

## JEJUNE LOON

By Jeff Ingber

His fingers sneak under the back of her tailored gold blouse and glide across the fabric of her skin. Accustomed to the journey, he shuts his eyes.

Jenna gently sways, and their breathing blends. "Ben, stop," she moans.

He holds still at the border. "Our last one, before..."

She arches back, caging her desire. "It would jinx us. I can feel that."

One hand immigrates cautiously, as if examining a cobweb. "Feel this instead."

Her eyelids flutter. "I want tomorrow night to be special."

"Every night with you is special."

She pushes him away, and her tender strength titillates him. "I'll make it up to you. Don't I always?"

Ben rises from the compressed sofa cushion and reluctantly tucks his shirttail into his pants. "Your wish, my command. Like it will be for the next fifty years."

Jenna glances at the liquor cabinet and frowns, biting her lip. "Not with our alcohol consumption rate." After a pause, she adds, "Kind of strange that your best man left the rehearsal dinner early."

"Beer before liquor, never been sicker."

"Ethan was giving me weird looks. When I met his stare, he jumped up and scooted out."

“My brother’s been strange since the stork left him on our doorstep.”

Jenna shakes her head emphatically. “It was like he felt sorry for me.”

“I think Ethan feels sorry for himself,” Ben muses.

Jenna smoothens the folds of her blouse, which shimmers above an ink-black pencil skirt. “Whatever.”

She ruffles Ben’s hair, a taunting gesture in view of their no-intimacy truce. “Please go to a decent haircut place tomorrow morning.”

Ben takes Jenna’s hand and delicately strokes his chin with it. “And because I love you so much, honey, I might even get a shave. What time are pictures?”

“At three. Guests arrive at five.”

He grabs a circle of keys from the table and spins the chain close to her face, a retaliatory measure he knows will annoy her. “Your wish, my...”

She stops him with a kiss deep enough to hold him.

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Entering his ground-floor apartment, a private space that soon will be shared, Ben switches on the kitchen light. Jenna’s days-old note lies on the table. In a world of cold computer fonts, her clean, flowing handwritten strokes are a comfort.

*I have dreamt of this day since I first understood that I would have a life beyond my family. I have dreamt of you since my mother told me that my father was the man she was destined to be with, and wished I would find a carbon copy.*

As Ben rereads, the taste of Jenna’s kiss washes through him. His reverie is broken by Emily, the cat, chewing on the corner of his shoe in a demand for fresh food. As Ben steps

toward the cupboard, his phone rings out, "*Come on, come on, come on, now touch me...*" He interrupts Jim Morrison on the first "*babe.*"

"Ethan, you okay?" Ben asks.

"I'm fine." Ethan's whispered response carries the tone of the condemned.

"Quick recovery, eh? Or was it a lady that sent you bolting? You could have brought her to dinner."

Silence. Ben's mind races, then sputters from lack of fuel. "It was Maya," Ethan finally says.

Jenna was not the first woman whose lightning had struck Ben. Who he had bared his dreams to and fancied spending eternity with. There had been another, one with copper hair whose sheen was a pyre. A mouth, a body, an allure that left him at her mercy. But he'd sensed from the start she would never be his. After this proved true, he'd met Jenna, and the dominoes fell in a perfect spiral.

"You kept in touch with her?" Ben's question dribbles out slowly.

"I came to Boston a day early to meet with a food allergy specialist who they say is the best. He's got an office by the seaport. All over the waiting room are these amazing blown-up photos he took of wildlife from around the world. I'm walking around gazing at the pictures when I bang into someone's leg. I look down and it's Maya, grinning at me."

Ben forces himself to sound casual. "How is she?"

"Still beautiful."

A ripple of lust overtakes Ben. He forces himself to recall not her splendor but her scorn.

"Why am I thinking there's a punch line coming I'm not gonna like?"

“You need to meet her. Tonight.”

“Why? You’re letting her manipulate you.” Ben’s tone is sharp. Off-putting even to him.

“What exactly did she say?”

“She asked if you still had feelings for her. I said I didn’t know.”

“Did you tell her I’m getting married tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Ben shakes his head to an unseeing audience. “I can’t board that train again. Certainly not now.”

“Bro, can you please take my word that it’s the right thing to do.”

Ben sighs. “I like my cocoon. Even if it’s a fool’s paradise.”

Ethan turns mute. Ben knows he will lose this game of chicken. “Okay,” Ben vents, “but you better not breathe a word of this to Jenna.”

“I’ll give you the address of her motel suite.”

“Motel suite is an oxymoron.”

“So is butthead.”

Staying put is the only destiny he can control, but Ben’s lost command of that. “You know I could never resist Maya,” Ben blurts out.

“Don’t flatter yourself. She’s not here for that.”

Ben gazes out the window at his modest garden, the only domain he rules. He’s learned many things from puttering in there. For some plants, the setting sun brings closure to their reproductive cycle. For others, nightfall is the cue for reproducing. You watch the leaves unfold,

gape at the flowers, and embrace their cloying fragrance. What if Maya's is sweeter than Jenna's? Ben's yearning mocks his own question. "Why do I think you're savoring this?"

"I'm not. And I'm here for you. Love you, bro."

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Ben climbs the metal stairs to the third floor, pulling himself up the railing in a darkness offset by ancient bulbs worked into a frenzy. Reaching the landing, he turns right, passing a door through which lovemaking sounds permeate. He chortles, recalling that, as teenagers, he and Ethan had invented a TV show in which couples would be interviewed after the act. The joke? Everyone would describe themselves as being in the top one percent of lovers. The sexual Lake Wobegon effect.

Ben stands in front of Room 213. He exhales as if lifting weights, and tells his knuckles to rap softly. Maya opens the door within seconds. She's draped in a white dress with green grapefruit bowls all over it, a pattern a little girl would choose. Her hair is cropped to frame her oval face. Loose strands paint her forehead. The white sclerae of her eyes are streaked with red veins, appearing as evidence of a strained life.

A quivering Ben crosses the chasm into a mildewed room bathed in varying shades of light. He pecks at her cheek, where the skin remains flawless. His memory flows mercilessly back to the day they first met.

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Ben was table-bound in Barnes & Noble with a mug of coffee and *The Collected Works of Emily Dickinson* in front of him. The book was one of his mom's favorites, which she periodically opened with a Christmas-morning sense of anticipation.

While skimming the pages, he became distracted by the full breasts and lips and glowing skin of the woman sitting across from him. Her head was buried in a thick tome with gold-leafed paper. She appeared to be the bookstore type who invariably read with blinders. Yet soon he sensed her scrutiny. Their glances each other loitered.

“Sorry,” she offered. “It’s just that I don’t come across many guys who like poetry.”

“I cannot tell a lie,” he responded. “I’m looking for a quote for a birthday card.”

“For your girlfriend?” She lingered on the last word.

“My mother.”

She tilted her head slightly to one side, exposing a slender neck that begged to be kissed. “I like a man with literary genes.”

“Actually, I take after my father. He only reads sports books.”

“How jejune,” she sniffed.

“Je-what?”

“Insidious.”

Her large eyes, emerald moss, pierced him. “Although I’m sure your dad is wonderful,” she continued. “I don’t mean to cast aspersions.”

Ben considered how far out of his league she was, but then shook off any doubts. “You like Dickinson?” he asked, a bit too eagerly.

“Love her.” She paused, savoring the aroma of conquest. “I so relate to her lesbianism.” He flinched and she chuckled before sticking out her hand. “I’m Maya. Like in Maya Angelou.”

“I’m Ben.” He vacillated, and then took the all-or-nothing chance. “Like in Big Ben.”

He waited for a look of repugnance. No loss. Some waters are too deep to swim in. Instead, she smirked, which smoothed her face deliciously.

Touchdown scored. Going for the two extra points, he searched his memory of verses that had once been lovingly recited to him at bedtime. “Rowing in Eden. Ah, the Sea! Might I but moor—tonight—In thee!”

Maya did not hesitate. “Wild nights, wild nights!” she recited fearlessly. “Were I with thee, wild nights should be our luxury!”

They were inseparable for the next three days, pushing past exhaustion to make up for all the time they hadn’t known the other existed.

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Maya plops onto a two-seater couch. Is this a hint? Hard to tell, as his understanding of her is contaminated. Ben plunks down on a chair near the door.

“How long has it been?” Ben asks.

“Six years.” He would have guessed more. She remains silent, until finally eking out, “Is Emily still alive?”

Was it only the cat for whom she maintained affection? He nods. “In fact,” he replies. “I wrote a poem about her.”

She beams in anticipation.

“The fog comes in on little cat feet.”

“There’s no ‘in.’”

“Are you sure?”

He hears the trademark Maya snort of glee, which had always massaged him. “Are you still teaching?” he asks.

“Yep. Same school. Now it’s third-graders. Ethan said you became a developer?”

“Yes. Now I count from zero.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. How’s your family?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“No.”

“Ethan didn’t tell you why I wanted to meet?”

“Nope.”

She purses her lips, as if suffering others’ ignorance was her lot in life. “Where to start?”

Had he killed their love, or had it simply been worn down by careless monotony? In the months before she left him, he must have missed countless signs, as if her details were like the Earth seen from the stratosphere. “How about telling me you’re sorry?” he spits out.

“Life can be so complicated.”

Ben tilts his head mockingly. “Can we keep things straightforward? And honest?”

She blows out a breath. “Okay, I was a coward for not explaining things then. You deserved better.”

Ben turns away from her, toward a window facing a blaring red motel sign that sends the color of love rising and falling in waves along the opposite wall. Ben realizes that “sorry” isn’t what he’s looking for. He wants to hear that she suffered.

“Something happened to me,” Maya continues, her expression melting into tranquil contemplation. “Two things actually. The combination really threw me.” She leans over to snatch a tissue from a cracked box on the coffee table. Ben watches Maya daintily dab her eyes, her hand showing veins through translucent skin.

“I didn’t schlep here to play guessing games,” he grumbles.

She crushes the tissue, avoiding his eyes. “Have you thought of me?”

His mouth dissolves. In the heady days of falling for Jenna, no one else existed. The world’s history had begun anew. But love’s intoxication fades even with the most special person. Now, Ben realizes, of the two women he has loved deeply, he is drawn to the one who doesn’t love him back.

A question trumps a lie. “Why should I?”

“It was so strange seeing Ethan at the doctor’s office. Because I had been thinking of you. I went to a Red Sox game last month. I liked being at Fenway when I went with you.”

“So why did you go?”

Maya rises and cautiously steps toward Ben, whose heart races. Her melancholy is a beauty beyond description. Reaching his chair, Maya takes Ben’s hand. “Come with me.”

He resists her pull. “Ethan told you I’m getting married. Tomorrow.”

“Yes. I’m glad for you.”

“Are you?”

She lets go of his hand and kneels to be eye level with him. “That question holds many questions. It’s fair for you to ask them and to expect answers. So here goes. I left you because I fell in love with someone else. I didn’t plan to. It just happened.”

He feels his stomach cramp, as if he'd developed food poisoning. "Who?"

"The father of a girl I was tutoring. Whose wife had just left him."

"If you loved me, you couldn't have loved him too," he bellows.

Maya strokes Ben's cheek with the back of her hand, as if to signal that their journey together has resumed. "Not true. I loved you both."

"I thought," he mutters, "I knew everything about you."

"We made no commitments." Her words jackhammer his ears. "I had a right to a private life."

"You had a secret life."

She turns her head away and pouts, a silent scream that six years is enough penance.

"Okay, a secret life."

"The life of a selfish bitch." Ben trembles in spite of the room's warmth, which is thick enough to seem visible.

She wraps her arms – narrow aisles of bliss – around him and lays her head on his shoulder. He allows this until his renewed rage shrugs her off. "Why did you pick him?"

"He was older. He understood me better. He gave me what I thought I needed. Please don't ask me to explain more."

"So how is Mister Wonderful?"

"Gone from the scene a year after I left you."

"Humped and dumped," he cackles. "What else are you here to tell me?"

She straightens. "Do you want to know why I drive ten hours roundtrip every week to see that allergist?"

“I’m so tired of riddles.”

Maya answers by taking Ben’s hand and leading him on paper-thin carpet into the adjoining room, lit only by a nightlight. Amid the shadows, he can make out faint images, as if at the edge of a lake at sunrise. A worn chest of drawers, a table, and a bed. And there, strewn over a rumpled blanket, is a sleeping child.

She turns on the desk lamp to its first level. The spiraling light traces patterns through the fog of darkness to reveal the impression of where Maya had lain, curled up beside the boy, who is drooling saliva. A smudge of dirt decorates a forehead otherwise covered with sheep-thick hair.

Maya sits on the bed and pats a spot next to her son. “Don’t worry. He sleeps like the dead.” As Ben complies, he makes quiet calculations. Not his face. Not his body type.

Maya reads his thoughts. “Noah’s got my hair. And your blue eyes.”

Ben reflects on the haze of their long-ago, vodka-filled nights. Trumpets marking the passing of time blare in his head. Had they ever discussed kid’s names? “Brown is the dominant eye color,” he insists.

“Thanks for the genetics lesson. He’s got your hanging earlobes and your nearsightedness. And your family’s predisposition for food allergies.” She grins. “Not to mention that he likes Beatles songs.”

And baseball at Fenway Park. Ben’s wound deepens and takes shape. “Everybody does.”

“I can send you the DNA results,” she says calmly.

Ben tenses, as if attacked by a blast of air conditioning. “How...”

“I had a hairbrush of yours.”

“How could you not have told me!” he hisses.

“I didn’t want you to feel responsible for him.”

“But now I am, because my seed was more potent than someone else’s? I’m guessing that Lover Boy didn’t leave you part of his fortune, since you’re staying in this palace.”

“I want nothing from you, Ben. But since I ran into Ethan, I thought I should take the opportunity to let you know about Noah.”

“The night before my wedding?”

“It’s pretty lousy timing, I admit.”

Maya stares at the floor tiles before returning her gaze to Ben. In a somber tone, she adds, “Yet another crappy thing I’ve done that you can add to your list.”

Noah stirs and then, sinking back into a pool of sleep, breathes more evenly. Maya strokes his head, her hand appearing as fragile as an egg shell. Where was the confident woman who had picked him up in a bookstore? The one who could leap tall buildings?

“It must be hard,” he whispers. “Being a single mom.”

“Impossible really. But I don’t worry about myself. The hardest part is that I’m afraid I’ll screw him up. That I’ll reflect my own angst on him, and not his beautiful being.”

Ben finds himself involuntarily grasping her hand. Her heat and pressure comfort him. The distance between them is so easily breached.

Ben shakes his head. “I can’t tell Jenna about this. And I can’t not tell her.”

Maya releases his hand. “If you tell her...” Her eyes close momentarily in a burst of transforming resolve. “When you tell her, make sure she understands this was all my fault. And that she can take it from someone who truly knows you that she’s marrying a fine person.”

His heart beats like a trapped bird. "When are you leaving?"

"Planning to go home tomorrow."

They each rise. She touches his shoulder and leaves her hand there. "I'm sorry. Truly sorry. What else can I say?"

Then, as was inevitable, the embers of their love reignite, its searing light burning away judgment. She allows him to pull her into the other room, where he grasps her neck and hair as they enter each other with kisses. Ben reaches across space and time for her top back button.

*I have dreamt of this day...*

Ben's hands freeze.

*I have dreamt of you...*

Ben tears himself away, an instant before he would have stayed until day chased away the night. An instant before all would have been lost.

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Ben sits in the front seat, key in the ignition but unturned. Maya's mist still clings to him. He opens his phone's green messages app, grateful for the nonverbal option.

*I've left*

Dot. Dot. Dot. *How did it go?*

*Remembered how much I loved her. Realized she's the only one for me. Calling off the wedding*

Dot. Dot. Dot. *C'mon. How did it feel?*

He could almost hear Ethan's voice, shrill enough to grind away all fortitude. *R you crazy? I didn't just get a massage*

Dot. Dot. Dot. *Sorry. Thought u needed to see your son before wedding.*

Ben starts up the engine, listening to its troubled rumbling, but stays in park. He types,  
*Can't text anymore about this. Too tired to talk.*

Dot. Dot. Dot. *I think you should invite them to wedding.*

*FU BRO!*

Ben guns the engine, lurching forward at the speed needed to escape the reach of  
Maya's gravity.

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At the altar, Ben studies the dark rings that circle the hazel of Jenna's eyes, punishing himself for never praising their richness. Had he ever noticed the specks in the hazel, or the symmetry of her lush eyebrows? It wasn't his fault. Too much exists in this world to pay attention to.

Jenna detects his daydreaming and subtly frowns. She had refused to make writing vows a joint project. Along with two hundred others, Ben is first hearing the special nature of her love for him.

*"I take you as you are, loving who you are and who you are yet to become."*

*How can this be? You have no idea who I will become. It may be bad...worse than you can imagine.*

*"I will stand by your side and sleep in your arms. Laugh with you, cry with you, and grow with you. Be a joy to your heart and food for your soul."*

*And you will be, my sweet Jenna. But what if I'm water to your fire?*

*"I love you unconditionally and without hesitation."*

*No, only children can be loved unconditionally. Children like my little Noah.*

“Ben,” she says, her words tearing at him, “you are my best friend.”

*I don't need a best friend. I need someone to guide me. Heal me. Absolve me of my sins.*

\*

Wearing khaki pants and a white golf shirt marked with food stains, Noah sits quietly in his seat, stacking a pile of utensils in front of him. His hair, once carefully brushed, is a cluster of tendrils broken free. An untouched salad, arranged like an intricate sea sponge, has been pushed to the side. Touching elbows with him is Maya, wearing a casual V-neck dress that reveals her cleavage. Maya is patiently listening to listen to the chatter of Jenna's work friend, a woman whose face ends in the narrowest of chins, like a Hershey's Kiss.

Ethan waits until the frenzied tones of “Cake by the Ocean” end and the subdued “I Will Always Love You” begins. As he approaches her table, Maya glances up at her rescuer. At “Would you like...” she rises, her smile framed by flaming red lipstick.

Ethan guides her to the middle of the floor. He towers over Maya with a gawky posture that her gracefulness cannot mitigate. Their dance is half glide, half walk, a statement of their mutual ignorance of the craft.

“I'm glad you came,” he offers.

Maya scans the room. “Feels strange being here.”

“Ben told me he wanted everyone who was important to him to be here.”

“I doubt he meant me.”

“Oh, he did. Even if he didn't know it.”

She giggles.

“Ben asked me to tell you something.” Ethan removes a square Post-it paper from his pants pocket and reads dramatically while not breaking stride. “Futile, the winds, to a heart in port.”

Maya tears up, and stumbles over Ethan’s foot.

“I’m so sorry,” he exclaims. “It was meant...” Maya shushes Ethan with a finger to his lips.

Whitney Houston keeps speaking to them: “*Bittersweet memories. That is all I’m taking with me.*” Ethan contemplates an attempt at a twirl, but satisfies himself with a growing ability to guide her with a gentle touch of her waist. He leans toward her ear and is treated to a whiff of fruity perfume.

“How did it feel, seeing Ben get married?”

“I’m happy for him,” she says, hesitantly.

“You don’t seem happy.”

“I have regrets.”

“You feel guilty for dumping him?”

Maya has been with men like Ethan before. The kind who struggle to find their place in the world. “You have no filter, do you? No, I wasn’t the one for your brother. At least I really thought so then. And I won’t beat myself up over that decision.”

“So what do you regret?”

Maya sighs, forced to speak words that should be obvious. “That when Noah falls asleep at night, I’m lonely. That I’ve never loved anyone like Ben loves Jenna. That I don’t seem to be desirable enough for a good man.”

“You’re desirable enough for any man.”

Her response is not the glow of appreciation Ethan expected but, rather, a flash of anger. “Why am I thinking,” she spits out, “that you’ve orchestrated all this for selfish reasons?”

The DJ taps Ethan’s shoulder. “We’re going to have you speak right after this song ends.” Ethan nods without turning.

“Sorry, I’ve got to find my notes. I’ve drunk too much to remember my speech.”

She releases him. “I’m sorry, Ethan. I shouldn’t have accused you of anything. Thanks for the dance.”

She turns toward her table, but Ethan clutches her hand. “Please don’t leave without saying goodbye to me.”

She takes in his tone and the weight of his grip. “I can never be with you, Ethan.”

Those seven words are a mortal wound. “Because I’m a jerk?”

“If anyone is a jerk, it’s me. It’s because it would hurt Ben. I can’t do that to him again.”

Her truth stings Ethan. “I would never hurt my brother,” he utters. “But I know in my heart that together we three can figure it out. Bury the past.”

“No such thing.” She pulls her hand away. “Don’t long for me, Ethan. Don’t long for anyone, or anything.”

“Why not? It makes life interesting.”

“You’re a nice guy. Sweet and genuine. What you need is already inside you.”

Ethan leans in to kiss Maya on the lips. She absorbs him with a softness that brings hope of a next time.

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Crystal wine glass in hand, Ethan stands in front of the orchestra with the entirety of the great room before him. His nerves on fire, he surveys the crowd before focusing on Ben and Jenna. "All my life," he blurts into the microphone as if detached from his voice, "I've looked up to my big brother. For his guidance, his wisdom, and his...porn collection."

Ripples of laughter bolster Ethan's confidence, and his tone and cadence firm up. "But seriously," he continues, "Ben's always been there to show me the way. And now, he's set an example of how not only to find love but to nurture it into an amazingly beautiful relationship. And he's given me and our family his dear Jenna. We could not ask for a better gift. Please join me in congratulating these two lovers wrapped in one cloak, one of passionate intimacy that..." Ethan sneaks a peak toward Maya's table. "That I hope one day to find myself under. I am so happy for you both."

Ethan raises his glass. "L'chaim!"

"L'chaim!" the throng chants back.

The beginning of a Sinatra song echoes as Ethan ambles over to hug Jenna and then Ben, who kisses him on the cheek and murmurs, "You're still an asshole."

When Ethan is out of earshot, Jenna turns to Ben. "Sweet speech."

"Perfect for a Hallmark card."

"Be nice. He wants us to be happy."

Ben kisses her on the nose. "We are."

Jenna's eyes narrow. "Who was that woman Ethan was dancing with? Is she a cousin of yours?"

"No, she's not a relative."

“College friend? I thought I’d met all of them.”

“I met her after college.”

Jenna’s eyebrows slant inward markedly. “Are we playing twenty questions? Why the mystery?”

Ben glances at his wine glass, which regretfully is empty. “She’s Maya.”

Jenna jerks her torso away from him. “Your ex? Why would you...” Her turned-down lips complete the sentence.

Ben’s breath shortens, as if the air around him has evaporated. “It’s a long story. One I can’t go into now. Just trust me.”

“Trust you about what?”

“Trust that I love you. Only you. So deeply. And...”

Jenna searches his face for the truth.

“That I will try to be,” he continues, “that carbon copy of a devoted husband.”

Her response is interrupted by Noah, who has carved a path through a swarm of dancers like a stray leaf floating down a gushing river laden with boulders.

Ben studies Noah, reflexively searching for clues about personality, while Jenna analyzes him for hints of identity. In Noah’s hands is a crystal globe, which he sheepishly raises high. In it, a wedding couple stands under a silver-scrolled arch.

“This is for you,” Noah mumbles.

He thrusts the ball unexpectedly into Jenna’s hands. “My mommy says I should tell you something. You are the most beautiful br...” Noah hesitates, gazing inward to find the word.

“Bride?” Jenna says softly.

“Bride,” he repeats with relief.

After seconds that are an eternity, Jenna’s face breaks into a broad smile. “Thank you and your mommy. What’s your name?”

“Noah.”

“You’re very good-looking. Have we met before, Noah?”

Noah shrugs. Escape is in his thoughts as he swings his body toward his mother, who is standing in front of a table by an exit. Jenna and Maya lock eyes momentarily, as if communicating telepathically, before Jenna calls out to Noah. “Wait!”

Ben is prepared to answer any more questions meant for his boy. But his wife doesn’t allow this.

“Do you like to dance, Noah?”

“I dunno.”

“Would you like to try?”

In spite of Noah’s dubious expression, Jenna reaches for his hand. He accepts it, as if the rule of adults is absolute. Before tears obliterate his vision, Ben watches, marveling at how Jenna tenderly guides his son along a pathless trail and into the heart of the dance floor. Each of their steps is an ode to his life’s glory, and Ben is certain that never in the history of the world has such a sight been beheld.