

Fly Away Home (Excerpt)

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

FLY AWAY HOME (EXCERPT)

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Written by Dave Cenker.

For all those wanderers in pursuit of their dream. Keep going.

*Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled
by, and that has made all the difference.*

~ Robert Frost ~

1

I swirl the glass of white wine and watch tiny bits of cork travel in circles on the surface. It requires too much effort to dig out those fragmented pieces. It's the lie I tell myself, even if my damaged heart welcomes the unorthodox companionship.

A person shouldn't feel such anxiety when visiting her childhood home. I suppose I'm not like most thirty-eight-year-old women. I am alone. Raised by a single mother and born out of wedlock, I know nothing about my father. Fierce resistance met any inquiry into his whereabouts.

The physical bruises disappeared with time. It's the deeper emotional scars that remain a mainstay in my life. Doctors insist the cause of my mother's death was a heart attack. I suspect excessive alcohol consumption played a significant role in her demise. The liquor cabinet disguised as a side table was like Pandora's box. Whenever I heard the latch close on that cupboard door, it triggered an impulsive response. I prepared for what would soon follow. Sometimes it was courtesy of a leather belt. If I was unlucky, it came from the backside of a right hand that should have stroked my cheek, not slapped it.

I'm sorry for your loss, Claire. Time will heal you. That's the recurring message I heard from neighbors and guests after the funeral service. I wasn't the least bit sorry, nor was time healing a single thing. I put on a plausible facade, but resentment overpowered my pretense of grieving. Ignoring the coldhearted thoughts seething inside me was impossible, but I need not pretend any longer.

It's now only me, a glass of wine, and a houseful of belongings to empty. If only I could dispose of these painful and repressed memories with the same ease.

2

Why is it so hot in here? I suspect stress plays a role, alongside effects from the alcohol I shouldn't be drinking. I'm hypocritical for partaking in libations at this moment, but I have no one here to chastise me.

As I stare at the ceiling, silence surrounds me. I push aside the dependent memories of voiceless pleas from years ago. Instead, I focus on a problem that's fixable: a lack of airflow coming from the vent above me.

The overhead attic door in the hallway is easier to reach as a grown woman. My bedroom chair isn't necessary. I am at ease climbing the stairs. Out of habit I conceal the creaks with each footstep. This was my shelter, a hiding place my mother never discovered because I used it with such discreet care. My destination today is the fuse box, to resolve one problem and hide from many others.

The red flashlight rests in the same spot. Turning it on, I watch a familiar stream of amber light spill from it. After I allow the dust particles floating before me to settle, my emotions do the same. I navigate the maze of boxes and furniture pieces with surprising ease. Swinging open the metal door, I trace my finger along the column of switches, each flipped to the left, save for one. Kicking the offending switch back in line with the others, I hear the air handler come to life outside.

There is so much awaiting me downstairs, packing up the remnants of a life I'd rather forget. But a growing curiosity beckons me. I'm sure it's no longer there, but I still need to check. I round the pile of cardboard boxes stacked three high, once an indestructible fortress to my younger self. I scoff at the naïveté of youth. Now they're nothing more than tattered containers. They hold useless relics from a mother who never loved me.

I catch sight of what I hoped to find. All the negativity inside me melts away, replaced by a warm smile I can't suppress. I run my hand over the shoebox that used to hold my favorite Converse shoes. Opening the lid, I see familiar slips of different colored paper. On autopilot, I walk

to the only window and place a sequence of Post-it notes in the frame, for old time's sake. It was a secret language, spoken in hues, not words. Each pattern held a unique message. Only one other individual understood that code, the boy in the house across the yard.

#

Over time, Dillon had become my best friend. Our relationship was born out of necessity and convenience. I needed someone to lean on when consumed by feelings of fear and rejection. He was the closest person willing to meet my needs. In return, he benefited from my ability to understand classic literature.

Dillon had three older sisters, so he possessed a natural comfort around girls. As for me? I escaped to one of two places when I had the opportunity—my attic or the library. There were always plenty of books in both locations. As a voracious reader, I consumed the titles on our school's assigned reading list before anyone else. So ours was a symbiotic relationship. We both had something valuable to offer the other and were both eager to share it.

Near the end of each summer, we'd find ourselves seated in the back corner of Peppi's with a pepperoni pizza between us. We discussed the merits of Steinbeck, Austen, Twain, and Fitzgerald. In the beginning, it was a chore for Dillon to complete the assignments. By senior year, though, he was a much stronger student, and our time together had developed into something more. I remember it with such clarity. And poignancy.

"Come over here. Look at this." I slid over and motioned for him to sit beside me in the booth.

Pushing our greasy pizza plates to the side, he sidled up next to me as I creased the book's spine. I began reciting Robert Frost's poem: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . ."

After each line, I glanced up at him, deepening emotion etched into his facial features. Something was different. We had started communicat-

ing through unspoken words nestled between each breath. We were writing a story together, filled with excitement, uncertainty, joy, and travel. On roads forsaken by others in my life.

“I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” I finished the poem, swallowed the lump in my throat, and prepared to share my interpretation of the work.

“You can see . . .” I began my sentence, not wanting to look up and meet his gaze. An unknown fear and anxiety consumed me. When my eyes finally found Dillon’s, it took only a moment for his to lock with mine. He connected with something elemental in the depths of my soul. It was more intimate than any physical connection. I welcomed and feared it in the same breath. Each new inhalation became shallower than the one before it. Dillon leaned in, closing the space between us with deliberate intentions. We were so absorbed in each other’s thoughts. Our eyelids closed and lips joined with impulsive certainty. An electricity coursed through me, more intense than any kiss in my young life.

That euphoric feeling made my ensuing choice unimaginable.

I pushed him away. The heartbroken look on his face crippled me. I didn’t know why I’d done it or what to do next. My feeble attempt to analyze Frost’s poetic form replaced the awkward silence between us.

We never returned to that pizza shop. That dreamlike-turned-distressing moment became a blemish in our relationship. The color-encoded messages subsided. We remained best friends through times of sadness and joy. But there had been an invisible thread delicately intertwined between our souls, and I had severed that connection after pulling away from our first, and only, kiss.

#

I wonder where he is now. My brief stroll down memory lane creates a longing desire for a fresh start. I pick up the shoebox full of childhood memories. It contains only pieces of paper, but it feels heavier, as if it holds more weight than it did a few moments ago.

With it nestled under my arm, I retreat down the attic stairs and sink into the cushion on the living room couch. I grab hold of my wine-glass, gazing into the half-empty goblet. A strand of wavy brunette hair drifts into my peripheral vision. Tucking it behind my ear, I refocus on what still rests in that amber liquid. Those small bits of cork remain, but they're now motionless, as if inviting their retrieval. It might not be so difficult to remove those fragments. While I ponder the possibility, my thoughts wander elsewhere.

#

I haven't approached this doorstep in over two decades. Sensing the countless impressions from my knuckles, I knock on the wooden door. The sound triggers pleasant memories.

As it swings open, I offer a tentative greeting. "Hi, Mrs. Darby. You might not remember me . . ." I notice moisture in the corner of her eye before she embraces me in a comforting hug.

"Claire." She speaks in an endearing tone, pushing me to arm's length. "You look beautiful, love. You haven't changed a bit. I still see that young girl in your eyes."

"You too." I smile. It might be a small white lie. Mrs. Darby is showing her age, but it's the only proper thing to say. She helped me through such a difficult stretch of childhood.

"Come in, please. I have a kettle for tea on the stove." Her familiar kitchen hasn't changed in twenty years. I fondly recall her serving warm cookies and milk for Dillon and me at the same table. "I'm so sorry I didn't make it to your mother's funeral. What she did, how she treated you . . ."

"Don't worry. It's okay."

"I never understood how someone could . . . well, you know. It was wrong."

"Please, think nothing of it. I understand." I rest my hand atop the one belonging to my true mother and look deep into her eyes. Scared to

hear the answer, I still need to ask the question. “Mrs. Darby, can you tell me where Dillon is these days?”

Selfishly, I fear she will tell me about a happy marriage, a gorgeous wife, three kids, and a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. And a dog. I can’t forget the canine part of my forlorn dream. It was the fairy-tale ending I missed out on due to my lack of courage.

Tears flow unfiltered from Mrs. Darby’s eyes. “Oh, Claire.”

“Mrs. Darby? What is it? Are you okay?” A hollow and foreboding desperation washes over me.

“My baby Dillon. He died in a car accident. Three years ago. He was only thirty-five. Too young.” She fights through the sobs between each fragmented sentence. The grieving mom is answering my question, but she speaks as much to herself as she does to me.

I cover my mouth in disbelief, sorrowful tears mirroring those from Mrs. Darby. “I’m so sorry.” The choking pain in those four syllables carries more empathy than the words themselves ever could.

“I know, honey. It’s been so difficult, so painful. It gets better, but it never seems to go away.” I understood all too well. There is too much pain and loss running rampant in both our lives, so I redirect her toward happy memories of Dillon. As afternoon turns to evening, our tears of sorrow transform into smiles and giggles. The shared pot of chamomile tea and pleasant reminiscences are therapeutic for both of us.

Her small cuckoo clock announces the nine o’clock hour. It’s a reminder of the daunting task awaiting me next door. “I have to go, but it has been so nice to see you, Mrs. Darby. You’ve always known what I need. Thank you so very much.”

As we prepare to part ways in her foyer, Mrs. Darby’s wrinkles press together as she squints at me. She looks deep into my eyes and pats my arm. “You wait here, dear. I have something for you.”

I watch her retreat up the stairs, one slow step at a time. She returns a few moments later with a book in her hands. “For you,” she says, passing it to me. “I think he meant for you to have this.”

The title on the cover reads *Homecoming*. I'm not sure what to make of this unexpected gift until my gaze falls upon the author's name. Dillon Darby.

"You made quite an impression on him, you know. He wouldn't have written this without your encouragement. You take care now, dear." She ushers me outside. It's not because she wants me to leave. She senses my anxious desire. To seek out a private place where I might devour this tangible memory of my kindred soul.

I slip through the front door, greeted by a blast of cool air, and make my way toward the attic stairs once more. It isn't necessary to consume this book in the privacy of my sanctuary, but it feels right.

Nestling into the corner of my cardboard fortress, I flip on the flashlight and pull my knees close. Opening the back cover, I find a photograph of Dillon and his brief author bio, but it's not enough. I want and need more. Running my index finger over his picture, I caress the author's face with a delicate touch. How I wish I'd had the courage to do so at that pizza parlor so many years ago. How different might my life have been?

I stare at the book, admiring everything connected to this man. He struggled through literature as a high school student. Now he is a published author. I smile, cherishing how Dillon had always been so perseverant.

With a million other things to do, I focus on the most important one in this moment. I open the novel, flip past the first blank page, and arrive at his opening words.

The dedication read: *For Claire, the Road Not Taken*.

How do I interpret this message? Was it a simple reminiscence of a time long ago? A memorable encounter in the pizza parlor that proved to be a turning point in his life as an author? It might be a safe interpretation, but I yearn for something more. Even if it's painful to accept, I ache to be the road not taken. I want to be connected with Dillon on a deeper level. I can only hope his story will bring me peace and offer a response to the burning questions in my heart.

My answer arrives before I reach his opening line in the first chapter. There are no words, only three Post-it notes positioned across the width of the page. The trio of colors sends a message never shared in our secret language. Red, yellow, blue: *I love you*.

I will read Dillon's story in its entirety one day, just not now. Removing each slip of paper from the book, I get to my knees. I place each one in succession along the pane of glass in the attic window. It's a reminder to the boy somewhere across the way. Even though it may have taken a while, I might finally understand what it means to be home.

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Purchase Fly Away Home¹ from all major retailers and continue reading the first volume in my Pigeon Grove Series.

1. <http://www.davecenker.com/fly-away-home>

About the Author



DAVE CENKER is a romantic fiction author, writing stories infused with a kaleidoscope of emotions that nurture the heart while exploring elements of the human condition. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with readers through a shared emotional chord and the enchanted sentiments of a timeless love story.

Like coffee provides caffeine for the physical body, Dave's stories supply caffeine for the soul. He lives in the Sunshine State with his beautiful wife, amazing son, and three cats.

Visit him online at www.davecenker.com¹

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