travel back to when and where they'd bought it. It was a simple blanket of typical American Indian design, wool, and woven with subtle earthy colors. She thought of Kevin and how he had insisted the blanket

would be perfect, “a usable souvenir,” he’d called it. She had privately thought it would be stuffed into a closet and never used. Who would have thought she would have a casual morning in Healdsburg fifteen years later, sipping coffee at home, running through old memories with the same blanket wrapped around her.

Beautiful Banff Springs, Canada, was the place the blanket took her mind to. Banff Springs was where Kevin took Modra for her first time traveling outside of the United States. At twenty-three, she had yet to master the art of taking a vacation without feeling guilty for leaving work. It only took an hour for the guilt to completely disappear and the thoughts of clients or work to be banished from her mind for the duration of their stay. The Banff Springs Resort is a chateau protected by lime-stone mountains, which are sparsely covered with pine trees, and it was easily the most beautiful place on earth to a new traveler like Modra, who had never before ventured out of the concrete jungle of Los Angeles. Once there, she was immediately overwhelmed by the natural beauty of the landscape.

She recalled the way she envied the locals and their love of life. No one had pagers or cell phones. People ate their meals at their leisure and everyone seemed to enjoy life as it was. And, this was where she first experienced the delightful flavor of mulled wine as it made its way through her body warming every limb. Banff Springs, with its bold fall colors, planted the seed for

a new way of life that contradicted her upbringing. It made her want the freedom to travel and live life on a whim.

Banff Springs was the beginning of a change that took place inside of Modra and reshuffled her priorities. With career success there was the financial security that provided the freedom to travel. Life became an intense commitment of long workdays heavily peppered with month long vacations and corporate sponsored trips. Suddenly there was a whole world out there that she needed to see with Kevin by her side and no distractions. And so began the ritual, with every planned vacation a prayer was said, praying that she not to become pregnant before the trip. The conflict of values arose because there was always a trip on the horizon- Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Germany, and so on. By the time one trip ended, the next location was already being discussed. With such a big world to see, there never seemed to be a good time to become pregnant, and so, Modra's private prayer ritual was born.

It didn't take long before her prayer ritual blossomed into guilt, yet she carried on with it. The feeling of being in a new place, experiencing the culture, the people, the food, and the wine was worth the guilt. For years she secretly prayed against what her family expected from her, and what she presumed her husband expected as well.

A slight cool morning breeze brushed over the porch and kissed her bare ankles as it passed, bringing her thoughts back to

Healdsburg and her husband, who, unawares to Modra, happened to be sitting quietly, staring at her with curiosity.

She's is in her own world again, Kevin thought, as he watched her big brown eyes stare off into the distance. *She is still having her private tug of war*. Kevin was anxious for the day to be over so he could have his free-spirited wife back. He was positive that after today the internal conflict she was having about not having children would be a dead issue. Tired of seeing his wife this way, he suddenly decided he needed her attention. He taped his wedding band against his empty mug and held it out, deliberately borrowing her signal for a refill.

She heard the familiar tapping and looked over at him. She hadn't noticed when, but he had made his way back from the kitchen and had been staring at her for heaven knows how long. "I didn't hear you get back," Modra said as she reached for the carafe of coffee, "I guess you're asking me to pour your coffee." She smiled at him, but Kevin noticed her thoughts were still drifting.

He considered making an excuse to leave her alone to sort out her thoughts, but decided against it almost as quickly as the thought crossed his mind. He wanted to be around in case she changed her mind and wanted to talk. "I'm looking forward to celebrating your birthday tonight," he said in an effort to keep her engaged. Modra sat with a hollow look. Though she seemed to be listening to Kevin's every word, it was obvious that her

mind was off again in some distant place. Kevin was normally happy to know that Modra was independent, but today he wanted to know what she was thinking. He wanted to know if she had changed her mind, but was afraid to admit it. “Babe, are you ready to celebrate your birthday tonight?”

She looked at him, registered his question and replied, “oh, yeah. I still can’t believe that you want to have a dinner party tonight. We should wait a few days so you can recover from your... your... surgery.” She pointed at his crotch in case he wasn’t sure what she was talking about.

He looked down and smiled, “Ooooh, You mean recover from my VAAASEECTOMYYYY?” he sang in his best baritone.

She gave him a look that told him she thought he was a bit on the crazy side.

“Of course I want to celebrate your birthday tonight. I also want to celebrate the grand finale of our ten year pact.” He bowed his head and tried to be serious, “Today you’re one year closer to middle-aged *and* you have faithfully fulfilled your end of the bargain with your conscience.” He wiggled his ten fingers at her and said, “Poof! I declare you free from guilt.” They both let out a giggle, before he asked, “Well, did it work?”

She took a deep breath, thought about it, and answered sincerely, “Nope, I still fill a monkey on my back.” She pursed her lips, *if only my conscious was a gracious loser*. “But you are right. This is a ten year journey we’re wrapping up today

and it is a big deal for us.” Time had flown by so fast; she never thought it would pass so quickly. She looked at her hands to see if she noticed any signs of aging. They looked the same to her, but she couldn’t really remember what they looked like ten years ago anyway. She turned to Kevin and said, “And when you put it that way, I am glad we’re celebrating tonight. Ten years is a long time to wait for a resolution. Even if I do think you’re nuts for wanting to celebrate today, the same day... no pun intended.” She added with a grin. ” *Incredible*, she thought, *a whole ten years have passed already—our pact is over.*

She went to take a sip from her mug and noticed it was empty so she looked to Kevin, who was looking right at her with a warm smile.

“I love you Babe.” He said with so much warmth, her heart fluttered.

“I love you too.” She replied happily before tapping her wedding ring against her own mug for a refill.

He promptly stood to pour her coffee and felt his heart break when he noticed how tired she looked.

“Thanks babe.” Her small heart shaped lips said, enticing him to bend down to kiss them.

“You're welcome." His loving blue eyes told her he loved her again. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Modra smiled at him gratefully then shook her head to say no. “It’s just anxiety. I’m not depressed. At least, I don’t think

I'm depressed." She said to him, wishing she could do a better job of concealing it all. She was tired, both emotionally and physically. She put her coffee down and attempted to wrap the blanket tightly around her shoulders while not allowing her ankles to become exposed. "Oh, babe," she paused. Maybe she did want to talk about it after all. Choosing her words carefully she said, "I know we've talked about all of this and we've both agreed, but it still scares me." *Oh no*, she thought when she saw Kevin go pale—I've really worried him now. She quickly explained, "No, no." and squeezing his hand said, "I swear I haven't changed my mind, it's just . . . I can't... never mind." She gave up. It seemed so futile. How could she begin to explain how she was feeling when she hadn't figured it out for herself.

He didn't know what to think, she was showing symptoms of both resolve and doubt simultaneously. He glanced at the floor, then out at the view, not knowing how to help. Modra had been toggling between fear of regret and fear of guilt, since the inception of their pact, but it had been especially severe within the last couple of weeks. What was it about not having children that kept her up at night? If only he could relate, or understand a little better, maybe he could help her cope. He wasn't sure he could fix her guilty conscience, guilt was so ingrained in her that he believed it to be a part of her genetic make-up, but he wondered if he couldn't at least help sooth it.

They both said nothing for a little while. He was hesitant to speak until he had a better understanding of what she was thinking. The need to avoid the wrong words was obvious. He was determined to choose his words carefully so as not to derail the vasectomy when it was so close at hand. *Babe, just hang in there until this afternoon. It will all be done with—and final.*

As miserable as she was right then, he couldn't be happier with the choice they'd made. The day she had come to him with shame on her face and tears in her eyes and admitted that she would rather not have children, he had picked her up, whirled her around, and planted a big wet kiss on her forehead. She told him she was happy just the way they were and didn't want to change anything. He had completely agreed with her; they have so much fun together and selfishly, he didn't want to share her.

A few minutes of silence passed. Modra never noticed Kevin leaving or returning until he placed her robe over her lap and put her slippers next to her feet. "Thank you," she said and smiled gratefully.

Kevin sat again. "You are very welcome."

Here they were spending a rare morning together and Modra was so consumed with her thoughts that she wasn't taking the time to enjoy the sun as it came up over the mountains. The warm rays extended themselves across the valley below, making their presence felt as they broke through the fog and changed the color of the sky. Watching the sunrise, he took her cold fingers

and put them in the palm of his hand, closing his hand around hers.

Then, knowing that he needed to know how she truly felt before he went through with the vasectomy, he said, “Mod, help me understand what you’re going through. I know this is what we both want, but the last three nights you have been different from what I had expected.” His brow crinkled, “I thought you would join me with the countdown.” He pouted his lips and flung them sideways trying to keep the mood light while holding the conversation, “you stopped counting at nine years three hundred and sixty one days! One minute you’re determined and resolute about not having kids, and the next you’re not sleeping over it?” He gently let go of her hand and reached across to her face and held it between his hands, “let me in so I can try to help. I need to know that you are really ready to go through with this before it’s done, because we cannot change our minds after. I know that I am not willing to undergo a reversal of the surgery.”

Modra looked at him for a few seconds trying to come up with a reasonable response because the truth would just drive him up the wall. She held her breath, shrugged her shoulders, and shook her head. “I don’t know.” She admitted. “I just know that right now, and just as I have known for the past ten years, I am sure that I don’t want to be a mom. But I can’t stop thinking of my family and how disappointed they are. And, I can’t help worrying about what the regrets might be down the

road.” Kevin was about to speak when she put a hand up to stop him. “I know we’ve gone over this before and I’ve been fine until a few days ago. These thoughts just monopolize my mind. I can be cooking and then realize when I’m done that all I’ve done is think about the same thing over and over again.”

He leaned in so close to her she could see his pours. “May I speak?” He asked politely as Modra nodded her permission. “So when you’ve been rethinking everything these last few days, have you once changed your mind? Have you even once said to yourself, *I want to be a mom?*” He waited for an answer, but she didn’t give him one. He decided to continue to push for an answer because he had to know whether he needed to forgo the Vasectomy or not. He would rather she be absolutely sure rather than have her change her mind after. “Babe, this is my way of asking you, please tell me if you have changed your mind and you want to try to have kids. I will go down that path with you if it is what you want, but you have to let me know. I want to know even if it is only a possibility that you are changing your mind, because I have to make a call as to whether I should postpone the surgery.”

“No. Not once.” She said definitively. “I love our life.” She looked at him sincerely, “I never in my wildest dreams thought that I would be this happy, day in and day out, with my husband.” She shook her head and added, “If anything I think kids would change our life so much that they would more than

likely ruin what we have. And it's only because I know that, that I am sure I will be fine once your surgery is done." Kevin looked relieved, "The problem is that right now I still have the choice and I think that until the choice is taken away, I won't be able to stop thinking about it. So please, DO NOT POSTPONE THE VASECTOMY!"

"Hang on. I'm going to go get the phone and call your mother." Kevin said standing up and walking towards the door.

"Kev, wait. Why do you need to call my mother?" She asked preferring not to talk to her today. It's V-day; there was no need to call her unless they were prepared to take a verbal lashing.

Kevin stopped mid stride and turned to her and with his most serious expression he said, "To thank her for screwing you girls up so badly."

Modra laughed, "No kidding." She said, "But wait until tomorrow if you don't mind." and laughed again at the thought of Kevin actually going through with the phone call. Feeling better about the day, she mused to Kevin, "You know moving here was the best thing we've ever done. I love this house," Modra said admiring the natural beauty, as if for the first time. "I could never imagine moving back to Los Angeles."

"I agree." He responded, feeling a huge relief himself.