

Excerpt from *I Look Like You*

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On the platform outside Kansas City's Union Station, as he waited to board the train, Andy felt shaky and weak. His ankles were tight, his back was sore. He felt like shit, really. He should've at least gotten some sleep, but when he got home a few minutes after 5:00 a.m. from his job as the night manager at the Stoddard Hotel in downtown Kansas City—a luxury hotel with headquarters in Chicago—he had instead spent the two-and-a-half hours before the 7:37 a.m. departure packing his suitcase, jogging forty-five minutes on the treadmill at his apartment's gym, and reading his parents' obituary for probably the tenth time.

They had died at the same time. The newspaper had printed a joint obituary.

There were a few dozen people also waiting, Andy somewhere in the middle of them, yawning and limply clutching a large coffee from the kiosk inside Union Station. As always, the coffee was giving him hints of a kick (more like a nudge), while leaving his stomach feeling murky and unhappy. He should've at least eaten breakfast rather than just that single serving of flaxseed crackers he had consumed before hustling out the door. The crackers had been somewhat good but had left his stomach still empty, and his mouth dry and chalky, like how it had mornings after smoking a cigarette, during that phase years ago when he had tried to look and act like James Dean.

"Okay. Who's next?"

Andy looked up to see an Amtrak attendant waving him over.

He handed his ticket to the attendant who skimmed it. Andy considered removing his sunglasses—was that rude or pretentious to just leave them on like this? But he kept them on. He looked better with them on. He was also wearing scuffed brown shoes and a light gray jacket that mixed well with his dark blue (practically black) jeans. His hair had recently been cut by his stylist of choice, Elise, and he had it slightly slicked back with the grooming clay the salon sold. He was thirty years old, five-foot-six, and had been skinny most of his life, the kind of malnourished-looking, never-gaining-weight-despite-eating-fast-food-multiple-times-a-week skinny that annoyed his more plump family members and friends, much to Andy's delight—people were jealous of *him*! But the last year or two, despite mostly cutting out fast food and instead eating more like an adult should, the weight had weirdly started to pile on, five pounds here, five pounds there, putting him at a good twenty pounds heavier than a couple years ago, the reason for which still unclear. Age? A change in metabolism? He still wasn't technically obese, and he knew telling people he was concerned about his increasing waistline would only elicit responses like "you've

gotta be kidding me” and “oh my God, you’re ridiculous,” so he kept these thoughts to himself.

“Okay.” The attendant scribbled a seat number on a small piece of blue paper and handed it to Andy.

Andy’s stomach growled again in rebellion, his body still unhappy with just the pathetic handful of flaxseed crackers and watered-down coffee this morning. Or maybe the coffee was too acidic. Or maybe he actually was allergic to gluten or dairy despite the tests he got at the doctor’s saying otherwise. His stomach was always making noises, seemingly always upset about something. It had been for years. “You just got yourself a rumbley tummy,” his doctor had said once, flicking Andy’s gut with an index finger.

He stepped onto the train, carrying his lone suitcase and backpack. That was enough for this weekend trip to Chicago. He had a couple outfits, his laptop, the always-growing collection of power cords for various electronics (the number of white Apple cords alone made Andy feel like he had signed a blood pact with the company), and of course a black suit for Saturday.

He wedged his suitcase in the rack along with the others on the first level of the train, and then climbed to the second level to look for seat C24.

He had always liked Amtrak fine. It was easier than driving, the seats were roomy, and most importantly, it wasn’t a plane—planes being one of his phobias, along with snakes and riding on a motorcycle. The trip from Kansas City to Chicago took a little over seven hours, giving him plenty of time to sleep and to complete the only item on his to-do list for today: writing a speech for Saturday.

Andy found C24, an aisle seat, next to a man who looked near seventy. The man was leaning on the windowsill, gazing outside. His hair was thin but still hanging in there.

He turned to Andy. “Oh, hi,” he said, smiling. He had on a blue striped button-down shirt, the kind of simple shirt they sold at mall department stores.

Andy started to place his backpack in the overhead compartment but then opted to put it at his feet.

“Hi,” Andy said. He removed his glasses. He wondered if his eyes looked bloodshot. They felt that way.

He took a deep breath, and put his sunglasses in the mesh netting on the back of the seat in front of him. He had only been standing for maybe four minutes, but sitting down felt amazing.

“So where you heading?” the man said. “I’m Jerry by the way.”

“Andy.” They shook hands. “Chicago.”

“Chicago! Beautiful city. Windy, isn’t it?”

“Yep. That’s the reputation.”

“I wonder how many times I’ve been there.” Jerry looked up, appearing nostalgic. “A lot. By my age if you haven’t been a lot of places, you know, what are you doing with your life?” He shook his hands as if he were ringing someone’s neck. “Heh-heh. I’m just kidding. So what brings you to Chicago?”

“Um.” Andy considered giving a fake answer—why open the flood gates?—but instead he opened the flood gates that were his mouth and said, “I’m from there, but this particular trip is for a funeral. My parents’.”

“Your *parents*? Oh. Oh. I’m so sorry. Oh boy.” Jerry stared down, looking at his clasped hands, his thumbs rubbing each other, as if trying to erase something. “Man, your parents were probably around my age? Crud.” He shook his head. He swallowed. “Well, I figure, if you make it to sixty, you’re lucky. You’ve won already. You know?”

Andy squinted in confusion. His parents had both made it to sixty, yes, but no further. That didn’t seem like much of a win.

“Still very sad,” Jerry said. “Hey, let me know if I can do anything.”

Everyone, it seemed, had offered to “do anything,” whatever that meant.

“Do you have any other family?” Jerry said.

Andy sipped at the coffee. He wouldn’t be getting to sleep anytime soon.

“Just a twin brother. Taylor. That’s who I’m staying with.”

“*Twins*. Oh wow. You guys must be close. Something about in the womb, right? Gestating together? That’s got to be an amazing connection. Well, at least you still have that.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Andy said, not bothering to correct Jerry on his assumption that twins = close. He and Taylor hadn’t even talked since the accident. It had been Taylor’s wife, Candice, who had told him the news.

He had just returned from the gym (he had done crunches so frantically a girl had told him to “chill out or you’re gonna crack a rib”) and was preparing a dinner of kale, mixed vegetables, and asparagus, missing the days in his early twenties when he had consumed hot dogs, fries, and Coke for dinner without any shame, when she called.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Andy,” Candice had said in a choked whisper.

“... Sorry about what? ... Is everything okay? What, does Taylor want to borrow money again?” He had laughed, he later realized, too loudly.

“Your parents ... they’re ... Andy, they’re dead.”

“... What? What do you mean?”

She then explained in a rush of words: his parents had been driving home from a late dinner in Chicago, and his father had apparently fallen asleep at the wheel, slamming the car into a streetlamp, killing them instantly.

“At least it was instant,” Candice had said.

Instant.

Was instant the way to go?

“Taylor’s too upset, so that’s why I’m the one to call,” Candice had said. “Oh, is there anything I can do?”

“No, no ... oh ... wow ... um ... no, it’s okay. Thanks. We’ll, well, we’ll talk soon. ... Yeah. ... Okay ... bye.”

On the train, a voice came over the intercom. “Hello, passengers! We are looking at a time of 7:40. We’re about to leave beautiful Kansas City on this crisp April morning, with service all the way to Chicago, with stops along the way. As always, thanks for choosing Amtrak. As a reminder, there is no smoking. ...”

When the intercom shut off, Jerry said, “I only lost my parents about ten years ago, actually. Though, not at the same time. I can’t imagine what that must be like. Just *poof*, gone like that.”

“Yeah, it was . . . it’s been hard.” It had been, but in some ways Andy was more upset by how *not* upset he was. There had been no crying, no pounding fists on the wall, no cursing God. Mostly just quiet.

He hadn’t seen his parents since Christmas, the last time he had visited Chicago. Since then they had talked sporadically, last talking a month or two ago. Taylor was the one closer to them. Taylor needed to be in some ways, as they had still been giving him money, despite him being married, not to mention thirty years old, while Andy had vowed since college to never ask his parents for a cent if he could help it.

The train lurched forward and began building in speed as it eased out of the station.

“Goodbye, Kansas City,” Jerry said to no one in particular and then pulled out a bag of peanuts, shaking a few into his upturned hand.

“Here, want some?” Jerry said, holding the bag to Andy.

“No, that’s okay. Thanks.” Andy took a pull on his coffee, which was still kind of disgusting, but for \$1.25 it was okay. He could afford better coffee, for sure, but he was thrifty with money—or cheap. One of those. And come to think of it, now he would probably save around two-hundred dollars a year from not having to buy his parents birthday or holiday presents anymore, not to mention the inheritance that would be coming his way. So at least there was—*I’m an asshole, a real fucking asshole*, Andy thought, sinking further into his chair. Where did thoughts like that come from? And why had he had so many of them the last few days? These *pluses to losing your parents* thoughts.

The stressful week and lack of sleep had messed with his head.

The sun was spiking through the windows, so Andy put his sunglasses back on as he fidgeted in his chair to get comfortable. It was time to get some sleep, and maybe that was possible now that Jerry had perhaps stopped talking.

“Oh!” Jerry said. “Is the sun bothering you?” He grabbed the curtain and pulled it closed.

“No, it’s okay. Really.”

“Nah, I don’t mind. Not good for my eyes either. Smart move bringing your sunglasses.”

Andy pulled off the sunglasses and held them out to Jerry, perhaps feeling like he needed to do a good deed. “If you’d like to wear them, you—”

“Oh no, nonsense.” Jerry held up his hands in protest. “But thank you.”

Andy put the glasses back on and then rustled in his backpack, finally extracting his iPod and headphones. He felt bad, but headphones were a nice way of saying, “I can’t really talk now.”

“Ooo,” Jerry said. “I got one of those a year or two ago. Pretty nice, but I find myself still listening to CDs. Call me old-fashioned.” He chuckled.

Andy put on his headphones.

“What are you listening to?” Jerry said.

Andy had been listening to some Neko Case, Future Islands, and Nick Drake lately, but what was the point of telling this guy? He wouldn’t have heard of any of them.

Andy shrugged. “Not sure. Still trying to decide.”

“Well, I’ll let you get to it.”

Andy nodded, switched to the Nick Drake, and turned the volume up and up, letting the sound surround him as he closed his eyes, feeling bad that he was hoping the man would please just stop talking.

When he opened his eyes, he noticed, to his relief, that the seat next to him was empty. He looked at his watch. 10:15. About two hours of sleep, but he felt even worse. A headache was beginning to form, jabbing at his forehead, and his stomach's upset rumbling had only grown in intensity.

"Oh, you're awake," Jerry said from behind, as he walked up the aisle, carrying a cup of coffee with the Amtrak logo on it.

Andy pulled in his stiff legs, so Jerry could squeeze past and land in his seat.

"I got you some breakfast earlier; hope you don't mind."

Jerry dug into his tote bag and handed a small box of Corn Flakes to Andy.

"Oh. Thanks," Andy said, sitting up.

"Those will clean you out all right," Jerry said, laughing. "Sure do to me."

Andy peered at the side of the box and was dismayed to see it contained high fructose corn syrup and more sugar than he'd like in a cereal, but rather than be rude, he opened the box and poured some into his hand before sliding the flakes into his mouth. His stomach shuddered in retaliation. He would have to pop some antacids later.

"So a twin, huh?" Jerry said, as if picking up from an earlier conversation. "I have a brother. Well . . . technically, *had* a brother. Not a twin though. He died in Vietnam."

"Really? Jeez, I'm sorry."

"He was younger, which made it harder to bear. My kid brother, y'know?" Jerry funneled more peanuts into his hand. "But whether you agree with the politics or not, you must have respect for our armed forces. An extreme sacrifice."

"Of course."

"Well." Jerry placed the empty peanut bag at his feet. "Do you and your brother look alike?"

"Yeah. Almost exactly. Though he's a little bigger." But then Andy realized, with his recent weight gain, maybe they were closer in size than he had thought, an idea that bothered him. Being better than his brother in finances, career prospects, and health had always been a badge of honor.

Their parents had done the classic twin things: dressing them alike, making them share a bedroom until well into high school when Andy and Taylor finally insisted they get their own rooms, even though that meant Andy had to sleep in the poorly-ventilated basement. His parents, like a lot of other parents of twins, had treated them as a "unit" in a sense, rather than as individuals; his parents had enjoyed the novelty of twinship. Andy and Taylor's classmates had too, frequently urging them to switch classes to pull a prank on the unsuspecting teacher. *Come on, it'll be so funny!*

Andy slid some more cereal into his mouth. Honestly, he hated being a twin. Taylor did too. To everyone else, they were something to gawk at. *You two are identical! I'm seeing double! Ha!* It was weird having a literal doppelganger, a 3-D mirror, someone to always be compared to.

Jerry brushed his hands together, flicking away the stray peanut crumbs, and then sipped his coffee. “Ah,” he said in satisfaction. He scratched at his scalp. “Well, you full? I got some more peanuts.” He produced another bag from his tote bag.

“No, I’m good. Thanks for the breakfast.”

“Sure thing.” Jerry reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of Tums. He held them out to Andy.

“Oh, thanks,” Andy said, grabbing two.

“Stomachs are made for being upset. Lord knows I know that.”

Andy grinned. Well, they had one thing in common.

After another ten minutes of small talk, Andy, realizing he wouldn’t fall asleep again anytime soon or get anything done here, grabbed his backpack and rose to his feet, his knees popping loudly.

“Well, I’ll see you later,” he said.

“Oh? Okay,” Jerry said, looking disappointed. He turned to stare out the window, shuddering against the cool temperature inside the train.

Andy walked down the aisle, passing an Amish family who appeared to be using cell phones. Eventually he reached the observation car a couple cars down, where a few people were sitting, talking in small groups or staring at phones, tablets, or books.

He pulled out his laptop and set it on his knees. He opened a Word document and saved it as “Eulogy.docx.” Candice had asked him to speak for a few minutes at the funeral. Taylor would speak too.

After hovering his fingers over the keys for what felt like a minute, he typed *Death can happen in the snap of a finger*.

He recoiled. *Death can happen in the snap of a finger*? While not necessarily false, it sounded way overly poetic and pretentious. He held down the “delete” key, wiping out the text.

Okay, he told himself, just write something, and I can edit it later.

He typed *My parents were great people. I like you am saddened by their sudden passing.*

Passing . . . why was it that people could never just say *died*? They had to say someone passed away, like it was some “woops!” moment, even if in this case it was. Still, they had crashed into a streetlamp. His dad had fallen asleep. If he was so tired, he shouldn’t have driven in the first place. Andy’s mom was perfectly capable of driving a car and had thousands of times. It wouldn’t have violated some husband/wife law of the universe to let the wife drive for once.

Andy took a deep breath, willing himself to chill out, to not be so cold and angry. *Jeez*, shouldn’t he have at least cried by now? Shouldn’t he have felt like his life was irrevocably changed? Was this what baby boomers meant when they said younger generations these days were too self-absorbed? Too obsessed with their online personas?

Andy peered up, watching the fields of grass pass by the window.

“Give it back!” a boy shouted.

Andy looked over to see two brothers, probably six or eight, fighting over an iPhone.

“Share. Brenton! Share,” the boys’ mom said, in between texting on her own phone. She didn’t look much older than Andy.

Andy turned back to his laptop and tapped on the keys, hoping this rhythm would drum an idea into his head. He had never been much of a writer or public speaker—that was more Taylor’s thing—but he wanted to come up with something good. There were no second takes at funerals. And maybe he was feeling like he had been a shit of a son—just getting them gift cards for their birthdays and holidays, rarely calling, just kind of keeping to himself rather than telling them about his life and what was going on—and this was one way to make it up to them.

Walter and Helen Canton were devoted parents, members of their community, employees, and family members. They worked hard and loved harder.

He stared at what he had just written. It all sounded phony, like “Eulogy Speechwriting 101.” Members of their community? Sure, they had volunteered a couple times, but what did that really mean? They had hated a lot of things about Chicago; his dad had ranted constantly about the homeless people, his mom about the freezing winters. What could Andy say that wasn’t totally trite? And “loved harder”? That sounded almost pornographic.

Andy turned his attention back to the window and the passing fields zooming by the train—or rather, the train zooming by the passing fields. They still had several hours until Chicago. There wouldn’t be much to look at on the way.

He glanced down at his laptop but nothing came to mind.

He wished he had a pen or pencil, so he could chew on the non-writing end while in thought, but instead he just had the lingering taste of Corn Flakes in his mouth.

“That’s it!” the mother nearby said, startling Andy.

She snatched the iPhone out of her son’s hand.

“Mom! That’s not fair!”

“Yeah! It was my turn! Mine!” the other boy said.

“No, it wasn’t! No, it wasn’t!”

The mother, without a word, put the phone in her purse and then returned to texting on her phone.

Andy and Taylor had fought constantly as kids.

The younger boy began crying.

“Mooooom,” he said. “I’ll be good. Pleeeease let me have it back.” He bowed his head in her lap.

“Go talk to Dad,” the mother said, glancing up from her phone, which was inches from the boy’s head.

The younger kid ran away to the adjoining train car.

“Here ya go,” the mother said, reaching into her purse and handing the iPhone to the older boy who flashed a conspiratorial smile.

Andy reached into his own bag and found some Tylenols he quickly popped in his mouth, before he remembered he hadn’t packed any water. He was out of coffee too, so he tried to build up saliva in his mouth, and when that didn’t work, he finally just bit down, crushing the tablets into a tangy dust that he swallowed, wincing.

He looked back at his computer, the cursor blinking as if to say, “You’re not done yet.”

Maybe the problem was his lack of knowledge about his parents, outside of the surface details: they were Walter and Helen Canton. They married in 1975. His mother had had at

least one miscarriage before having Taylor and Andy in 1983. Her maiden name was Wyatt. She and Walter had met at college, where he studied economics and she French.

Maybe there was a French saying he could throw in the speech, something that sounded deep and relevant. But what? His mother had rarely spoken French around the house. After graduation she had worked as a secretary for a car dealership—speaking only English, Andy assumed—before becoming a mother and ditching a day job altogether. His dad, meanwhile, had worked his entire career at a company that did *something* with money; Andy still didn't understand what. Mostly just trying to create more of it. He had brought Helen and the kids to a few company outings, awkward picnics with heaps of clammy potato salad, or baseball games (always the Cubs and never the White Sox, for some reason), where he and Taylor were told to be on their best behavior, and if so, they would get McDonald's for dinner.

His parents had been relatively good parents. They had seemed relatively happy in their marriage and their lives from what Andy could tell.

Relatively.

Relatively.

They had been neither remarkable nor boring. Neither rich nor poor. They had done okay for themselves. They had played by the rules. With politics, they had been moderate, voting for Reagan twice, but later Dukakis and Clinton, and then later George W. Bush. In religion, they had chosen to believe.

Andy wiped the sleep out of his eyes. He still felt in a daze, so maybe he wasn't totally emotionless about his parents' deaths if you counted "in a daze" as an emotion. Taylor had always been the more emotional one.

When the Stoddard Hotel told Andy they were opening a Kansas City location and wanted him to be the night manager, he had said yes almost immediately, despite having next to no knowledge of Kansas City. Was it just country music? Backwards politics? Failing sports teams? A crumbling city? Still, he welcomed the challenge, while Taylor would probably never leave Chicago, and in some ways, might never fully get his shit together, as he was now on his third graduate program in a third subject (none of them completed so far), this time International Leadership, as if he had a future brokering NATO treaties. His current job was an unpaid internship at an agency in Chicago that did, what, Andy didn't know, other than not pay their interns. Luckily the money from their parents and his wife's salary as a lawyer at a small firm downtown had helped them rent at least a decent apartment in Lincoln Park.

Andy returned his fingers to his laptop.

My parents were devoted to us and each other. They were inseparable.

He once again stopped. Was that true? Yeah, his parents had spent a lot of time together, but was it just out of marital duty, rather than a yearning to be with each other?

He dug around in his backpack for a book someone had loaned him at work. Maybe he needed a break from the speech. He just wasn't inspired yet. The book was called *The New Thirty: How to Turn the Dreams of Your Twenties into Realities in Your Thirties!* It was written by a guy named Baron Ritter. Andy turned over the book. Predictably, the author in the photo looked to be early forties, slightly graying, wearing an expensive suit, and smiling with his arms folded in a look of "Don't you wish you were me?" success. From the bio, he

sounded like a junior Tony Robbins, one of those intense “self-actualization” guys probably exhausting to be around.

Andy had casually mentioned to a coworker on Tuesday that he was interested in self-improvement. He had always worked hard and tried to be disciplined, but this renewed interest had most likely cropped up in the aftermath of his parents’ death, when his own mortality became apparent, so it was time to get with it now or risk not achieving . . . whatever it was he wanted to achieve. He was happy working in the hotel industry. He took hospitality seriously. He had done well at the Stoddard since starting fresh out of college at the Chicago location. Eight years of loyalty; eight years of listening to nightly customer complaints; eight years of co-workers who sometimes failed drug tests (and were promptly fired); eight years of never enough towels in a guest’s bathroom. Still, he liked it. The Kansas City location was thriving in the revitalized downtown Power & Light District, and he liked to think he was part of its success. He didn’t love working nights—it made having a regular social life difficult, and the last time he had been on a date or even gotten laid had been . . . six months? Eight?—and nighttime was when the most intense things happened: guests fighting, drunken misadventures in the hotel hallways, people breaking into the closed pool, hotel staff members fucking in a storage closet among the stacks of towels and toilet paper—but Andy didn’t mind the challenge.

Andy opened the book and turned to the prologue.

When I turned thirty, I looked in the mirror and thought, “I’m not all I could be.” I was working at a hedge fund, pulling down 150K a year, and I still wasn’t happy! Can you believe that!?

Andy shut the book. He already hated this guy.

The crying boy came back into the observation car.

“Mom! Mom! Dad says I should get it. Jefferson had it yesterday.”

The mother glanced up from her phone.

“Yeah, okay. Whatever.”

She grabbed it from the older son and handed it to the other kid.

“What! That’s not fair!” the one apparently named Jefferson said.

The mother shrugged.

Andy shoved his laptop and the piece-of-shit book that he’d have to tell his coworker he “wanted to read but just don’t have the time right now” into his backpack and stood up, sending a wave of dizziness through his head. Spots blinked in front of his eyes. Ugh. He needed some sleep.

He steadied himself, grabbing a nearby chair. He looked at his watch. It was a little after 11:00. Might as well go down to the snack car and get lunch. Maybe a heavy lunch could sedate him for an afternoon nap.

Down in the snack car, he surveyed his options. There was nothing remotely healthy except some browning bananas and apples that looked equally decayed, so he sighed and chose the personal pizza option, which the attendant microwaved for him.

“This is some good stuff,” the attendant said. “I like it myself.”

The pizza was no doubt loaded with preservatives, processed cheese, and other no-nos, but in some ways, Andy felt, maybe he could ease up on his diet for a few days. He had wanted to eat healthy on this trip, but it was hard to eat well while traveling. Or at least that was a convenient excuse.

Still, he already felt the pangs of regret, and he had yet to put any food in his mouth.

The microwave dinged.

“All right,” the attendant said. He grabbed it. “Ooo! Ooo! Sucker’s hot.”

He placed it down on the counter, shaking his fingers.

“You think I’d know by now,” he said, chuckling.

Andy also bought a Starbucks Frappuccino—mocha flavored—even though he knew it was basically five-percent coffee and ninety-five percent sugar. Sugar—another thing he needed to cut out entirely. Everywhere he looked there were things he needed to stop eating or drinking. How did people make it through their days, their lives, and not succumb to all the crap easily at your disposal everywhere?

He looked around the car for a place to consume his shame meal but every table was spoken for, so he headed back to his seat, hoping Jerry would be gone. But when he returned, he saw Jerry not only sitting and gesturing animatedly with his hands, but also a woman, around fifty, heavily made-up and with an abundance of jewelry, sitting in Andy’s seat.

“It’s a disgrace, is what it is,” Jerry said, before seeing Andy. “Oh sorry, bud.”

“It’s okay. I can find a seat somewhere—”

“No, no,” Jerry said.

“Sorry, hon,” the woman said.

“Andy, this is Diane.”

“Hi,” Diane said, beaming.

“You never know who you’ll meet on this train,” Jerry said. “My lucky day.”

“Are you . . . famous?” Andy said.

“No,” she giggled. “Hardly. Only to my friends! I was just walking by, and this character over here starts talking to me.”

“Ah.” Andy spied a large wedding ring on her left hand. Was her husband here somewhere? Had Jerry not noticed the ring?

“Well,” Jerry said, “maybe we should go to the observation car.”

“Good idea,” Diane said, standing up. “I could use a change of location on this stuffy train.”

Jerry soon followed.

Andy sat down in his vacated chair, excited to be alone.

“Well, you are joining us, aren’t you?” Jerry said. “There’s plenty of room.”

“Oh, I was just gonna eat lunch.” Andy pointed down in embarrassment at the pathetic cheese pizza—more like a pile of cheese on a supposed piece of bread—and his Starbucks Frappuccino, which, save for the coffee, looked like a drink for children.

“Nonsense. Plenty of room. Come on. You can eat your food there.”

Andy relented and followed them to the observation car.

Luckily, the mother and her fighting sons were gone.

Jerry found a table and took a seat, while Diane grabbed the seat on the opposite side of the table. After a brief deliberation, Andy sat next to Jerry, placing his food and coffee on the table and his backpack by his feet.

“Mmm,” Jerry said, “that pizza smells good. Too bad I can’t have any, or I’d get one of those myself.” He looked up at Diane. “The doc’s got me on Lipitor and other things to quote-unquote ‘address the health concerns of a man my age.’”

“Yep, I’m barking down that door too—but for women, of course.”

“I’ve been trying to exercise more like the doc said. Well, then of course my joints go to crap, and now I’m taking chondroitin and—blah, Andy, just enjoy it while you can.”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to cut out this kind of food too,” Andy said.

“What? Nonsense. Enjoy it while you can.”

“For real, hon,” Diane said.

Andy took a bite of the pizza, which was still incredibly hot. He quickly doused the fire with the Frappuccino. Why he was consuming more caffeine when he wanted to fall asleep, he didn’t know.

“And my hearing’s getting bad too,” Jerry said, throwing up his arms before slapping them on the table. “I figure I’ll just spontaneously combust one of these days.” He pulled some Tums out of his pocket and popped them in his mouth.

“My pinky. . . .” Diane stuck up her left pinky. “Anytime it’s gonna rain, it starts tingling. This kind of *bzzz-bzzz* feeling.” She clasped her hands. “Well. So, you’re father and son, I take it?”

“Oh no,” Jerry said, chuckling. “Andy’s just a nice guy I met on the train.”

“Oh that’s sweet,” Diane said. “What brings you on the train, Andy? I like hearing why people are on the train.”

“My parents died, and I’m going to their funeral.”

“Oh. Oh dear, I’m so sorry.”

Andy swallowed another bite of pizza.

“And here we are talking about our own silly problems,” Diane said. “I’m sincerely sorry.” She reached forward and touched Andy’s hand.

“No, that’s okay,” Andy said. “Sorry, I’m a little sleep-deprived, so I’m a little punchy. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

She gave Andy’s hand a friendly squeeze and then let go.

“Apparently, Diane’s going up to Chicago too,” Jerry said. “She makes her own jewelry, and there’s a big convention this weekend.”

Diane held up her hands in a “ta-dah!” showcasing the multiple rings and other pieces on her hands and wrists. “Started out as a passion project, but when I lost my job, well, I took it full-time.”

“See, that’s great,” Jerry said. “I could use a passion project like that.” He nodded to himself. “Well, if you’re ever looking for a partner, I might just be interested.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you.” She turned to Andy. “You know, women always like jewelry as a gift. I have a lot of my products on board if you’d like to take a look. Seriously, it’s no problem. I can go get some right now.”

Andy swallowed another bite of the pizza. “That’s okay. I’m single.”

“Well, a little jewelry could change that.” She winked before growing serious. “Oh, you’re not gay, are you? Sorry. If you are, that’s totally fine. I have a gay nephew. I unfortunately don’t have any jewelry for men.”

“No, I just said I’m single. Being single doesn’t mean I’m gay.”

“Sorry. Ha. I’m just trying to be P.C.—there’s always something new. Well.” She unclasped her purse and pulled out a card. “Let me give you one of my cards at least.” She handed it to Andy.

Diamonds by Diane: When you want to Sparkle!

“Thanks,” he said. “Well, I think I’ll go back to the seat and get some sleep. Thanks for the card.”

“Sure thing, sweetie,” Diane said. “And I’m really sorry about your parents.”

“I’ll see you later, bud,” Jerry said. “Get some sleep. You look exhausted.” He clapped Andy on the back.

Whether it was the Frappuccino or how his mouth was still on fire from the pizza, he didn’t feel particularly tired. Still, when he got back to his seat, he stashed his backpack at his feet, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. He sat there for five or ten minutes, but sleep predictably didn’t come, so finally he opened his eyes and pulled out his laptop again to work on the funeral speech. He began typing, *My parent’s death is a reminder of how short life can be. Life is fragile. Take the opportunities you have and go with them. Like my parents did.*

Ugh. He stopped himself. He sounded like a televangelist. He was supposed to say some nice words, not give a sermon.

Maybe he needed to brainstorm more. He opened a new Word document, saved it as “Eulogy Ideas.docx,” and started a list:

**Mom liked football, Dad liked baseball. Maybe something about that?*

**Dad played the bass guitar in a band in high school. His favorite band was the Animals, he’s the only person I’ve ever hear say that.*

**Mom used to watch Seinfeld and laugh so loud, the neighbors would call to make sure everything was ok. <- Ok, use that. That’s funny. Maybe??*

**We went to Cedar Point for 3 family vacations. One time we heard people in the hotel room next to us having sex and mom laughed and laughed. Ok yeah that’s good. She liked to laugh a lot. Laughing is good. Dad laughed some, too. But probably a normal level of laughing. Maybe shouldn’t mention sex in a church though??*

**Dad taught both Taylor and I how to drive at the same time. He once said “When I’m old and blind, you’ll be driving me around”. That might be good to say, except they died in a car accident. Dad was never blind but he fell asleep at the wheel so he was blind in a way.*

Andy stopped himself. This was getting depressing. Well, maybe that was a sign he was on the right track. It was a eulogy after all, and it would be nice to feel *something* but still. .

..

He put his laptop away. He still had a couple days before the funeral. Maybe Taylor could help him come up with something, or maybe Andy would insist just Taylor talk. Did it really matter if Andy said something too? Either way, he and Taylor would probably fight over it.

He sat back in his chair and out of the corner of his eye saw Jerry walking his way, alone. Andy immediately closed his eyes and mimed being asleep.

He heard Jerry scoot in front of him and sit down in the window seat, breathing audibly.

Andy was continuing to play sleep, when he heard Jerry whisper, “It’s okay. I saw you were awake. I get it. Sorry to be a bother.”

Andy winced but didn’t know how to respond, so he kept his eyes closed, waiting for this moment to pass. Still, he could recognize, he *was* a real asshole. It had been a weird, weird week. Or had he always been an asshole like this?

When the train pulled into Union Station in Chicago, a few minutes after 3:00, Andy grabbed his backpack and stood up.

“Oh, don’t forget these,” Jerry said, grabbing Andy’s sunglasses from the mesh net hanging off the seat in front of them.

“Oh, thanks.” Andy looked down at Jerry still sitting in his seat. “Aren’t you getting off too?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t you have to? It’s the end of the line, isn’t it?”

“I’ve actually just been riding the train across the country back and forth for a few months now.”

“... Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask why?”

Jerry shrugged. “Gives me something to do. Gives me a sense of purpose in my ‘old age.’ I’ve needed that.”

“Ah. I had no idea.”

“You never asked,” Jerry said, shrugging again.

“What about Diane?”

“Oh, her? It was just nice to talk to someone. Even for just a few minutes.” Jerry gazed into the distance, looking wistful. He gave a weak smile, far removed from his earlier bouncy body language. He turned his head to peer out the window, which now just showed the inside of the train terminal, a poorly-lit cavernous structure that resembled a factory at night.

Andy stared a second longer at Jerry, feeling like apologizing for something, but he didn’t know what to say, so he joined the herd of people leaving the train, all pushing to get off quickly, all pushing to just get off the train.