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**English 223 – David Gutierrez**

**Second Chances**

***January 4th, 2005***

The squeaking of wet, slush-stained boots on speckled beige linoleum tiles echoed through the narrow halls of Rivercrest High. It had snowed yesterday but not enough to close our little Iowa county school for today – the first day of the new semester. The once sparkling-white snow now caked the rubber soles of students’ boots in a dull grey. I looked down. Mine were no different. I slowly made my way to my first class of the day, with each step, a small piece of slush falling off of my worn black boots. That semester, I only had one new class: American history with Mr. Moretti.

 “Jan!” I heard from behind my shoulder. Turning, I saw my sweet-faced friend Sierra, and with her, her boyfriend Abdul. I smiled and pulled the both of them in for a hug. The image of my long, pin-straight hair, almond shaped eyes, and short, curvy figure juxta-positioned near Sierra’s 6-foot stance, athletic build, and curly, red hair must have been humorous at best, and alien at worst.

 “Happy New Year to the happy couple!” I said as I took off my winter hat and waved it on top of my friends, letting the leftover snow fall onto them like sparkling confetti. Abdul and Sierra laughed and wiped the snow off their shoulders. Before I could say another word, Abdul launched into a monologue on why the current student body president was shrouded in scandal regarding his relationship with the head of the debate team.

 “…and people say he’s been dating her on and off but he’s going to college in California and she’s going to college in Chicago and we all just know it’d never work out between them…” I let his words float over my head as I glanced at my full schedule. School would be a welcome change from my past two weeks of sitting on the couch, turning the TV just high enough to drown out the sound of my parents fighting. Looking at the silver watch on my wrist, I abruptly cut Abdul off.

 “I have to get to class. Let’s meet up at lunch?” I said, shooing them away. I made my way towards the history block of our small high school. As I opened the door to my classroom, two minutes before the first bell would sound, I saw our teacher, sitting at his wooden desk, head bent over a stack of papers. I was one of the first students in the room, but Mr. Moretti didn’t lift his head to acknowledge my entrance. Sitting down at the grey steel desk, I took out my paper and pens and arranged them neatly on my desk, waiting for class to start.

As the second bell rang and my classmates trickled in, Mr. Moretti finally rose from his desk in the corner of the room and found his way to the center of the empty space in front of the rows of desks. Lining the walls were colorful maps of the United States: some detailed with names and pictures, some vintage and worn, and others of specific regions within the US. He stood between us and these maps, guarding them from our ignorance, but also allowing himself to be this intermediary of sacred knowledge.

“Welcome to US History, everyone! My name, as you all know, is James Moretti. You may call me Mr. Moretti or Mr. M –preferably not James, but if you must, then you should know that I do prefer my friends to call me Jim.” A small chuckle rose from the class. I tried hard not to roll my eyes. I hated when teachers tried to be relatable. He continued. “Most of you probably view this class as a box to check: if you were truly interested in American History, I’d like to think you would have taken my AP offering. Either way, this semester I aim to not only help you guys check that box, but a few other boxes as well.”

Mr. Moretti’s voice wasn’t very deep, nor was it very high. It was neutral sounding in almost every sense, except for his small pauses between sentences. He spoke slowly and ponderously, as if tasting every sentence in his mouth before deciding it was good enough to say out loud. I sat in my seat as the lesson continued, taking diligent notes as Mr. Moretti went through his expectations for the class and launched into his introduction of the Native American tribes in the continental United States. In those moments, I didn’t know if I would enjoy this class, enjoy Mr. Moretti’s presence, or even learn anything in my final semester of high school. I was already focused on going to Boston College that fall and leaving Iowa and the entire Rivercrest experience behind. I did, however, know that getting through this class was the final box I had to check for my ticket out.

***March 17th, 2005***

 Spring was setting in slowly and behind schedule, as usual. My parents were fighting less, as they did whenever the snow started to thaw, and my younger brother was starting his regular after-school basketball sessions with the rest of the middle school boys in our neighborhood. My father’s charisma had skipped me entirely and gone all to my brother, who seemed to have a larger group of boys following him around each week. I, on the other hand, was gifted with my mother’s skepticism about friendship, but also her loyalty when she found it. Sierra and Abdul were two of my best friends, with the others scattered across cliques within the school. But in my first period class, I sat alone, without friends to chat with during work periods or people to rely on if I hadn’t done the previous nights’ reading. Maybe that’s why I got so close to Mr. Moretti. He saw me, an island of one among clusters of students, and gave me his sympathy. It started slowly, with him coming up to me during personal work time to ask me if I was understanding the material, or what I thought of that day’s lesson. I probably would have elicited any teachers’ sympathy, sitting quietly in the front row by myself while every other student had turned their desks to talk to their friends and work on the essay prompts or discussion questions together. But Mr. Moretti noticed me especially and wandered towards my desk before attending to the questions of other students.

 At first, I only talked to Mr. Moretti about my answers, checking them with him to see if I was right, or if a historian’s viewpoint could be used within my analysis. It continued on like this until sometime at the end of February, when I was wearing my Boston College t-shirt.

 “Boston.” he said as he approached my desk. He said it not as a question, but rather as a fact, eyeing the logo across my light grey long sleeve.

 “Yes, Boston.” I said, smiling softly. I was secretly happy he had noticed my shirt; in the narcissistic way that I could only admit to myself, I was happy when anyone noticed. Most students at Rivercrest stayed in-state, living in Iowa for their entire lives, and I selfishly took a small pride in the fact that I was ‘getting out’.

 “I’m an alumnus. Class of ’86. You know, I didn’t know anyone in the senior class was going to Boston College. Or any school in Boston.” Mr. Moretti paused and almost glared at me. “Why didn’t you tell me? What are you studying? Where will you be living?” The onslaught of questions was rapid, but genuine. His glare had softened to an imploring look. I would later find out that Boston – the city, the College, its people, the culture – was deeply intertwined in the identity of Mr. Moretti. And that day when I first mentioned Boston College, he found the water of a connection to Boston in the desert that was Weldon City, Iowa.

 At that moment I saw Shelly Shaw and her red, waist length hair out of the corner of my eye, coming forward to presumably ask Mr. Moretti a question. “I’ll tell you all about it after class. Or school. But, disclaimer, the answer to most of those questions is I don’t know.” He chuckled at me and turned towards Shelly to discuss the War of 1812. As I gathered my things at the end of class, I walked past Mr. Moretti’s wooden desk and motioned that I’d come back after final classes were over for the day.

 After the 6th period bell tolled loudly across the narrow hallways, I packed up my bag and made my way back to Mr. Moretti’s room, small butterflies in my stomach. No teacher had ever paid attention to me at Rivercrest High or had any interest in talking about my plans after high school, and here I was, about to talk to an alumnus of my future alma matter. I approached the ajar metal door and knocked gently before walking inside. There was Mr. Moretti, with his clipped grey-brown hair, prominent nose, and skin freckled with sunspots – not young, but not yet old either. He looked up at me and smiled.

 “Jan! I’m glad you came by. Please, come, sit.”

 I walked towards his desk and took a spot in the desk I sat in for class most days. “I actually had some questions about Boston College and the upcoming fall, I just had no idea that any of the teachers here were alumni.” I said.

 Mr. Moretti launched into an excited monologue about where to live, where to eat, which dorms he lived in, and which professors he had. Most of his tangents were about Boston itself, rather than the College, going on about how Falafel King’s tahini sauce was good, but their shawarma left much to be desired, or how seeing a game in Fenway Park was truly a must as well.

I could barely spit out a few words of agreement and excitement, but managed to squeeze in a question “Did you live in Boston for long?”

Mr. Moretti looked at me and laughed softly, his eyes a bit glazed over with his prior stream of desperate nostalgia. “Yes, I did. I grew up there actually, went to school there, college, and spent most of my early 20s in a small studio downtown, working in the public schools. Followed my ex-wife here when I was 30 and ended up staying.” He shook his head and chuckled a bit more.

“Don’t really know why anyone would stay,” I said. “When I went to Boston to visit, that was the first time I saw a gas station open past 10pm. But I guess my family doesn’t travel much. Or at all.” I trailed off.

My mind wandered for a second. “How did you get from Boston back to Weldon City?” I asked abruptly. I quickly corrected my too-inquisitive question. “Or rather, what made you move back here?”

Mr. Moretti chuckled and looked away. “Life just brings you places, I suppose.” He stared off a bit. Blood rushed a bit to my cheeks, and I felt embarrassed for being intrusive. I awkwardly chuckled in response to his vauge answer and looked at the maps behind Mr. Moretti’s desk.

“I can’t believe I haven’t asked yet.” He abruptly changed the subject. “What do you plan to study?”

Mr. Moretti’s question hung in the empty classroom and I let it stay there for a few moments. The tale of what I was to study was the daily dinner table battle, it was a question I hid from when asked by family friends, and an issue I tried very hard to gloss over, even now with Mr. Moretti. I mumbled something about biology, or chemistry. Biopsychology. Neurology. The word’s blurred together. I thought for a second about Sierra, about how her parents were excited for her upcoming orientation into a small liberal arts school – she was going to study English. I almost laughed out loud when she told me. For me – it wasn’t a conversation that I could even dream of having. My parents had set their sights on medical school far before I was born – and so to be a doctor I was to study for. Mr. Moretti accepted my vague answer after a moment of hesitation, and after a few more minutes of conversation, I said goodbye and left his classroom to head home for the day.

***May 25th, 2005***

We graduated in our own gymnasium. The prom committee had taken to decorating for graduation as well, it seemed. There were bright banners placed all around the walls, masking some of the grime of our old gym. The gowns we received were a shiny dark brown for boys and a pale yellow for girls. Against my own Vietnamese complexion, they looked even paler and gave me a sickly glow. My parents had called a ceasefire for the day, both engulfed in a major milestone of their own lives and their chase for the American Dream: their American born daughter was graduating high school. And not half bad either. I played with the cords around my neck and the “Salutatorian” pin that made my gown hang a bit around my left breast. I did not pretend today was a day for myself or my own accomplishments. Today was all about my parents: it was the culmination of late-night phone calls to their parents back home, to never being included in a PTA function by the other white parents, to sacrifices of their careers, their happiness, and their values. Today made up for the time a white, middle-school aged boy made fun of my father’s accent to his face and told him that “we fought a war for a reason”. Today made up for my mother being unable to be by *her* mother’s side as she died. Today made up for the unraveling of my parents’ marriage, a love they found did not work in the conservative, cookie cutter neighborhoods of Weldon City. Today was not for me, and I was okay with that.

Graduation came and went. We all walked across the stage, one by one, shook our principal’s hand, and received an empty diploma holder while posing for a picture. The two other Nguyen’s and I walked one after another, their parents sitting next to mine, friends from the Vietnamese church, clapping loudly when it was our turn. I turned to smile at my family as it was my turn to walk across the stage and laughed as my little brother hooted loudly and obnoxiously in the bleachers. My mother had a hand placed on her cheek, smiling softly, her eyes proud. My father, a short wiry man, was standing and clapping next to her, while trying to keep my brother somewhat civil.

After what felt like hours of taking pictures, saying congratulations to all of the people I saw, friends or not, hugging Sierra and Abdul’s parents and saying goodbye to many of my teachers, I finally had a moment to myself. I realized that Mr. Moretti wasn’t in the audience today. Checking that my family was preoccupied with something else, I quietly snuck out of the gymnasium, through the halls, until I reached the history block. I turned a corner quickly and reached Mr. Moretti’s door. Knocking softly at the ajar metal door, I heard his distinct, ponderous voice answer back: “Come in”.

I poked my head into his classroom, like I always did when I stopped by his classroom after school. It had become almost a ritual. I’d pop by his classroom, sometimes for only minute to ask about something we had learned in class that day, sometimes for half an hour, just talking to him about school, current events, Boston, my friends, almost anything really. He never shared much of his life, which I understood. He was my teacher after all. But he was always attentive, shared his wisdoms to me, and laughed at my complaints about the world. And slowly, as I got closer to Mr. Moretti, I also grew to love history. I loved the way Mr. Moretti focused on the marginalized groups that were often left out of the usual story in class: he told us about Native American spirituality and farming practices, he told us about how women in the colonies were the backbone of the American Revolution, and he told us about the ingenious of African Americans within the early years of the Union, even when they were in states of oppression. Mr. Moretti taught history in his own way, unhindered by a national curriculum in this introductory level class. I started reading history books in my free time, most the recommendation of Mr. Moretti himself. I read about the tragedy of the Vietnam war, about India under British ruling, and about the Rwandan genocide. I was a sponge, soaking up the stories of people who had gone through so much, so long ago. And as I finished one book, another was always put into my hand by my history teacher, who stoked the passion for history that was growing inside of me.

As I poked my head inside the classroom, the finality of the day finally hit me. This was it. This was quite possible the last time that I’d come to Mr. Moretti’s classroom for our daily conversations. The fact hit me in the bottom of my stomach.

“Congratulations on graduating, Jan! How do you feel?” Mr. Moretti smiled as he saw my face. He was sitting, as usual, at his wooden desk, a stack of what I assumed were final exams in front of it.

“I feel…exactly the same”

He laughed.

“But I guess I’m happy to be done. I’ve been waiting for this day, but now that it’s come…I forgot why I’ve been waiting for it.” I struggled for words, speaking as slowly as Mr. Moretti for once.

“I’m sure you’ll remember as soon as Fall rolls around.”

“I’m sure too.” I chuckled and checked my watch. “I should probably get back to my family. I just wanted to pop in and say goodbye.”

“I’m proud of what you’ve done today – and this past year. And I’m sure your parents are too. You’ve been a great student.”

My chest swelled. I was reminded, for the first time today, that today was my day too, a culmination of *my* hard work, the person I had become. “Thank you, Mr. Moretti. I loved your class. Truly. Thank you for everything.”

His eyes shone bright and he smiled gently. “Don’t forget to visit, now. I’ll be here.”

I waved and walked out of Mr. Moretti’s classroom. But not, I decided, for the last time.

***January 4th, 2006***

I wore the same boots as I had during my senior year, yet, now, as I looked down at them, they looked alien on top of the speckled linoleum floors of Rivercrest high. I had just finished my first semester of college and was home on winter break. Eager to escape my home and the constant bickering that came along with it, I decided to visit Mr. Moretti. The sky was grey, casting a dull shadow across the school campus as I parked my car in student parking lot and walked into the building. I was hit by small wave of déjà vu. It had only been nine months since I had graduated, but the school felt foreign, as if I was floating within a distant memory. I made my way to Mr. Moretti’s classroom among the end of the day frenzy, as current students flocked the hallways beside me, eager to empty their lockers and leave.

I poked my head into his door as I had so many times before to find him sitting at his large wooden desk with his head bent over a book and his legs resting easily on the top of his desk, propped up by his leather messenger bag. I paused before I said anything, looking around the classroom. Nothing had really changed; the posters were the same and the tube lights shone with their same obnoxious glare.

“Hi Mr. Moretti!” I said, my voice breaking the silence of his classroom.

He looked up, confused for a second. Then, his face broke out into a big smile as he saw me.

“Jan! It’s so good to see you! What a surprise! How are you?”

I walked over to his desk, smiling. The foreign feeling had left me, and in the comfort of this classroom that I had spent so many hours in after school, I could feel myself relaxing. I went over to his desk and plopped myself into a chair on the opposite side of his desk. He had put his feet down and was leaning towards me as I started telling him all about my summer, my first semester at Boston College, the clubs I had joined and the classes I was taking, and how life had changed for me after getting out of our sleepy little town. I barely gave Mr. Moretti a chance to answer most of my stories and musings. Since coming home, I had very few people to talk to about my newfound adventures. It was winter, which meant that my parents were at each other’s throats, at my brother for his slipping grades, and they were missing Vietnam more than ever, the snow a constant reminder of the tropical home they had left. They had little energy left for me, though they were glad to see me. My mother cooked all of my favorites for me and mostly left me to my own devices, which pleased me enough.

I rambled on for a few more minutes before stopping to breathe. In the momentary silence, I realized I should probably ask Mr. Moretti how he was.

“More of the same. Nothing new around here. I think I’ll be teaching a class on World History next semester, which is exciting since that is what I studied. I’m thinking about focusing on authoritarian leaders throughout time and across regions.”

“That sounds fascinating. I wish that class was here when I was a student.”

Mr. Moretti laughed. “You have a plethora of interesting classes at your disposal at Boston. Why haven’t you taken any history classes?” He looked at me meaningfully, and my chest shrank a little, racked with guilt over what I knew would be a disappointing answer.

“I’m actually planning to graduate in 3 years with my biochemistry degree so I can go to medical school faster. I’ll probably declare this semester. Biochemistry. That’s what I’m studying. No time to take fun classes, I guess. My scholarship only covers 18 credits a semester too, so I can’t take past what I need to graduate, especially with pre-med track requirements and extracurriculars to boost my resume, and research. I should probably volunteer in a hospital too.” I was talking quickly, trying to gloss over the fact that my future was scary and long.

“I had never heard you talk about biology when you went here. Do you enjoy those classes?”

“I’m not sure. Not really? But they’re requirements to the pre-med track.”

Mr. Moretti made a thoughtful sound and didn’t say anything. I appreciated it. I didn’t really need any more judgement about what I was studying. I heard it enough from Sierra. She lectured me about passion and fulfillment as if they were the lifeblood of college. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, they had given up so much for me to be a doctor, and this was simply the next step to help them achieve their dream. I was going to be a doctor. Passion and fulfillment had nothing to do with it.

We talked a bit more before I had to leave to pick up my brother from the middle school, which ended about an hour after the high school did. As I said my goodbyes and promised to visit again, Mr. Moretti asked me to wait a second. He reached behind is desk and pulled out a book, dusted off the cover and handed it to me. The cover read ‘*Mao: The Unknown Story by Jung Chang’* and had a picture of the young Mao Zedong framed on the cover.

“I used this book to research for my new class curriculum. It was by far my favorite – there’s interviews, historian perspective, and examples of printed propaganda.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing.”

“Keep it and read it. Return it next time you visit.”

“Really?” I turned the book over in my hands. It was obviously well loved, but still in good condition, respected as any academic knows how to respect a book. “Thank you so much Mr. Moretti. I’ll return it soon, don’t worry.” I looked up at Mr. Moretti who was smiling at me.

“Of course. And take your time reading it, I won’t need it for a bit. But do me one favor.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Sure, what do you need?” I questioned, turning my attention off of my new book and towards my old teacher.

“Take a history class in college. Audit it if you need to, or take it pass and fail. Just take one.”

I paused and smiled. “I’ll try to make it happen, Mr. Moretti.”

***September 8th, 2007***

Winter was supposed to be the season that my family fell apart. The numbing cold and endless feet of snow were supposed to place the final straw on the camel’s back. My parents hated the winter: they grumbled about the snow and desperately prayed for warmer days. Once every two years, we all escaped to Vietnam to see our grandparents and bask in tropical humidity over our Christmas break. Those were the winters that were bearable in my family, our fortnight in my parents’ home getting us through the harshness of cold season in Iowa.

It wasn’t supposed to be the summer.

My brother called me on August 17th, as I was walking back to my dorm from my summer class in Boston. He was crying, a sound I hadn’t heard since we were children, his words blurred by hiccups and heavy breaths. Our parents, he said, were separating. Dad had left with a suitcase and our mother wouldn’t leave the bedroom. They weren’t getting divorced, of course, and would still go to church together on Sunday mornings to keep appearances up, but for now, my father would not be living at home. Only their marriage was over, but in that moment, it felt like our family was over. I put aside my feelings and stayed on the phone with my brother until he fell asleep that night. And the next night. And the next night. I called my brother, giving him the attention, love, and reassurance he needed –the care my parents selfishly weren’t giving him—every night until my flight back home at the end of August.

The past week at home had drained me. I had very little left to give. I had gotten my mother out of her bedroom and back to acting like her old self. I had convinced my father to come home to talk to my brother about what the future would look like and reassure him of his love for both of us. I forced my parents to talk to each other about what the rest of our lives would look like. I went with my father and translated for him at the apartment leasing facility five blocks over. I was tired. It was with this heavy heart and damaged spirit that I drove into the familiar student parking lot at Rivercrest High, parked my beat-up Honda Accord, and walked into Mr. Moretti’s classroom. I was headed back to Boston College in 2 days and wanted to tie up all lose ends at home before I left. It had been too long since I had visited Mr. Moretti, and I was slightly ashamed to be walking back into his classroom over a year after my past visit.

I knocked on the door of the familiar classroom and walked inside, not bothering to wait for the “Come in” that I knew would come. Mr. Moretti’s face lit up when he saw me. He smiled widely, putting down his work immediately and closing the book he had open. I smiled back. For a second, the weight of the past week slipped away.

We spoke for about two hours that day about school, my summer history class that I ended up taking alongside my genetics requirement, his new students and their abysmal work ethic, and his brand-new granddaughter. I sat on top of the metal desk, my feet crossed, catching him up on everything I could think of. I relished in talking about something that wasn’t my parents.

“She’s so cute! She kind of looks like you.” I said as he pulled up a picture of his granddaughter on his phone. He was gleaming, I had never seen him so excited about something in his life. In a way, his happiness brought me a sense of calm. It felt good to know that even when some families were breaking apart, others were growing closer and larger. The news gave me a sense of balance and chipped away at some of the sadness I felt. Before I left, I remembered my book bag and the Mao book he had let me borrow during my last visit.

“Oh, thank you by the way! I really did love it,” I said as I handed book back to him. He took it back from me and immediately turned back around and took another book off of the shelf behind his desk.

“Here’s another one I liked. It’s yours if you want to borrow it.” The title of the book read *“Jewels in Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran”.*

“Really? Is this just a ploy to get me to keep visiting?” I teasingly asked. He laughed and nodded.

“Sure is.”

I left Mr. Moretti’s classroom that day the way I usually did: feeling a bit lighter, a bit more listened to, and a bit smarter than I had when I came in.

***May 13th, 2009***

College graduation didn’t feel so different than high school graduation. Instead of graduating in a gymnasium, we graduated in the Alumni Stadium. 3 years later, it seemed, the jocks still ruled. I had passed my classes with mostly flying colors and was presented honors cords by the head of the Biochemistry department. My parents were both sitting at my graduation ceremony, my brother sitting between them, a buffer to keep the peace. My mother cried when I got my diploma and my dad hugged me for the first time in a while. They were so proud of me. For the past 7 years my parents had asked me about my grades, hounded me about my future, and had enrolled me in every academic extracurricular they could to strengthen my intellect and work ethic. Today, they were even closer to the dream that America had sold them – the dream that immigrated them across the world, broke up their marriage, highlighted their otherness, and forced them to give their everything to their children. The closest friend I had made in college, Emily Grierson, had her entire family, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles at graduation. They hugged her and her boyfriend, popped champagne as a family, and sang the college fight song together. The contrast between our situations was almost humorous.

After the four of us went to dinner together at a local pho joint, I packed up my dorm into the trunk of our silver minivan and we rode home together, silent the entire way. The next day, I decided to visit Mr. Moretti. It felt fitting – I spoke to him after my high school graduation, I should probably go back and visit after my college graduation as well. Before I left, I grabbed two books off of my shelf: one that Mr. Moretti had lent me several months ago and one that I had bought earlier in the year about the history of biological warfare and eugenics. It was a harrowing read and struck me as something Mr. Moretti would enjoy but wouldn’t come across himself. I left the house, yelling to my mom that I was borrowing her car, and drove myself to Rivercrest High.

I walked into the main office, signing in as per the new instructions on the windows. I then made my way to the history block of the building. Checking my watch, I realized it was a little past the end of the school day and I had a momentary worry that Mr. Moretti had already left for the day. These worries were calmed when I saw Mr. Moretti’s grey and brown speckled hair through the narrow window on the door to his classroom.

“Don’t you ever leave this building?” I teased as I announced my entrance. Mr. Moretti – clearly startled by my voice and not as initially amused by my joke as I thought he’d be-- lifted his head. As soon as he saw me though, he smiled and laughed a little, shaking his head ever so slightly.

“You sound like the voice in the back of my head. And my ex-wife. And honestly most of my friends.”

“They sound like smart people.” I laughed and pulled up a chair to the other side of his desk.

“So guess what, Mr. Moretti,” I started. “I just graduated college. Honors. I’m officially as smart as you.” I laughed again. I was in a great mood today – I was leaving for Europe with Sierra and Abdul, still as in love as they were in high school, in a week and was planning to spend the next few days lazing around my house and hanging out with my brother. The sun was shining brightly, and right above me, it felt like. There were no clouds in my sky.

“Wow! Congratulations! Oh, I feel old. I forgot you were on track to graduate in three years instead of four. Always one step ahead, I remember that.” Mr. Moretti seemed genuinely enthusiastic and proud of me. My chest swelled. “What are your post grad plans? What does one actually do with a biochemistry major…” His sarcasm was apparent, but it was friendly.

“I’m off to medical school in the Fall. But before that I’ll be travelling around Europe this summer with Sierra and Abdul. Do you remember them? I’m not sure they had you. Anyways, it’s going to be incredible. We’re starting off in Ireland, doing most of Western Europe then heading to some of the Eastern European nations.”

“Europe after college? How original…” Mr. Moretti’s words stung a bit, but I knew he was joking. Or at least I hoped so. I was excited about my trip; it would be my first time travelling abroad alone and I had planned to see all the historical sites that I had learned about in the Modern European History course I took in my last semester of college. I felt myself needing to explain myself.

“It is original! We’re doing really interesting regions, not just the whole drinking at pubs thing. Plus, I took another history class that will map well onto our trip…” I trailed off. Mr. Moretti perked up a bit after hearing about the history class and asked me a few questions about it. But, I noticed him totally avoiding my obviously larger announcement of medical school. In an effort to bring attention to what I thought of as my biggest accomplishment in these past 3 years, I brought it up again.
 “I’m going to medical school in California, actually. UCLA. I’m so excited to be in the sunshine all year long!”

“That does sound nice, I’m sure it’ll be a good change from here.” His usually bright voice was a bit monotonous and flat. I was confused and irritated. My good mood was ebbing, and I made it clear in my tone.
 “It’s one of the best schools in the country, you know. And I have a pretty decent scholarship too. Not a full one, of course. But a partial one.”
 “I’m sure it’s a great school.”

“You don’t seem excited for me,” I accused.

“Are *you* excited for you?” He questioned back. I paused. What a ridiculous question, I thought to myself. Of course I was excited for medical school. Maybe not the actual school itself, but I was excited for what medical school meant. It meant I’d be getting one step closer to getting a job, fulfilling my parents’ wishes, and doing what I had planned to do for the last 3 years.

“Being a doctor is the most noble profession. I’ll be helping people. I’ll be making good money. This is just the next step. Of course I’m excited for me.” I bit my tongue before I spoke too much and started sounding defensive.

“Then I’m excited for you too, Jan. UCLA is an amazing school and they’re lucky to have you. Just, don’t forget about what you’re interested in, okay?”

I took a deep breathe. Mr. Moretti would always be proud of me, and that fact was comforting. Just then I remembered the books in my backpack, pulled them out and handed them to him. He was excited about my gift to him and we spent the rest of the afternoon talking about books we had read, our opinions on our new president, and the budget cuts that were currently affecting Rivercrest High. When we got to the topic of the currently struggling economy, Mr. Moretti hesitated for a second before asking me how my parents were doing.

“They’re struggling but staying afloat for now. They separated a few years back – I don’t remember if I’ve mentioned that to you – but my mom didn’t work before that. And every company is cutting their most recent hires…so she’s worried, but my dad still helps support her and my brother.” I looked down. I don’t know if Mr. Moretti and I had ever really talked about our personal lives or families. It felt foreign to talk to an old teacher about the more intimate details about my life, but also comforting. Therapeutic, almost. We continued on, updating each other about our families, our conversation creeping into the new territory of our families, relationships, and friendships.

“Do you plan on moving back to Boston ever?” He questioned, after I told him that I broke up with my college boyfriend since he was staying in Boston and I was leaving.

“Hopefully? I don’t know. I don’t plan on moving back to Weldon, though, that’s for sure.” I looked at him accusingly, teasing him about his own situation.

“I followed my ex-wife here – it was a great grand gesture at the time. Now… well let’s just say that I have a 30 year mortgage to pay off.” He laughed and I joined him.

“Hey at least you’ve lived to tell the tale – and now, if I ever consider move across the country to live with someone in a boring, sleepy town, I’ll look to you as an example of why I shouldn’t”

“Glad that my career as a teacher has paid off in at least one way – educating the next generation in how not to make life-changing relationship mistakes.”

We laughed together at the absurdity of our conversation and I sat a bit longer in the chair across from his desk, relishing in the easiness of our banter. For the first time, I felt Mr. Moretti cross over from being purely a teacher to becoming more – he had simply become my friend.

***February 16th, 2012***

The next time I visited Mr. Moretti was 3 years later, while I was deep in the trenches of medical school. My mother had moved to Illinois where my brother was going to college, and my father had started splitting his time between Chicago and California, trying to find times to see my brother and I between overseeing his growing business. There was very little left for me in Iowa, but I was in town to go to Abdul and Sierra’s wedding and had decided to extend my trip a day so that I could pay a quick visit to my old high school. I hadn’t seen Mr. Moretti in what felt like a lifetime, and made a mental note to ask him for his email so that we could keep in touch better. Most of my recent memories of Weldon City were just pictures off of my high school friends’ Facebook pages, so as I walked up the hallway to Mr. Moretti’s classroom on a Monday after school, I felt a sense of unfamiliarity flood through me. The hallways of Rivercrest High vaguely reminded me of the corridors of the hospital where I did my rotations: bleak, dimly lit, and closing in. I approached the metal door that had a dulled silver name plate that read “MR. MORETTI” in bolded, large letters. Quietly I turned the nob of the door and entered the small classroom in which I was a student, a mere 7 years ago. My entrance had been quiet enough for Mr. Moretti to have not lifted his head from what I assumed was a stack of unit tests from his current back of history students. I coughed slightly, hoping to get his attention but not yet startle him. Mr. Moretti lifted his head, his salt and pepper hair still cut short and his black wire glasses falling slightly down his crooked nose. His blue eyes lit up – he was always enthusiastic in his greeting to see me, even if it had been a long time since my last visit. My hand went up to near my chest for a short wave before I sped over to his desk, saving him the 10 feet walk.

“Hi there, Mr. Moretti. Remember me?” Of course he did, but I knew I would enjoy the momentary validation of his chuckle and eyeroll, as if not remembering me would be absurd.

“Of course, Jan. It’s been so long –two years? Three? I was starting to think you had forgotten about me.” A bit of guilt washed over me. It had been a long time, and here I was, popping up with no notice, and simply because I was back in town for something else – someone else. “So, tell me,” Mr. Moretti continued, “What brings you into town?”

Before I answered, I took a moment to properly look at Mr. Moretti, now that he was facing completely towards me. The wrinkles in his face seemed engraved, deeper now than they had been years prior. These ridges in his olive, freckled face each reminded me of the teacher he was –the teacher, I realized, he still is to many. The small crows feet near his eyes were most clearly marked, probably from his years of smiling at the innocent mischief that, for some reason, always seemed to occur in his classroom. The wrinkles on his forehead reminded me of his sternness, of a tone of voice that caught you off guard and made you regret the actions you’d taken to elicit it – not guilt for getting caught, but a true guilt, of making such a man like Mr. Moretti angry at all. The lines around his mouth were newer, one’s I hadn’t seen before. I guess I had forgotten the exponential nature of aging: how it seems to not happen at all for many years, then one day, all at once. I snapped myself out of this examination of him, realizing I had waited a moment too long before answering, turning my pause from pensive to rude.

“I’m back in Iowa for Abdul and Sierra’s wedding – my friends from high school. And I thought while I was here, I should pay you a visit! It has been a while, too long, and I just wanted to catch up.”

“Well, I’m glad you made the journey out here. So, tell me, Jan. How are you?”

And with that, I opened my mouth and out poured story after story about California, medical school, my boyfriend of a year, trips I had been on recently, my visit back to Boston, and everything else memorable that had happened to me since my last visit. Mr. Moretti regaled in my stories and shared parts of his own life. He had visited Boston recently too and had a second grandchild now. He had thought about retiring away from Iowa, to where his daughter lived, but had decided against it. And he was teaching a new history class about South East Asia this year, which only 12 students signed up for. As he spoke, I noticed his wheezing breaths and the sunkenness around his eyes. In many ways, Mr. Moretti looked well past the retirement age, but his voice still sounded young, bright, and lively. He still spoke with the energy and passion of a young man, which sounded almost strange coming out of his elderly body. I debated asking Mr. Moretti how old he was or bring up retirement; I was curious to know if he was close to that point of his life. But, I reasoned to myself that he had always seemed a bit old, and the wheeziness of his voice was just exemplified by the thoughtfulness with which he spoke. I decided not to ask, and reimmersed myself in our conversation, eager to fit in as much catching-up as I could in my short visit.

It was almost 5:30pm by the time I looked at my watch again and realized that I needed to head to the airport for my red-eye back to Los Angeles. I said goodbye to Mr. Moretti, giving him a light touch on the shoulder before I ran to my car, checking into my flight on my Blackberry on the walk through the parking lot.

In the car driving towards the Des Moines airport, I realized I had forgotten to get Mr. Moretti’s email address. I sighed. *Next time.*

***September 12th, 2015***

Dr. Jan Nguyen. Doctor. Jan Nguyen M.D. I had been repeating the words over and over in my head for the last year and a half that I had been in my residency, but the name still didn’t feel like my own. The word *doctor* tasted sickly sweet in my mouth, like an overripened fruit, seemingly sweet but overpowering to my taste buds. I had decided to do my residency in diagnostic radiology and was working in Chicago now as well, close to my mother and brother. Residency was slowly draining me – I slept, worked, and ate when I could. Friendships seemed distant, relationships were a far cry from reality, and any semblance of hobbies were humorous. But I was out of my first year of residency and things had calmed down enough for me to find time to make a visit out to Iowa to see Abdul and Sierra and their new baby. Sierra had been begging me for months to come back home to see her beautiful daughter who was excited to meet “Aunt Jan”. I flew into Des Moines on a Thursday night and had spent all day Friday, Saturday, and Sunday playing with the round faced and gurgling Maya. I was so tempted to extend my trip for another week to stay in Sierra’s beautiful home, eat Abdul’s home-cooked dinners, and enjoy a life removed from the bustle and stress of my residency program. Yet, the days I had taken off were already probably too many, and I had booked a return flight for Tuesday morning back to Chicago. As soon as my Avis rental car rolled into Weldon City, I felt the feeling of home settle over me. This feeling of home had evaded me since I left Boston; no other city had felt like home since I had left my undergraduate, and since I had moved to Chicago, I had been itching to feel the security of a home. When I parked in Sierra’s driveway, got out of the car, and smelled crisp air, tinged with the smell of pesticides and manure of the close by orchard, I felt like I had walked into my home after a long, tiring vacation.

 I had been planning to visit Mr. Moretti. Aside from Sierra and Abdul, he was the only other friend I had in this small town. But unlike Sierra and Abdul, I never talked to him outside of my sparse visits back home. I had hit myself over the head after I had forgotten to get his email address, and when I searched for him on Facebook, nothing had come up. Itching to see him, I left Sierra’s at 3pm exactly on Monday and made my way towards Rivercrest. I walked into the building, which looked bigger and under construction now, signed in at the main office, and made small talk with the secretaries. They asked if I was picking up my son or daughter and I laughed.

 “Gosh, I hope I don’t look old enough to have a high school child. No, I’m just here to see an old teacher, Mr. Moretti.” They beamed at me. “He doesn’t get many visitors, but he’s here today I think, let me check my schedule.” I crooked my head, vaguely thinking it was weird that he wouldn’t just be here every day. The secretary consulted her old computer and confirmed his availability, saying that it looked like he was teaching today. My cell phone rang just then, and I picked it up, seeing it was the hospital. Stepping out of the room, I took the call and spoke to my supervisor for a few minutes to fill him in on a patient I was working with the week before. I walked back into the office and the front desk secretary smiled at me and we chatted for a few minutes; she was obviously impressed when I signed her form as “Dr. Jan Nguyen”. I momentarily forgot about the seemingly part-time nature of Mr. Moretti’s position now, took my visitor sticker and the secretary sent me on my way. I reached Mr. Moretti’s familiar door and paused, smoothing down the t-shirt and jeans I had donned, both a little tighter due to the stress-weight I had gained since starting my residency, and pulled my fingers through my fine, black hair. A decade ago, I had walked into this classroom every morning, and here I was, a 28-year-old woman, nervous to open the door.

 Walking into the small classroom, I saw Mr. Moretti hanging up new posters along the walls of his classroom. He was standing on a chair, his short stature a disadvantage to his decorating skills, stapling an Underground Railroad map onto the back wall of the classroom. I announced my entrance by accidentally letting the door slam into its metal frame. Mr. Moretti jumped a bit, turned around, and took a second to process my entrance.

 In his silence, I greeted him. “Hi Mr. Moretti!”

 “Is that the elusive Jan Nguyen? Wow, you’re still coming back to visit, huh?” He teased, over his momentary surprise.

 “It’s actually Dr. Jan Nguyen now.” I joked back.

 “Oh, of course it is. So, you’re a doctor now? Out of the pits of medical school?” He asked as he climbed off of the chair and made his way towards his desk.

 “Yeah, I guess so. I’m in my residency so it isn’t much better, but at least I’m finally making some money.” I took a seat across from his desk as I usually did and continued. “But I’m living in Chicago now, where my mother and brother live so that’s nice. I see them when I’m off-shift and live a 3-minute walk from the hospital I work at. So overall, it’s not bad. I finally feel like a real adult.”

 Mr. Moretti laughed. “A real adult, huh? And how are you liking that?”

 “Not loving it honestly. I’m looking for a better gig, but it doesn’t look like anyone can get out of it.”

 “No, that’s usually the way it is.”

 I asked him about his family and grandchildren, and he took out his ancient flip phone and showed me pictures on the small screen. I asked him if he had heard about smart phones yet, and he shook his head at me and rolled his eyes, telling me he didn’t need a phone that could go on the internet because he had a computer at home and at work.

 “Oh, that reminds me!” I interjected, interrupting his condemnation of his students, who now hid smart phones under their desks and were constantly texting on them. “What is a good email to reach you at? It feels silly that I only ever see you when I come back to visit, and I’d like to keep in touch better. Here,” I said, taking out my own iPhone, “type it into this contact information for me.” Mr. Moretti took my phone into his hands, obviously uncomfortable holding the larger, sleeker cell phone that I had, and carefully typed in his name and email address, using his right pointer finger to painfully tap on each letter while holding the phone securely in his left hand. I tried my best not to roll my eyes or laugh.

 We spent the next hour talking mostly about light things, like my new apartment and Sierra’s new baby, his own day to day with his students, books he had read and wanted me to read, and my busy schedule.

 “There’s no way I can read this entire list of books. I barely have time to read the takeout menus of the dinners I eat at 10pm after my shift…”

 “You don’t read anymore? You don’t like history anymore?” Mr. Moretti accused me.

 “No, of course I do. Of course, truly. I just haven’t had time in the past few years. I just feel like everything has been about becoming a doctor, and now that I am, everything is about becoming an attending and finishing residency. I’m sure once I’m an attending, things will slow down, and I’ll have to go back to doing things that I love.”

 “So, you don’t love treating your patients then?”

 “I mean, I enjoy it, sure. Radiology isn’t as patient centric as some other departments are. It’s not like I’m in pediatrics. But you know, doing things you really love is different than doing your work.”

 Mr. Moretti scoffed. “Not for me. I love teaching. And history. So, I’m a history teacher. It was a pretty simple decision there.”

 I grew a bit pink, my cheeks flushing over. “Not this conversation again. I told you, after I finish my residency program, I’ll have time to read about history again, travel to historical sites, do all the things I love. I’ve heard of attendings who even went to night school to study new subjects just for fun, because they missed it.”

 “And how many years until you’re done with residency?”

 “About two.” Mr. Moretti mulled my answer over, saying nothing. I didn’t break the silence, but I knew what its weight meant. Two years. Two years of working 80-hour weeks. Two years of not learning what I actually wanted to learn. Of not travelling to all the destinations I wanted to, of not being able to start a family or come back to see Sierra and Abdul. Two years of calling my dad once a month because I couldn’t visit him in California. Two years of working at a job where I was struggling to find meaning, passion, and excitement. And a lifetime of having the title of ‘doctor’ that was barely palatable tied to my name.

 “Can I say something?” His request broke my inner monologue. I just nodded, not sure I wanted to hear what was coming.

Mr. Moretti shook his head ever so subtly as he spoke, his gaze reaching my eyes. “You told me you weren’t that interested in science and medicine in high school. You never even really talked about how interesting you found medical school. I find it hard to believe you’ve done a 180 just because you’re a resident now. I just thought that somewhere on this journey you’d end up doing what you were passionate about. Sooner or later, at least. But it keeps being pushed off to later, Jan. And you say you’ll start after residency, but I know it’ll keep getting pushed off. The things people want to happen in their lives don’t just happen with time. They are put into motion by the people who want them the most. And I honestly don’t think you want to be happy, fulfilled, excited– or at least, you’re too scared to make it happen for yourself.”

His words stung. I was hurt, but more immediately, I was angry.

“Not everyone has the privilege to ‘follow their passions’, Mr. Moretti.” I snapped back, making air quotes with my fingers, my tone increasingly sarcastic. “No offense, but my situation is more complicated than most people’s – and more complicated than I’m betting yours was. I had to do all of this. I had to study biochemistry and I had to go to medical school. And after that, I had to start my residency program. This path has been mapped out for me before I was born. This path is why my parents sacrificed every day for me for 28 years. And, honestly, I’ve worked really hard for the past 10 years and now, I’m an M.D. I’m a doctor. And I’m really proud of myself.” I stopped talking to take a deep breathe. Mr. Moretti’s face softened at my outburst.

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t be proud of yourself. You should be. I’m proud of you too. But I always knew you were intelligent and hardworking. I’m just saying that you could give this world more.”

I cut him off, my voice rising. “How can someone give more than a doctor? I help people every day. Every day I contribute – people are alive because of me. Families are whole because of me. I do contribute.”

Mr. Moretti stayed completely calm, despite my rising voice. “I’m not saying you’re not contributing right now. I’m just saying that if you were doing something you were passionate about and that brought you joy, you could contribute to your full potential.” He paused, and added as an afterthought, “and there are other ways to contribute past being a doctor and saving lives. You can add knowledge to this world. You can write, you can create art, you can share your values. Don’t be so narrowminded as to think that contributing necessitates a tangible benefit.”

I shook my head and laughed meanly. “So, you think I should give up on being a doctor, after spending a decade working up to this point.”

“You know that’s a logical fallacy. Sunk costs, Jan.”

“Sunk costs?” I almost yelled, calming myself down before continuing in a softer voice. “Sunk costs don’t even begin to cover what I’ve done to get here. Sierra is married and has a baby. I didn’t even have time to keep up my relationship once I started my residency. Long distance isn’t even possible when you’re working 40-hour shifts. I’ve given up so much to get to this point, and now, I’m one of the best residents at the University of Chicago hospital. I work hard, and I’ve learned a lot – these aren’t just sunk costs, Mr. Moretti. This is my life.”

“You’re not doing much living, though, it sounds like. You can’t just keep putting your life off, Jan. You’re never going to start living at this rate.”

“I’m living just fine. Just because I don’t teach history in a small town in Iowa doesn’t mean that I’m not living.” I was surprised by my boldness and anger – I didn’t know where it was coming from, but Mr. Moretti was striking a chord inside of me that did not want to be struck.

Mr. Moretti didn’t skip a beat, nor did he respond to my attack on him. “I’m not saying you have to be a teacher or live in Iowa. I just know, more than anyone, that not following your passions or doing what you want to do is scary. Because sooner or later, you’ll run out of time. You’ll run out of ‘later’. I wish I had moved out of Weldon 15 years ago. I wish I had gone to graduate school and travelled more. I just don’t want you to become stuck the same way I’ve become stuck.”

“Well, don’t worry. I won’t become stuck – and I have time.” I got up from the small chair I had been sitting in, checked my phone for the time, and abruptly said, “I have to go, I should get back to Sierra’s. I’ve been gone for a while.”

Mr. Moretti sighed and gently smiled up at me, still sitting at his dark wooden desk that he seemed most comfortable when he was behind.

“Jan, I am proud of you. I just want you to do what’s best for yourself. I want more for you than I chose for myself. Thank you for visiting me, it was really great to see you.”

My chest ached. I was angry, but the taste of guilt rose in my throat. “It was good seeing you too, Mr. Moretti.”

I turned around and walked out of the door, pausing in the door frame to look back and wave, smiling ever so slightly, the sadness our conversation had brought me still evident in the way that the smile didn’t reach my eyes. I walked out to my rental car and drove back to Sierra’s house, numb by the interaction I had just had.

When I reached Sierra’s driveway, I put the car in park and leaned back in the black leather seat. All of a sudden, the flood gates that had been keeping the onslaught of emotions I had been compartmentalizing for years opened, and I sat in that car and cried. I cried for the years I had spent in a library, reading textbooks I had no interest in learning about. I flashed back to the time that I froze up during a medical school interview because I had no answer to why I wanted to attend medical school. I had a graveyard of relationships that ended with the words “I just don’t have the time”. I grieved for giving up on people I loved for a career I wasn’t fulfilled by. I saw mother and father’s estranged relationship and my brother’s and my rocky childhood in my mind, and I cried for our whole family. Guilt raked through me as I thought about my parents how they never felt at home in the United States. I cried for all they had given up for me, and I cried for all I had given up for them. Everything felt uncertain and unclear: I couldn’t connect to my patients, no matter how hard I tried, and I couldn’t find my spot in the University of Chicago hospital. I sobbed once more as I realized how angry and rude I had been to Mr. Moretti today, one of my few ties to home. I cried for what felt like an hour. Taking a few last ragged breathes, I opened the mirror on the visor of the car, cleaned up my dripping mascara, shut it quickly, and walked back into my best friend’s house.

***September 6th, 2018***

I had meant to email so many times. It would have been so easy. I send hundreds of emails every week. I could have emailed during work breaks. I could have emailed right after I had left Weldon City that day, many years ago. But I never did. Sierra and Abdul had moved to Des Moines a couple of years earlier, and nothing was left for me in that small town except for Mr. Moretti and the words he had left me with 3 years prior. Mr. Moretti’s contact burned in my phone, and every time I accidentally came upon it while scrolling through my phone for someone else to call, it stared at me accusingly. I had left his classroom so angry, and such a different person than I was today. But that day had changed me, and I was back today, in Weldon City, driving down these country roads that were so rough on my new car, to tell Mr. Moretti that he had saved me.

Harvard’s Masters of History program had just gotten back to me with an acceptance, and I was ready to move back to Boston. I was ready to study something that had been the love of my academic life for many years – though I was unwilling to admit to it for many of them. I was excited about my future for the first time in so many years, and the feeling felt so foreign. I had taken a leave of absence from the hospital for my Masters, which they were reluctant to grant me, and had gotten back to Harvard immediately with my confirmation of the acceptance. Every part of me buzzed. I was moving next week, but I knew that before I left back to Boston I had to pay a visit to Mr. Moretti to thank him for everything he had done for me, said to me, and given to me since I was 18 years old. I sold my Chicago high-rise apartment, kissed my mother and brother goodbye, and set out for Iowa, driving back by myself through the one-lane highways and corn fields that I had grown to love. As I drove down Route 30 in my Camero, I took in the views around me -- views that I once say as a prison growing up, confining me to their conservative neighborhoods and low-shooting dreams. Now, I saw them as a reminder of the community that made me.

It was a Monday at 3pm when I pulled up to the parking lot at Rivercrest High. I had brought along my acceptance letter with its Harvard seal and salutation that started with “Congratulations”. Taking it out of my leather messenger bag, I climbed out of my car and walked towards the front office of Rivercrest High. The high school had expanded so far past what it looked like when I was a student, all those years ago. There was a glass extension with furniture that looked like it came out of an office building. The brick was bright and recently power washed, and a large arch surrounded the entrance, with the name ‘Rivercrest High’ clearly shown across the top of the structure. I strolled towards the entrance, a hop in my step that had definitely not been there when I was in the depths of my residency three years ago.

As I entered the front office, I noticed the commotion around me. It was the beginning of the school year and students were trying to switch into and out of classes, parents were coming in to pick their students up for after school programs, and the hustle and bustle of Fall in high school was evident. I sat down in one of the chairs in the make-shift waiting room in the office, patiently lingering until one of the secretaries was free to sign me in. After a few minutes, my scrolling through my phone was interrupted by a secretary saying “Honey, do you need something?” in my direction. I got up and walked over to her front desk. She was an older woman, with her hair cut short in a blond, fluffed pixie cut and glasses hanging around her neck, connected to either side with a beaded string.

“I’m here to visit a teacher, so I just need a visitor’s tag.” I said. She took her glasses from around her neck and placed them on her narrow nose, peering at me.

“Which teacher do you need to see?”

“Mr. Moretti, the history teacher.”

She paused, as if she hadn’t heard the name before. “Mr. Moretti?” She repeated, obviously confused.

“Yes, Mr. Moretti. He’s been working here forever, shorter Italian man. He teaches AP and regular history?” Was this woman new, I wondered to myself. Who here didn’t know Mr. Moretti? The secretary still didn’t speak, but her gaze turned from confused to wistful and melancholy.

“Oh, honey.” Her was softer now, as she stepped out from behind the desk she sat at and towards me, taking my arm gently and pulling me to a corner of the busy office. I went along with her without thinking about the actions my body was taking or the steps I was taking. I looked back at the desk as she led me into the corner, unsure about why we were now in this isolated corner of the office.

“What’s going on? Is everything okay? Is Mr. Moretti out today?” Confusion seeped through my voice as I ran through scenarios in my head about why Mr. Moretti wouldn’t be teaching today.

“Honey, Mr. Moretti passed away a few months ago. He had been working part time for a few years while he was sick, but he couldn’t keep it up. The days drained him. He stopped working about 5 months before he passed away. We had a memorial in June when school ended, and I think it was sent out in the alumni magazine…”

She continued on, but I hadn’t heard a word after ‘passed away’. In a hospital, there wasn’t the courtesy of calling the dead the ‘passed away’ or ‘late’. We saw too much death to beat around the bush about it. Deceased. Irreversible cessation. Just simply dead. I’d seen a lot of death in the last five years. But for a second, I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t breathe. How had Mr. Moretti died? He was sick? How was I so not in the know about this man I had considered a friend of mine? My eyes glossed over and I moved my arm away from the gentle touch of the secretary. I mumbled something incoherent and almost ran out of the office, power-walking through the speckled-linoleum corridors, my head down, desperate to get to fresh air. I burst through the front doors of Rivercrest High, the brisk Fall air washing over me. I tried to take a breath, but my lungs weren’t receptive to the oxygen around them. They were still in shock, along with the rest of me.

My mind was running with a million questions, but before I could make sense of any of it, a wave of heartbreak and sorrow grasped my body. Tears started trickling from my eyes before I could control them and I was crying deeply, but without making a sound. The noise around me had muted itself and I could only feel the pit in my stomach rising to my chest and tears trickling down my cheek. Nothing else was registering with me at that moment. The saltiness of my tears and dripping nose burned on my dry lips, and I could taste this almost as strongly as I could taste the regret of all I had left unsaid to Mr. Moretti and all I had meant to say today. I was still holding my acceptance letter, but tears were dripping off of my face and onto the paper, blurring the words. For a moment, as I looked down at the letter, my sadness subsided enough for anger to take hold. I crumbled the letter in my hands with a fierce grip and threw it into the trash can I was standing next to.

Bile rose in my throat as I thought of the fact that I hadn’t even noticed his sickness. What kind of doctor was I, to not even see a fatally sick man after talking to him for so many years? If I had asked him more about himself, he would have told me. But whenever I walked into his classroom, it was all about me. My life, my goals, my path. Me asking him for advice – wasn’t I now the more studied, more accomplished out of the two of us? Shouldn’t I have asked if my services or expertise was ever needed? I was selfish. If I had asked him more about himself, he would have shared. Guilt was an emotion I was used to carrying around with me, but in that moment, it hit me like a high-speed train. The last time we spoke I had yelled at him. I never even reached out between then. I had his email address in my phone too. I couldn’t think: there was too much going on in my head, most of it attacks against myself. I don’t remember how I made it back to my car that day, I don’t remember how I drove myself back to my hotel, and I don’t remember what I thought about laying on the bed of the Best Western.

I woke up the next morning and for a split moment, before the sadness of the previous day came rushing back to me, I felt at peace in the low thread count sheets and dimly lit hotel room I found myself in. I checked my phone, and looking at the central time zone I found myself in, the thoughts of the previous day engulfed me once again. For the rest of the morning, I tortured myself by reminding myself of my lack of observance, my anger on our last meeting, and my selfishness over these last years. I paced around the hotel, not knowing where to go outside of it. The understanding that there was truly no one left for me in this town kept me from wandering aimlessly around the city.

I got a drink from the minibar. I thought about leaving the hotel to find lunch, but my appetite wasn’t large enough to risk facing Weldon City and all I had come to associate it with: Family. My childhood. High school. Mr. Moretti. I read a few pages of the history book that I had taken up a week before, the book I was going to share with Mr. Moretti had I seen him. I hadn’t read in so many years, unless it was out of a medical textbook or journal. As I sat on my hotel bed with the open book on my lap, I felt my eyes blur after a few passages, and I was unable to keep the stories straight in my head. I thought about rescinding my acceptance to Harvard. It felt fitting that I shouldn’t be allowed to go now, after everything I had done. After everything I hadn’t done. These thoughts were fleeting, and partially serious at best, but still, they flickered through my head.

I thought about other ways I could punish myself, or maybe atone for these last years. Maybe I should go back to being a doctor full time so that I learn to notice symptoms more carefully. Or maybe I should never practice again, my inobservance the obvious sign that I was a shitty doctor anyways. I could make myself move back to Weldon County to teach history as Mr. Moretti did. I almost laughed after that thought, remembering his distaste for this dull town had rivaled mine when I was in high school.

Around 5pm I felt the air in the hotel room go stale, and the minibar had dwindled to only the candy and drinks that I didn’t like. I thought about calling my parents to tell them where I was but decided against it. My conversations with my parents in the recent past had become about my job or my lack of marriage, and I had gone from calling my parents once a week to once every few weeks, unable to deal with their growing list of expectations about my life. I quickly packed up the two or three things that had made it out of my suitcase and made my way downstairs to check out, reassuring the front desk that I knew I had another day on my reservation, and that I was checking out all the same.

As I walked towards my car, I caught a glimpse of myself in the distorted dark glass of the car window. My black hair was disheveled and my skin was glowing a slight red with the couple of drinks I had nursed through the day. Aside from these small differences, I didn’t look much different than I had when I was in high school. I still had high cheekbones, a curvy figure, and dark brown, almond-shaped eyes. It felt wrong that the stark changes I felt that had happened inside of me these past 15 years didn’t result in dramatic differences on the outside of me.

I climbed into my Camero and adjusted my mirrors, put my seatbelt on, and pulled out of the hotel parking lot, and out of Weldon City for the last time. As I drove down the roads, trees on either side of me speckled with red, orange and green, I thought about all that the city had given me –the friendships of Sierra and Abdul, the strength to be a Vietnamese woman in a town that sometimes felt resistant to have me, and the guidance of a high school history teacher that never gave up on my dreams, even when I did. With my route set for Boston, only one thought lingered: Mr. Moretti would have been proud of me.