

Pinot for Your Thoughts

Halfway through a warehouse-sized bottle of wine on a Friday night in February, I was painting my toenails when my phone vibrated in my back pocket. Forgetting about the nail polish brush before I reached for it, I smeared red paint on the cheap carpet of the crappy apartment we hated.

“MORGAN, WHAT THE HELL?”

My roommate was yelling at me but started laughing again as soon as I tried to reinsert the wand into the bottle and missed. Now our crappy coffee table had some crappy nail polish on it too.

I managed to answer the phone.

“Mom?”

The TV was up too loud. Karen’s cat began to turn seductive, dangerous circles around our half-empty discount bottle of wine.

“Mom, hey, I can’t hear you, hang on—”

I motioned for Karen to turn it down, but moving my hands around just seemed to aggravate her cat. The cat was an animal of delicate sensibilities, who had particular preferences about everything we said or did, right down to the types of perfumes we used, how loudly we ate our chips, and where we sat on the couch.

Right now, she was mad. The cat did not approve of nail polish, or late-night television, or being ignored while we were drunkenly painting our nails and watching late-night TV. She decided to demonstrate her ire by knocking over the bottle of wine.

It didn't break, but wine went everywhere, sloshing over the laminate edges of the coffee table and onto the floor, where it sat on top of the coarse carpet.

My mom was crying. I couldn't find the remote so I got up and turned off the TV manually.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm so sorry. I'm coming. I'm coming as soon as I can. I'll be there, Mom. I'm so sorry." Sorry like it was my fault. Like I had done it.

I hung up.

Karen wasn't giggling anymore, but she had the hiccups. She grabbed a handful of paper towels and dropped them ineffectually over the puddle of wine spreading slowly from the center of the room, where neither of us had bothered to pick up the bottle.

"You okay?" she asked.

"My uncle's been really sick."

"Yeah, you told me. Like cancer or something?"

"No. He was depressed. He killed himself."

The smell of the cheap pinot grigio clashed horribly with the scent wafting out of the five open bottles of nail polish and I covered my mouth and retched.

I packed while I was still drunk and planned to be on the road first thing in the morning, but I woke up in the middle of the night, sober, dry-mouthed, and cranky, so I decided to leave then instead.

My mother and her sisters were going to see my grandparents today. To tell them about Uncle Pat. I was going to see my mother today, to be her person when it all went to Hell.

My aunts are all still married (Aunt Catherine was on her second husband, but still married.) so they had their person, to text or call when Grandfather was driving them crazy, and

to go home to when the whole funeral debacle was over. My parents are long divorced, so Mom needed a buddy. That was me.

I don't know what they told their parents when they said they were all going to come see them. They haven't all been to see them for a non-holiday since ever. Maybe that was the tip-off that something had happened.

Or maybe they weren't keyed in on it yet, since they don't know that they only have three children now. That when just the girls come, and Pat can't make it, that that's the new normal. That their daughters visiting them constitute all of their children.

I go inside.

My mom and her older sister are sitting on either side of my grandmother, each holding her hand. Grandmother is shaking her head slowly, swaying side-to-side, as though the truth of what has happened will get dizzy and leave her alone if she persists.

My mom hugs me tightly ("Bless you for being here,") before returning to her station at her mother's side.

Their two younger sisters, the twins, Aunt Catherine and Aunt Mary, are in the kitchen. I can hear silverware clanging. "Morgan, there's food!"

I join them.

"Have a mimosa." Catherine hands me a glass that looks like orange juice but is mostly alcohol. "You're gonna need it." She is the skinny twin. She has dyed her hair a violent shade of red. From the smell, she seems to have taken up smoking again with gusto.

It is a five-hour drive to my grandparents' house. I haven't eaten anything since last night and only had a little water since Karen and I put a dent in that bottle of wine.

“You don’t have to, sweetie.” Mary is the fat twin. “You probably want some breakfast.” There is a box of donuts behind her. I expect her to hand me one but instead she just gives me the whole box. Well, okay then.

“Morgan, hi, so glad you’re here—” Aunt Ruth sneaks up on me. She’s left her hand-holding station. “Don’t eat all of those. Mary brought them. There’s quiche in the fridge. I brought some kale; I’ll make some salads later.”

Ruth is the oldest sister. She is not fat like Mary, but she’s not as likeable as Mary is either. She wants to be skinny like Catherine but her hips never allowed it so she spends a lot of time narrowing her eyes at food, deeming it too-something (too fatty, too caloric, too rich, too chocolatey, too delicious, whatever) and deciding not to eat it, then trying to force her deprivation onto the rest of us poor suckers.

In the end, my mom loses her position as Grandmother’s hand-holder and is assigned the daunting task of helping Grandfather make the hotel reservations for the funeral.

“Let’s do it online,” I say.

“No, they never work online,” he says.

“Daddy, have you tried it?” Mom asks.

“No,” he says. “And I don’t trust it. Just call the lady.”

Mom calls the lady.

“Tell her we want six rooms.”

“We only need five, Dad.”

“What about Joanne?”

Aunt Joanne is Pat’s wife. Well. Now she is his widow.

“The funeral home is close to their house. They don’t need a hotel. Joanne’s staying at home.”

“She doesn’t want to stay there.”

Uncle Pat killed himself in their house. Joanne came home and found him hanging there last night.

“She said she’s staying there.”

“I sure as Hell wouldn’t stay there.”

“Daddy, do you want me to call the hotel back?”

“No, just tell them five rooms.”

“Okay. Hi, yes. I’m still here. I’m sorry. Thanks. Yes, it’s five rooms.”

Grandfather gets up. “I bet your mother can’t hear that lady very well because the reception in here is bad.”

I nod noncommittally. It’s usually best to just half-agree with him. I can hear the person on the other end of the phone with perfect clarity (it’s actually not a lady. It’s a guy).

“The reception in here is so bad,” he says, louder.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I’ll get some wine.”

He disappears into the kitchen and reappears with a glass of wine. He drains it and leaves it on the floor next to the coffee table.

“Know why we get lousy reception in here?”

I shake my head.

“Your mother knows. It’s because of that damn Bart Sullivan.” He points out the window at the modest single-story home behind their house.

He looks to my mother for confirmation, but she's jotting down some details on a scrap piece of paper.

"Bart Sullivan is why you can't hear that lady," he says.

She nods.

He seems satisfied and turns back to me. "Know what's behind Bart's house?"

Couldn't tell you.

"A lake."

Ah, yes. It's all clear to me now.

"Can't see it, can you?"

Sure can't. I shake my head.

"Because of Bart Sullivan's place. They told me when I bought this house no one would ever build behind it, but lo and behold, ten years later, there's old Bart, building that house. Piece of garbage. Doesn't take care of it. Now we can't see the lake. And we can't talk on our cell phones in the house."

Lakes are known for their superior cellular projection capabilities. Modest one-story homes are similarly known for blocking those capabilities.

"I'm going to get some wine," he says.

I figure he'll only come back with enough for himself, but he brings the whole bottle this time. As he refills his glass, I realize neither Mom nor I have a glass.

The bottle is his serving size.

"Dad, do you want to stay two nights?" Mom asks. "At the hotel?"

“You’re really having trouble hearing that lady, aren’t you?” he asks. “It’s because of the service. The reception is really bad. I’ll heat up some food.” He drains his glass again and leaves it somewhere it is likely to be kicked over and disappears into the kitchen again.

“Two nights is fine,” Mom tells the hotel guy.

There are five stages of grief in my family: make a call, pour a glass of wine, heat up some food, comfort someone else in the family, have a complete meltdown.

The real five stages of grief are interchangeable and don’t necessarily happen in the right order. This is true for my family too. I don’t make calls; I just text nonstop and try not to look up from my phone. It’s easier to scan through the generic messages—“OMG so sorry, I am praying for you guys” “pls tell ur mom we love her” “r u doing ok?”—than to face the real time grief of my relatives.

I prefer the digital and easily dismissible to awkward, face-to-face encounters even when death isn’t involved.

Like pizza. I prefer it for pizza.

Why call and try to explain over the background noise your topping preferences (no, I said I DIDN’T WANT PEPPERS) then try to spell the name of your street, when you can just type it all in online, get an e-mail confirmation, then track the status of your order while watching Netflix and playing Tetris? You don’t even have to stare at the door and will the food to arrive; you already know exactly when it’s coming because your tracker just told you.

“I thought that quiche Ruth brought was pretty bad, but then I stuck it in the microwave for about forty-five seconds and it was okay,” Grandfather announced as he returned to the room.

Mom is about to finish the booking.

“Your grandmother needs a handicapped room,” Grandfather says. “But I want to be on the second floor. Ask them if we can get a handicapped room on the second floor.”

Mom moves the phone away from her mouth. “Dad. You have to stay on the first floor. It’s too hard on Mom to stay on a higher floor. Yes, I’m still here. No, it doesn’t matter if the rooms aren’t all together.”

I know she’s thinking she doesn’t want to be anywhere near Grandfather during our stay in the hotel. If she had her way she’d put him up in a hotel across the city and keep Grandmother with us.

“Ask if they have breakfast.”

“They have breakfast,” I say.

“Is it included?” he asks. “I’m not paying extra for breakfast.”

“It’s included.”

“Ask if the breakfast is included. I want them to tell you while you’re making the reservation, so that if they try to charge my card later I can tell the lady that she told me it was included so that I can get my money back.”

We should have made the reservations online.

“Okay, the credit card number is—“

“Wait, don’t give them your credit card number!”

Mom looks up. “What?” She seems to be sending apologetic energy into the phone. “I’m sorry, could you hold on a second?”

“They’ll charge your card before you get there and then what if it’s not right? Don’t give them the number. They just need your name to hold the rooms. They can charge it when we check out. Don’t give them the money. We need leverage. Got it?”

“Dad...” She sighs. “It doesn’t...work like that. They just put a small hold on the card to make sure it’s valid and—Dad, it’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“No!” He’s pacing. He jerks back the curtains so we have a better view of the not-lake and Bart Sullivan’s squat, gray house and dried-out, winter-dead lawn. “Don’t give those people any money till we get there. Hear me? Hang up. Hang up now.”

He walks into the wine glass he set on the floor and it rolls away from his foot like it’s trying to make a surreptitious escape.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. Mom hangs up.

“You didn’t ask them about the breakfast,” Grandfather says. “Did that call keep going in and out? It’s the goddamn reception because that house is in the way. Can’t see the lake and I know there’s a tower or something back there—if we could have a clear shot we’d have perfect reception in here. I’m going to call the cell phone company again.”

“They don’t know about Bart?” I ask.

My mom shoots me a look.

“Of course they know about Bart,” he says. “Bastards don’t care because no Bart Sullivans are building houses in front of their lakefront properties!”

Bart Sullivan has done the unthinkable: he has built a house that blocks my grandfather’s view of a not-very-impressive lake. But goddammit if he didn’t want to look at that lake every day for the last fifty years, and now he can’t, because his view is gray siding and one sad rosebush and Bart needs to clean out his gutters, goddammit.

We make the hotel reservations online while my grandfather is in the kitchen trying to install a new filter into his water pitcher.

“It’s backwards, Dad,” Mary insists.

“I do this every month,” he says. “I think I know which way it goes.”

“No, Dad, look—those holes fit *here* in the pitcher, so it has to go this way—“

“Oh for God’s sake,” I hear Catherine say. The back door closes and she appears on the porch, lighting a cigarette.

The hotel’s website kicks us off because our connection is too slow. Grandfather won’t pay for Wi-Fi and we’re trying to steal Bart Sullivan’s. Mom is losing patience.

“Morgan, why don’t you go check on your grandmother?”

I leave her to type in her credit card information for the fifth time, swearing under her breath.

Grandmother is lying on her back, hands folded over her abdomen. She looks like someone has laid her out for her funeral. She looks like she is practicing.

In a twisted reversal of what we have been conditioned to consider the normal order of things, she’ll have to look at her son laid out like this tomorrow instead. I swallow. I am hungover, and sad, and not nearly emotionally capable enough to be anyone’s person.

“Hi honey,” she says. “Did you get something to eat? The girls brought a lot of food.”

“I did. Did you eat?”

“Oh, I’m not hungry. Here, you come rest too.”

I lay in bed next to my grandmother and wonder what it is like to be a parent. And what it is like for your child to die. And what it is like if that child has killed himself.

Her pain is a palpable force; it feels like the bed is pulsing with it, as though her heart will spasm with grief then stop entirely for a moment because she simply doesn’t want to go on living.

She is crying without seeming to realize she is doing it, the tears leaking from her eyes involuntarily, like rain running down a window—not the force itself, only the effect.

“There, there,” she says, reaching out to pat my hand, as though I am the one who needs to be comforted.

“How are you doing, honey?” she asks. There isn’t even a hint of a tremor in her voice. If we had been speaking on the phone I wouldn’t have been able to tell she was crying.

“I’m...okay.”

“Yeah. That’s good, honey. This is hard for you. I know you loved Patrick.”

Maybe this is how she plans to survive—pretend someone has lost an uncle, rather than face the fact that the baby who had made her a mother for the first time had grown into a man who was so unhappy that he has killed himself.

That night Grandfather putts in the backyard by moonlight while the aunts and Grandmother sleep. He misses every shot.

He lets them all roll away instead of retrieving the balls. There is a full bag of golf balls beside his foot, and after each miss, he pulls out a fresh ball and lines up another putt.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Mom says. We watch Grandfather line up with the hole. He hunches, straightens, then assumes a good putting stance.

“I think I’ll just have more wine,” I say.

We fill our glasses as Grandfather drew back—not to putt, but to swing. A mighty, angry drive that sends grass and soil flying into the air. A window shatters somewhere in the distance.

Grandfather doesn’t even flinch. He comes inside, locks the door behind him, and replaces the putter neatly in his bag. “Neighborhood’s really gone to Hell,” he remarks. “It’s a shame. Goodnight.”

“Guess Bart will want to hire someone to replace his window whenever he gets around to cleaning out those gutters,” Mom says.

“Still can’t see the lake.”

“That lake was always ugly.”

We finish the bottle.