

Year 1, January

“Wow, did you listen to that when you were little?” Ouch. I’m not surprised that Olive has no idea how old a Victrola is. Still, the wood is cracking in places and the record sleeves are yellowed and aged, it obviously isn’t new. I suddenly am very self-aware of every gray strand of hair on my head.

Hunter lets out a snort. I glare at him. We’re the same age, that traitor! Plus, he’s one to talk about being old, his hair all gray since he was, what, 30? When he was 50, at our wedding, his hair was already practically blindingly white under the lights, painfully white, like, have you ever looked out your window after a fresh snowfall, and the sun is hitting the snow just right? I’ve always thought his hair is pretty. Didn’t keep me from harassing him about it, though.

“This came out in the 1920s, dear. 1925, if I remember correctly?” Hunter looms over the musical mess of a machine with a concerned hum and focused eyes. “By the time we were born, this thing was able to vote and rent a car.”

“Yeah, it’s like showing you an Atari and asking if you grew up with it.” I say. I join Hunter in looking at the Victrola, sharing his worry. The poor thing had been left to rot and collect dust in the armpit of the Virginia countryside, and the humidity hadn’t been kind to the wood. “Your great granddad on my side got this as a birthday gift. Collected records until the day he kicked it.”

“Daniel! Word that a little nicer.” Hunter scolds. “That’s no way to talk about a dead man.”

“Sitting around moping about him isn’t how he’d want to be remembered. Not the man who insisted margaritas be served at his funeral.” That gets a laugh from Olive, and a deeper glare from Hunter. “Uh, anyway, Olive, pick a record and let’s try this big guy out.” She picks one with a watercolor dog on the sleeve, with an almost sad, nostalgic look on their face. “Waiting for Master” reads the faded letters. Yep, that is an old record alright. No dog owner calls themselves a master anymore, although I guess owner isn’t really any better. I can almost imagine some sad old hound listening to this, waiting for their poor owner to trod home from their 10 hour a day job (this did come out during the Great Depression, after all), staring out into the... right, I should play it. I take the record, gently pull it out of the sleeve and place it on the... uh, turntable? I place the needle on the record and start winding up the handle on the side (terrifying experience, with how that spring just gets tighter and tighter and

what if it snaps and I’ll cry and when I finally go belly up my granddad’ll be like ‘So, about that Victrola’, and I’ll have to be like..)

“That should be enough, you don’t want to hurt the spring,” Hunter warns. He’s worried about it, too, huh? I reach over, the moment of truth, flick the little lever to get it to spin, and... Christ, what unholy sound is it making?

“Ow, ow, OW, that’s crackling like HELL!” Olive jumps up to turn it off with a huff before I even have time to react, stopping the strange, popping sound that had suddenly filled the apartment.

“Olivia, language,” I told her, my words having barely any bite. She was 17, one, plenty old enough for some light cussing, and absolutely not wrong in her word choice. As her dad, though, I at least have to try.

“Hm, maybe we need to re-wax the needle or replace it?” Hunter suggested. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out. You... did wax the needle, right, Daniel?”

“Uh... you wax it?”

“I think...?”

“Looking it up, guys, hang on.” Olive, ever the hero, taps away at her phone.

Year 1, April

Gentle music wafted through the apartment. There is nothing better, in my humble opinion, then melting into the couch with some old (barely crackling this time) 20s music in the background. I should work on my novel, sure, but the window is cracked and the breeze is so nice... I don’t particularly have anything to do until I have to go pick up Olive from school at 2:30. She is in high school, perfectly capable of walking the quarter mile home from class or driving herself, but she always cons me into giving her a lift home.

“Hey, Dad!” The door whips open to reveal the little troublemaker herself. “Too lazy to give your poor, tired daughter a ride home?” Huh? She didn’t tell me she’d be home early. I groggily check my phone, still in a sleepy haze. 1:54.

“You didn’t tell me you’d be home early, sorry.” I check my calls and texts just to be sure. Nope, nothing.

“I... always get out of school at 1:30.” Olivia said, now sounding a bit hurt and confused.

Huh? No, that isn’t right. I scrolled through our texts, spotting a ‘I’m out front’ text from me earlier in the week. Sent at 1:28. Oh. Geez. Guilt gripped my chest. “I’m so sorry, Olivia. I don’t know what got into me, I...”

Olive shot me a worried look. “Hey, don’t worry about it.” Easier said than done. I watched her do a little dance to the music on her way to the kitchen to grab an after-school snack. “We should ask Papa if we can order pizza tonight, because I’m such a lovely daughter and I deserve it.”

“Are you, now?” I asked. “I can convince him to order pizza, but the lovely part? I’ll work on it.” I shoot her a smirk from my place on the couch, and got a Goldfish tossed at my face.

“You’re lame and stinky,” she says, without a hint of malice in her voice. I flick open my phone and shoot off a text to Hunter.

Olive wants pizza.

We have leftovers and vegetables in the fridge that need to be cooked soon.

His utterly Hunter-like response.

“He said no.” I call out to Olive.

“Ugh. Let me guess, ‘we have leftovers in the fridge, you should really be more responsible, blah, blah, I’m lame and no fun.’”

“Hey, I married that lame man. At least he didn’t forget to give you a lift.”

Olive paused her munching. “If you get all sad over that I’m pouring these Goldfish over your head.”

Year 2, April

“I’ll see you after! I’ll look for you guys when I’m walking up for the diploma.” Olivia gives me a big hug and a kiss on the forehead, before doing the same to Hunter. We watch her as she scampers down the bleacher stairs, off to change and get ready for the big event.

“Are you two her grandparents?” someone next to us asks. Well, that was a rude question. Either we say ‘yes’ and the stranger gets nothing from the question, or we say ‘no’ and the stranger feels mildly awkward for starting the conversation in the first place.

“We’re her fathers, actually,” Hunter interjects for me.

“Oh.” the stranger responds. Yep, exactly what I expected. It only takes a minute for him to get up and leave with the woman next to him, mumbling something about ‘getting snacks’, leaving us relatively alone on the cold bleachers. Oh, well, the price we pay for being early.

“He’s not coming back, is he?” I sigh, watching the pair go.

“Probably not.” Hunter responded. “Some people will always be like that.”

“Do you think Olive would be happier with younger parents? With straight parents? I mean, looking around us, it’s all 30-somethings. Do we stick out?”

“We’re only 50-somethings, Daniel. Plus, it’s not exactly like we had a choice to adopt in our 30s, given that it was... well, illegal. Every parent has those moments, those ‘would they be happier’ moments. You know I’ve had my fair share of mine.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just... wish we could’ve gotten married earlier. I wish we could have adopted her earlier. I couldn’t imagine the hell she went through.”

“But we did get married earlier, remember?”

“Are you talking about that time I got tipsy and proposed to you on the way to a late-night grocery store run?” I joke. Hunter will never let me live that down.

“And I said yes.” He sounds way too fond. It still melts my heart when he gets that tone of voice.

“And we pretended to honeymoon in the McDonalds parking lot.” I say.

Hunter laughs, giving my hand a squeeze. “And you whispered, ‘one day, we’ll do this for real,’ and I’d never believed anything more in my life.”

“From what I remember, you got this snarky look on your face and said ‘Do you mean making a fool out of yourself in front of a McDonalds?’” I put on my best Hunter impression to get the next part to stick. Asshole smirk and all. “I assure you, that’s quite real’.

“I wish I could go back,” Hunter says, blowing off my snark with a sudden serious tone. “I wish I could tell us back then that we’d be here, today, watching our lovely daughter graduate. I wish I could tell us that it’ll be okay.”

“Don’t make me cry before this has even started.” I joke, giving him a shove.

“I’m dragging you down with me. You know we’re both going to bawl.”

“Hush up, there’s people coming.” I glance over at a couple making their way to a seat within listening range. We quietly look out on the still-empty field. I feel Hunter squeeze my hand. It’s shaking slightly. What a sap.

“I hope she knows how proud we are of her.” he says, his voice cracking.

Year 3, July

I feel guilty about always making Hunter drive, but being in the driver’s seat makes me quickly realize why I always make him do it. If I get into a crash on our anniversary, I’m going to cry and never drive again.

“It feels nice to have time to ourselves. We haven’t gotten this in a while.” Hunter dreamily stares out the window at the highway from his cozy spot in the s – oh, hell, is that person getting into my lane? Of course, it’s a BMW. Stay there, stay the... good, they stopped swerving.

“I’m just surprised to hear that old theater is still open. Do you remember begging your dad up and down to go on your birthday that one year? I spilled the popcorn all over your lap, then cried for like, ten minutes because I thought I ruined your new clothes.”

“As if I could forget. It was a little more than ten minutes.”

“Hey, no need to be an ass about it, I cried a reasonable amount for an eight-year-old.

I flicked the fabled turn signal of doom on; I hated changing lines in the highway, but this BMW was starting to freak me out, and I had to get over soon anyway.

“You’re lucky you’re handsome, or you’d be spending our anniversary on the asphalt.”

“With my bad driving, I don’t think my handsomeness is enough to protect me from that.”

“Daniel, you missed the exit.” Hunter whips around to watch our intended route leave his vision. Of course I did, I should’ve just let him drive.

“Sorry, uh, I think I can get off on the next one and cut through that one outdoor shopping center.”

“... What shopping center?”

“You know, the one with that Vietnamese restaurant and the arcade? Olive liked to play there a lot as a little girl.”

“That was us. That entire mall closed down before she was born. Arcades aren’t really a thing anymore.” What? Oh, shit. Shit, now that he mentions it, that was right. What’s going on with me?

“Sorry.” I don’t know what else to say. I hate seeing such a look of pity from my husband on our anniversary.

“Are you feeling alright? You’ve been mixing things up a lot lately. I’m getting worried about your health.”

I clenched the wheel, my throat starting to tighten. I was fine. I was just getting old, and all the nostalgic talk about the theater made me mix stuff up. “I’m fine. I promise.”

The rest of the ride was spent in awkward silence, with lots of me kicking myself for making my husband worry, especially today. The movie theater should get us back in higher spirits. We’ll be fine.

Year 4, October

I slam the laptop shut with the kind of force that should’ve reasonably broke it. Why the fuck couldn’t I get my head on straight? My thoughts keep wandering, I keep forgetting what I want to write and having to check my notes, and sometimes my notes weren’t enough. I can’t get it finished like this. I pace the kitchen. My head feels like swiss cheese. Is this what getting old is like? Would I have to live the rest of my life like this? This sucks. Not even the Victrola’s smooth music is calming me down; in fact, it’s starting to sound bad again. Like the day we first got it. Was it breaking?

“Daniel? Daniel, what’s wrong?” My pacing is interrupted by Hunter.

"I... can't get this done. I keep getting distracted, I keep forgetting important stuff I wanted to put, my notes aren't making sense to me... It's a mess. I wanted to get this published by the end of the year."

"Come here, dear." Hunter wraps me in a hug, and I don't hesitate to hug back. "Step away from it for a bit. Let's sit and talk, alright?" Hunter guides me to the couch. "We need to visit a doctor. If there's something happening, it's best you get diagnosed right away. It could make a world of difference."

"I know, I'm just scared. I have a feeling I know what they're going to say. My Granddad had Alzheimer's, and you know that's what they're going to jump to, but you never really

know if you have it unless you have an autopsy, so I just keep thinking what if they diagnose me with it, but I don't actually have it, and I spend years and years worrying and watching and... I just... I don't want to put you guys through that."

"Through sickness and health, Daniel. That's what this means."

Year 5, December

"Let's take a run, Dad!" Olivia meanders around the couch expectantly. I didn't bother to move. How long had I been lying here? Minutes? Hours? Not like I have a job or deadlines anymore. My brain is too shit to let me keep up with that. The Christmas lights are giving me a headache. I can't believe it's already December.

"Sorry, hon, I'm not feeling too good."

"The doc says exercise helps out. Come on, we can just take a stroll if you want."

Exercise did help sometimes, but walking around the town just freaked me out. What would I recognize? What would I not recognize? I just want to stay inside and not think about it. Of course, everyone says that's bad for me, too. The less I did, the more this would eat away at me. Hunter had tried to get me to keep writing for the mental stimulation, pick up chess with him to get a new hobby and something to get my brain to keep whirring, but all I wanted to do was just sit on this couch. Olivia was still looking at me.

I can't give up. I couldn't let these be her last memories of me.

I stumbled to a sitting position.

Time to take a walk.

Year 6, November

The most annoying part about this whole thing is how it fluctuates. Some days are so, so much worse than others. You have to live like every day is a bad day, though, because you never know when it'll strike.

It doesn't mean I have to stop living, though. I was getting used to all of th

is, after all!

I'm in my favorite recliner, my favorite record playing, as Olive works on this pie she insisted she had to make for us for Thanksgiving. I'm writing. Writing novels is harder now, for sure, but not impossible. I just have to take it slow and keep good notes. I probably won't publish it, but...

"Hey, Dad, can you come do the mashed potatoes?" Olive shouts jarringly from the kitchen. I'm old, not deaf.

"Yeah, hang on a second!" I call back at a much more reasonable volume. I stretch my fingers and start to type.

There's something I want to write real quick.

Year 6 , ???

How much of yourself has to die until you die? Twisted Theseus's ship, yellow post-it notes strung up around the apartment, dates and locations and directions, pointing to the fridge, how long do I have left? Tick, tick, tick, hard shoes on the floor, time ticking away, it's a small apartment, do you remember where the kitchen is? Pull yourself together. Pull yourself together. You don't want your husband to see you like this. Think about him. Where does he work? When's his birthday? When's his damn birthday? You're an asshole, your brain all swiss cheese, think,

December.

He would always get his birthday and Christmas gifts together when you were kids. December. What day in December? 12

? No that's yours, October 12

. December. December. December. Hang on to that, remember the way the Christmas lights lit up his face? Remember that day you two took Olive out on the town to see the lights? December 18

! Of course! That's it. That's it. It'll be okay.

There's something you need to tell Hunter. Right.

"Meet me on the patio? I want to talk." Where you'd always go, back when you smoked, remember?

"Hm? Of course." Go out there. Get some fresh air. It'll help you clear your head. This is important.

I know it's not

What's the point? What if you just forget it, anyway?

"If I get... really bad, and I can't remember you or Olive, or can't take care of myself, just leave me to a caretaker. You don't have to visit or help me out. I want you to remember me as the man you fell in love with."

"I can't do that, dear."

"Why even visit me? Why do that to yourself? I may not even remember you."

"Because I'll remember you."

this isn't my home I don't think? I don't think?

Nothing's where it's supposed to be.

I'm mixing it up with my childhood home, aren't I?

There's people around me all the time, place to place like a fucking sheep

Rasp the Feeding me

To the

I

Hate it.

It's one of the bad days. Go open the box. Grasp the lid.

"You are Daniel Coldwater.

You are married to Hunter Coldwater.

Your daughter's name is Olivia Coldwater."

Pictures. You remember their

Faces. You remember them. Good sign.

The voice in the back of your head says "how much longer?"

You're 20 again, slow dancing with your boyfriend in the livingroom of your new apartment, cheap takeout on the table, Boxes still unpacked.

Where is he?

Year

Year?

Year

I want my kid. I want my husband. I want my
kid. I want my husband. Where is this place?
Who the hell are these people? I want my kid. I

want my kid. I want my kid. Stop shoving me
around, lady.

Where's my husband?

I'm so lonely.

I'm lonely.

Everything's there. You just can't get to it. Try harder.

Year

Year

Why can't I get into the wheelchair? Always lifting me around, can't they see this is embarrassing? I can
do it on my own. Can't I? Why can't I do it on my own? When will I get better? Close your eyes. Bad day.
Bad day.

December 18 .

December 18

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He grabs my hand. I still know him. God, I still know him. I know the way his kiss feels
against my cheek, the way it feels when he wipes a tear from my eye.

Year

My daughter? How old is she? I wish I wrote it down. It's getting hard to listen. It's getting hard to think.

Year

Year

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hool at 1olled through our texts, spotting a 'I'm out front' text from me earlier in the week. Sent at 1:28. Oh. Geez. Guilt gripped my chest. "I'm so sorry, Olivia. I don't know what got into me, I..."

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"It's okay. We can get this cleaned up. Don't cry. Don't cry."

"It's your new birthday clothes! I'm sorry. I ruined your

Whole birthday by being a clumsy idiot."

Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think.
Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think. Think.

“To my goofballs, By the time you’ve found this, I probably kicked it, huh? I decided I wanted to at least finish one thing before I lost it, so here goes.

Olivia, my sweet Olive, thank you for keeping me young. You are brave, bold, and stronger than you can ever imagine. I’m still going to be watching you from up here, so you better not pull too many shenanigans. A couple are alright, though.

Hunter, you’re so precious to me. I never told you this enough, but you are the most handsome guy I’ve ever met. Meet me in the McDonalds in the afterlife.

I’d tell you guys not to be sad, but every dead person would say that, so I’ll say this, instead. Cry your damn hearts out. When you feel better, I want you guys to do one last thing for me. Put on that record with the dog Olive and I always played, have a toast, and complain about how much of a bastard I was.

Always, always yours,

Daniel