The Price

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Julia Napoli absently brushed a coil of ebony-colored hair out of her eyes, too absorbed in the letter before her to remove her gaze from the page. Reading over her childish scrawl, she vaguely remembered writing it and noticed the spots where previous teardrops had made the paper bubble and the ink smear."

Cover Page Footnote
Darryl waited for the dancer to finish. After giving the restroom the once-over and making sure that there weren't any surprises to clean up, he exited and headed for the women's room.

After making that sharp click with his time card that meant there would be another Dominds sheet pizza and a bottle of Colt 45 on the table this week, Darryl headed back upstairs for a quick peek in the Windsor Room. The dance was about a half hour from ending when he looked in. Though the music sounded like fingernails scraping across a Blackboard, there was something about the dancing that excited him. The visions before him of writhing flesh to flesh reminded him of the many times he had taken Alice to high school dances back in the '60s. For the next half hour Darryl felt and again as a smile bloomed on his face.

Julia Napoli absently brushed a coil of ebony-colored hair out of her eyes, too absorbed in the letter before her to remove her gaze from the page. Reading over her childish scrawl, she vaguely remembered writing it and noticed the spots where previous teardrops had made the paper bubble and the ink smear.

When she was seventeen the letter had been what she'd needed. The pain of his absence, instead of decreasing with time, had remained, provoked by all the occasions that came and went without his acknowledgement. Breaking the silence between them, she had written, pouring out all the anger and resentment that had been left unsaid. The bitter, hateful words that stared back at her were obviously her attempt to hurt him in return.

It wasn't until the last paragraph that she realized the intention of the letter seemed to change. It was detached, the writing stilled, as if it had been difficult for her. No doubt it had been, she thought, wincing as she read it over again. Despite all the pain she had just bluntly expressed, this paragraph alone dared to suggest the faint hope that they had a future.

There had been no reply to that letter. Julia closed the diary and ran her finger over its cover to remove the dust that had accumulated over the past ten years. The copy of the letter to her father had been the last entry she'd made before leaving for college. She remembered thinking how important it was at the time to copy all the words exactly as she'd written them, almost as if she had known that years later she would need to read them again. Now, sitting on a pile of boxes in the musty attic, she realized the pain had dulled with time but was still there, accompanied by an empty sadness for what would never be.

Dust danced carelessly in the air around her, disturbed from its rest by her methodical search for the diary. The distant memory of its existence had led her to the attic and sent her shuffling through box after box of forgotten love letters, high school yearbooks and football pennants. It contained the final communication between her and her father but offered little explanation for his request. The conversation with her grandmother floated back to her and her fingers tightened around the diary as she remembered the older woman's words: "Your father wants to see you, Julia."

They rarely discussed her father and Julia had been caught off guard by the unexpected remark. She had pictured her grandmother's worried frown at the other end of the phone and knew what the sentence had cost her.

Rose had been trying unsuccessfully for years to renew her son's interest in his only child. After the divorce she had known the restricted visitation rights and the three-hour commute to his former home would be difficult for Michael. But two years later, when Julia was nine, and the infrequent weekend visits stopped, Rose had been shocked. A bitter argument with Michael had ensued and while she had received no explanation for his behavior, she had been forced to accept it. She had never stopped hoping, however, that Michael would have a chance of heart and the two could resume their relationship as father and daughter. It was that hope that had made her the willing messenger between them; years ago delivering Julia's letter and two days ago, Michael's request.

A muffled, high-pitched giggle broke through her thoughts and Julia traveled the length of the attic to stand in front of the window that faced the backyard. The air on the third floor was dry and hot, as if the house had been trying desperately to trap the warmth of summer. The
sealed pane offered little hope of escape into the cool fall day visible through the dirty glass.

Staring at the scene below, she heard another peal of laughter and spotted its small owner in a scattered pile of crinkly, red and orange leaves. The precocious three-year old was obviously delighting in the way her father had invented and waited patiently as he re-nailed the strewn leaves into a tidy clump. Taking an unsteady running start she rushed headlong into the colorful patch, then through it into her father's arms, sending sprays of autumn foliage wafting through the air.

Unconsciously, a smile spread across Julia's face. Seeing the two of them together always managed to take her breath away. Sometimes it surprised her; how much Sam loved the toddler. When Alexandra was born she had been sure Sam wanted a boy, although he had never stated a preference. Still, Lexie was everything Julia could have hoped for in a daughter, and the apple of her father's eye - a beautiful, happy little girl with glossy black hair and a curious nature.

Sam was unable to resist spilling it and Lexie in turn adored her father. Together the three of them formed the family Julia had always wished for, only her role in it had changed.

Turning away from the window, she began to unpack the adolescent souvenirs that littered the dull hardwood floor. Her hands were filthy from repacking the adolescent souvenirs destined for, only the prospect of seeing him again scared the hell out of her. Seeing the two of them together always went as she had expected and she gasped in surprise. Lexie giggled at her mother's reaction and flattened her muddy palm to accommodate the worm's movement.

"It's Albert," she explained with little girl innocence. "He's beautiful, Lexie," Julia humored, resisting the urge to get a napkin and remove Albert from her hand. "Lexie," Sam admonished, hanging up their coats. "I thought I asked you to leave Albert outside?"

"But it's cold outside, Daddy," Lexie explained seriously. "Worms like the cold, honey," Sam improvis ed. "Remember I told you we'd have to keep him in the backyard?"

"But I'll get warm," she argued. "How 'bout the refrigerator?" Both parents concealed smiles and Julia patiently explained that Albert would really prefer the backyard where he could be with his friends.

With a small frown puckering her brow, Lexie reluctantly handed the worm to her father. "Be careful with him, Daddy," she cautioned. "I will, Lex," Sam assured her gently. "Now why don't you run upstairs and wash your face and hands. Then, maybe after dinner we can go outside and visit Albert for a minute before you go to bed." Lexie nodded silently, her pout receding as she turned and ran from the kitchen.

"I can't believe you said she could keep him," Julia scolded softly when Sam returned from outside. "Honey, it's only a worm," he replied with a smile in his voice.

"I know, it's just, first the dog and now this. I hate it when she gets disappointed."

"You mean," Sam stated, his smile fading, "when I disappoint her."

"No, when either one of us does." Sam's anger then drew her away from the stove and pulled her into his arms. "Look," he reasoned gently, "she's upstairs now and she's probably forgotten all about it. And as far as Bear goes, he's always taking off, but he'll be back."

"You're right," Julia conceded, trying to avoid Sam's steady gaze. Lifting her chin with his finger, he bent to kiss her but stopped abruptly.

"Hey," she frowned with concern, "have you been crying?"

"No," Julia answered, the lie coming easily to her lips. Sam, he sat down in a large black chair and extended his arm. In the nearby corner of the couch, with their daughter on her lap, Julia took his hand, knowing it was all she could say, confident it would be enough.

The afternoon spent frolicking in the leaves soon took its toll on her family and Julia leaned back against the cushions, watching them sleep. Sam had sprawled comfortably in the chair, his calm, relaxed features appearing almost boyish. Logically, Sam predicted that the teen would leave Bear at her mother's until they could afford their own home. Julia, however, had stubbornly rejected the idea. Having taken on the responsibility, she refused to dismiss it, arguing that both she and Bear had become attached.

Sam's anger had continued for months to cool, Julia remembered. But in the end she had won and the wedding had been postponed a full year. All for the love of a straggly-looking, sheep-dog mix that now snored noisily on the floor.

Lexie stirred softly on her lap and Julia looked down at the sleeping child, at the tendrils of still-damp hair clinging to her flushed face. Gent­ly smoothing them off her brow, Julia pulled her closer, marveling at her status as a parent and wondering how he could have ever given it up.

Unwilling to disturb the peaceful picture with his father, she had tried repeatedly to force them from her mind, only to have them resurface, haunting her. Her husband's words had struck a nerve, insinuating a need she was reluctant to acknowledge. Trying hard to understand her own feelings, she realized that the fear stemmed, not from the idea of seeing him again, but of losing him again. As the years had passed, her hopes for a reunion had withered, only to be renewed by a single phone call. If he were to turn and walk away and nothing changed, it would have all been for nothing. Still, she con­sidered, it was a small price to pay. He had made an impression on her that the remainder of her life had never been able to erase and now she could no longer deny it.

The next day Julia placed the call to grandmother. Facing the kitchen, she listened to the phone ring, almost hoping Rose wasn't home. The decision was still too fresh to feel right and she found herself wishing she had more time to

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Turning away from the window, she began to repack the adolescent souvenirs that littered the dull hardwood floor. Her hands were filthy from an hour in the attic and smudges of dirt trailed across her cheeks. She had promised her mother an answer for tomorrow.

The prospect of seeing him again scared the hell out of her, she admitted. As a child she had imagined what it would be like and there had been no fear. Back then, if he had embraced her he would have been forgiven. The comfort of her father's arms had been all she had wanted, cer­tain that once he was holding her everything would be all right. At the time, she had still been young enough to believe that her parents could fix any problems.

"Fuck him," she whispered with finality. She didn't need him anymore, she told herself, hadn't needed him for years. There were no more reports cards to sign, boyfriends to meet or aisles to walk down. She no longer believed that a hug could change the world; she had outgrown him. Tossing the diary into the nearest box, Julia head­ed for the stairs to call her family in for dinner.

Reaching the main floor, she heard the door open and felt the fall-scented draft that preceded­ed their entrance into the kitchen. "Hi honey," Sam yelled from the doorway. "I thought you were coming out?"

"Mama, look," Lexie interrupted, running to stand in front of her mother. Her black eyes were wide with excitement and kneeling down to meet them, Julia noticed how long her bangs had got­ten. They hung down past her eyebrows and met the curls of her eyelashes every time she blink­ed. Making a mental note to trim them, she kiss­ed Lexie's cold cheek. The comfort of her daughter's love she didn't need him anymore, she told herself, hadn't been all she needed.

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"But it's cold outside, Daddy," Lexie explained seriously.

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The afternoon spent frolicking in the leaves soon took its toll on her family and Julia leaned back against the cushions, watching them sleep. Sam had sprawled comfortably in the chair, his calm, relaxed features appearing almost boyish and Julia felt again the strong surge of love she was so often unable to express. Warm and drowsy after her bath, Lexie had curled con­testedly in Julia's arms, the sweet baby smell of her scenting the air. Even Bear, having just return­ed after dinner, was stretched lazily on the rug by the door, exhausted from his travels. Looking over at the furry, spotted mongrel, Julia repeated her silent thanks for his safe re­turn. Lexie would have been heartbroken if he hadn't come back, she thought, and recalling Bear's place in their family history, she had to ad­mit that her daughter wouldn't have been the only one.

Having adopted the stray dog the year Sam had proposed, Julia had barely taught him his new name when it seemed apparent she would have to give him up. With the date for their wed­ding set, and they had been unable to find an apartment that would accept a dog of Bear's size. Logically, Sam suggested that they leave Bear at her mother's until they could afford their own home. Julia, however, had stubbornly re­jected the idea. Having taken on the responsibili­ty, she refused to dis­miss it, arguing that both she and Bear had become attached.

Sam's anger lingered, he drew her away from the air. Julia noticed how long her bangs had got­ten. They hung down past her eyebrows and met the curls of her eyelashes every time she blink­ed. Making a mental note to trim them, she kiss­ed Lexie's cold cheek. The comfort of her daughter's love she didn't need him anymore, she told herself, hadn't been all she needed. The fear had never been able to erase and now she could no longer deny it.

The next day Julia placed the call to grand­mother. Facing the kitchen, she listened to the phone ring, almost hoping Rose wasn't home. The decision was still too fresh to feel right and she found herself wishing she had more time to
think about it. Hearing her grandmother's expectant voice answer, she twirled the phone cord tightly around her finger and tried to sound casual.

"Hi Gram."

"Julia, hi!"

"How're you feeling," Julia probed with concern. "You haven't said a word."

"I'm fine, honey. Just fine."

"And how's Grandpa?"

"He's good. He's in the other room watching sports," Rose chuckled softly. "What else?"

Julia laughed nervously at her grandmother's affectionate remark, not knowing what to say and uncomfortably stating the reason for her call. In the thick silence that followed she knew her grandmother was waiting.

"Well," Rose hinted gently, "your father's going to call today, about five I think he said.' She hesitated a few seconds, then continued. "Do you know what you want me to tell him?"

"Yes," Julia admitted evenly. "I'm hoping to go home."

"And your last name," Rose pressed gently. "What will you tell him?"

"I don't know," Julia answered truthfully. "I'm going to see if I've ached here twice to see if I've missed you."

"Hi Jewel," he said, trying to smile.

"Yes, Julia and I agree. Rose responded happily. "And of course your father will be glad. He's called her twice to see if I've heard his remark."

"Yes, I'm so glad," Rose responded warmly. "Hi, she answered, careful to keep the emotion from her voice. In front of her stood the man who had once been her father, yet there was nothing affectionate display or welcoming embrace, only an awkward silence. The realization left Julia cold and sad.

"You've grown up," Michael stated with a tentative smile. "The strong, solemn face he offered was a child's, a woman's, a wife's, a mother's, all put together in one face. As if struggling to relay a message he couldn't put into words.

Examining his features critically, Julia barely recognized him. Suddenly it all seemed so pointless that she wanted to turn and leave. For so long, she realized, she had fooled herself into believing that she knew him, that somehow during that brief period of the childhood she had been able to form an image of him that would last forever. She had known him as only a child could know a parent. It was a shock to realize that she had been wrong. She knew nothing about him. The person before her looked different from the father she remembered and had acted out of character for the man she had believed him to be. He had lost his trust and it would take more than a wishful smile to gain it back. Turning away from him, she stared off into the cloudy horizon, steeling herself not to cry.

Running his fingers through his hair, Michael seemed to sense the change in her. "Do you want to walk for a while?" he asked quietly. She nodded and they started down the beach, the rough water rushing close to their feet, smoothing the sand.

"I knew this wouldn't be easy," Michael managed after they had walked a ways.

Strong gusts of wind lifted his hair away from his face and Julia glanced at him, noting the deep lines that furrowed his brow, the long, confident strides he took as they walked. Things she should have known so well, yet barely remembered.

"I don't know how you feel about seeing me again, Julia," he continued softly. "You're so quiet."

With both hands shoved deeply into the pockets of her jacket, Julia pulled the warm coat tightly around her. "I don't know what to say to you," she answered in a low voice.

It was the truth. she conceded. All the hurtful, angry words she had been prepared to hurl at him had died on her lips. She had been ready to meet him as an adult, a wife, a mother, all the things she had grown to become. Instead, seeing him again she realized none of that made a difference. In his presence she would always be reduced to a shy seven-year-old, wanting to make him love her and hate her for it.

For several awkward minutes neither of them spoke. Leaves from the surrounding roadside had managed to reach the shore and rustled furious­ly across their path. The playful, swirling patterns caught Julia's eye and the tension between them was forgotten as she concentrated on the beauty of the land around her.

This was the beach that he had played on as a child and although the sky was gray with clouds and the air held the smoky scent of fall, instead of campfires, she could still recognize it. Here, she remembered, she had waited, searching the drive to see her father's car and listening to hear his voice call her from the water. It was hard to remember her father waiting, when the hope had faded and when the father she loved had become a memory. It seemed like
think about it. Hearing her grandmother's expectant voice answer, she twirled the phone cord tightly around her finger and tried to sound casual.

"Hi Gram."

"Julia, hi!"

"How're you feeling," Julia probed with concern. "You're not feeling sick, are you?"

"I'm fine, honey. Just fine."

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"He's good. He's in the other room watching sports," Rose chuckled softly. "What else?"

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"Yes," Julia admitted evenly. "I'm hoping to go Gram."

"Oh, Julia, I'm so glad," Rose responded happily. "And of course your father will be glad. He's called her twice to see if I've heard from you. He'll do the right thing," she concluded, "you'll see."

Hearing the confidence in Rose's voice, Julia remained quiet, knowing her grandmother was pleased and hoping that, this time, she wouldn't be disappointed.

* * *

It was a typical autumn day, dawning cold and full of clouds. Yet Julia knew it was a day she would never forget. Examining herself in the mirror for the seventh time, she finally decided on a pair of old faded Levi's and a white silk shirt. She felt nauseous, as if someone had kicked her in the stomach. Forcing herself to swallow the last of her coffee, she grabbed Sam's brown leather jacket and headed for the car.

When she met him at her grandmother's summer cottage on Moon Lake, Largely deserted at the end of the season, it had seemed the perfect place, being half-way between their two homes. Ironically, Julia remembered, it was where she had last seen her father, the summer she was nine. Her gazing eyes met Sam's meaningfully as she kissed Lexi goodbye, squeezing the little body close to her. He knew how nervous she was but had never said a word. He didn't have to. He had said it all the week before.

The long drive passed quickly as Julia tried hard to imagine what they would say to each other. Starting at the road ahead, she wondered briefly what she should call him. Years ago she had called him 'Daddy,' yet that title seemed pitifully inappropriate now.

Pulling into the gravelly dirt driveway, she saw another car there and knew it was his. Her grandparents had remained home, Rose having decided that it would be best if they met alone. Julia let herself sit in the car a few minutes, feeling sick and wanting desperately to leave, to go back to being Sam's wife and Lexi's mother, roles that were familiar, anything but Michael's daughter.

As the top of the gray slate steps that dotted the hill, Julia stepped onto the deck. The red, weathered wood circled the house, giving a view from every direction, the front facing the beach. She and Sam had brought Lexi here last summer and except for the warm presence of her grandparents, Julia noted, the house hadn't changed.

Walking around to the front, she dropped her purse on a rusty lawn chair and paused a moment to lean against the railing. "The long stretch of sand that led to the water was flecked with driftwood and marred by the scattered remains of forgotten campfires. She felt herself relax slightly as she looked out at the lake she had loved so well. It was more green than blue today, whitecaps popping up on its glassy surface. The wind blew coldly against her, making her nose run and bringing color to her cheeks. Deciding she should probably go into the house, Julia took a last glance at the empty shoreline and lost sight, standing near a pile of large rocks that jutted into the water. As if she had felt her presence, he turned to face her and

when their eyes met he raised his hand in greeting.

The sun-bleached front steps seemed to take forever to descend, knowing that he was waiting for her. At the bottom, her shoes sunk into the cold, damp sand and wet sticks broke under her feet. She made herself walk over to him, conscious of every second it took, wanting to remember it. In case she never saw him again.

Reaching him, Julia stopped, unsure what to do and taken back by his appearance. The change in him was strong evidence that the years they had missed could never be reclaimed. The young father she remembered was gone, replaced by a man whose thick, dark hair was mixed with gray. His tanned face and strong jawline were still familiar but lined with age, unlike the man she had known.

"Hi Jewel," he said, trying to smile. The childhood nickname surprised her and she looked up into black eyes that matched Lexi's. "Hi," she answered, careful to keep the emotion from her voice. In front of her stood the man who had once been her father, yet there was no affectionate display or welcoming embrace, only an awkward silence. The realization left Julia cold and sad.

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With both hands shoved deeply into the pockets of her jacket, Julia pulled the warm coat tightly around her. "I don't know what to say to you," she answered in a low voice.

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another life.

Disgusted by her own self-pity, Julia pushed the thought aside and forced her mind back to the present. She was almost surprised to find that Michael was still walking wordlessly beside her, his brows drawn together, deep in thought. Unable to stand the silence any longer, she forced herself to say something, anything, to remind him of her presence. "I almost didn't come." Keeping her eyes down, she continued to watch her feet travel evenly over the sand and waited for his reaction. The long heavy sigh she heard made her glance up, and for a moment, she thought she had hurt him.

"Come on," he said solemnly, taking her by the elbow. "Let's sit down for a minute." Leading her up the shore, Michael gestured to a spot where the remains of a large-draped Maple had embedded itself in the beach.

Seating herself at one end of the dappled, rotted log, facing the water, Julia tried to relax, letting the wind lift her hair off of her face. She had waited years, it seemed, to hear him explain his reaction. The long heavy sigh she heard made her glance up, and for a moment, she thought she had hurt him.

Michael seemed reluctant to sit down. With his hands in the pockets of his jacket, he stood silently next to her, squinting in the sun. "Remember when I taught you...'

"I wish I could have done things differently with you. I wish I had been the problem, but...Jesu..." he whispered roughly, dragging a hand through his hair. "I was your father once...and I tried...he continued hoarsely, "honestly I did. But, it wasn't easy and I wasn't good at it. We were drifting apart...things were happening in your life that I just.. .let you go."

There was a pregnant pause as Julia let his words sink in, feeling all the deeply buried pain and anger rise to the surface. "So that's what I was doing," she asked sharply, her voice breaking, "an incomprehensible, it was too difficult to be my father so you just...turned your back and...and forgot me? Am I supposed to understand that? Is it that easy to--"

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Michael cut off her last remark, knowing she deserved it but unable to watch the pain on her face. "Listen to me," he began, forcing her to look at him. "I was very young, Julia, too young to know what I was giving up...And no," he answered softly, his eyes bright with tears, "it wasn't easy...and I never forgot you.

Facing him, Julia felt her hard, polished reserve melt away. "This isn't about you and Mom," Julia interrupted.

"No, you're right. It's not, it's about me." He paused for what seemed like hours and when he spoke again there was a resignation in his voice that hadn't been there before. "You know, when you get to be my age, Julia, you start to think about all the mistakes you've made in your life, choices you've made, things you could have done differently." He never looked at her as he spoke, his gaze alternating between the sand at his feet and the turbulent waters of the lake. "I wish I had done things differently with you. I wish I could go back...I just...I just couldn't be a weekend father, Julia. I know that doesn't sound like much of an excuse, Lord knows you deserve a better one, but...you've got to know that...I never meant to hurt you."

"I remember," Julia answered softly. Fleeting, ly, images of a tall, smiling man and a small, sun-baked little girl crossed her mind. They were together, walking slowly along the bright summer beach, their heads down as they searched the shore for the flattest, smoothest rocks. She could remember it all, the comfort of his hand wrapped around hers, both of her knees damp and dusted with sand, the feel of a faded floral bathing suit with ruffles on the bottom and the soothing, mingled smells of the lake and coconut suntan lotion. They were glimpses of a childhood that she had long ago stopped regarding as her own.

Intent on his examination of the rock, Michael rubbed it between his fingers, running his thumb along its surface. Julia, watching him, realized that for the moment, he was as absorbed in the memory as she had been. Then, just as suddenly it faded.

"I know I have a lot to explain," Michael whispered after clearing his throat. He put the rock in his pocket, lifting his head to stare out at the water again. "I guess I don't know where to start..." The words came out with a conscious hesitancy, as if he had rehearsed them earlier, only to realize how false they sounded when he repeated them. "Your Mom and I...well, you know..."

"This isn't about you and Mom," Julia interrupted.

"No, you're right. It's not, it's about me." He paused for what seemed like hours and when he spoke again there was a resignation in his voice that hadn't been there before. "You know, when you get to be my age, Julia, you start to think about all the mistakes you've made in your life, choices you've made, things you could have done differently." He never looked at her as he spoke, his gaze alternating between the sand at his feet and the turbulent waters of the lake. "I wish I had done things differently with you. I wish I could go back...I just...I just couldn't be a weekend father, Julia. I know that doesn't sound like much of an excuse, Lord knows you deserve a better one, but...you've got to know that...I never meant to hurt you.

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Listening intently as he spoke, Julia was aware of an overwhelming emptiness. She had expected a dramatic revelation, something that would justify what he had done, as if anything could. The blindingly truthful admission hurt more than any reason he could have given her.

Although he still hadn't looked at her, Julia continued to watch him, his form blurring as the sun's light filtered through the cottage window. He was leaning against the railing watching her, the tip of his cigarette glowing brightly as he drew on it. Funny, she thought, she had forgotten he smoked, had forgotten a lot of things.

Their meeting hadn't turned like she'd imagined, Julia reflected. Instead of being indifferent to him, she had begun studying him, relearning his features, the way he walked and talked, the way he said her name. Somehow along the way, she had found herself hoping that he could see in her the child he had left behind, that maybe this time it wouldn't be quite so easy for him to say goodbye.

He had said it had never been easy, in fact, he had said a lot of things in his quiet, sincere way that Julia had been afraid she would never hear. He wanted to be in her life, to be a grandfather to Lexi, a father-in-law to Sam, someone she could trust and love, and rely on. It was a lot to ask and for a moment part of her had wanted to deny him, as he had denied her years ago, of the luxury of having a father. She had tried to remember every time her birthday had passed without a card from him, every family vacation when his absence had been filled by a stranger. Even those memories had failed to erase the effect he had on her.

Today she had gotten a glimpse of what it had been like to be his daughter and despite the past, she admitted silently, she could never walk away from him, even if staying meant getting hurt. She
another life.

Disgusted by her own self-pity, Julia pushed the thought aside and forced her mind back to the present. She was almost surprised to find that Michael was still walking wordlessly beside her, his brows drawn together, deep in thought. Unable to stand the silence any longer, she forced herself to say something, anything, to remind him of her presence. “I almost didn’t come.” Keeping her eyes down, she continued to watch her feet travel evenly over the sand and waited for his reaction. The long heavy sigh she heard made her glance up, for a moment, she thought she had hurt him.

“Let’s sit down for a minute.” Leading her up the shore, Michael gestured to a spot where the remains of a large-dusted Maple had embedded itself in the beach.

Seating herself at one end of the dune, ruffled log, facing the water, Julia tried to relax, letting the wind lift her hair off of her face. Her eyes down, she continued to watch the remains of a large-dusted Maple had embedded itself in the beach.

“Remember when I taught you to sit?”

“Just a moment,” Michael whispered roughly, dragging a hand through his hair. “I was your father once…and I tried.” He continued hoarsely, “Honestly I did. But, it wasn’t easy and it wasn’t good at it. We were drifting apart…things were happening in your life that for the moment, he was as absorbed in the present. He never looked at her, Julia felt her hard, polished reserve soften a little, the child he had left behind, that maybe this time he’d have to pay for the words that would come out of his mouth. The long heavy sigh she heard made her glance up, for a moment, she thought she had hurt him.

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Facing him, Julia felt her hard, polished reserve crumbling. His last four words had the effect of a physical blow, making it difficult for her to breathe. A choked sob escaped from her throat and she began to cry openly.

Pulling her against him, Michael listened to her daughter’s sobs, knowing it was the price he would have to pay and knowing she was worth it. He searched for the words that would comfort her, as he had done when she was little, when he hadn’t been the problem, but the solution.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered, wrapping her in his arms, the tears streamed freely down Michael’s face. “I’m sorry, Julia,” he gasped. “God, I am so sorry…we have so much to talk about.”

As he wrapped her in his arms, the tears streamed freely down Michael’s face. “I’m sorry, Julia,” he gasped. “God, I am so sorry…we have so much to talk about.”

In the shelter of her father’s embrace, Julia let the pain come. Michael’s jacket grew wet with tears, still he held her. This was what she had always wanted. It couldn’t erase the pain or re-place the memories, but there was a part of her that had never outgrown him.

Rocking her gently back and forth, Michael absorbed the brunt of the cold wind, his face buried in his daughter’s hair.

It was dark when Julia finally walked back down the driveway. The gravel crunched under her feet, breaking the silence that enveloped the Deserted summer cottages along the lake.

As she sat in her car letting the engine warm up, she could see him standing on the deck, his form silhouetted by the dim light filtering through the cottage window. He was leaning against the railing watching her, the tip of his cigarette glowing brightly as he drew on it. Funnily, she thought, she had forgotten he smoked, had forgotten a lot of things.

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Today she had gotten a glimpse of what it had said what it had been like to be his daughter and despite the past, she admitted silently, she could never walk away from him, even if staying meant getting hurt. She
had always known the price but had never thought it worth paying. Now, she knew differently. Maybe it was too late for them, maybe he would hurt her again, but he was her father...at any price.

MICHAEL E. MCGRAW

The Flight

It happened
This year on March 8th
Like the distant bells of a Skippy Ice Cream truck
And I
(Enlightened)
Scattered
As if I were scattering for change
But the coins I found were my eyes
Like two silver dollars
Waiting for a chance
Gazing into the blue
Ready
To taste the cool fresh flavor
Of the flight.