

THIN PLACES

MONDAY

“Okay, we’re going to wrap up today by shifting the discussion from Pavlov to Skinner, from classical conditioning to operant conditioning.”

A gigantic screen emitted a soft glow that accentuated Eleanor Watkins’ stern, self-confident profile. One-hundred twenty-seven scared-to-death UT-San Antonio freshmen stared back at her; another 60 or so looked hungover.

“Let’s start with the basics,” Eleanor continued. “Skinner believed we are shaped by our environment. We are what we’ve been exposed to. So, in other words, we have no free will.”

A student at the side of the room raised her hand.

“Hannah?”

“Dr. Watkins, if we don’t have free will, where does God fit into this?”

Eleanor glanced at the wall clock. 11:47. “I don’t know. You’ll have to ask her.” *Skirted that one.*

A few students chuckled.

“Unfortunately, we’re out of time for today so we’ll pick this up on Wednesday.” The noise level rose significantly as students exited the large lecture hall. “Remember to put your homework in the box by the door! And put your name on it, please!”

Late in the afternoon, Eleanor inched through rush hour traffic but still managed to arrive home a little earlier than expected. The garage door rose a second before she pushed the button. She saw her husband standing next to his Range Rover and released a deep exasperated sigh.

“Duane?” She said, exiting her Prius. “Going somewhere?”

“Spurs game with Andy,” he said. “Don’t wait up.”

TUESDAY

Eleanor woke from fitful sleep and looked at the clock. It was 4:03 AM and Duane was not there. She rubbed her forehead and evaluated her life. They had met at a mutual friend's wedding when she, a newly minted Ph.D., had just looked up from a textbook, and realized she had everything she wanted in life except a husband and family. There had been a whirlwind romance, marriage; and two daughters within three years. Now, with their daughters out of the house and her career well established, they lived alone, together. Most nights, she worked in her study while Duane guzzled Chardonnay from his La-Z-Boy. About a month ago, he suddenly became chipper, lost weight, and started working late.

I don't know that I even like him. Why am I putting up with his side-twinkie? She stared into the dark and felt empty. Her head pounded. *Coffee*, she thought. *Might as well get moving.*

She entered the faculty office wing before daylight and the space was oddly quiet. She dropped her purse into the bottom drawer then dove into her email. The energy level gradually picked up as staff flowed in, phones rang, students and faculty came and went. She blankly stared at her computer monitor for several minutes then her gaze began to drift – diplomas, awards, old family photos.

Her ringing cell phone jolted her back to the present. *Mom. Can't take her right now.* Eleanor let the call roll to voice mail. The cell phone rang again. She declined the call. A few minutes later, the department secretary stood in her office door.

“Dr. Watkins, it's your mother. She says it's urgent.”

Eleanor's face turned ashen. “Transfer the call.”

“Ellie, it's your daddy,” her mother's voice broke. “You need to come.”

There had been countless doctors' visits that emanated out in concentric circles: first in her dusty little hometown, then San Antonio, followed by Houston, and finally, back where they started. She had sat with her parents in San Antonio and Houston when they heard words like stage four, rare, and aggressive. There was the possibility of a clinical trial, which her dad refused outright.

"Mom, just last week they gave him three to six months," Eleanor said.

Silence.

"I'll be there this afternoon."

The news had hit then ricocheted around the small south Texas town.

"Have you heard?"

"Oh no . . . I'm not surprised."

The wonder wasn't that Lloyd Watkins had taken to bed in the middle of the day. The wonder was how he had lasted as long as he had. There had been whispers about "all those doctors' visits"; and the whole town saw the extra holes whittled into the belt that barely held pants on his hipbones.

Eleanor drove past the green city limit sign and read ESCONDIDO SPRINGS POPULATION 2036. *And every one of them are into each other's business*, she thought. She rolled her eyes when she passed the Mexican cemetery where the standard white Jesus stood guard at the gate. "Some things never change," she said to herself. *I spent most of my life trying to get out of this little redneck shithole. Damn, if I'm not right back where I started.* She passed the Bluebonnet Café and half a dozen sad, dusty storefronts. *Been here two seconds and I'm already suffocating.*

She coasted to a stop in front of a modest brick house surrounded by a white picket fence. *A lot of old ghosts in there*, she thought. Her mouth went dry.

The typically well-manicured yard told the saga of recent months. The grass was brown and scraggly, the flowerbeds, full of weeds. The hedges, untrimmed and overgrown, looked like something out of a Dr. Seuss book. She took a minute to steel herself.

The house was dimly lit and jarringly still. Casseroles, homemade breads, and desserts filled every bit of space in the kitchen.

“Esperanza’s with him now.” Her mom stood in the kitchen doorway. “Shouldn’t be long, then you can go in.”

Eleanor was struck by her mom’s appearance. Once the town beauty, Brenda Watkins, was now gray at the temples; her glasses, crow’s feet, and dark circles framed her piercing blue eyes.

“Who’s Esperanza?”

“The hospice nurse.”

“We have hospice in Escondido Springs?”

“Their office is in Laredo,” Brenda said, “But Esperanza lives here in town. That way, we get support faster.”

Eleanor nodded. “How is he?”

“Tired. In pain. He keeps mumbling something about wildflowers and tall grass. Esperanza’s hooking him up to IV meds now, putting in a catheter, so that should help.”

The back door squeaked open.

“Hey, Dr. Watkins.” Ben leaned over and kissed Eleanor on the cheek.

“Oh please. Don’t be silly.” She smiled and squeezed his hand. “Good to see you, Ben. Thanks for being here.”

“Your dad’s been my best friend since Mrs. Connally’s kindergarten.” His bloodshot eyes filled. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else right now.”

“He always said you’re the brother he never had,” Eleanor said.

He nodded and wiped his nose. “Well, Ellie-Belly, that would make you the niece I never had and I’m okay with that.”

Esperanza’s rotund body appeared in the doorway. “You can go in if you want.”

The former gentle giant was now just a wisp of a man. The room was still and quiet, except for the whine from a machine pulsing oxygen through a tube to his nose.

Eleanor gasped at the sight. “Daddy?” No answer. “Daddy?”

She turned to Ben. “This is surreal.” Her lip quivered.

“Here.” Ben placed a chair by the bed.

She slumped into the chair and reached for her dad’s hand.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ellie. You always put him in good spirits.” Ben paused. “He already looks a lot more peaceful than he did a while ago.”

“Do the drugs usually kick in that fast?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m a funeral director. By the time people call me, the drugs don’t matter.” He put his hand on her shoulder and said, “Miss Ellie, I’m going to step out so you two can be together. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

About an hour later, her mother opened the door and whispered, “Ellie, the preacher’s here. Would you like to talk to him?”

“What for?” Her gaze never left her dad.

“Well,” Brenda paused, “he wants to talk to us.”

“I’d rather stay here with Dad.”

“Don’t you think the preacher can bring us some comfort, Ellie? At least hear what he has to say.”

Eleanor sighed. “Okay but let’s make it quick.”

Brenda and Eleanor found the minister waiting in the living room.

“Reverend Thompson, this is my daughter, Eleanor. We call her Ellie.”

She extended her hand to a pasty little man with hairy ears. “I’m Dr. Watkins. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh? A great help at a time like this.”

“Not an MD,” she explained. “Ph.D. in Psychology.”

“I see.” His voice fell. “May we sit?” He motioned toward the couch. “I know this is an important time in the life of a family, so I won’t take much of your time.”

Good. Eleanor clenched her jaw.

“I just want you to know that Mr. Watkins, your dad,” he nodded toward Eleanor, “and your husband,” he looked at Brenda, “is nearing the end of his life.”

“We’re aware, Reverend,” Eleanor said. “That’s why he’s under hospice care. That’s why the kitchen is full of enough food to feed an army.”

“Eleanor,” Brenda said.

“Sorry, Reverend. I’m a little stressed. Go on.”

“It’s a stressful time. I know. Now, Mrs. Watkins, you’ve been very active with both the choir and the prayer circle but, well, your husband was not in the habit of attending church. Would either of you happen to know if he’s had a chance to get right with the Lord?”

Eleanor sat stone-faced. A clock ticked loudly.

He continued. "Because soon, he's going to be at the pearly gates. At least, I hope that's where he'll be. He's going to be standing before his Almighty Judge, and --"

"He's fine," Eleanor interrupted. "No need to worry. He's got this. Yep, good to go."

The clock struck seven, a cuckoo popped out and sounded off. An awkward silence fell on the room.

Brenda quietly said, "He's a rancher, Reverend. He worshiped creation every day."

"I see," the Reverend said. "Well, then I guess that will have to do. Can we pray?"

Do we have to? "Sure." Eleanor sighed and bowed her head.

"Dear God, our brother, Lloyd Watkins is-- "

Blah, blah, blah, Eleanor thought.

He continued. "Even though we don't know what kind of shape his soul is in, --"

Eleanor's head popped up. She turned to her mother; her head still bowed.

The minister droned on. "Even though he never came to church, we're hoping you'll see fit to let him in -- "

Even though this. Even though that. Eleanor rolled her eyes.

Then finally, "In Jesus's name, Amen."

"Thank God," fell out of Eleanor's mouth and landed with a thud. "Sorry," she said to the preacher. She turned to her mother and said, "I'm going to check on Dad."

About 30 minutes later, she walked into the kitchen, scooped a pile of chicken casserole onto a plate, and placed it in the microwave.

"Eleanor Jean Watkins, are you proud of yourself?"

Brenda stood in the doorway, hand on her hip.

“What are you talking about?”

“You were rude to the preacher. I didn’t raise you that way.”

Eleanor sighed. “Oh Mother, not now. Please. That guy’s a puffed-up pious jerk and this is no time to be so damn judgmental.”

“He’s the preacher, Ellie. And he was here to comfort us.”

“Well, I’d say he fell woefully short on that one. Is Dad ‘right with the Lord?’ Good grief. I guess that kind of thing means something to you but, to me? Not so much. Sorry.”

The microwave dinged.

“Look, Mom, if that kind of stuff helps you, I’m glad. I really am. It just falls flat with me.”

“You were rude, Ellie. You shouldn’t talk to anyone like that, but especially not the preacher.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Mother, just stop.” She looked to the ceiling then to her mother.

“You know, I’ve never been good enough. My grades were never high enough. I always had to win just a few more awards. There were always two categories with you, Mother: first place and loser. Two ways to do things: your way and wrong. And that preacher? Ugh. He’s probably the reason Dad never went to church. If Dad was awake and lucid, do you think that would’ve made him feel the least bit better?” She hesitated, then, quietly said, “Not that you care how he feels.”

“What was that?” Brenda’s voice rose. “You think your dad’s feelings don’t mean anything to me? How can you say that?”

Eleanor glanced toward the bedroom then held a finger to her lips. “Easy,” she whispered. “Everything’s always about you. You love playing the martyr; you always have.

Everyone knows Sofia Sanchez was the love of Dad's life. But just because she had brown skin, this little hick town made sure they kept them apart and he never got over it."

Brenda gasped.

"You thought I didn't know? God, Mom. Everybody has always known. But here's the thing, one, you married him knowing that, and two, you stayed when everyone else knew it too. What kind of person stays married to someone who loves someone else?" *What kind indeed.* She thought then swallowed her hypocrisy.

Brenda stood stunned for several seconds. She adjusted her glasses, then calmly said, "Ellie, just exactly where was I supposed to go? What was I supposed to do?"

"So, what kind of role model were you for me?"

"Oh, so now it's all about you. Look, Ellie, I married your dad a week after I graduated high school. Then you came along. I knew he had a thing with Sofia in high school. Everybody did. But they broke up and she left. A couple of years later, he proposed so I figured he was over her. Turns out, he wasn't. So, after 26 years of marriage, when you had been out of the house for years, by the way, he strutted into her funeral in front of God and everybody. Sat in that Catholic church and cried. So then, not only did everybody in town know but everybody knew that everybody knew. You think I wasn't humiliated? I didn't leave the house for at least six months after that.

"In my day, we married our own kind, and we stayed married. So, we came to an understanding. I kept cooking and doing the laundry, only difference was I slept in the guestroom. Now, here we are, married almost 50 years and he's . . ." her voice cracked, "disappearing right before our eyes." She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. Sighed

deeply. “And don’t you think you’re being more than just a little judgmental, Ellie? Marriage is complicated. Surely, you’ve been married to Duane long enough to know that.

“And parenting? Sure, I made my mistakes just like you made yours with your girls. I know I rode you hard when you were growing up. That’s because I was determined that you’d get an education, Ellie; determined you’d have options I never had. If I look like the bad guy in this, so be it. I’m well aware that you’re a daddy’s girl. Fine. But I’m the one who pushed you to get you where you are. He sure didn’t. You’re a grown woman making your own decisions. Whatever your life is, or whatever it isn’t for that matter, it’s your choice. You’re not trapped by anything but yourself.”

“Mrs. Watkins,” Esperanza said, “excuse me, but Mr. Watkins is awake. I thought you’d want to know.”

Eleanor took a step toward the door.

Brenda raised her hand. “I’ll go,” she said. “Eat your supper.”

Eleanor took a few bites, chewed until it was mush, then dumped the rest of it in the trash. Brenda returned to the kitchen, dazed, and silently took a seat across the table from Ellie.

“Mom? What is it?”

Brenda looked blankly around the room. “Ellie, do you remember Hank?”

“Hank? You mean that yellow Lab Dad had when I was in high school?”

“Right. Well, your dad thinks that dog’s up in the bed with him.”

Eleanor sat back in her chair. “He’s hallucinating. Esperanza? Where did she go?”

Esperanza appeared in the doorway. “Sorry, Dr. Watkins. I try to stay out of the way as much as possible. What is it?”

“My dad’s hallucinating. Should you change the dosage on his meds?”

“He’s on the lowest dose of everything already, Dr. Watkins.” Esperanza turned to Brenda. “Does he seem to be in pain?”

“No,” Brenda said.

“Is he agitated? Upset in any way?”

“No.” Eleanor interjected. “He’s just enjoying a rather pleasant conversation with a dead dog.”

“I can contact the doctor if you want but, if we increase his dosage, the less lucid he’ll be,” Esperanza paused. “Plus, it’s possible they’re not hallucinations.”

Eleanor tilted her head. *First the preacher, now the nurse.* “What else could it be?”

“I see this all the time,” Esperanza said. “He’s in two worlds now, not fully here and not completely there. My priest calls them ‘thin places,’ where the boundary between heaven and earth opens.”

Yep, whack job, Eleanor thought.

Esperanza continued. “Whether he’s hallucinating or something more is happening, we don’t know. But we do know that it’s real to him. My experience tells me the best thing to do is to go with it. Don’t try to tell him he’s hallucinating, just pet the dog.”

Eleanor sat at her dad’s bedside and took his hand. “Hey, Dad, I’m glad you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

He smiled and whispered, “Better now that you’re here. How’s my girl?”

She smiled back. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

His eyes drifted from her face to an empty chair in the corner. He smiled and his face filled with warmth.

“Dad, what are you looking at?”

His brown eyes sparkled. “Sofia.”

Ben quietly moved into the room and stood next to Ellie’s chair. “Did I hear that right?”

She nodded then leaned in close to the bed and whispered, “Dad, is Sofia here?”

“Oh yes, she’s been here for a while now.”

“I see,” Ben said.

“Ben?” Lloyd said, eyes closed.

“Yes.”

“Can you open that window for me?”

“Sure.”

Ben stepped across the room and raised the window. A minute later, the curtains billowed, and a soft breeze drifted into the room.

Lloyd smiled and, eyes still closed, said, “That feels nice. Thank you.” He paused a beat.

“Well, Mark Gutierrez. Good to see you, son.”

Eleanor turned to Ben and frowned.

“He’s a high school kid your dad hired to help out at the ranch. We were just talking about him a few days ago so I guess that’s why your dad’s conjuring him up. Good kid. Hard worker. Your dad really likes him.”

During the next several hours, Hank, Sofia, and Mark were joined by Lloyd’s parents, and both sets of grandparents.

Concern clouded Eleanor’s face. “It’s getting a little crowded in here, Dad. Do you think you might be hallucinating?”

He chuckled. “No, but your grandmother’s not surprised you’d think that.”

She frowned. “Okay, so, what are they doing?”

His eyes closed, he whispered. “Just waiting. Do you know where my boots are?”

“Yes. They’re next to the washing machine.”

“Will you get them for me? I’m going to need them.”

“Good heavens, Dad. What for?”

Ben nodded and returned a few minutes later, boots in hand.

WEDNESDAY

About 1:00 AM, Eleanor wandered into the living room and found her mom lying on the couch.

“Mom?” Ellie whispered. “You awake?”

“Yeah. Trying to get a little rest but I’m not having much luck. How’s he doing?”

“He’s in and out. Hallucinating quite a bit. He thinks half a dozen people are in there.

Mark Gutiérrez is sitting on the bed scratching Hank’s ears.”

Brenda raised her eyebrows and nodded. “I see.”

About 7:00 AM, Lloyd opened his eyes, looked at Ellie and said, “I should’ve called the vet for that horse,” then fell asleep again.

She gasped. *My God, she thought, that was 1985? No, ’84. Right before Thanksgiving.*

Her horse had been sick for weeks and they watched him grow weaker every day until he fell and broke his leg. So, Lloyd put his pistol in the horse’s ear and broke his daughter’s heart.

They never spoke of it again. Until now, all these decades later.

Oh, Daddy, she thought, you’ve carried that all these years. She stroked his face and kissed his cheek. “You did what you had to do, Daddy. You can let it go now.” *God, please. Don’t let this regret be the last thing he feels.* She put her face on the bed’s edge and sobbed.

A couple of hours later, Lloyd woke and, with clear eyes and a strong voice said, “Ellie, Belly, Bo-Belly, help me sit up.”

“Daddy?” She placed an extra pillow behind his back then ran to the door. “Mom!”

Brenda rushed in then abruptly stopped in the middle of the room. “Oh my. Not what I was expecting. Lloyd?” She paused. “You’re sitting up.” She tilted her head. “Talking.”

He chuckled. “And a little hungry. What are the chances a guy could get a scrambled egg around here?”

“Pretty good.” She turned to Ellie on her way out the door and whispered, “I’ll call Esperanza.”

Lloyd Watkins turned to his daughter. “Have to keep your mother busy,” he said then reached for her hand. “Ellie, sit with me for a bit. I need to tell you some things, Sweet Girl.”

Eleanor sat on the side of his bed.

“I lived too much of my life for other people and by the time I realized what a bad idea that was, well, let’s just say the sooner you figure out how to live an honest life on your terms, the better. Love’s the only thing that makes any difference in this life. Nothing else is worth a hill of beans. If you want to make your old daddy happy, start with loving yourself; by being honest with yourself. You and Duane aren’t fooling anybody, Ellie. Figure out what you need to do then do it. It can be scary but you’re tough. Another thing about love – and if not for you, I don’t think I’d know this – love’s what’ll live on after this old boy’s gone. So, no matter what, Ellie, whether I’m dead or alive, I will never not love you. Feel that breeze? It’s kind of like that. I’ll always be with you, Ellie. Always.”

She laughed through her tears. “Always? Really, Dad? You’re going to follow me to the bathroom?”

He chuckled. “Only if you want me to but I expect I’ll wait outside. Don’t you worry about me. I’m going to be okay. One more thing. Make peace with your mother. She’s a good woman. She’s going to need you. And you’re going to need her. My boots are by the bed?”

“Yes, Daddy. Just where Ben put them. But just exactly what do you think you need your boots for?”

He took a deep breath and fell asleep just as Brenda returned with his scrambled eggs. Esperanza trailed two steps behind.

An hour or so later, he took a breath then paused a few seconds. Another breath. A longer pause. Another breath.

Just like the nurse said. Eleanor pushed a few buttons on the phone. “Ben, come now.”

“On my way,” he said.

Lloyd raised his hand toward the ceiling and laced his fingers into a hand nobody else could see. There was a warm, peaceful smile then he whispered, “Let’s go home,” and his chest fell still.

Esperanza held a stethoscope to his chest then turned off the oxygen machine.

A still calm descended on the room. Time slowed.

Brenda, Ellie, and Ben sat with Lloyd for a while. Held his hand. Stroked his face. Quietly wept.

Ben called the funeral home. “Eddie? He’s gone.” . . . “Just now. You’ll need to come get the body.” . . . “What?” He gasped then his head snapped toward Ellie and Brenda. “No. Oh my.” . . . “Sure. Of course. When you can.” . . . “Thanks, Eddie. I’ll tell them.” Ben’s face was pale. His gaze floated around the room.

“Tell us what, Ben?” Brenda frowned.

“That was Eddie.” He took a deep breath. “He’ll come get the body when he can. We’ll let you know when it’s ready.”

“Okay.” Eleanor’s brow furrowed. “But there’s something else, Ben. What is it?”

Ben continued. “He said it might take a little longer than usual because we’re backed up at the funeral home.” He rubbed his forehead and drew a deep breath. He was shaking when he reached for Brenda with one hand and Ellie with the other. “They found Mark Gutiérrez’s body this morning.”

Eleanor’s knees went weak. She heard her mother gasp.

“According to Mark’s mom,” Ben continued, “he left town last Wednesday about dark. He was going to visit his girlfriend in Eagle Pass, but he never showed up. They thought he was there, and the girlfriend thought he stood her up; so, no one knew he was missing. Looks like his truck went off a bridge and rolled down into a ravine. Sheriff said he was killed instantly. A couple of hikers found him just after daybreak.”

Ellie swallowed hard then turned and stared at her dad’s body.

FRIDAY

More casseroles filled the kitchen. Duane and the girls drove in from San Antonio. The funeral, since it was the only social event in town, was huge.

Reverend Thompson reminded the congregation that, “Lloyd was not a churchgoer. So, we don’t know where he is now.”

Eleanor breathed deeply and fought her urge to throttle him.

Afterward, the house filled with people who came to eat, hug, and offer condolences. Old men and women teetered up the front steps with their walkers and canes. The screen door opened and slammed as little kids ran in and out.

An old woman who Eleanor didn't remember declared, "It's not our place to question God's will."

Seriously? She thought.

"He was such a good man," another mourner said.

Maybe you could've said that while he was alive. Or better yet, maybe you could've let him love a woman with brown skin. "Yes. Yes, he was," she finally said.

"Call me if you need anything."

Yeah. Right.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," she said.

But Eleanor's favorite comment came from Shotgun Harris, a giant of a woman who donned her best clean overalls and said, "Well, ya don't wanta die with nothin' wrong with ya. I'm sure gonna miss him."

Eleanor finally found Duane in the dining room and whispered, "We need to talk."

She felt his body stiffen.

"I'll be home in a day or two," she said.

They locked eyes. He nodded.

She turned toward the living room but stopped at the sight before her – Brenda sat on the couch flanked by Eleanor's two daughters. They held hands. Molly leaned in and nestled her head on her grandmother's shoulder. Megan stroked her grandmother's arm.

Make peace with your mother, he had said. *Make peace.*

The mothers and daughters smiled at each other across the crowded room. For the first time, Eleanor realized that she stood solidly in both the past and the future; and her grief faded

into a new, bittersweet understanding of her mother. Years of family knots, taut with anxiety and tension, began to loosen and the possibility of a new peace came into focus.

MONDAY

The week following the funeral, Eleanor stood before the same wide-eyed college freshmen and said, “Let’s see, where were we? I believe Hannah had a question about how God fits into Skinner’s theory. Before I address that question, I want to tell you that my dad passed away last week. So, I have a different answer for you than I would have a few days ago.”

She stopped, cleared her throat, then continued. “Last week, I would’ve said God doesn’t fit in this theory. And while that is true, I need to add that Skinner knew his science had its limits. He didn’t have a problem with individual beliefs about God, but he strongly believed that organized religion often gets in the way of the very things it claims to support like Goodness, Truth, and Love. So, I ask all of you to carefully consider how you perceive God and spirituality and religion. And then keep considering them throughout your life. Don’t do it for me or for this class. Do it for yourself. The important thing is to keep examining and never lose sight of the mystery. Now, let’s move on to positive reinforcement.”

Eleanor felt her dad beside her and knew he was smiling.