

# The Aggregate

“Always on my mind” played on the jukebox, just barely audible over the noise in the diner. Terry smiled at her husband and said, “Elvis’s new song.”

“Yes, Dear.” Ed smiled briefly and tapped the linoleum countertop, his freckled hands lined with thick veins of a machinist. He looked nervous, even though the lunch was his idea, it was his friends they were meeting. Terry could have stayed home; there was homework to grade, and she had promised Uncle Harvey she’d help him with the balance sheets today. Ed and Terry could use the extra cash her uncle paid her when pitched in.

An old man suddenly slid into her side of the booth. “Good morning, or is it afternoon already?” His voice was raspy, his breath stank from decades of cigarettes.

“Get lost, Clif,” Ed banged the table. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

A young woman, wearing an outfit that was noticeably plain and clean, rushed over to the table and breathlessly asked Clif to join her with a vaguely Spanish accent.

“I think I’ll stay right here,” Clif leaned over as far as he could, leering at Terry.

“Is this the friend we’re meeting?” she asked her husband.

“You know Clif.”

A tall young man tapped Clif on the shoulder. His nametag declared him ‘Joel.’ He probably came from the kitchen. Clif stood up and let the young man lead him out of the diner.

“Do you know what you want?” Ed tapped her menu.

Terry glanced over it again. There were so many options.

“Why didn’t we just go to Mildred’s? We know everybody there.”

“Mildred’s is closed.”

“Since when?”

“It’s been closed for years now. Don’t you remember?”

Terry tried to remember the last time they had gone to her favorite cafe on Main Street. Wasn’t it just last summer?

“I loved her cherry pie,” Terry closed her menu and stacked it behind the condiments.

“I’ll just have whatever you’re having.”

Ed glanced at his watch. “They’re late. I told her to be here right at noon.”

“You told *her*? I thought we were meeting your friend from work.” Terry had assumed it would be one of his colleagues from the floor.

“Stephanie and Mark are coming to see us, unless she forgot.”

“Who are Stephanie and Mark?”

Ed looked at her with his droopy blue eyes, as if she should just know. Well she couldn’t read his mind.

There was a hollar from behind him, and a young woman appeared at the end of the booth.

“There you are!” she said loudly, as if she were talking to a small child. She couldn’t have been much older than eighteen herself.

To Terry’s surprise, she leaned over and planted a peck on Ed’s cheek. This Stephanie seemed very familiar with her husband.

“I’ll let you two sit next to each other,” said Ed.

“Please, Ed, you’re fine,” Mark sat down quickly and stuck out his hand for Ed to shake.

Stephanie sat down next to Terry and stroked her arm. Maybe she was just affectionate.

“How are you?” She asked with that same high-pitched tone.

Terry tried to think of an answer, but she was still stunned by Stephanie's touchy nature.

"Well, my spleen's been bothering me--"

"We've been fine," said Ed. "How are you two lovebirds doing?"

"Just great." Stephanie smiled. "I got a commission for another guitar this week."

"You're still doing the music thing, eh?" Ed's voice had a short sting of judgement to it.

"It's full time work now," her voice grew quiet.

Ed handed them both menus.

"She couldn't keep up with the orders when she worked at the store," said Mark.

"You should have finished that accounting certificate, like your mother wanted."

Terri looked up at Stephanie. Something about her seemed familiar. She remembered arguing about going into accounting.

"My mother wanted me to be a teacher," she commented to the countertop. "I thought there'd be more money in it, she thought teaching was more appropriate for a young lady."

"But you loved teaching," said Stephanie. "Have you decided what you want to eat?"

"I'll have whatever you're having."

"We can decide together," Stephanie examined the menu. "You've always liked the turkey plate."

"You seem to know a lot about me," said Terry.

Stephanie just smiled and patted her back.

Who was this woman?

Ed had fallen into an easy conversation with her husband Mark.

"So the new basement should be in by December? You got Hank to seal it, right?"

Mark nodded in agreement. "We got a local guy. Hank retired."

“That’s too bad, no one knew basements like Hank.”

Mark simply nodded again.

“I wouldn’t want you guys sleeping in a leaky basement,” continued Ed.

“So what’s good here?” Mark leaned over the menu.

“Don’t get the tacos.” Ed patted his chest. “They’ll give you heartburn.”

A waitress appeared, took their orders, and retreated again. The diner calmed down as the lunch crowd cleared.

“How did the painting go? Were you able to find those same colors?” Ed’s eyes bounced between Stephanie and Mark’s. Terry wondered what this all could be about - remodeling the workshop, probably. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Her Saturday afternoon was getting wasted with two people she barely knew. She’d be up all night with the student’s worksheets because Ed wanted to talk shop.

“We weren’t able to find those colors, but we picked out some really nice ones.”

Stephanie’s fingers were chafed, with short, blunt fingernails. You’d think a woman as nicely dressed as she was would get a manicure. “The living room is blue.”

“Blue? I liked the yellow!”

“When were you at their house, Ed?” Terry asked.

“We agreed on keeping the colors! What else have you changed?”

Mark quickly shook his head.

“Nothing,” Stephanie said after some hesitation. “We’re keeping everything else the same.”

The table was quiet.

“Have you heard anything from Lance?” Ed asked quietly.

“Oh!” Terry looked up from her turkey plate. “We have a son named Lance!”

Stephanie’s smile fell from her face and she sighed.

“Lance is at boy scout camp,” said Terry. “He loves that summer camp so much, he’s going to get to be an eagle scout soon, I just know it.”

“He texted me this morning,” said Mark. “sounds like he’s doing alright.”

Mark had his elbows firmly planted on the table, his hands clenched tightly together. Ed directed his questions to Stephanie.

“Well, is he working at all?”

Stephanie ignored the question, and asked Terry if the turkey tasted alright.

“I assume so, he hasn’t asked us for money,” Mark replied. Under the table, he tapped his foot repetitively.

“Where’s he living now?”

“Still in Alaska.”

Terry suddenly remembered her own son, Lance going to Alaska. He was going there for boy scout camp. It seemed a long way away for boy scout camp. That was why she hadn’t seen him all summer.

“He hasn’t called us. Do they not get cell phone service up there?”

Stephanie looked up again. “I mean, if he’s on a trail, then, no.” Her voice was flat, hurt.

“I just wished he’d call us. Send us a postcard, a smoke signal.” Ed waved a french fry at Stephanie, as if she somehow had power over this Lance.

“Hey, we tell you everything we know, ok?” Mark playfully pushed Ed’s hand down, as if the french fry were a weapon.

“Terry,” said Mark, “I saw a parrot this morning, a big rainbow one.”

“Oh I had a parrot when I was a child!” Terry’s mind was flooded with memories.

“Tweety, we called him. Now, that was the golden parakeet. The parrot’s name was Polly. She was the most beautiful bird, and she could talk talk talk all afternoon.”

“We were thinking about getting a dog,” said Stephanie.

“I love dogs, especially pugs. Ed and I had a neighbor who used to raise pugs.”

“Where are you going to keep it?” Ed asked. “The dog’s not going to be happy in the basement.”

“We’re just thinking about it,” Mark said quickly.

“I don’t want him to scuff the floors.”

“Ed,” Mark turned to him, “It’s just a thought.”

“Tell me more about the pugs, Mom,” said Stephanie.

Terry brushed over the fact that this strange woman called her ‘Mom,’ and launched into memories of her favorite puppies, how the neighbors used to jockey to get the cutest dogs, how they got a pug of their own but she had died of cancer.

“It’s so sad when they leave us,” she concluded.

“Our pastor says pets are angels in disguise.”

“Now that’s a sweet thought.”

“Terry, you’ve barely eaten your lunch,” Ed grumbled.

Terry looked down at her plate. Most of the turkey was still there, cut into bite sized pieces. There was a sizable dent in the mashed potatoes.

She looked up at the clock. If they lingered too long at lunch, she wouldn’t be able to get to Uncle Harvey’s factory in time to help him with the balance sheets.

“I’ll have to pack it up, I really have too much to do to sit and chat all afternoon.”

Stephanie took Terry's hand. "We don't have to leave right away."

Ed picked up the menu again. "Let's order dessert. This place actually makes a decent pie."

"I could go either way," said Mark.

"Dear, I have to get to Uncle Harvey's, it's almost one thirty already." There was an anxiety in Terry's voice that she rarely showed.

"Your Uncle Harvey's dead," was Ed's short reply.

The table was silent.

Stephanie and Mark started laughing, tensely at first, until Mark said, "Good one, Ed," and Ed joined in. Terry didn't find the joke to be funny but laughed along anyway, letting herself get caught in the moment.

"Well I just have so many papers to grade this afternoon, I really hope you don't mind," Terry said to Stephanie.

The young woman gave her the kindest smile. She really was very beautiful, her hair a deep rich brown, like Terry's mother. Terry wondered if she might be some distant relative. They'd have to compare notes someday, when Terry had a little more time. She really did seem familiar. Terry had a vague notion that she once cared deeply about this woman, like she cared for her toddler, Stevie, who should be waking up from her nap soon.

"She's getting tired," Ed mumbled under her breath.

"Well I think it's about time we hit the road, Sweetie," Mark said to his wife as he stood up quickly.

"If you don't mind, it was nice to meet you all, but I must head out or I'll be late."

Mark made his pleasantries, but Stephanie was visibly upset. She had certainly grown attached after one lunch. She insisted on giving Terry a hug, and was visibly upset when she finally pulled away.

“Now really, I must leave you all and get down to business.”

The woman she had seen before, the one who dressed so plainly, came up to her and asked her where she was going.

“It’s none of your business!” People are so nosy today.

“She’s going to her Uncle Harvey’s factory,” said Ed to the woman.

“So am I! Terry, we should walk together. My dad worked in a factory.”

“Thank you Melanie,” said Ed.

“Have we met?” Terry asked her as Melanie wrapped Terry’s thin arm around her muscular elbow.

“We’ve met a couple of times. Do you have your sunglasses? It’s very bright outside.”

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Ed walked Stephanie and Mark back to their car.

“Is that a new pickup?” he asked, his face somewhere between admiration and jealousy.

“It’s the same one we’ve had for the past couple of years. Mark takes good care of it.”

“Well I hope you got a good deal on it, I know you’re spending a lot of money on the house.”

“Dad, how’s she doing?” Stephanie faced him squarely. The girlishness he had loved so much about his little baby daughter was fading so fast.

“She tries, I think. The doctors say we should be able to come home by December, so I need the house ready by then.”



Mark rolled his eyes. “We were there, Ed, the doctors said-”

“It’ll be ready, Dad,” said Stephanie. “We’ll have it just how you like it, and we’ll be all set up in the basement. We’ll have our own apartment.”

“That’s my girl.”

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Stephanie cried the entire way home.

Mark didn’t try to stop her, he just patted her shoulder when he could take his right hand off the wheel, and asked her if any of her playlists would help.

She thumbed her phone, “I don’t know, maybe,” she mumbled.

“Funnest pop songs” appeared on the dashboard display, and Britney’s voice came over the speakers.

“This isn’t helping,” Stephanie turned it off.

“Do you want to talk?”

She shook her head, and turned back to her phone.

“Stuff” appeared on the board, another woman’s voice in the speakers, upbeat but a little more mellow.

“Who’s this?”

“Maggie something. Phoebe something. I don’t care.”

“I like it.”

Stephanie looked at him, smiled, and then sobbed again. She turned up the music.

By the time they arrived home, her crying had leveled into the occasional hard sniff.

Mark went directly to the kitchen. After scanning the fridge and the cabinets, he shouted “Hey, do you want to order in for dinner? Maybe Thai food?”

From the living room, the sobbing returned.

Mark found her standing in the center of the room, staring at the corner.

“Talk to me,” he said.

“He’s going to be so mad when he finds out that we tossed his chair and cut the cable.”

“He’s not coming back here.”

“He’s going to look at all the guitars and tell me I wasted my life.”

“Sweetie, they are never going to leave the memory care.”

She turned and buried her face into his chest, leaving big wet stains on his t-shirt.

He hugged her and rocked her until her breathing slowed. She turned back again to look at the corner of the living room.

It had been her father’s favorite place in the house. He had his recliner set way too close to the big screen tv, the dials glued to a conservative news channel. Ed rarely moved from that spot, in fact he was getting more active now that he was at the memory care, with its 9 hole golf course in short walking distance.

When Stephanie and Mark moved in to her parent’s house, she refused to send the recliner with Ed in the moving van. Mark stepped in and promised to only repair, not to replace anything. They agreed to finish the basement, and to take up residence there when Ed and Terry returned.

Ed always said they’d be home in the next six months. In three years, the prognosis never changed.

Stephanie set up a workshop in the basement to make her guitars. A selection was now on display in Ed’s corner, with a simple wooden stool, speaker, desk, tripod webcam, and ring light. Posting online had made it easy for Stephanie to demonstrate her skill and sell what she made.

Classic six string acoustics sold fast, electric made more cash, commissions funded the whole endeavor and put food on the table. Mark had thought about quitting teaching to help her out, but she convinced him to stay for the benefits. And there wasn't much he could do, anyway, all that Mark ever got out of wood was splinters.

"I'm just sick of lying to them. I know they get angry if I don't, but it's so hard."

They got identical pings on their phones.

"Lance," she rolled her eyes. "Leave it to the older brother to just run away when things get tough!"

"Hey," Mark took her hand. "Go sit down, let's ignore him for a minute."

Stephanie carefully picked one of her guitars from the wall, cherry wood with a mint green guard.

She played soft arpeggios, up and down, until Mark recognized the song.

It was Elvis, one of the slow, early tunes. Mark absentmindedly sang when the words came to him, enjoying the feeling of his natural vibrato while he constructed a message to Lance.

When he came to the chorus, she sang along, an improvised harmony. He couldn't remember the rest of the words, but she kept playing anyway, meditating on each chord as it passed through her hands, drawing out the song as long as she could.