

3-7-2016

A Single Regret

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A SINGLE REGRET

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jason Ehlen

2016

To: **Dean Michael R. Heithaus** choose the name of dean of your college/school
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This thesis, written by Jason Ehlen, and entitled A Single Regret, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

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Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A SINGLE REGRET

by

Jason Ehlen

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

A SINGLE REGRET is a murder mystery set on the post Hurricane Sandy Jersey shore.

At thirteen, Jimmy Miller killed his father in retribution for murdering his mother. Twenty years later, he returns home because of the murder of his childhood best friend, Dillon Abernathy. Jimmy learns that Gavin, a classmate turned junkie, is charged with murdering Dillon, a scenario Jimmy doesn't find plausible, so he decides to pursue leads the police won't.

Told in first person past tense, A SINGLE REGRET follows Jimmy as he unearths the secrets behind his friend's death and also learns the truth behind the destruction of his own family. As in Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River*, the novel examines how childhood ties shape perceptions in ways that are both true and false. Jimmy is forced to evaluate his own sense of bitterness and learn how to forgive his own mistakes and those of others.

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Prologue

You'd think the day your mother was killed would be branded into your memory. That every waking second would be ready to be pulled back for introspection, review. But I only remember bits and pieces.

Seventh grade. Walking home from school with Dillon. Barren brown trees beginning to turn green, early spring on the Jersey shore. Dillon smiling as he told me some story, ducking his face as a gust of wind came off the ocean, his brown hair falling across his forehead.

Walking up the white stone driveway to my house. Stopping to turn and wave as Harry Doyle, our neighbor, tooted the horn of his oversized gray pickup and drove past, a weathered Yankees cap perched on his head.

Opening the front door. The smile on my mother's face. The redness of her eyes, as if she'd been crying. I must have asked her what was wrong; I remember that she was crying, but I don't remember what she said. I don't even remember asking. But I must have. She would have told me not to worry, but I always did when it came to her, worry.

Me following my mother as she went from room to room. Her picking up a black and white picture of her mother standing next to a tree, her mother's left arm up, palm touching the trunk. Her wiping the dust off the table before carefully placing the picture at the center. Me turning the picture so it was off kilter. Her rolling her eyes, reaching over, ruffling and re-straightening my hair. Telling me to go clean my room. Fingering the silver cross that hung around her neck, her Christmas gift from me.

Me running my finger along a chest-high glass box perched on top of four stainless steel legs. Inside, two shelves. The bottom shelf had a black and white picture of

my father's parents sitting in the front seat of a convertible. Besides that, a picture of my mother holding me on the day that I was born. The top shelf had a Reggie Jackson autographed baseball and a picture of my father standing outside a courthouse. He liked to compare himself to Reggie Jackson. Always said that real men showed up in crunch time, like Mr. October. That was how my father viewed himself, the criminal defense attorney version of Mr. October.

Her asking me what I want for dinner. Claiming there's no need to be fancy if it's just the two of us. Me telling her that she just didn't want to do the dishes. Eating the kitchen table. Pizza on paper plates.

At least that's what I thought happened that night. It can't be far from the truth. It's something that happened many times on the days that my father worked late, but that night, I just don't remember what we ate or what we talked about. Over the years, I've tried to pull it out bit by bit, but the memory just gets further away and cloudier and cloudier, then an image will come, my mother smiling at me, long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, a piece of pizza bent in half in her hand, the cheese dripping down from the point, hanging there waiting to fall, and I tell myself that's it, that's what happened, but I know deep inside that it isn't.

I don't remember the last moments that I spent with my mother at all.

When I opened my eyes, silence. The darkness of my room. The familiar shadows of my bookshelf, my television, my rolling chair. I rolled over and closed my eyes again. Burrowed down into my pillow.

Then it started.

The yelling.

At first, I thought it was a normal evening. My father home late, stressed from work and taking it out on my mother over some inadequacy. Some forgotten chore. Something that would blow over in a few minutes, leaving a smoldering anger that lingered for days and came out in overly sharp responses to simple daily requests.

But that night was different.

My mother was the one yelling.

I got out of bed and walked to the door. Opened it and stood in the doorway. Listened to them go back and forth. Listened to her call him names: liar, cheat, whoremongerer. Heard my father's defense, at first cautious and plaintive. The typical response of one caught red-handed, but as they argued, I heard the danger gathering in his tone.

I had spent my youth playing on the edge of "too far" with my father, of searching for the line between a tongue lashing and a smack, and I heard the rage build in the diction, the undertone, the clipped answers. I knew that I should go down. Intervene. Give him an outlet, a focus, a recess. But I didn't.

I didn't do anything.

My mother's voice, high pitched, angrier than I had ever heard, telling my father that he wasn't a real man. A poor excuse. A well-dressed piece of shit. Then my father was yelling, so loud, so angry, more guttural screams than words.

Tussling and panting.

I knew that I should run downstairs. Being there would make them stop.

A loud smack.

“Don’t touch me!” my mother yelled.

Ripping fabric.

Heavy footsteps.

A crash.

The cracking of glass.

The thud of a body hitting the floor.

“Mary?” my father said. “Mary?”

I stood there waiting for my mother to reply. For my father to say anything other than her name, but he didn’t, and she didn’t. Maybe I stood there for a minute. Maybe five. I don’t know. I just know that I didn’t go soon enough.

The first thing I saw was my mother on the floor. My father’s trophy case spilled across her body, a piece of glass sticking out of her arm. Blood everywhere. On the floor. On the case. Dripping off of the semi-clutched fingers of her hand.

My father was looking around. Analyzing the situation. Periodically shaking his head. Going back to surveying the room. I’d seen that look on him before when he was preparing for a trial. Case file in front of him. Sitting at the dining room table. Red wine glass in hand. Staring at the wall, lips moving soundlessly.

He was figuring out a defense.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Go back to your room,” my father said.

“What did you do?”

“I said go back to your room!”

I went back up the stairs, but I didn’t go back to my room. I went into their room

and picked up the phone on the nightstand and dialed 911. I was still there in his room holding the phone when my father came upstairs, a manila envelope in his hand.

“I told you to go to your room,” he said.

I sat there. Mute. The receiver in my hand.

“Did you call 911?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

He told me that was fine, but he wanted me to go to my room now.

I stood and walked past him, but as I left, I stopped and peeked around the corner and watched him slide open the nightstand and put the manila envelope in the top drawer, the one where he kept important papers.

Knocking started at the door.

From the window, I watched the ambulance pull up the driveway, the men run out, and my mother taken away, a white sheet over her body. I watched the police cars and the firemen. It seemed like everyone who worked for the town was on my front lawn, and I went and sat at the top of the stairs and I listened to my father tell Officer Peay that my mother had attacked him. How they had been arguing over something insignificant and it had escalated into something bigger and how my father had just been defending himself and how my mother had come at him with a knife and in the process of trying to get away, of trying to defend himself, he had shoved my mother who had fallen into the trophy case. A terrible accident, he said.

“Did your son see any of this?” Officer Peay asked.

“He was upstairs asleep,” my father said.