

Tell Me a Story

by Kunal Lobo

When I couldn't think anymore, I put my pencil down. It had been a long day, and I was ready for the weekend. I looked around my office and realized for the first time this week how messy it was. There were papers covering my desk, and some had even fallen onto the floor. Equations covered everything – from the white board to every single paper on my desk to my computer screen. Many have told me that I have poor organizational skills, but I always responded by saying the smartest people always do.

I was calculating the non-linear terms of the one-loop matter bi-spectrum – basically messy algebra and calculus I haven't seen since graduate school. And after this long day of straight number crunching, my entire body ached. My butt hurt from sitting in the chair all day,

my fingers hurt from writing with the pencil, my arm hurt from writing on the white board, my eyes hurt from staring at the computer screen, and my head ached from working all day.

Don't get me wrong—I loved my job. It made excellent money, and I only had to teach two classes a week. Additionally, it was everything I was good at—math, astrophysics, and computer programming. Cosmology was always a passion of mine, and one day I will unravel the secrets of the early universe.

I stacked a few papers on my desk and picked up the ones off the floor, packing my briefcase with just a few papers. As I glanced at the convex mirror on my desk, I noticed that my light brown beard was slightly unkempt. My skin was unusually pale for this time in November, as I had been too busy with my research to spend time in the sunlight.

I switched off my office light, closed the door, and walked down the long hallway to the elevator. Earlier in the week, I tried to take the stairs, but at the moment, I was just too tired to walk down three flights of stairs. As I stepped outside, I felt the cold, moist air sting my exposed skin, making me regret not wearing a jacket on top of my half-sleeve shirt. Hearing the rain drops harshly hitting the pavement, I sighed in annoyance. I lifted my briefcase close to my body and took my car keys out of my pocket. Mustering up all the energy I had left, I sprinted to my car, clicking the unlock key on the run over. At these moments, I always thought about buying an umbrella, but I always forgot to the moment it stopped raining. And at this point, sprinting through the rain had become a habit.

I turned the heat up to the maximum in my car and tried to wipe off the water on my arms. I never liked driving in the rain in the dark—the streetlights would reflect upon the wet surface of the road, making it a lot more difficult to see. And so, the drive to my daughter's school took a whole twenty minutes.

“How was she?” I asked the afterschool daycare worker.

“Hey William!” The daycare greeted me, “Sarah might just be the smartest ten-year-old I’ve ever met. Really sweet as well.”

“Daddy!” my daughter’s face lit up as she came running into my arms. I gave her a hug and thanked the daycare worker for looking after her, as we left the building.

“How was your day, Sarah?” I asked her.

“It was awesome, Daddy!” she replied. “In advanced math today, I was...”

“What?” I said, as we stepped outside.

“Do you have an umbrella?” she asked. “I forgot mine today.”

I sighed. “No, I forgot mine as well.”

I sprinted to the car again and brought it back around for her. She let out a big smile, as I let her sit in the front seat again—which I had started letting her do for the last few months. Sarah had her mother’s smile—so cheerful and so optimistic. Every time Sarah smiled, I would think of her mother and how similar the two were. Sarah might have gotten her math and science intellect from me, but everything else she got from her mother—the creativity, the people skills, and the kindness. Every parent-teacher conference, the teacher always commented on those things—particularly how kind she was to her classmates.

She looked like her mother as well. She had the same shade of light brown hair and the same shaped blue eyes. The two of them got along well, and they did basically everything together. They would go to art museums, classical music concerts, and theatres. Sometimes I felt like I was too different from them, but they both loved me anyway.

“So, tell me more about your day?” I said, as we started driving.

“Oh, I have the best story,” my daughter said. “I walked down to the middle school for my advanced math class. Some of the stupid sixth grade boys tried to make fun of me, but then we played this game called the 24 Game. I showed them all up in it—none of them even came close to beating me, and they were so embarrassed to have lost to a fourth grader.”

“Why were they making fun of you?” I asked. I had always worried that sending her to the middle school for all her classes could be a bad idea for her socially.

“I don’t know,” Sarah laughed it off. “They’re probably just stupid boys, and it makes them feel better to pick on younger girls. I don’t really care though. I’m just glad I got to show them up.”

“That’s good,” I smiled at her. When I was a kid, I had issues with bullying as well, but Sarah certainly seemed to be less phased by it.

“Anything else interesting happen?” I asked.

“You’re gonna love this,” Sarah said, with excitement and eagerness filling her voice. “In advanced science today, we were talking about atoms and molecules. The teacher asked us to name the three parts of the atom, and I quickly responded the proton, the neutron, and the electron, and...”

“That’s awesome!” I interjected, remembering when I had taught her that for the first time.

“Also,” Sarah laughed, trying to get through her story without cracking up. “I wasn’t sure exactly what Miss Castle was looking for, so then I told her that each proton and neutron was made up of even smaller particles named quarks. She didn’t believe me at first, but I insisted. So, she looked it up, and turns out I was right!”

“Well, you know,” I sighed, “the quark model is an advanced model, and most middle school teachers don’t really know about it, so...”

“I know!” she cut me off. “But she was really impressed, and the rest of the class was too!”

“Yeah, of course,” I smiled back at her. Back in my day, knowing the quark model was never a path to popularity, but somehow Sarah had made it work.

“Anything else?” I asked, “Like in your other classes?”

“Well, my advanced English class was fun today as well,” Sarah started. “I know, that’s not as interesting to you, although, we are starting a book called *A Wrinkle in Time* and I know that has some physics stuff in it.”

“I mean, just because I don’t know much about English doesn’t mean...”

“It’s fine,” she cut me off again, “I want to talk about things that you would find interesting.”

“Okay, fine,” I said. I knew I had to do a better job showing interest in every subject, or at some point she would fall behind in English like I did. “How’s your friends? Do you still hang out with some of the other fourth graders?”

“Yeah, of course,” Sarah responded. “Actually, would Emily be able to come over for a sleepover tomorrow? I know I should have asked you first, but...”

“Totally!” I said, glad that her advanced coursework wasn’t impacting her social life too much.

Throughout the car ride home, Sarah continued to tell me stories about her day. She used to do this with her mother as well, but they would talk about different things. When she talked to

her mother, Sarah would talk about art and music—things she usually didn't bring up with me. Sometimes worried me—am I really doing everything I can to make up for her mother?

Driving past the crisp pine trees, we entered our neighborhood. I was used to it now, but I occasionally thought back to the first time I ever drove through this neighborhood—back when I was searching for houses with my wife. Each of the houses in this neighborhood were almost twice as big as any house I lived in as a child. The houses looked beautiful, even in the pouring rain. Most of them had a three-car garage and a swimming pool. They were spaced pretty far apart too, leaving each house to have a nice lawn for the kids to play around in. The popular sports in this neighborhood were football and soccer, and on the weekend, almost every child came out to play. I drove past the house that Sarah always visited—she liked to play badminton with the fifth-grade girl who lived there. I continued to drive up the hill until our house came into sight—the house made out of dark bricks with an orange door. Our house was slightly bigger than the other mansions in this neighborhood and spaced slightly farther away from the other houses as well.

Although we parked in the garage, it was still cold when we got out of the car. As we entered the house, we quickly warmed up—we had a remote control for our thermostat that I would set to heat the house thirty minutes before I reached home. I turned on the first set of lights, but the house was still dark. I systematically turned on all the lights until we felt warm and cozy sitting in the kitchen.

My wife and I had first bought this house when her first novel was published. Generating a lot more revenue than she anticipated, she decided to gift me by getting me the one thing that I always dreamed about—a mansion that we could get lost in. When we first moved in, it was epic. It was just me and her and an epic space. We could enter a new room and spontaneously

decide what to do with it. We could play hide and seek as adults. We could set up board games and never have to clean them up. We could invite our college friends over and party like those days had never ended.

We also had a swimming pool in the back yard. I was never a great swimmer, but my wife taught me. In the family room, we could watch TV on a large screen like we were in the theatre. In the basement, we had air hockey, ping pong, pool, foosball, and basically any other game you could think of. And it only got better when Sarah was born. Sarah would try to invite her friends over for a sleepover almost every week until my wife would say no. Her friends loved our house as well. They could run around, and play hide and seek. When they grew a bit older, they could go outside and play a pickup game of soccer. The swimmers would usually opt out and go in the pool instead. And for all of us, we were happy. I'm sure we could have been happy in a small house as well, but we had the money, so why not?

Without my wife though, the mansion felt too big. There were always too many empty rooms that I never knew what to do with. Sarah and her friends would have fun playing in them, but when it was just me, it felt a bit empty. I had this big, huge mansion, but it was all to myself. When the lights were off, I would feel a bit scared. The silence scared me as well—it was gloomy and depressing. I occasionally thought about selling this mansion, but I had finally paid off the mortgage, and I couldn't bring myself to.

“What's for dinner?” Sarah asked.

“I'm going to make pasta,” I told her. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I love pasta!” Sarah said, but I could tell she was a bit disappointed. I felt bad. I had never really learned how to cook, and now I could never make the dishes that my wife would always make for Sarah.

I took out the pot and boiled the water. I placed the pasta box on the counter as I waited for the water to boil. Next to the pasta box on the counter lay a forty-seven-dollar bottle of red wine. Last week, I had gone to the liquor store in search of some pinot noir, and the owner recommended that bottle to me, saying it was the best thing he had ever tasted. My mouth watered slightly, just looking at it. After putting Sarah to bed, it would be all mine.

“Good pasta,” Sarah complimented me, as we finished up dinner. I could tell that she was just trying to make me feel better.

“I promise you Sarah,” I said, “one day I’m going to learn to cook for real. Then I’ll make you all the dishes that Mommy used to make.”

“It’s okay, Daddy.” She smiled gently at me, “I know you’re just trying your best.”

As Sarah went to take a shower, I sat at the counter and stared at the bottle of red wine. Most of my colleagues preferred beer at the end of the week, but there was something satisfying about finishing an entire bottle of red wine. While I loved the wine, I could never drink it while Sarah was awake—my duties as a parent came first. Sarah was such a brilliant girl, and I couldn’t help thinking that this situation was unfair to her. I was doing my best as a parent, but I would never be as good as her mother. I would never be able to replace the bond the two of them had. And even if just for Sarah’s sake, I wish her mother was still with me.

When she finished her shower, I walked down the long corridor and walked up the stairs. The upstairs looked especially creepy because the lights of the other bedrooms were almost always off, and I couldn’t justify turning them on. I knew it was normal for little girls to be scared of the dark, but for some reason it never bothered Sarah. I entered her bedroom, which admittedly was way too large for a ten-year-old girl and saw her lying quietly on her bed.

I rolled her over, lifted the blankets and covers, and placed them upon her. I kissed her forehead the way her mother used to. She smiled at me, with her eyes still open. I smiled back at her, before turning around and walking towards the door.

“Wait, Daddy?” she called out, right as my fingers were reaching for the light switch.

“Can you tell me a story?”

“A story?” I asked, a bit confused. “You mean like... about my day?”

“Uhm...” Sarah pondered for a minute. “Sure.”

“Okay,” I sighed at sat down on her bed next to her. “Well today was a fairly typical day for me. I went into the office and got all my papers out. Do you remember that algebra you’re starting to learn? Well, that’s what I did. I did a lot of that algebra and I also typed it all onto the computer so the computer could calculate it for me. Basically, I’m looking at the relative spacing between three galaxies.”

“Same as every day,” Sarah giggled. “But can you tell me like a real story? Like something you find really interesting?”

“The Universe started at the Big Bang,” I said the first thing that came to my head. “When the Universe first began, everything was radiation—light. There were some particles, but not many compared to the amount of light. As the Universe expanded, the density of light decreased the fastest. The density of matter decreased as well, but not as quickly, so eventually matter became the most contributing component. Finally, matter decreased as well, leaving the one last thing in charge—we call it dark energy or the cosmological constant. This cosmological constant remains the same no matter what and it causes the universe to accelerate its expansion.”

“You know I love that story,” Sarah smiled at me. “But how about another story? Like a different one.”

“The early Universe was homogeneous and isotropic,” I thought of the next thing that came to my head. I really was unsure what she wanted. “Some parts of the universe were over dense, and some parts were under dense. In the regions that were over dense...”

“More matter was attracted to it. And these density fluctuations gave rise to the formation of first structures, such as galaxies,” Sarah cut me off, smiling proudly to having known that. “You’ve told me that story thousands of times, Daddy. Why not a new story? Why not make one up?”

Make up a story? I had never done that in my life. I tried several times, but I was seriously lacking in creativity. I had always admired how my wife can frame a story out of thin air. She was the creative one, not me.

“Oh, uhm...” I stuttered, “Like, would you like me to read from one of Mommy’s books? You know I have all of them.”

“And you know that I’ve read all of them, already,” Sarah explained.

“Still not sure how you read all thirteen of those books,” I laughed. “You know they’re meant for teenagers and young adults.”

“Well, you know that I’m way above my grade level for reading,” Sarah bragged. “And I miss Mommy a lot. Of course, I’ve read all her books. Some of them multiple times.”

“Mommy was the creative one,” I sighed. “I don’t know how to make up a story.”

“Look into your heart,” Sarah said. “Mommy always said the best stories were in there.”

I sighed again and thought about it. I could tell the stereotypical story of the knight in shining armor who rescued the princess, but Sarah had probably read all of those. I could tell her some of my favorite stories like *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*, but she had seen those movies as well. My wife had tried to teach me to write short stories, but I could never wrap my head around

the concept. She told me to start with my childhood, but my childhood was boring. I grew up with relatively normal parents, went to college, got my degree, got my PhD, and that's it.

But then again, there was one story that occurred in my life that I had always found interesting. It was a story of something completely unplanned, something I had no control over. But a story that changed my life in ways I could only begin to describe. And if I just changed the names, my daughter would think that I had just made this story up.

"Okay," I smiled. "Let's call the main character Neil, okay? Neil was a college student studying astrophysics at Princeton University. Now Neil, he was very shy. He had friends, but for the most part, he was introverted. Neil was a senior, and by the end of the year, he would graduate and continue his plan of going on to graduate school to continue studying astrophysics—cosmology in particular."

"Okay," Sarah smiled, as she curled up in her bed. "Sounds like a good story. Keep going."

I saw my daughter smile, and I thought of her mother, my wife again. And seeing how happy it made Sarah, I kept telling the story that I had known so well.

Neil sat in math class, right leg shaking, as he was finishing up his exam. There were fifteen minutes left, but he had already checked his work over twice, and there was not a whole lot more that he could do to improve his score. Still, he didn't want to just leave now because then he would miss his opportunity. So, he sat there, fiddling with his pencil, until time was called.

As soon as time was called, he quickly walked to the front of the room and handed in his test. He glanced back to see the girl he was waiting for, Lucy. Lucy was a beautiful woman, and

Neil had had his eyes on her for the last two months since they've been in class together. They had only talked a few times so far, and it had only ever been about homework. Neil wanted to change that.

"Hey Lucy!" Neil greeted her. "What did you think of the exam?"

"I didn't think it was too bad," Lucy said. "What about you?"

"Same," Neil said. "Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to get dinner tonight."

"Oh, uhm... sure," Lucy stuttered. "Wait, do you mean like a date?"

"Uhm..." Neil was unsure how to respond to that. "Yeah."

"I would love to," Lucy said, covering her mouth to hide her gentle laugh. "But I kinda have a boyfriend."

Neil kicked himself as Lucy walked off. This was the third girl that Neil had been into who had had a boyfriend. After all this time, you would think Neil would learn from his mistakes. You would think Neil would go online, look up the girl, and make sure for himself that she was single. But unfortunately, Neil's skills ended at math and science.

Sarah sat up in her bed and started giggling. I paused my story for a second and started laughing with her. She then lay back down and told me to keep going. I had never told a story before, but Sarah seemed to be enjoying it.

"What were you thinking dude?" Neil's friend, Matt confronted him later in the day.

"You know she has a boyfriend, right?"

"No..." Neil defended himself. "No, I didn't."

"You're an idiot," Matt teased him.

“I’m just so frustrated,” Neil sighed. “Like I can’t believe I thought I had a chance.”

“Dude, you really want to meet some girls?” Matt asked. “Come out with me tonight. I’ll show you the ropes.”

“Nah, I just...” Neil stuttered, “I have that problem set due next...”

“Dude,” Matt cut me off. “I’m an astro major too. You turned twenty-one three weeks ago, and you haven’t even celebrated yet.”

“Okay fine,” Neil sighed.

Now Neil was a studious student—he rarely broke the rules or did anything reckless. He went to very few parties, and when he did, he kept to himself. But Neil knew that this time, Matt was going to get him to have a good time.

“Is this like the peer pressure they always keep telling us about?” Sarah interjected.

“No,” I said, “Well... yes. But not quite the same. In the peer pressure that they are telling you about, it’s usually when your peers tell you to do something that’s bad. In this case Matt wasn’t going to make Neil do anything bad; rather he just wanted Neil to have some fun.”

“Oh okay,” Sarah said. “You can keep going.”

So, Neil and Matt went to the bar that night to celebrate his twenty-first birthday. When they went to the bar, they drank... let’s call it soda. But it wasn’t just like any soda—no, this soda was like magical soda. When this kind of magical soda was drunk, it affects the minds of the person drinking it. One of these effects is it helps the person drinking it have more fun. But the side effect is it sometimes causes that person to act stupid and if way too much is drunk, it can cause that person to forget things.

For each one of these magical sodas that Matt drank, he made Neil have one as well. And after about eight, Neil was having a great time. However, Neil had never had any of these magical sodas before, so he had no idea how silly he was acting that night. Matt promised that he would introduce Neil to some beautiful women, but Neil was not in the mental state to talk to anyone. And so, Neil and Matt had a great time drinking these magical sodas by themselves at the bar.

When it was time to go to bed, Matt insisted that Neil crash on the couch of his apartment. Neil lived much farther away, and Matt didn't want Neil to walk home alone. Neil insisted that he was fine, but Matt wouldn't let him leave. So, he crashed on Matt's couch while Matt went up to bed.

But then Neil woke up. It was the middle of the night, and he had forgotten where he was. Due to the after-effects of this magical soda, the room was spinning. But Neil trusted himself—he was smart, and he knew that he could make it home to his apartment. And so, very quietly, he opened the door and walked out of Matt's apartment.

"That doesn't sound like a good idea," Sarah pointed out. "These magical sodas seem to be more trouble than they're worth."

"Oh, you have no idea," I laughed, thinking to myself how right she was. "Those magical sodas certainly did cause a lot of problems for Matt and Neil."

"Keep going," Sarah insisted.

So, Neil kept walking—he knew his path home all too well as he walked it every day. But as Neil looked at his surroundings, he didn't know where he was. He tried to take his phone

out and put his address into his GPS, but his vision was too blurry to read the screen. At that point, Neil realized that he had drunk way too much of those magical sodas. He didn't know where he was or how he got here.

But Neil's sense of direction was key. He knew which direction was his apartment. And so, he kept walking, waiting for a road to lead him east. He found none—he kept walking and there was no road there. And then his fears caught up to him. What if there were no roads leading east?

In panic, Neil abandoned the road. He darted east as fast as he could. Bumping into a bush, he quickly pondered the idea of going through the forest, but then decided against it. He was too scared to enter a forest in the middle of the night. He kept walking down that road that seemed to never end. There were some stores on either side of the road, but they were all closed. There was no one he could talk to and ask for directions home. He picked up his phone to dial his roommate, but his vision was still too blurry to even see the numbers.

But then at last, Neil saw another person walking in the opposite direction as him. It was dark, and his vision was blurred, but he could tell from her shape that she was a girl. Neil looked upon her to see that she was quite beautiful.

“Wh-where am I?” Neil asked the girl, calmly approaching her.

“You're on Blue Drive,” the girl told him. “Are you okay?”

“Not... not really,” Neil said. “How do I get home?”

“Uhm,” the girl said, pulling out her phone. “What's your address?”

“It's uh...” Neil contemplated, trying to remember his address. “It's forty-seven Allenal Drive, and uh...”

“That’s forty-six minutes away,” the girl said, looking up at him. “Are you sure you’re okay to walk all the way?”

“Uhm... not really,” Neil sighed, “I don’t really know how else...”

“I can call you an Uber,” the girl offered. “Do you want me to call you an Uber?”

“Would you?” Neil begged. “Please. I’ll pay you back, I promise.”

And so, the girl called an Uber and waited with Neil for it to arrive. Meanwhile, she took his phone and put her number in. The girl knew that Neil was in no state of mind to pay her right now, so she figured that she would text him the next day and remind him.

“What’s your name again?” Neil asked as he got in the Uber.

“Jessica,” the girl smiled at him.

“That was nice of her,” Sarah smiled. “Neil was really lucky that he ran into her.”

“Yep,” I laughed. “He certainly was. Who knows what would have happened to Neil if she didn’t find him?”

“He might not have even made it home that night,” Sarah suggested. “Sorry, this is your story, not mine. This is getting good though! Can you keep going?”

And so, the next day, Neil woke up with a huge headache. By the way, that’s the other effect of this magical soda. But he looked at his phone, and he saw a text from a strange number. When he saw the name Jessica, the end of the night flashed back to him. He couldn’t remember how he got to Blue Drive, but he remembered meeting that girl and her calling him an Uber. Neil instantly paid her back using this app on his phone called Venmo.

For the next few days Neil constantly stared at that message from her. He couldn't help thinking about where he would be if Jessica hadn't found him. He didn't remember much of what she looked like except that she was pretty cute. And so, Neil couldn't help wondering if things had happened for a reason. After pacing around for a while, Neil finally mustered up the courage to text her. She took a while to respond, but eventually she did. And after pacing around for a few hours on end, Neil mustered up the courage again to send her another text asking her out.

And so, the next weekend, the two of them agreed to meet for ice cream. Neil got to the ice cream shop ten minutes before the time that they agreed to meet. He sat there anxiously, with his left leg shaking. He didn't really remember what she looked like—he just had a rough sketch. But when Jessica arrived, she instantly recognized him and waved.

“Hey, I’m Neil,” he greeted her. “I guess I’m in a much better state of mind than last time.” The two of them laughed and walked into the shop.

“I got it,” Neil said to the cashier, as Jessica put her card away.

“Oh, you didn’t have to...”

“Yes, I did,” Neil laughed. “I owe you one.”

“So, what are you studying?” Jessica asked.

“I’m astrophysics,” Neil said. “What about you?”

“Oh wow,” she laughed, giving the same reaction that Neil always got from stating his major. “I’m majoring in creative writing. Well, technically I’m an English major, but I specialize in creative writing.”

“Oh, I gotcha,” Neil said, “What do you want to do with that?”

“I want to be a novelist someday,” Jessica explained. “I know it’s sort of a hit or miss kind of thing, but that’s my goal for now. What about you?”

“I’m trying to go to grad school,” Neil told her. “I want to study cosmology.”

“Oh like...”

“Not cosmetology,” Neil cut her off. “I want to study the Universe not how to make people look pretty.”

“That makes more sense,” she giggled. That joke had now worked seven out of seven times for Neil. “That’s pretty cool though. I always found space fascinating.”

So, Neil and Jessica had a great time at ice cream. In fact, they stayed there for two and a half hours just to keep talking to each other. They hung out again. And again. And it wasn’t always ice cream. Sometimes they would do homework together and sometimes they would go on walks. But for a while, they were just friends. Neil was always too scared to tell her how he felt. Until this one time.

Neil and Jessica were walking back from class one day. It was perfect weather; they were both wearing short sleeve shirts and walking side by side. Neil looked to the side and saw Jessica’s hand just a few inches from his. He resisted his urge to hold it, as he didn’t want to risk making it weird between them. If he was going to do something, he had to do it in the right way.

“Would you like to get dinner with me tonight?” Neil blurted out. “Like on a real date?”

Butterflies exploded in Neil’s stomach as he awaited her response. She looked at Neil with a huge smile on her face, as she giggled. She nodded her head, and Neil stepped forward and gave her a hug. And as sad as this might have been for a college student, Neil had finally got his first date.

“Awwww,” Sarah’s face lit up. “This is so sweet. I always love a good romance.”

“Glad you liked the story,” I smiled at her. “Now are you ready to go to bed?”

“But the story doesn’t seem finished,” Sarah said. “Like what happens on the first date? Do they become boyfriend and girlfriend? Does it work out between them?”

“Uhm, well...”

“Can you keep going?” Sarah begged, “Please.”

“Fine,” I sighed.

So, Neil took Jessica to a fancy restaurant—perhaps the fanciest restaurant in their little college town. Jessica wore a beautiful blue dress that she looked absolutely stunning in. When they got in, they realized that they were the youngest people in the restaurant. Luckily for Neil, he had made a lot of money the previous summer with his research position, and so he could afford a treat every now and then.

“So, do you drink those magical drinks often?” Jessica asked. “Or was it like a once and a while thing?”

“Actually,” Neil said, “the one time you saw me is really the only time I’ve had more than two. What about you, do you drink magical sodas at all?”

“Well, I just turned twenty-one a few months ago,” Jessica explained. “I never really drank any magical drinks back then, but now I’ll have a few every once in a while.”

“Just magical soda?” Neil asked. “Or do you drink those concentrated magical short drinks?”

“Actually neither,” Jessica said. “I’ve had magical soda before, but I’m not a huge fan. I’m more of a fan of magical white grape juice.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “That doesn’t seem as popular in college.”

“Well, you should try some,” Jessica smiled.

The waitress approached our table and asked for our order. She was a tall blonde, but she looked young. As Neil gave his order to the waitress, Jessica took her wallet out of her dress, and revealed her driver’s license.

“Could we get two glasses of Chardonnay?” Jessica smiled. Chardonnay is the fancy word for a type of magical white grape juice, and at fancy restaurants like this you can’t just call it magical white grape juice.

The magical white grape juice came out before the meal. Jessica looked at Neil eagerly as he took his first sip. Neil, having never drunk magical white grape juice before, took a large sip, causing him to set his glass down and cough a few times. Jessica laughed as she knew that this was not the proper way to drink it. Neil liked this magical white grape juice a lot, and after they were all done with their meal, Neil and Jessica ordered two more glasses.

On their walk home, Neil confessed his feelings to her. He told Jessica how much he liked her, and Jessica told him that she felt the same way about him. On the way home, he saw her hand dangling next to his, but this time Neil finally had the courage to hold it. And so yes, they became boyfriend and girlfriend.

Neil never really drank too much of any magical drink again. Still both Jessica and Neil enjoyed magical white grape juice, and they would usually drink it together while watching a movie or eating dinner. Neil might not have had much luck with girls in high school or even college for that matter. But his luck came when it counted—when he met the one girl he was supposed to be in love with. Neil went on to grad school, and Jessica went on to write novels. Even though they were busy with their work, they always stayed together. And right about when

Neil was about to graduate from grad school, the Neil and Jessica got married. And they lived happily ever after.

A tear rolled down from Sarah's cheek. With the back of my hand, I wiped it off, but more of them kept coming. Sarah was a tough girl, but everyone has a breaking point. And Sarah had reached hers.

"What's wrong, Sarah?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Daddy, and I really liked the story," she told me. "But that story was about Mommy, wasn't it? That story was about how you two met."

"But Mommy's name is Jennifer, not Jessica," I tried to hide the all too obvious truth.

"And your name is William not Neil," Sarah forced a laugh. "This was about you and Mommy, right?"

"Yes," I sighed, realizing that she wanted me to actually make up a story.

"It's okay, Daddy—it was still a great story. It was just based on a true story," she said. "As most stories usually are."

"Wait?" I asked confused. "What do you mean by that?"

"You remember the shy magician in the first novel Mommy ever published?" Sarah said. "That was based off of you. Mommy told me that, but she told me not to tell you, as she wanted you to figure it out yourself."

"So, what's wrong then?" I asked. "You said you liked the story?"

"I loved the story," Sarah smiled at me. "I just really miss Mommy."

"I miss her too," I sighed. "She was a really special lady."

"Where do you think she is right now?" Sarah asked.

“Mommy’s watching over us,” I said, even though I could never get myself to believe that. “She’s watching over us from the skies.”

Sarah sat up in her bed and wrapped her arms around me. As I hugged her back, she held on tighter and tighter, as I felt the tears falling from her eyes. I had never been the comforting one—that was always Jennifer’s thing. But now I had to fill that role too. I had to be both parents.

“Thank you for the story, Daddy,” Sarah smiled through her tears.

I pulled the blankets and covers over her and stroked her back lightly. I turned out the light and sat on the side of her bed until she fell asleep. She looked just like her mother when she slept, and I could only hope that one day she would grow up to be as kind as her mother as well. It wasn’t fair—Sarah was such an innocent girl, and she didn’t do anything to deserve this. But she still trusted me—she was the one person in the world who truly looked up to me. And today, I told her a story which she loved. I did the one thing that I thought only her mother could do well.

After she was asleep for a few minutes, I quietly got up and shut the door of her bedroom on the way out. I walked down the stairs and through the long corridor that led back to the kitchen. And on the counter was that bottle of red wine that I had been so desperately waiting for.

I approached it, taking the wine opener from the drawer and placing it next to the bottle. I looked around the house for a bit, and for the first time, it didn’t feel as lonely. It always made me sad when I told myself the story—thinking that the girl who called me an Uber that one night would once not be there in my life. But for the first time, I felt a part of that girl still lived on. That part lived on through Sarah.

I reached for the upper cabinet doors and pulled out the only four photographs that I had ever printed out. I laid the four photographs next to each other.

The first photograph was taken on the day of our wedding. Jennifer wore a beautiful white dress, and both our families were around to watch. It was the happiest day of my life.

The second photograph was taken on the day Sarah was born. It was taken in the hospital, and even though Jennifer was in tremendous pain, she was smiling and holding baby Sarah in her arms. It was the happiest day of Jennifer's life.

The third photograph was taken the day before the doctor called. It was taken the day before the universe betrayed us. It was taken just a few years back, and we were both smiling and happy. Jennifer still had every single hair on her head. It was taken on the last day that I ever drank white wine.

The fourth photograph was taken on the last day. It was almost a year ago, but I remembered it like yesterday. Every single strand of hair had fallen off of Jennifer's head. Jennifer had been in excruciating pain. Yet, she was strong. She still managed to smile for the picture as if her life was still perfect. It was taken on the first day that I ever drank red wine.

I stared at the bottle and at all four photographs until I couldn't take it any longer. Making a firm decision, I picked up the picture of Jennifer on the last day. I walked to the living room and used our automatic fire starter to turn on the fireplace. Tears rolling down my eyes, I took the picture of Jennifer on the last day and tossed it into the fire. I waited a few seconds until it had completely disappeared and then put out the fire.

I walked back to the counter in the kitchen and looked at the three remaining pictures. Those were the only three that I needed. I then stared at the bottle of red wine for a few

moments. Letting out a sigh, I picked up the bottle and placed it back in the closet. I didn't need it today either.