The Barbecue

A 2-3 hour LARP for 10 players (5 male characters, 5 female characters) with 1 or 2 GMs

It's a quiet, sunny summer day in the suburbs. The monthly neighborhood barbecue (and pie contest) will be hosted by the Kessenich family this Sunday. The Rossi and Lee family will be in attendance as usual, along with the Kessenich's new tenant Brittany.

This is a character-driven drama, lightly plotted with no magic or supernatural elements. The setting is contemporary and realistic. Content may include abandonment, abortion, adultery, aging, crime, divorce, drug use, poverty, separation, serious illness, unexpected pregnancy, internalized homophobia and internalized sexism. Pie may be represented by actual pie.

GM-sanctioned mayhem only.

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The Barbecue was facilitated by Jennifer Diewald for the 2012 New England LARP Conference (NELCO), Build Your Own Game seminar. The game was collaboratively written over the course of 24 hours, and has since been revised and re-edited following feedback from several runs. For more information about NELCO or other completed Build Your Own Game projects, please visit: http://www.interactiveliterature.org .

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Introduction

The Barbecue is a game which could benefit from careful casting, some cooking, and attention during the run.

A few things to be particularly aware of:

- The setting is contemporary and in the suburbs of the United States. The timeliness and controversial nature of themes of this game may be close – possibly too close – for some players. While the authors' intentions are to challenge, we do not wish to cause harm nor induce players to participate unwillingly in difficult situations. Care should be taken in casting players to roles, and some suggestions on what to watch out for have been provided below. That said, we believe you know your local community and local players better than the authors and, therefore, can and ought to proceed accordingly with due caution.

- This game runs better with actual food – such as pies for the pie contest. Regular American backyard party food would also work – chips, dip, crackers, and such. A setup that simulates a grill (if not an actual grill) would be helpful for Fred Kessenich's role as a cook and a host. Players may opt bring their allergies or food preferences into their characters. As GMs, you may wish to ask if they have any particularly dangerous allergies (e.g. can't be in the same room as shelled peanuts) to avoid problems. In indoor settings, such as hotels, we have either gone through the hotel to get food for the run, or explained the items as props – albeit edible ones. Without social interaction via food and the unwritten courtesies and customs surrounding them, there's less to fill player downtime and rest from play on the heavier topics. The setting of a backyard barbecue also becomes that much less contrived.

- Otherwise, other plot-relevant props in this game can be, or are already, represented by paper item cards as indicated in the appropriate character sheets and the Printing Guide.

  Four in particular could use additional attention: the Old Photo, the Bag of Pills, the Cell Phone, and Tax Forms.

  Text on the back of the Old Photo is given in David Rossi's character sheet. If you have time and inclination to work out some sort of image for the front of the photo, based off the younger versions of the players you have cast in those roles, more power to you. (We've almost, but never quite, managed to be so organized for our prior runs). We have used generic photos found on the web in the past, or just left the text on an index card.

  The Bag of Pills, in Fred Kessenich's character sheet, is best represented by a Ziploc or sandwich bag of candy (Tic Tacs or Smarties work). Players of Fred in the past have enjoyed "accidentally" dropping the bag to see others' reaction; a very Fred thing to do.

  Next, there is a plot-relevant series of Cell Phone calls (usually 2, sometimes 3) scheduled to Fred Kessenich during the course of the game. Either using the player's cell, or providing

one, would be helpful for other players' to be annoyed that's taking a call or help in their attempts to overhear. Although, of course, taking the player to side and roleplaying the call would work, too.

Finally, Margaret Lee has some tax forms she needs signed. Anything appropriate can be used; if checked, make sure players understand that the request is legitimate (and is not an apparently fraudulent or criminal request).

Most of the authors are available if you have any comments or questions. If you would like to find one or more of us, we are most easily found through NEIL, the New England Interactive Literature LARP organization, at http://www.interactiveliterature.org .

Casting Suggestions

Casting players to roles in the game involves asking them what they want, and then assigning them the characters closest to what they want. While familiarity with the characters in the game will help cast, here is a rough guide to which character deals more with particular topics listed in the content listing in the game's blurb:

abandonment – Paul Rossi and the Rossi family. Nathan Lee and Margaret Lee to a lesser extent. Fred Kessenich, to the extent he may counsel Paul on the topic.

abortion – Jennifer Kessenich and Brittany Oswald. The other Kesseniches to a lesser extent, if they find out. (Note that the game works whether Jennifer decides to keep the baby or not.) Nathan and Paul, to the extent that they need or wish to help Jennifer figure things out.

adultery – Charles Lee and Brittany Oswald. Margaret Lee to the extent that she's Charles' wife.

aging – Anthony Rossi, and Eleanor Rossi. The younger generation (Jennifer, Nathan, and Paul) deals with these matters, although from the perspective of growing into adulthood.

crime – Margaret Lee, as she is the mob's accountant. Anthony Rossi and Samantha Kessenich, due to the drug dealing. Brittany Oswald, as law enforcement.

divorce – Charles and Margaret Lee, so Nathan as well. It also may be a thread in the air for Fred and Jennifer Kessenich. Brittany, indirectly, as a possible cause.

drug use – Anthony Rossi and Samantha Kessenich. Eleanor may likely have to deal with this via Anthony.

poverty – Fred Kessenich and Jennifer Kessenich. Likely Charles Lee. Possibly the younger generation as well.

separation – Samantha Kessenich, as she is leaving for college soon.

serious illness – Note we do not call this "fatal illness" as it would give away the situation. Charles Lee. Margaret Lee and Nathan Lee will have to deal with this in a major way as well. While Anthony Rossi (and Eleanor via Anthony) has to deal with it as well, it has a better prognosis.

unexpected pregnancy – Note we do not call this "teenage pregnancy" as it would give away the situation. Samantha Kessenich and Nathan Lee, their relatives as a step away from the situation. Brittany Oswald also had an unexpected pregnancy, which resulted in David Rossi.

internalized homophobia – Charles Lee/Nathan Lee, although David Rossi's internalized homophobia may be more relevant. Fred Kessenich's book, and advice to David, attempts to address this topic.

internalized sexism – this is widespread in the game at a low level, with no one holding to it strongly (although it is why Anthony and Eleanor do not automatically think of Jennifer Kessenich as a successor to the family business).

The next section provides a sample questionnaire we have used to positive affect with people we do not know. Any serious attempt to assign players to roles, following dissemination of what the game is about, ought to be helpful in guiding your casting for this game.

Sample Casting Questionnaire

Name:
Age:
Age range you would feel comfortable playing (if there is a particular age range you want to play, note that as well – this larp ranges from teen to grandparents):
Gender:
Gender/s you would feel comfortable playing (if you'd prefer not to be cross-cast, but wouldn't mind being cross-cast let me know that too):

This game has some mature issues. Rank the following from 0-5 with 0 being I'd be uncomfortable with this and 5 being please cast me as a character involved with this.
Lying?
Stealing?
Being involved in the mafia?
Pregnancy?
As a teenager?
As an older adult?
Causing another to be in that situation?
Gay?
Straight?
Bi?
Asexual?
In the closet?
Out of the closet?
Selling drugs?
Buying drugs?
Addiction to drugs?
Alcoholism?
Failing out of school?
Cheating on your spouse?
Cheating has been thought of, but hasn't happened yet?

Having your spouse cheat on you?
Giving your kid up for adoption?
Having been adopted?
Having financial issues?
Death?
Of a son/daughter?
Of a parent?
Of a spouse?
Cancer?

If you're uncomfortable playing in a game with any of the above, let me know which (as not *all* are actually in the game). **If you want to hear about how the idea was implemented in this game I can let you know. I also wouldn't be offended if you decide this isn't the game you.**

Tell me about characters you've enjoyed playing in the past and what you enjoyed about them.

What characters have you NOT enjoyed in the past, and why.

Printing Guide

The Barbecue has 10 player characters, and some number of GMs. Here is how you pack the game.

Assemble the GM copies

Print out a copy of this document for each GM. Single-sided is probably better, so you can pull out and hand to players if needed. If you can three-hold punch, and put into a binder, it might also help.

Assemble the Individual Character copies

We've used manila envelopes, with the character names marked in front, to hold papers and plots for day of distribution. Anything equivalent would work just as well.

Print:
Neighborhood Bluesheet & Rules Bluesheet (10 copies)
Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet (6 copies)
An Old Photo (1 copy)
Mortgage Letter (1 copy)
Character sheets (1 copy), staple each

Make:
Bag of pills (1 copy)
Tax Forms (1 copy)

Note:
Cell phone number or cell phone call plan for Fred Kessenich

Assemble:
Everyone gets a copy of the Neighborhood & Rules Bluesheet.
Everyone gets a copy of their own character sheet

Additionally, add:
Anthony Rossi: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet
David Rossi: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet, an Old Photo
Eleanor Rossi: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet
Fred Kessenich: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet, Bag of Pills, Cell Phone
Jennifer Kessenich: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet, Mortgage Letter
Margaret Lee: Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet, Tax Forms

Pregame and Setup

The comments related to props from “Introduction” are helpful to re-read, as they are applicable to setup.

It is helpful to plan to have more than one GM on hand, so that you can have a better idea of what is happening in the entire game. Additionally, the in-game phone conversation(s) will take up some time. If there is a second GM, this individual probably ought to run the phone conversation – reviewing “The Deal with Fred’s Book” or attempting some dry runs of the conversation may be helpful. Still, it is runnable with just one person, given preparation.

If you can pre-cast individuals prior to the game run, and wish to send information to your players, distributing the Neighborhood Bluesheet & Rules and their initial character sheet (but not the props) may be useful for costume preparation (if any) and to try and understanding their mindsets.

In its original conception, there are no nametags for the characters of the game, so a cast list of who is playing which character might be helpful for players.

That said, players should not communicate the information on their character sheets prior to the run. The characters were written right up to the start of play; communication prior to that would solve difficulties intended to be addressed face-to-face.

The cell phone number, or the plan for the cell phone calls, should be considered, as it is plot-relevant to Fred Kessenich.

Depending on your space – whether indoors or outdoors – try to visualize where you’ll put most of the food, where the “grill” will be, where the large, overhanging tree is located (between the Rossi and Kessenich backyards) and where there could be some space for private conversations. You want players to move around a little, although you may compromise by putting groups of chairs or other seating around on empty lawn (or “lawn”) spaces, for their comfort and convenience.

When we have used real pies (whether homemade or purchased), we’ve let the players of Eleanor Rossi, Jennifer Kessenich, and Margaret Lee choose their weapon (so to speak) the day of. First come, first served. These will then be their entries for the pie contest, to be judged essentially as the players feel their characters wish.

If you make the run outdoors, and experience bad weather, or you do not feel like calling your indoor space an outdoor one, you can justify the indoor space as “being in the Kessenich’s house”, in keeping with the rainy-day barbecue plans. After all, this monthly barbecue must have been scheduled against bad weather at some point or another.

Runtime

Welcome the players.

Re-iterate the blurb. If you would be so kind as to mention the authors, who have created this game at the 2012 Build Your Own Game seminar at the NELCO conference, it would be appreciated.

Go over the rules. Go over the space set up, particularly which areas are out of game, and which areas are in-game locations. Solicit feedback. Answer any questions.

Allow the characters to gather in family groups. Introduce the names of the characters to all. The lack of name tags is intentional [please use your discretion as the runtime GM to ignore this, if you determine this is necessary.] Except for Brittany Oswald, all characters present have known each other for years. Note that Brittany may need to be introduced by a player in-game, as she is the new tenant of the Kessenich family.

Ask players to take a position in the space as they wish, as they are waiting for Charles Lee. Charles Lee just came in, and can be placed in an appropriate place. And with his presence here, as per the Rules, ask the player of Jennifer Kessenich to start the party with the introductory activity.

You can sit back and watch; the game is on.

Answer any questions as needed. (See Supplement: Money Sheet for specific questions about current finances. The characters probably could check this in various ways during the course of the game.) Subtly guide players back towards interaction with one another, as needed.

Call Fred

See Supplement: The Deal with Fred's Book for some background information about this.

About half an hour to an hour into the game, call Fred Kessenich as his editor. (Feel free to make up a name and/or suitable publishing company.) Perhaps start with light banter, but get to business: You have some questions and concerns about the book he has recently written, and need them addressed before you'd feel comfortable paying for it or having it published. Fred ought to try and get this sold. Be encouraging and slightly wary. You can end the call if it's going too long by asking if he can get some sort of solid analysis to back his sales or readership claims, perhaps expressing some doubt it could be done in the timeframe and on a weekend. But promise to call back in half an hour or so.

Call back in half an hour or so, or maybe later – something like after three-quarters of the game is done. If Fred makes *any* reasonable argument or effort, somewhere between reluctantly to enthusiastically agree to purchase and publish his new book, exact amount to be determined Monday (i.e. outside the frame of the game).

Pie Contest

You should not, as a GM, be involved in either collecting the ballots or establishing anything OOG about this, other than that it is an in-game decision largely under the control of the Kessenich family (as hosts). Whether they do or don't play fair is not up to you, as a GM. At some point, they should attempt to decide, through whatever means, who the winner is this time around by the end of the game. Nudge as needed.

When to Call Game End (and Combat)

Combat should be avoided or strongly discouraged from an in-game (and, if necessary, out-of-game) standpoint *except* when it looks like the game is about to end.

The plots you are looking to see resolve or near resolution, satisfyingly or not, are:
- Anthony's drug use/health problems and Samantha's involvement as supplier
- Samantha's pregnancy decision
- David's and the Rossi's relationship with Brittany
- Agreed-upon succession planning for the Rossi Furniture Company
- Charles' decision to have an affair/let his wife/son know about his health situation
- Brittany's ability to plausibly access the Lee household, however she manages it, or not
- Who wins the pie contest

There are other plots (e.g. the overhanging tree, the Kessenich's financial situation), but the above are the ones that signal things are coming to a close.

When all but two or three of the above list have been complete, perhaps issue a 5-minute warning to players that the game is nearing an end, and to get any last actions done. Feel free to ignore these suggestions if, in your judgment, things are ending in any case.

If things get out of hand, it is possible that things fall apart, and this becomes the story of how these three families stop their tradition of being friendly neighbors. A fight, a car drive into a tree, or some other base drama that eventually gets police, ambulance, or other services called could be an appropriate ending then. You may have a more active role figuring out a logical and satisfying disastrous ending to the session.

If things don't get out of hand, things will naturally resolve, and your role as GM will simply be to note the end of the session. You can consider whether some of goals have happened after the game – such as whether Margaret Lee will be arrested – as you enter the debriefing.

Debriefing

Following the end of the session, give players a few minutes to ask and answer questions, and go over some of the interesting bits of their character.

As the subject matter for this game is serious, we've found it useful to suggest how to debrief players from this game. If you come from a tradition with different methods or means, feel free to use those instead, if they seem more appropriate.

Otherwise, offer to have the players and GMs sit in a circle to formally debrief from the game. Any who wish to observe the debriefing rather than participate in it may; if they wish to pass when called upon to speak, they may do so, too; this process is entirely voluntary.

Going around, ask them one thing they will take away from the character they played, and one thing they will leave behind.

You can start, with a slightly modified version of the question (as a GM). What is one thing you will take from running the game? What is one thing you wish to leave behind?

At the end of this, ask players to metaphorically take off their characters, and toss them aside.

Thank you for running, and thank the players for playing!

Supplement: The Deal with Fred's Book

The problem, when you get down to it, with Fred's book is that his last book didn't sell through its advance (that is, while it may eventually do so, the publishing house has not yet sold enough copies that the royalties he has earned have matched or exceeded what they've already paid him to acquire the book).

Fred's editor has read and liked the prospectus for his new book. But there was no formal acceptance before the numbers on Fred's last book came out, and that puts the editor into an uncomfortable position. It's possible, of course, that the editor could back the book despite the numbers. But that means the editor his putting his or her own reputation behind the book – possibly a career ending move if the bet doesn't pan out.

Of course, the easy way out is to not buy the book. Nobody ever got fired for not buying a book – and as intriguing as the book is, if Fred doesn't have confidence in his own work, it's a lot easier to let it pass by then to take a risk.

On the other hand, **if** the editor could get some solid numbers that support the book despite the author's mixed track record (his first book sold out the advance fairly quickly, and is still a steady, if unexciting seller. The second work was enough different than the first that it was hard to market, as it had very little reader overlap, so it's understandable that it tanked, but still very hard to justify to the business), the editor might be able to get approval to back the book without having to put his or her reputation on the line. This lowers the personal risk a lot – the editor is making a sound (in theory) business decision, so it's understandable and not a major personal loss even if the book doesn't do as well as the numbers imply.

The best case would look at the difference between the first two books and compare the numbers to other similarly different books – then look at the market saturation for gay male personal drama books, thus showing a strong author in an under-served market. The editor might still want to ask that Fred publish under a pseudonym – but that's a compromise that Fred might be able to accept with a clear conscience.

Even without the similarity numbers (probably too subtle a point and less of an issue if Fred can be persuaded to write under a pseudonym) a strong case can be made with the market numbers, perhaps provided by analysis of someone good with numbers (which hopefully they will realize exists in game, as Margaret Lee).

Supplement: Money Sheet

In case people ask questions about their finances and assets, here is the current state of various bank accounts and relatively easily available funds or credit cards.

Rossi Joint - $28,430
Rossi Corp - $31,912
Rossi IRAs - $684,220
David - $120

Kessenich Joint - $270
Fred - $12
Jennifer - $36
Samantha - $375

Charles - $1,327
Margaret - $28,460
Nathan - $620

Brittany - $13,276

Brittany's rent - $750/month, incl. util.

Neighborhood Bluesheet & Rules

This little section of Jenny Jump Road, one of the streets of Hope, New Jersey, has three families that have lived next to each other for almost twenty years.

The Rossi clan has been here for about a hundred years. Anthony, Eleanor and David live in the sprawling old family house. When Anthony's little sister married Fred Kessenich, the Rossi clan split the big lot and built a new house for Fred, Jennifer and Samantha. It's a nice place, with a little 2nd floor apartment that they rent out.

The Lees moved into the neighboring house just before Nathan was born.

While the houses are close together, all three lots are multi-acre lots, with beautiful old-growth trees shading the yards and a river running through the back acre.

For the last ten years, they've been holding a monthly party. During the summer, it's always a barbecue. Last month, the Rossis threw the party. This month, it's the Kessenich's turn. Next month, the Lees will organize things. There's always a little friendly competition, but it's all in fun.

Anthony Rossi: Sixty years old, married to Eleanor for nearly forty years. Anthony's grandfather founded the Rossi Furniture Company. It's been passed down to Anthony, who now runs the business with Eleanor.

Eleanor Rossi: In her sixties, Eleanor runs the business with Anthony.

David Rossi: Going into his senior year in high school, David is the grandson of Anthony and Eleanor. He was raised by Anthony and Eleanor.

Fred Kessenich: A writer in his late forties, Fred has written a couple of science fiction books, after a long career producing freelance magazine articles. Fred coached the kids' basketball team until he got a chance to help coach the boys' high school basketball team.

Jennifer Kessenich: In her early forties, Jennifer is looking for work. She was laid off from her job as a librarian a few months ago.

Samantha Kessenich: The Yale-bound valedictorian of Hope, New Jersey. She skipped a grade, so graduated a year ahead of her peers.

Brittany Oswald: In her mid-to-late thirties, Brittany moved into the second-floor apartment of the Kessenich home just after the last barbecue.

Charles Lee: About forty, Charles used to work for a bank. He was laid off three years ago, and now works from home.

Margaret Lee: About forty, Margaret is a busy accountant with a one-woman firm she runs out of the office in her home. She does the books for a lot of people, including the Rossi Furniture Company.

Nathan Lee: Going into his senior year in high school, he's openly bisexual but doesn't broadcast it.

Starting the Party

There are traditions within the party tradition. About eight years back, someone, probably Eleanor, insisted that people needed to tell each other nice things. So, starting with the hostess, everyone gets a turn saying something nice about someone of their choice.

(Players: make up something nice about someone - it doesn't have to come from your character background.)

The Dessert Contest

It started out simple, and now it's a big deal. The hostess gets to decide what dessert they're going to make. Everyone gets to vote on which one they like best. This month, Jennifer picked pies. If Eleanor wins, this will be the third month in a row.

The host collects and counts the votes.

(Players: there's no mechanic for this. Pick one of the pies and vote for it, for whatever reason you want.)

Combat

This game is GM Sanctioned Mayhem only. If you are gauche enough to consider combat at a friendly summer barbecue, see a GM and tell them what you want to do.

Rossi Furniture Company Bluesheet

The Rossi Furniture Company is a small but successful and profitable business that has been in existence for nearly 100 years. Since the death of Anthony and Jennifer Rossis' parents, control of the Company has passed solely to Anthony Rossi.

This has been the cause of some friction between Anthony and Jennifer. Anthony believes that Jennifer was left college tuition – Anthony has never had an education past high school – and that his work since was what kept the company moderately successful. So, things between them ought to be considered settled.

Jennifer believes that their parents would have wanted them to share the benefits of what each of them received from them. She helped with the business when Anthony and Eleanor started out, which ought to count for something -- at least part ownership -- now that the business has turned out well.

Anthony Rossi

Age: 60
Gender: Male

History

Hope, NJ is your home. You live in the house you grew up in as a child, with your wife Eleanor and your grandson David. After your baby sister Jennifer married the writer Fred Kessenich, they moved into the house next door, which your father had built for them. You became fast friends with the Lee family - Charles and Margaret - after they moved into the house down the street almost twenty years ago. Their son, Nathan, was born almost the same time Jennifer gave birth to your niece Samantha.

You met your wife, Eleanor, when you were in high school. She is, was, and will always be the love of your life. There are few words that can describe how much you feel about her, how much you trust her, and how much you want to be the right man for her. You live with her. Together, you raised your grandson David from infancy. Your son, Paul, passed away soon after David was born.

That was the most horrible time of your life. Paul had been accepted to NYU. He was considering a career in furniture design, and it seemed one of the best places for him to do that at the time. But he ran with the wrong crowd, and got into serious trouble. You remember the day he came back with shocking news that he was both a gay man and that he had conceived a child! And, after the shock and start of that, after your firm statements about responsibility to his new child and the child's mother, he ran off.

You remember Eleanor doing more than you to hold things together in those dark days. She reached out to the young woman, Brittany Taylor, who was the mother of your grandchild. Brittany came to live with you. She was difficult during the pregnancy. Eleanor put up with the problems; it made her angry, but she kept it in check. Brittany didn't want to have anything to do with the baby, so Eleanor insisted that the two of you would raise him. By the time David was born, a healthy, happy infant, everything was set. The lawyers had prepared all the papers. Everyone signed, David became yours to raise, and Ms. Taylor left to go back to her university classes.

You did your part by learning how to work email, voicemail and cell phones to reach out to Paul. He was out on a cross-country ramble to find himself.

You spent months coaxing Paul to come back. You sent him pictures of his growing son. With every new contact, Paul became more receptive. Finally, he decided to come home, to take part in raising his son. He was excited on the phone, promised to see everyone soon, how sorry he was, and that he expected to be home soon.

The police knocked on your door later that day. There had been a car crash. Paul was dead. You prayed and wept a great deal that year. More than a decade ago, and it hurts as much as it ever did. (Ms. Taylor sent a sympathy card.)

David has been a blessing. You've watched him grow into a good kid, a reader, and a basketball player. He's not your second chance; he's his own person, and you're proud to see him grow to be an upstanding young man.

That said, David's not that attuned to your furniture store. He's 16, but his 17-year-old friend Nathan Lee, your accountant's son, does it better. You've hired them for the summer to help with deliveries, hauling, and with customers. David might be happier doing other work, which is fine.

Your business, the Rossi Furniture Company, while modest, has been yours and your responsibility since your father left it to you. Nowadays, Eleanor manages a lot of the day to day work, especially since it's become harder for you to manage a pen, or stand, move around - let alone haul things. Eleanor believes your health is getting worse. You've even stopped driving at her suggestion, especially after you almost got into a big accident during David's college visit to CMU last week. She had to grab the wheel and help you pull over when your arms suddenly became too stiff to move. Fortunately, she and David were fine. You're pretty sure you can get back to driving as soon as the pain and stiffness gets under better control.

The doctor says it's arthritis. It hurts like hell, especially in your elbows and wrists.

He gave you these good pain pills, which worked really well. The doctor wouldn't give you more after the prescription ran out. You pleaded with him, because they were the only thing that seemed to work, but he refused to listen. Your niece Samantha hurt her ankle, got the same prescription, then gave you some of the extras she didn't need. Since then, she has managed to get you a steady supply, which you gladly pay her for.

Your baby sister, Jennifer Kessenich, has an expensive wheelchair your father used to own and use. While you don't like thinking about, there might be a point where it's helpful to have around. She'll probably give it to you if you ask, as she's only keeping it for sentimental reasons.

What will happen with the Rossi Furniture Company after you're gone? Well, you don't want to think about it, so whatever Eleanor decides will be fine with you. It'd be like her to think of grooming Nathan or David to do the work; she'd rather lend aid to a friend than give work to a stranger.

Anyway, you've been taking it a little easier than you used to and watching more of the ESPN, rooting for the Yankees, doing yardwork and such. On one of your walks neatening the lawn, you've noticed an oak tree in Fred's property is dying. It has these large limbs that hang over onto your property, and some of them reach rather close to the house. It might fall over and do damage at a strong wind. You haven't mentioned it yet, but you'll be seeing him soon.

Eleanor won the last pie contest, when you were hosts of the barbecue. It's time for another monthly barbecue. Fred's doing this one.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue.
* Your arthritis has been acting up again. Although the school year's over, maybe Samantha has some pills left.
* You're going to have to talk to Fred about the dying tree again. It's a big old thing, and there's no way that you and Fred are going to be able to take it down safely. Fred should probably hire someone to have it cut down.

What you think of the neighbors

Fred: You like Fred, but Jennifer could have done better. You've read some of the stuff that he's written, and it's just not your cup of tea. He's been working on some big new project.

Jennifer: Your sister. She got to go off to college, paid for by your father, while you were breaking your back at the company. It meant that your father arranged for you to get control of the company when he died. Your sister was still in college at the time. You've always wondered if she wanted to be part of the company, since she was a good worker when she worked there in high school.

Samantha: Your niece. She's been accepted to Yale, which shows how they've been doing something right.

Brittany: She's Fred's new tenant.

Charles: He's a good friend. He used to be a banker, until he was laid off. Now he's a day trader, dealing with stocks and bonds.

Margaret: Charles' wife and your accountant, and a competent one, too. No complaints, although you point her at Eleanor when something needs signing nowadays.

Nathan: You've hired him to help with the business, and he's been doing a pretty good job of things. He's going to be a senior in high school after the summer.

Brittany Oswald (Taylor)

Age: 37
Gender: Female

History

You grew up in the town of Hope, NJ, a crappy podunk suburb. Your family was poor, but otherwise typical. You knew you were smarter and cleverer than most of the people that came from Hope and you were going to go somewhere and become someone.

When you graduated high school, you got into NYU. Your neighbor Paul Rossi wound up going there, too. You both had big dreams; you both pushed things too fast.

In retrospect, your pregnancy wasn't inevitable, and looking back you regret not taking stronger preventative measures. Other than making sure you weren't planning to get an abortion, your family couldn't or wouldn't give you real help. Paul "discovered" he was gay pretty much right after you told him you were going to have to keep the baby and wanted him to marry you. But his parents were great; when they found out what had happened, they put you up during the pregnancy, and when you confided that you were planning on putting the baby up for adoption, they offered to adopt him themselves.

You didn't want to be a burden, wanted to make sure they could raise the boy without confusing interference, and frankly, never saw yourself as a mother. You didn't want a life revolving around a baby, which was a life that was nearly foisted on you regardless. The situation turned, luckily, better than you feared, so you hit the road after you'd recovered from the birth and went back to school. You came out of NYU with a double degree in Sociology and Accounting, a 3.3 GPA, and a ton of student loans. You did hear about the tragedy of Paul dying on his way back to Hope since it was making the rounds at NYU and signed a sympathy card for his parents, but aside from a bit of schadenfreude and a tear shed for what could have been, you didn't let it slow you down.

Since then, you've been a little pickier about your lovers and have worked hard advancing your career. After several efforts, you were hired by the FBI as a low-level analyst and, over the next thirteen years, have worked steadily and competently to rise in the ranks of their forensic accountants. Although you're not rich by any means, you do good work and make a positive impact.

The organized crime department recently got a strong tip making a connection between Margaret Lee, of Hope, NJ and one of the branches of the Mob. Knowing it was your hometown, you were told to go back to Hope and gather information necessary to complete the case. You're pretty sure if you can review a copy of her client's confidential account records in a legal enough way that wouldn't exclude the evidence from court, you'll probably have enough for a full warrant--and enough of a big score to get another promotion.

So, off to Hope again. Undercover as a local real estate agent, you changed your last name to Oswald and rented a newly-available second floor apartment next door to the Lee family. You had never intended to come back, but you hope you can leave soon and without too much entanglement. Maybe the FBI wanted you to do your job without a cover identity in this case, but they gave you the discretion to handle things as you saw fit, and talking to Anthony and Eleanor would just be too weird.

Which...is going to happen, but hopefully only as Brittany Oswald. There's a young man that lives with them named David who is almost certainly your son. This is one of the reasons you didn't want to come back to Hope. You know you would have been a terrible mother, particularly as you never imagined yourself in that role - and still don't - and you were right that you couldn't have handled a child properly. It certainly would have stymied your career advancement and left you desperately unhappy. Eleanor's adoption seemed the perfect solution for everyone. But that's in the past. While this may be an opportunity to communicate with David as two adults (assuming he is your son), he could be a terrible distraction. You hope your assumed name will make it less likely they'll notice you or seek out a confrontation, but if things get complicated, you'll have to take your lumps.

By your observations over the last three weeks and some days, the Lees seem like quiet people who keep to themselves. Their child, Nathan, seems to have more freedom for a teenager his age, staying out later at night than you did at his age, and holding a job at Rossi Furniture Company. Margaret, your target, and Charles, her spouse, both seem to work from home and don't go out regularly. You haven't been able to get too close to Margaret, but you've coincidentally found yourself sharing a morning run with Charles. He's started opening up about problems with his wife. You've been encouraging this line of talk, hoping to hear something incriminating or useful. Charles awkwardly hit on you at the end of yesterday's jog. He wasn't there this morning.

Your first reaction to him hitting on you was a gut reaction - negative. But now that you've had a day to think about it, you see a possible opportunity. If Charles is willing to break spousal privilege - if their marriage is really in such a bad state of affairs - he might be the shortcut you need to get at Margaret's Mob account books. It's going to have to be handled carefully, but you have the authority to offer him and his son immunity if Charles can give you Margaret. It'd be a bluff (because the FBI can't make the case without going through the books), but you could threaten to jail them all if they don't cooperate. That'd blow your cover pretty conclusively. Though admittedly an actual affair with Charles could, on further consideration, be kinda fun. He's cute.

Meanwhile, you've made fast friends with the Kessenich family. The head of the family, Fred Kessenich, you think of as a stereotypical air-headed writer. He stays out of the way. Jennifer Kessenich is the person you hand rent checks to. She's invited you to join them with their local, monthly barbecue. (Your target, Margaret, will be there, but so will the Rossis.) Their daughter, Samantha Kessenich, reminds you of yourself at her age. She's a smart girl, on her way to Yale.

But it seems like Samantha has boyfriend troubles. Two days ago, she asked you to help dispose of a pregnancy test. You threw it out in the Lee's trash for her next morning, but couldn't help noticing again that it was positive. It's none of your business, but you can't help wondering what she's going to do. You tried to console Samantha but didn't want to get too involved - and to be honest, you were taken aback at her frantic knocking at your door and tear-filled confession, particularly given its resemblance to your own situation with David.

Lately, you've noticed some maintenance problems with your apartment. Some of the paint is peeling from the ceiling, and the toilet tends to clog and overflow. It's not what you're here for, and work-related, "reasonably necessary, customary and usual" expenses, such as the rent does not come from your personal funds, but it is an uncomfortable situation that ought to be handled by the landlord.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue.
* If you can manage to get at Margaret Lee's account books sooner rather than later, you can get out of town sooner, too.
* One way would be to get Charles Lee and Margaret Lee to break up, and Charles to testify against her.
* David Rossi was a chapter of your life that's closed and over. Is this still true?
* Give Samantha some good advice about her situation.
* The apartment ought to be put into better shape.

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony Rossi - Paul's father. You'd barely spoken to him, and then it was briefly, 17 or 18 years ago.

Eleanor Rossi - Paul's mother. Last time you saw her, you were handing her a baby and she was trying to insult you.

David Rossi - He seems like a nice enough young man. He's not part of your assignment.

Fred Kessenich - Harmless enough. A writer. Although writers are said to be observant of details.

Jennifer Kessenich - Your landlady, and coincidentally very helpful to you.

Samantha Kessenich - A smart girl, that reminds you of yourself at her age. Pity about the pregnancy.

Charles Lee - An opportunity to get to Margaret. Not bad looking for a long-married guy.

Margaret Lee - You know very little about her, and it's your job to know more.

Nathan Lee - He seems like a nice enough young man.

Charles Lee

Age: almost 40
Gender: Male

History

“May you live in interesting times” is supposed to be an old Chinese curse. Your grandmother used it all the time, usually before she started some story about the homeland, half in English, half in Mandarin.

Interesting times, indeed. You got a call on your cell from Dr. Barnabas this morning, while you were out running errands. She wanted you to come into her office. Doctors are *never* in the office on a Saturday, at least not for good news.

She wouldn’t say anything until you sat down.

Prostate cancer. You went numb.

Metastasized. Spread to the blood, probably more.

It’s bad. As in there are good odds you won’t reach your next birthday. Dr. Barnabas scheduled a whole bunch of tests at the hospital for Monday morning. You’re going to be there a lot.

Somehow, you ended up sitting in the gazebo in the Town Square. You don’t remember driving there.

That’s when Margaret called to remind you about the party. Damn. You’re going to have to put on a nice face and socialize. It’s the monthly picnic, after all.

And Margaret, you’re going to have to tell Margaret. She’s going to know something is up the minute she sees your face, if she hasn’t figured it out already from the phone call. Things have not been good between you for so long now, this may just push things over the edge.

As if you weren’t headed that way to begin with.

You did, after all, just proposition Brittany, the new neighbor, yesterday. That was just stupid. You’re going to have apologize to her. Damn. Those legs. You’ve really been thinking about those legs. And wrapping them around you.

No. Get that out of your head.

It’s just that she’s been so good to talk to in the morning. She’s been the sympathetic ear you needed. You met her just after she moved in a couple of weeks ago. You were out on your usual morning jog, and there she was, warming up at the base of the outside stairs from the

Kessenich's second floor apartment. You've been sharing the run every morning since then.

Well, except this morning. You were too damned embarrassed about the proposition. You just hurried out of the house to run errands, and now look where you are. And it may all be over before you know it.

And what if Margaret is pregnant again? Two days ago, you found a positive pregnancy test in the trash. You would never had known if the damn neighborhood dogs hadn't been pawing through your trash again. There it was, sitting on the grass, along with a pile of chewed up takeout boxes.

Your wife may be pregnant and you proposition the new neighbor. What were you thinking?

Fucking interesting times indeed.

It all started with such promise. You were (barely) still in college when you met Margaret. You were a business major and she was studying accounting. She was smart, beautiful, and driven enough to get a full scholarship to school. She graduated, took a job just a few subway stops away, and waited for you to finish.

Getting married was the obvious next step, and you were surprised at how quickly she became pregnant. While New York City was a great place to work, it wasn't the best place to raise a family. You looked around, and Margaret finally settled on Hope, in New Jersey. You managed to arrange for a transfer to a more local office of the bank, so that your commute was manageable. It took you out of the fast track for the sexy jobs, but you weren't so worried about that. You had a family to raise.

The neighbors -- Fred and Jennifer Kessenich, and Anthony and Eleanor Rossi, were very welcoming -- and Jennifer was also pregnant, so she and Margaret had quite a lot to talk about. When Margaret went into the hospital, Jennifer also went into labor shortly after -- and they put the two of them in adjacent hospital beds. That's how your son Nathan was born. Samantha Kessenich was born shortly thereafter.

Nathan and Samantha were as close as two kids could be. They did everything together. Eleanor's grandchild, David, who is less than a year younger than Nathan, was always hanging out with them too, but Nathan and Samantha were special, and the neighbors were welcoming, inviting you into their monthly barbecue parties.

Margaret quit her job to take care of Nathan. Your salary was good enough to live well, and you were quite fine with being the breadwinner.

That didn't last too long. By the time that Nathan was toddling along, Margaret cleared out the spare bedroom, set up an office, printed up some letterhead, and had her own accounting business. It didn't take her long to have a steady clientele, including Anthony and Eleanor's

Rossi Furniture Company accounts. It meant that you had to do more around the house, which was annoying. You did what you had to do; if you didn't, Margaret would let you know in her own snide way.

Over the years, you've talked about how it might be nice to have another kid, but it just never seemed like the right time. You were busy with the bank, rising quickly to an executive position, on the road a fair amount. She was also growing her business, and had her own trips to take. You always managed to make it work so that someone was home for Nathan. (Despite that, he often went to one of the neighbors' house for dinner.)

There are times when Margaret's off on one of her business trips, and she calls you. You have to drop whatever it is you're doing, jump to her computer, log in with her password, grab whatever files she needs and email them to her. She's usually under a lot of pressure, but, still, she could be nicer about it.

Three years ago, your bank was bought out. The new owners looked around, decided to cut everyone making over an arbitrary salary, and laid you off. You were a victim of your own success.

At first, it was nice to be able to spend some time with Nathan.

You tried to find another job, but no one was hiring, at least not for anything close to what you'd been making. You sent out resume after resume, only to be told that you were overqualified, overpriced, or both. It was damned depressing.

Yes, you weren't at your best, and the marriage suffered for it. She didn't help; she was always insisting you do more. Couldn't she see you were struggling?

Since no one would hire you, you decided to take matters into your own hands. Your own investments weren't doing so bad, so day trading seemed logical. It's a lot harder than it looks. You've made some money, but there have been too many times when you've lost more. Margaret covers the losses, but she's always angry about it. You've had some nasty fights as a result. The rest of the time, you don't really argue much, but you also don't talk much.

Her business always takes precedence. Sometimes she just goes into her office, locks the door, and doesn't come out for hours. She's been doing it more and more of late.

Even the time with Nathan hasn't been great. Nathan and Samantha have been best friends their entire lives. They even started "dating" in second grade. It was cute and harmless. Margaret often said she'd be planning their wedding when they grew up. It didn't last. Nathan broke up with her early in high school. He made sure that everyone knew that he was interested in boys as well as girls.

He was so damn vocal about it. You were raised in a traditional Chinese family, and these sorts

of things Just Weren't Announced. You yelled at Nathan to stop talking about it; if your mother ever got wind of it, it would kill her. It's not just the gay thing. She's been itching for a great grandchild before she goes to meet the ancestors.

Nathan hasn't been very talkative since then.

You order a lot of takeout. You eat in front of the TV, Margaret goes into her office, and Nathan just goes out.

At least there's a lot of sex late at night. It's weird, and you're not going to argue about it, but it's one of the few times you can communicate. Sort of.

Still, there are times when you just have to get out of the house for a while. Nathan's old enough that he can make his own dinner at times.

Now would be one of those times, but you have the damned barbecue to go to. It's a neighborhood tradition. The three families -- you, the Kesseniches, and the Rossis alternate hosting; there are seasonally appropriate games. There's a "friendly" competition over who makes the best desserts. Heaven help you if you don't vote for Margaret's latest attempt at trying to outdo the other women. Sometimes it takes a lot of beer to wash down her creations. Eleanor won the last two, and Margaret's been very intense about making sure that it's not three in a row.

Seems kind of unimportant now.

Goals

* You're going to have to pull Margaret aside and let her know about your cancer.
* Figure out what you're going to do now that she's pregnant.
* Figure out what to do with Brittany.
* Pretend to have a good time at the barbecue. [As a player, you may want to fail at this goal, and we're okay with that.]

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony: He's been a good friend. He's been having some physical issues; he's been having trouble getting around. Margaret does the books for their family furniture business.

Brittany: You've been with Margaret for a very long time. Despite the frequency, intense, angry sex, late at night, isn't all that satisfying. And Brittany is so tempting. If you're going to die, and go impotent in the process, then you might as well get something new and exciting before you lose it.

Apologize to her.

Fuck her.

It's too damned confusing.

David: Anthony and Eleanor's grandson. They raised him after their son died.

Fred: You told him you had a sure thing; he gave you $5,000, on your promise that you'd make him at least 10% back in a year. It's gone. You don't know what you're going to do about it.

Jennifer: Margaret's best friend. The two of them are always talking.

Nathan: Your son has been helping out a lot at Rossi Furniture. It's good for him.

Samantha: You like her. You really wish that Nathan would get through this phase and go back to her.

David Rossi

Age: 16
Gender: male

History

You discovered some old dusty Led Zeppelin albums in the back of grandpa's store three years ago, and fell in love with them. Actually, you fell in love with Robert Plant, but didn't really realize that at the time.

Mom and dad both walked out on you when you were an infant, and you were raised by your grandparents, Anthony and Eleanor. They don't really talk about your parents much, and since it was when you were so young, you don't remember them at all. Sometimes you wish you knew more about them and what they had been going through. You know your dad died, later, in a car accident. Grandma and Grandpa really avoid talking about that part. But you don't think it's really affected you that much; Grandma and Grandpa have taken good care of you. You grew up spending half of your free time at the store, and Grandpa has always given you a large allowance, so you're not really sure when you started officially working there, but you're happy to help out. Sometimes you wish you had a better job, but you don't want to leave your grandparents hanging. You try and get time to yourself; you like to sit and home and read Tolkien. Recently, though, grandpa's been having a harder time with his arthritis, so you've been spending a bit more time at the store than you had, which is actually fine with you because of Nathan.

Two years ago, Nathan Lee, who lives two houses down, started working at the store. You used to hang out with him and Samantha Kessenich (your next-door neighbor and cousin) back in elementary school, but they started dating in middle school, and you started feeling more and more left out. But a few months after Nathan started working with you, he confessed to you that he had a crush on you. Apparently, he and Samantha had broken up a few months earlier when she skipped ahead a grade, and he realized he was bisexual at about the same time. At first you were just confused, but over time you came to realize that your crush on Robert Plant and your feelings about Nathan were similar in many ways, and that you'd never really understood the attraction of girls. You've been dating since then, and it's been pretty intense. You lost your virginity to each other a few months after you started dating. Most other people don't know; you've come out to Fred Kessenich, your next-door neighbor and a school basketball coach, because you wanted to talk to someone, but you're kind of scared to tell anyone else. You have no idea how your grandparents will react, and while you'd consider telling Samantha, she's gotten close to you since she and Nathan broke up, and has told you how much she still loves him, so you're worried it would make things awkward. Sneaking around and making sure no one catches you can be challenging, but Nathan's parents are kind of distracted by their own marital troubles, so it's not that hard to slip into his bedroom window without them noticing -- and you've been friends for years, so nobody notices when you spend a bit of time hanging out with him.

Not to mention that you get plenty of time seeing Nathan since he works in your parents' shop, as do you. He's a good worker -- better than you -- and while you've both had management of special projects, you know he's better than you. Sure, you're better at wood carving -- at least at the moment, but you've got a lot more practice at it than Nathan has. Grandpa Anthony is all but retired, and you think Grandma Eleanor is thinking of backing out of the business and focusing on taking care of Grandpa and enjoying their "golden years", but you don't think you're ready to manage a business. Nathan could do it better, you know, but frankly, the whole situation scares you, as you're both pretty young for this.

Uncle Fred -- Coach -- is also a writer. He's mostly written sci-fi, but is currently working on a realistic novel which he's basing on your life and the history of your family (though obviously he's changing all the names). You've been working with him to gather family history, which has been kind of fascinating. In fact, you recently found an old photo of a guy who looks almost exactly like you holding hands with a woman, and you're very curious who they are. Coach has also been helping you work through some of the confusion you're feeling about being gay. Nathan's been wanting to tell other people, and frankly, you agree that it will probably be easier if you come out, but the prospect scares you.

Hopefully you'll have an easier time with the confusion once you get to college. You need to start applying to colleges soon, in fact; this coming year will be your senior year. You could go to Rutgers, which would be relatively inexpensive and is a decent school, and would allow you to stay relatively close. Alternatively, you visited Carnegie Mellon last month with your grandparents and fell in love with it. It's far away, which would be difficult for you and Nathan and would make your grandparents sad, but it's an amazing school. On the way back, Grandpa almost drove into a truck, so you took over the driving. Come to think of it, you don't recall him having driven since then. The car was really fun to drive; maybe you can convince him to sell it to you.

A few weeks ago, Nathan called you, upset about his parents fighting. You went over there to console him, but ended up fighting when he pressured you about wanting to tell his parents. You haven't really talked much since then.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue.
* Think about where you want to go to school; maybe talk to Nathan and Fred about it.
* Ask Grandpa Anthony or Grandma Eleanor about the photo.
* Try and convince Grandpa Anthony to sell you his car.
* Ask Uncle Fred for advice about how to come out.

What you think of the neighbors

The Kesseniches - Uncle Fred has been your basketball coach since you were eight; first he coached the co-ed team that both you and Samantha were on, then he moved to the high school boys' team at the same time you did. He'd have preferred to continue coaching Samantha, but was perfectly happy to coach the boy's team and the girl's team already had a volunteer coach. Aunt Jennifer's been like a foster mom for you since you were small; you would often eat dinner there with Samantha and Nathan when you were kids. You and Samantha were close when you were kids, but grew apart in middle school. Now you're becoming close again.

The Lees - Charles and Margaret have been having marital troubles lately, though you're not sure exactly why. It's had positive benefits; it makes it much easier to sneak around without them noticing.

Brittany Oswald - The Kessenichs' new tenant. You've not had a chance to talk to her yet

Items

An old photo

An Old Photo

OOC All:
This is an old photo of a young man and young woman, giving thumbs up in front of an NYU seal.

OOC David, Samantha, Nathan:
The young man looks a lot like David Rossi.

OOC Eleanor, Anthony, Fred, Jennifer, Charles, Margaret, Brittany:
The young man is Paul Rossi. There's a strong resemblance between the young woman and Brittany Oswald. Perhaps with a different hairstyle, hair color, and makeup?

OOC Eleanor, Anthony, Brittany:
The young woman is Brittany Taylor.

Eleanor Rossi

Age: 55
Gender: Female

History

You love your husband Anthony with your whole being. You still remember the day he met you in High School. His eyes sparkled. He handed you a chocolate chip cookie in the shape of a heart on Valentine's Day, and his smile could extend to the moon. He finally asked you out just before senior prom. You wore your fluffiest, bright blue skirt, and he wore a matching suit. He proposed to you a short year after that, but it was a foregone conclusion. What could you say but yes?

Getting married to Anthony also meant you married into Rossi Furniture. This suited you fine. You always had a mind for numbers, and for advertising. This gave Anthony time to do what the Rossis are best at - design furniture, leaving a lot of the business dealing to you. You've watched the company double its profits in your day. That said, its growing harder to watch on your own. Anthony is not quite as there as he once was, and you're both just so physically tired. It's time to consider passing it off. You'll have to let Margaret know what your plan is, once you decide; she's the accountant for Rossi Furniture.

Twenty years ago, this wouldn't be a problem at all. At that point you had a son, Paul, who was doing wonderful things for the family business. He was athletic and bright. He could be anything he wanted to be. You looked forward to teaching him about the family business. He went off to NYU for furniture design. You expected to pass of the business to him pretty much as soon as he graduated. Unfortunately, this wasn't to be.

In college, your son got introduced to some crazy ideas. He bought into the whole free love thing, apparently. One day he came home and told you he had made a woman pregnant, but had no intention to marry her or take care of the child, as he'd realized he was more interested in men, and didn't want to be in a lustless marriage. You and Anthony both felt that he should be more responsible than that. You can't make a woman pregnant and entirely ignore the consequences. He had a child. You had a grandchild. Anthony did most of the lecturing, but you were behind him 100%.

What happened after that, however, broke your heart. He left. Never called home, never wrote a letter. You had no idea where he ran to. You and Anthony definitely came down way too hard on him. Yes, making children and then leaving them is irresponsible, but he was a boy! What more do you expect from an 18-year-old? Apparently too much.

It turns out the woman he got pregnant was named Brittany. She was scared and alone - you're surprised her parents wouldn't support her through it, but they didn't seem to, so you and Anthony took her in. When you found out she was thinking of adoption, you offered to adopt the

baby instead. You missed Paul, and wanted a second chance. Aside from which, this was Paul's flesh and blood. Brittany thought she was imposing. She wasn't. She couldn't understand how cathartic taking care of *someone* was for you. You wonder where she is now, and wonder that she never showed any interest in her son David after the adoption. And now David is grown, hopefully without the loss of growing both motherless...

…and you love David, but you also loved Paul, and wanted to give him a chance to be a part of his son's life. You learned how to use the internet, and used it in part for the business, but in part to track down your son. A few months after earning custody of David, Anthony found a Paul Rossi, on a cross country road trip, and sent him an email, describing how David was just learning to crawl and had a beautiful laugh. Paul emailed you back. It took months of emails and phone calls, but eventually Paul chose to fly home to take responsibility for his kid. You were both elated.

Your elation didn't last long. The day he was supposed to arrive, you received the message that a man identified as Paul Rossi had died in a car accident near the airport. You sobbed for days. The last face-to-face conversation you ever had with your son was about how irresponsible he was. You will never forgive yourself for not telling him how much you loved him the last time you saw him.

You love David. You hope you have done a better job teaching the boy some responsibility than you'd done with Paul. He's certainly quieter and gets better grades than his father ever did. In several other ways, however, he is clearly his father's son. Both were athletic. You and Anthony no longer have quite the energy you once did for this, however. You are grateful for the extra effort his basketball coach, your neighbor Fred Kessenich, has made in this regard. Fred's kind of an extra father for David.

Much as you love David and trust him to be more responsible than his father, you're not quite sure he has the charisma to be the leader for the company. Nathan, on the other hand, has that in spades. You've hired him to do some extra work for Rossi's Furniture, and noticed that he took to it really well. You've also been given the pleasure of watching him interact with customers. He has the knack. It would be kind of sad to see Rossi's Furniture not in the hands of a Rossi, but it may be what's best for the company.

David may be happy with that decision as well. You've started discussing colleges with him, and took him on a college visit to Carnegie Mellon. He seemed psyched. You want to encourage him in whatever his dreams are.

Thinking about that trip also gives you the chills, however. Your husband and you are very mortal, and you're getting on in years. Anthony used to love taking the family out for drives - you fondly remember a cross-country college and sightseeing road trip you and Anthony took with Paul when he was David's age. Anthony drove through all of that, and never seemed to tire of it. On this past trip to CMU, however, his arms got stiff, and he almost plowed into a truck in the next lane. You had to grab the wheel from him. What if you're not there some day? You've

convinced him to stop driving, “at least for the moment.” It just isn’t safe anymore. Anthony says he has things “under control.” You feel uneasy, then guilty: he has been moving better recently.

Last but certainly not least is the matter of the pie contest. You have won the past two, and think you’ve really outdone yourself with this latest pie. Jennifer doesn’t have a chance!

At the very least, it will be good to see everyone again. Watch David and Nathan’s business practices. Get Anthony out of the house - pain has kept him lifeless lately, and you miss the mischievous fire he used to always have in his eyes. He’s still handsome, but he certainly needs some fresh air. Let David hang with Coach Kessenich. Meet the new tenant at the Kessenich’s. Win the pie competition. Yeah, this should be a great event.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue
* Figure out who should take over the store -- David, as family, or Nathan, the competent one.
* Figure out if Brittany is David’s Mother (she seems familiar). If so, why now, after all these years of neglect?
* Make sure Anthony doesn’t ever drive again. That last accident was just too scary, and you don’t want him hurt, much less anyone with him.
* Win the pie contest. Nobody’s ever won three times in a row, and you’d like to be a first.

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony - Your husband. Handsome as ever!

David - You failed his father. You are not going to fail him, no matter what.

Margaret - Does your accounting. Does a very good job of your accounting.

Brittany - You’re not sure, but she could be David’s mother. If she is, do you want her near David? Isn’t seventeen years too long to wait? You have heard nothing from her since she went back to school aside from spotting her signature on a group sympathy card from NYU after Paul died -- what kind of mother wouldn’t at least attempt to make contact?

Jennifer - You wonder if Jennifer has harbored resentment over the fact that the furniture business went right to Anthony without her having any say. It’s probably been so long now that it’s water under the bridge, but she’s at least always been a fierce competitor in the barbecue bake-off competitions.

Nathan and **Samantha -** David’s best friends. It’s good that David has friends, but David could really use some friends that put him first. You’re thinking of promoting Nathan within the company as you think he’d be a great candidate to run it someday.

Fred Kessenich

Age: 45
Gender: Male

History

Ah, the monthly barbecue with the Rossis and the Lees! It's a great excuse to keep up your relationship with the neighbors. Both neighbors are very important to you. The Lees have been good friends since they moved next door - it was clearly fated, as Margaret was pregnant at the same time as your Jenny, and they gave birth in the same wing. Your daughter, Samantha, and their son, Nathan, were born that day, and have been close friends ever since. They dated in that cute sort of puppy love way. While every father is protective, you trust Nathan and you trust your daughter.

Samantha is even more daughter than you deserve. You fell in love with Jenny when as a Master of Library Sciences student, she was the only other student in one of your graduate classes who you could work with without being bored out of your mind. And Samantha's smarter than either of you -- she is fluent in three languages, graduated valedictorian, and got an early acceptance to Yale. You do want to get her to Yale; you love your daughter and want her to become as educated and successful as she is smart. But unless she's going to end up with huge student loans, you're not sure how you're going to get the money.

The Rossis are also more than neighbors -- they're family. Your wife is Anthony's sister. Anthony and Eleanor adopted their grandson, David, who feels even more like family to you than he is. You coached him and Samantha when basketball teams were co-ed. By the time they reached High School, however, the teams separated, and as there was a volunteer coach for the girls' team, you followed the boys, and with them David. You've really tried to be a father figure for him.

You and Jenny are hosting the barbecue this time. You're excited to show off your skills at the 'cue - you've become famous for your cheese-filled hamburgers and grilled peaches. You've also been testing out veggie burger recipes for the last month, just in case someone has decided to become a vegetarian without you noticing.

One of the reasons you love these barbecues is that it makes sure you and your neighbors get the chance to settle your differences. Other neighborhoods allow those to fester until they become old grudges nobody even remembers the initial reasons for. These barbecues give you the chance to make sure that never occurs.

At least, that's the theory. There's bit of a bit of distracting nonsense with the Rossis recently you'd like to clear up. They want you to deal with removing the tree that is technically on your land, but is growing out of hand into the Rossi lawn. You know the tree is on your land, not theirs, and thus is your problem. You know that it has gotten to a point where if a major

rainstorm happened (and they do in summer), that tree can be a problem for the Rossis - possibly even breaking a window. You're also keenly aware (your wife keeps reminding you) that any damage to Rossi property would, in fact, cost even more than getting rid of the darn thing. It's just... you don't have the money right now. Your wife just got laid off a few months ago, and your job as a full-time author was never meant to pay the bills, plus your last book didn't sell well enough to pay off the advance. You hope to have the money soon, and that by tonight you can let them know that you're working on it, but you just can't deal with it *now*.

You do have a couple of books published, but while the first one did fine at the outset -- a theoretical science fiction novel that appeals to the right crowd -- it's now down to hundred-dollar royalty checks. And your second novel -- an attempt at a space opera comedy, fell flat; didn't even earn out it's advance. A shame, really, as it was fun to write and you're sure it could have found an audience with time.

But recently, you've written a novel you are very proud of, and sent off to the publishers. They showed interest, which got your hopes up, but then you heard nothing for months. It turns out, they're not sure you'll get the numbers they need. Your last book wasn't a huge commercial success. *This* book though, is some of your best work, and you're sure it will do well. More, the book is important, and not just because of your financial situation. You're writing this book for David, and for other teenagers like him.

David is gay. Nathan came out as bisexual two years ago, at approximately the same time he broke up with your daughter. You're glad that he felt comfortable enough with everyone to be open about it. But David has had a much harder time. While he's a great ball-player, he's always been somewhat shy. He's a great social chameleon, always looking to fit in, not making waves. That his mere existence makes waves has got to be terrifying. You're flattered to be the person he trusts sharing his thoughts and feelings with - starting from his first crush on Robert Plant (though that took him a year to tell you about, *after* Nathan came out as bi). David has a new crush, this time on a classmate who apparently likes him back. You're excited for him. You only wish he could be more open with everyone else. You're hoping your book--starring a gay character in a loving out-of-the-closet relationship will help both give gay kids a character they can relate to, and help straight people see their gay peers and children with empathy.

For that to happen, you need the book to be published. The problem is, an author is only as good as his last book -- but this book is just better than anything else you've ever written. It -has- to be published. It's numbers and statistics that are your enemy here, and numbers have never been your friends. Fortunately, your neighbor, Margaret, is a world class accountant -- if anyone can prove that your book is worth publishing, it's her.

In the meantime, your wife is working diligently on the financial issues in, in her own words, "the practical way". She took all the initiative (with your approval), and you now have a tenant for the upstairs apartment that could help hold you over the long haul. The tenant, Brittany, isn't bad either - she's pleasant, seems to get along with your daughter Samantha and pays her rent, which combined with your investments and the new book, should put you ahead in the long

term.

But there are more important things to worry about than money. You found a plastic bag of pills on your way up the stairs to the porch. You're not really sure why someone from your family would need that. Maybe they're the tenant's? Your wife is pretty bent out of shape about finances... but would she go as far as to sell drugs? Is she in great pain and needs these pills? Could there be something wrong with your daughter that she's afraid to tell you? Is there a neighborhood druggie that slept on your porch the night before? Regardless... a bag full of oxycontin painkillers means something is wrong with *somebody*. Those are very strong pills. You'd love to figure out who it is so that you can help them. People need to be worried about. Money will eventually take care of itself.

That said, money *does* make things easier for people. If you had money, Samantha would be able to go to Yale without crippling debt -- to the tune of 40k per year. If you had money, your wife would be happier and maybe be able to go back to school and get the doctorate you know she could get easily. You don't want to be rich, you just want enough money to stop worrying about money. Charles, you know, is good with money -- he has a degree in business, while his wife, Margaret has a degree in accounting. So, when he said he could get you 10% on an investment, even in this economy, you took the $5,000 in petty cash that was in the joint account and invested it with him. You look forward to asking him how your investment is doing. And you're looking forward to the party. After all, these are your friends, and you want to see them having a good time.

Goals

* Make sure everyone has a good time at the barbecue.
* Have a good time at the barbecue
* Man the grill
* Introduce Brittany to the group.
* Get your book published!
* Figure out what's up with that plastic bag full of oxycontin
* Check with Charles about the $5,000 investment - you need that money back desperately.
* Work out your differences with the Rossis - you would love to get rid of that tree for them, but you just don't have the money right now.
* Talk to Margaret about your novel, and see if she can 'work out the numbers' on the profit
* Make sure Samantha can go to Yale
* Collect and count the votes for the pie contest.

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony Rossi: Your brother-in-law, who is friendly enough -- as long as you continue to tiptoe around the issue of the family business and his health, both of which your wife Jennifer has been increasingly interested in.

Eleanor Rossi - Your sister-in-law. A shrewd woman; you have a love-hate relationship with her. She's a tough lady to butt heads with.

David Rossi - Your great-nephew; the Rossi's grandson whom they took in after his parents left him, shortly after which David's father Paul passed away. You've never met the mother as she left the Rossi home and leaving David behind before Jennifer brought you home with her from college. What a great kid. The son you never had. You've coached him in the neighborhood basketball league since he was eight. He's gay, but not out of the closet to anybody besides you yet, and you respect that. In fact, you're honored to the point that David is the subject of your newest book.

Jennifer Kessenich - Your wife. Gorgeous, brilliant. Worries far too much, though.

Samantha Kessenich - Your daughter. Great kid. Recently, she's seemed more nervous than usual, which is probably normal given that she's leaving for Yale in the fall.

Brittany Oswald - The new second floor apartment tenant. She's a little younger than you and seems to do alright for herself, keeping the apartment clean and paying her rent on time. She gets along well with Sam and it's nice for Sam to have a girlfriend close by.

Charles Lee - Your neighbor, and the husband of your wife's best friend Margaret. They haven't been getting along well lately, and you're increasingly concerned with what happened to that $5,000 you invested with him.

Margaret Lee - Your neighbor and Charles' wife. She's a stellar accountant, and you hope she'll be able to help you work out the numbers on the potential profits for your new book.

Nathan Lee - Charles' and Margaret's son, and your daughter Sam's former boyfriend. They had a cute puppy love thing going for a while there... like, since they were seven. You're glad they seem to have "broken up" (as much as they'd ever had a relationship) pretty amicably since Nathan came out as bi.

Items

Bag of pills
Cell phone

Jennifer Kessenich (née: Rossi)

Age: 42
Gender: Female

History

Growing up a Rossi wasn't easy. The child of a self-made business owner, the expectation to be a good daughter, and to be the model wife and mother and neighbor, while enviously watching what should be your part in the family business pass to your older brother Anthony. You know you would have done just as good a job running Rossi Furniture Company; before going off to college, you'd always helped at the store and you'd expected to help take over when your father died in your senior year as an undergraduate. You had been a business major and were newly engaged to Fred (whom you met on campus while you were finishing your degree and he was starting his PhD. D in Creative Writing). When you learned your father had bequeathed the company to Anthony, not giving you the equal partnership you had expected and were by right entitled to, you were devastated but decided to pick your battles and forge your own career. You married Fred and obtained a Masters in Library Science and proceeded with a successful career in that field while starting a family. You had been raised to avoid family conflict, so you had never directly confronted Anthony about this. However, you increasingly wonder if that's the tactic you need to use to address your displeasure.

Anthony's a fine guy and goodness knows he loves and provides for his family, but his health has been getting worse and you wonder how much more he's got in him before he'll have to call it quits. Can your sister-in-law Eleanor really handle the business on her own? She's a shrewd woman, but she's only a Rossi by marriage and she's never gone to college... YOU are a Rossi by blood, and you should be next in line to take over the business. You've been unemployed as a librarian for months and can't think of a better option to help your family's financial situation. You miss your job, but you're convinced getting the business back is a better option than a lengthy commute to the next closest library that may be hiring. It's the perfect time to make your move and get your foot back in the door of the Rossi Furniture Company as a co-owner, especially since you'll have more free time soon: your daughter Samantha will be moving out of the house this fall to attend Yale.

You're so proud of Sam! You know she hates it when you call her that (you've noticed she only lets Nathan do so), but you slip up sometimes. She's such a bright and proactive girl. She gets that from your side of the family, no doubt. It's unfortunate that she and the nice neighbor boy Nathan Lee broke up a few years ago. They've been dating since they were kids. You respect Nathan's need to explore his emerging bisexuality and you certainly wish him well - he's like a second son to you, after all. Still, it would be lovely if Sam and Nathan were to get back together, and if someday you could pass the house and the furniture business along to them and their children...

You and your good friend Margaret Lee (Nathan's mother) gave birth to your children in the

same Obstetrics wing within days of each other, shortly after the Lee's moved into the neighborhood. Bonding over new motherhood, you and Margaret have been close for almost two decades. You're terribly sad over Margaret's increasing marriage problems with Charles and their communication has been deteriorating; Margaret says they barely even eat dinner together anymore and have been fighting more often. Margaret confided in you that she's been trying to get pregnant again, and Charles has been complying but isn't fully informed as to Margaret's intentions. Margaret took a pregnancy test yesterday, and confided in you that she was distraught over it being negative. Another issue is that of Charles and your second-floor tenant Brittany. You've seen them running together in the morning and think something seems off about it; Margaret ought to know, if only to be on guard.

However, Margaret's problems are hardly your only concern. For one, it seems that you've missed the last two "mortgage" payments (actually an equity loan with the house as collateral, but with the same negative consequences) and this month's is coming due - $5,000 and another $2,500, and that's not including penalties. You thought the past payments had been paid, but the bank says it never got that $5,000. Where did it go if it didn't go to the mortgage? Fred's been deep working on his latest book, so you haven't bothered him with your worries - but if you miss one more you face the serious risk of eviction from your family home. You need cash fast.

You have no savings. Unless another big advance comes, Fred's current royalties are no more than enough to pay some daily expenses. You could sell your mother's diamond necklace. You could push Anthony to give you your due from the Rossi Furniture Company. You could beg Margaret for a loan. And there's Samantha's Yale tuition bill due soon. Fred's a talented writer; maybe too good for the market. His last book didn't do that well, and he's never written the giant blockbuster, but you knew that going in. You were happy to support his dreams for as long as you could. That time may rapidly be coming to an end, though, because money is tight and the finances look bad.

You've rented the second-floor apartment to Brittany Oswald, which helps. She's new in town and has been living with your family for three weeks now, and seems to get along well with Sam. The rent income ($750 per month) will help, but you've already used her down payment to keep the utilities on. Can you get an early rent payment from her?

Those money problems won't go away if you keep worrying about it. And there's the monthly barbecue to cheer things up. You're helping Fred host the party at your home this time around. You want to make sure everyone has a good time, and plan to start the event off with what has become the barbecue tradition - each person goes around and says one nice thing about another guest of their choice, starting with yourself as hostess. The other barbecue tradition is the dessert-cookoff between yourself, Eleanor Rossi, and Margaret Lee, with the rule that the hostess gets to choose the type of dessert. You intend to make sure you win the dessert contest, and prevent Eleanor from winning for the third month in a row. You've chosen pie as your best weapon. Let the barbecue begin!

Goals

* Make sure everyone has a good time at the barbecue
* Have a good time at the barbecue
* Start off the ‘nice comments’ game at the beginning of the barbecue
* Get enough money to pay off your $7,500 “mortgage” bill and not get foreclosed on
* Solve your family’s financial problems sufficiently that you won’t be facing foreclosure every month
* Find a way get enough money to send Sam to Yale
* Start getting your share of the Rossi profits by confronting Eleanor and Anthony
* Make sure Margaret finds out about Charles paying too much attention to Brittany
* Make sure your pie wins the contest

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony Rossi: Your older brother, who is friendly enough -- as long as you continue to tiptoe around the issue of the family business and his health.

Eleanor Rossi - Your sister-in-law. A shrewd woman; you have a love-hate relationship with her. She’s a tough lady to butt heads with. Beating her at the pie contest may be a step towards getting a little leverage over her.

David Rossi - Your great-nephew; the Rossi’s grandson whom they took in after his parents left him, shortly after which David’s father Paul passed away. You’ve never met the mother as she left the Rossi home before you returned from college, leaving David behind.

Fred Kessenich - Your loving but somewhat aloof husband. You met in college and have been in love ever since. He’s a good father to Samantha, a father-figure to David and a friend to Nathan. You’re concerned over his continued success as a writer, and you are both eagerly awaiting the phone call from Fred’s agent as to whether his newest book will be picked up.

Samantha Kessenich - Your daughter and pride and joy. She’s going to Yale this fall and graduated as valedictorian of her high school class while being a star basketball player. You only wish she’d get back together with the nice neighbor boy Nathan, your best friend’s son.

Brittany Oswald - The new second floor apartment tenant. She’s a little younger than you and seems to do alright for herself, keeping the apartment clean and paying her rent on time. She gets along well with Sam and it’s nice for Sam to have a girlfriend close by. You’ve noticed there seems to be some tension between her, Anthony and Eleanor whenever they’ve happened upon each other in passing, and you wonder why that may be.

Charles Lee - Your neighbor, and the husband of your best friend Margaret. They haven’t been getting along well, and you’re concerned about his inappropriate behavior towards Brittany lately.

Margaret Lee - Your neighbor and best friend; you raised your children together and are very

close. You're concerned over her deteriorating relationship and her desire to get pregnant without informing Charles.

Nathan Lee - Charles' and Margaret's son, and your daughter Sam's former boyfriend. He's a wonderful boy and you'd love for the two of them to get back together. You respect that Nathan is openly bi and broke up with Sam to explore his sexuality, but you hope he'll come back to her soon enough.

Items

Mortgage letter

First Bank of New Jersey

July 13, 2013

Mr. Fred Kessenich
and Ms. Jennifer Kessenich
23 Jenny Jump Road
Hope, NJ 07844

Mr. and Ms. Kessenich:

This letter serves to inform you that you are 90 days delinquent in your loan payment. Your current amount owed is $7,500, with $5,000 in arrears. You have 30 days to repay the full $7,500. After that time, we will initiate proceedings to foreclose and resell your property for the remaining balance on your loan.

We appreciate your business and thank you for choosing the First Bank of New Jersey.

Yours truly,

James Wilcox, Esq.

JW/gt

Margaret Lee

Age: Almost 39 (from the wrong direction)
Gender: Female

History

You were (barely) still in college when you met Charles. You were studying accounting; he was a business major -- so the numbers added up, plus, he was charming, and studious, and smart. Not to mention the fact that you were in love with him, and less than a year older. You kept up your courtship after graduation -- taking a job nearby and spending time with him every day.

So, after he'd graduated, you married, and it wasn't long before you became pregnant. New York was a great place to work, but no place to raise a family. Hope, NJ, on the other hand, seemed perfect.

The neighbors -- Fred and Jennifer Kessenich, and Anthony and Eleanor Rossi, were very welcoming -- and Jennifer was also pregnant, so you had quite a lot to talk about. When you went into the hospital, Jennifer also went into labor shortly after -- and they put you in adjacent recovery beds. And that's how Nathan -- your darling Nathan -- first met his lifelong friend, Samantha Kessenich.

Nathan and Samantha were as close as two kids could be. They did everything together. Eleanor's grandchild, David, who is less than a year younger than your son, was always hanging out with them too, but Nathan and Samantha were special, and the neighbors were welcoming, inviting you into their monthly barbecue parties.

Charles's banking career was enough to support you, so you quit your job to take care of Nathan for the first couple of years. But as fulfilling as motherhood is, it wasn't enough for you forever -- as soon as Nathan was old enough not to be taking up all your time, you started your own accounting business, juggling numbers in both hands while juggling Nathan on our knee (figuratively -- usually). You both wanted to have another child after Nathan, but you knew you needed to keep on working -- you've talked of your desires for a larger family, but while you made sure someone was always home for Nathan, between your self-employment and the travel both of your jobs required, it was never the right time. (Of course, now he's old enough that he can make his own dinner, if need be.)

The thing is, accounting, for you, isn't just a matter of self-worth and bringing in money. It's an obligation. You were good, but you couldn't have gotten a full scholarship. And your parents certainly didn't have enough money to pay your way through college. But your father had friends -- powerful friends, with big pockets, who needed an accountant who, let's say, could keep their legal businesses separate from their illegal ones. And naturally, once you were on your feet again, they wanted some return for their investment.

So yes, you're an accountant for the Mafia. Not that you call them that out loud -- ever -- but doing their books means knowing quite a lot about their business, so you know exactly what you're doing and who you're working for. They aren't your only clients, of course -- you also manage money for the Rossi Furniture Company, owned by Anthony Rossi, for instance -- but they've always been good to you, and under their patronage, you have become very, very good at coming up with favorable and "correct" numbers for various interesting situations.

Not even Charles knows about your Mob connections. But you trust him, and always have -- enough to have him log into your computer and send you files whenever you're on site and need something you didn't think to bring on occasion.

That has become, unfortunately, a lot easier recently. Charles's bank was bought out nearly three years ago and he was doing well enough that he was found redundant. This is understandable -- he was a victim of his own success. But rather than jump back into the workforce, Charles has languished. At first, he was sending out five applications a week -- still not enough, you thought, and it wasn't. But since then, it's declined -- you don't think he's sent out a single application in the last five months. Instead, he's taken to trading stock (and not always successfully) and languishing at home. You've covered too many of his losses, and it hasn't always been easy. (The money problems cause the worst fights.) Something has to change -- you rarely argue, but you rarely talk, and while you seldom have time to talk, Charles seems often too depressed. You order a lot of takeout.

It must be your fault. You simply aren't motivating enough for Charles to do his best. You have tried to have another child -- you are both still young enough -- and Charles might find himself motivated to make something of himself again if you were unable to work again for a while -- plus another child young enough to need his help might rekindle his spirit.

However, despite your efforts (and you've done your best) you've yet to have any luck. There's been a lot of intense, angry sex, late at night, and you've been off birth control for quite a while now. As of yesterday, the home pregnancy test said you were definitely not pregnant. Jennifer is a good friend, and you've often talked about the whole situation with Charles and your desire for another child. She isn't sure that your marriage would be rekindled by a child -- and she's right that Charles would likely get better if he had a job. But that's something he has to do for himself.

Of course, it's possible that Charles would be able to find some motivation in Nathan if he could reconcile himself to who Nathan is. Nathan and Samantha were best friends since they were little kids--only natural, since they were born so close together, and "dating" since they were in second grade. It was very sweet, and you had fond ideas of them getting married once they were old enough. That ended when Nathan broke up with Samantha early in high school. He made sure that everyone knew that he was interested in boys as well as girls -- and Charles and he had a big shouting match. They've not been talking much since -- and while you're fine with Nathan being with whoever he likes as long as he's happy and works hard, you know Charles has never reconciled himself to Nathan's sexuality -- and still hopes that he'll get together with Samantha again.

Still, whenever you argue -- or even when you don't -- there's your accounting business. Your "special" clients are what they are, of course. Among your ordinary, legitimate business clients, the Rossis are ideal. Their business is clean, and simple enough that you never begrudge the time it takes, but still lucrative. Still, you do need to get sign-offs on various things at times -- and today you have a few forms that you need a signature on. You've brought them to the barbecue.

The barbecue has become a neighborhood tradition. The three families -- you, the Kessenichs, and the Rossis alternate hosting; there are seasonally appropriate games, and then there's the friendly competition you have with Eleanor over the desserts. Despite the burden of your career, you always make sure to make something appropriate -- and like anything else in your life, you play to win. Eleanor has won the last two competitions -- and it is imperative that she does not win the next one. After all, you have your pride! If only Charles had as much. You're going to have to talk to him again.

Charles drove out alone this morning -- without even a word; what is going -on- in that man's head? You had to call him to make sure he would arrive home in time to be ready for the party -- and even then, you were almost late! How could he do this to you?

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue.
* You're the next family to host the barbecue, so you're going to have to get Charles to think about what you're going to do.
* Fix the problems in your marriage.
* Win the pie competition. Failing that, make sure Eleanor does not win the pie competition again.
* Make sure your mob connections aren't exposed.
* Make sure Nathan knows you support him.
* Make sure that Anthony Rossi signature goes on the tax forms you've brought for him. (Usually you go to Eleanor to do this.)
* Get pregnant.

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony: A good client. His business employs Nathan, but Nathan's going to want to move to a non-family business if he's to become his own man.

Eleanor: A friend, but you want to make sure her head doesn't get too big.

David: David stopped hanging around as much with Samantha and Nathan after they announced that they were dating in second grade, although they all remained friends. But lately he's been spending more time with Nathan -- hopefully they're becoming better friends again.

Jennifer: Your best friend. She's planning to try to get more control of the family business, and you think she may have money troubles.

Samantha: Nathan's best friend, and for seven years, his girlfriend. You like her and thinks she's good for Nathan, and they're still quite close after the breakup.

Items

Tax forms

Nathan Lee

Age: 17
Gender: male

History

Life can be difficult for a half-Chinese bisexual kid in Hope, New Jersey.

You've known Samantha (your neighbor) since you were... well, technically since before you were born; as your mom (Margaret) likes to remind you of *all the time*, "You know Jennifer and I shared a recovery room in the Obstetrics wing". You used to have playdates with her and David Rossi (the Kessenich's other next-door neighbors) back in elementary school. Your parents both traveled a lot for business, and though there would always be someone home while you were growing up, you'd often go to one of David or Sam's houses for dinner. You're the only person who's allowed to call her Sam instead of Samantha, and she's the only one who can call you Nate. She was your first "girlfriend" back in second grade, and while the nature of the relationship changed over time, you didn't really stop dating her until the end of your freshman year.

The breakup was amicable; you've always been close friends before anything else, and when you came out and she skipped a grade, you both decided that it was for the best. She was distant at first, but after a few weeks things felt comfortable again. Coming out was much easier than you'd expected; it took a few months for you to come to terms with yourself, but you were eventually ready to tell people. First to Sam and your friends and then, eventually, to your parents. They could have taken it worse. Mom (Margaret) actually gave you a hug and said, "as long as you're happy, so am I." Dad (Charles) shouted a bit about that not being something you talk about and it will kill grandma and how inappropriate that is, so since then you haven't talked with him, about that or much else of substance.

About that time, you started working at Rossi Furniture Company in town. The Rossis have owned the store since before you were born, and you enjoy the job. You go over there after school most days to deliver furniture, help with the paperwork, and generally keep the store. Lately, Eleanor has been giving you jobs where you're both supervising other workers and making bigger decisions. Added to her making noises about retiring soon, you wonder if she's trying to groom you as a successor. That would be kind of odd, since her grandson David Rossi is also one of your coworkers, and at 17, you're not sure you're ready to run even a small company, but you can't say David is any readier.

Oh, David Rossi. Beautiful, complicated David Rossi, who you had a crush on after the first day at the store. It took you a few months, but in October of last year you couldn't stand it anymore and had to tell him how you felt. You weren't actually expecting him to reciprocate, and in fact, at first he didn't. But a few days later he came up to you at lunch and asked to speak to you in private. Tearfully, he confessed that he had feelings for you as well, and begged you not to tell

anyone. You agreed, of course, and have been dating since then. He's since come out to one other person, his basketball coach, who also happens to be Sam's father Fred, but he still doesn't want anyone else to know. You lost your virginity to each other a few months after you started dating (you'd fooled around with Samantha, but it had never gotten that far with her). It's a bit complicated, sneaking around and making sure no-one notices, but David can sneak into your room through the window, so it's not that hard.

Things have been pretty tense at home for a few years now. Dad used to be a banker but was laid off three years ago and became a day trader, and since then, he and mom have been fighting a lot. You think dad's not making much and mom's bringing in most of the money with her accounting business. They try to keep it from you, but when dad eats take-out in front of the TV most nights and mom orders separately, takes it into her office, and locks the door, it's not that hard to figure out what's going on. It was nice at first to have dad home much more often, but the tension has been getting worse and harder to bear.

Sam and David have both been very supportive, and it's actually made dates with David easier. Sam's getting ready to go to Yale; you'll be sad to miss her, but you're excited for her, and you've promised to stay in touch. Not telling Sam about David has been difficult, but he really doesn't want you to. You're sure she'd be fine about it, but you don't want to betray David's confidence. Or at least, you're sure she would have been fine with it if she'd found out before that one weekend a month and a half ago.

Dinner had been particularly tense that Friday. You started thinking your parents would get divorced. You called David for support, but when he came over it turned into a fight when you pushed him about being able to tell your parents about him. The next day you called Sam up and invited her over to watch a movie. You were sitting on your bed watching Friday the 13th, which you'd always meant to show her. She was snuggled up to you, and with your parents both out of the house until quite late, one thing eventually led to another. You were tired and upset, and when you woke up the next morning, you felt horrible, both about cheating on David and about being Sam's first. Things have been really awkward since then between you and Sam; you've barely even spoken. But you also realized how much David meant to you. You love Sam, and she'll always be a close friend, but David is your world, and you've never felt about anyone the way you do about him. You want to spend the rest of your life with him. Since then, you've been trying to work up the nerve to tell him what happened. You've decided that the best way to handle it is to both tell him that you want to get married and confess your infidelity. Having someone to talk about this with would be really helpful, which is why you're considering asking Fred Kessenich for help.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue.
* Approach Mr. Kessenich for advice about proposing to David. Are you supposed to buy him a ring? Can you propose before he comes out to his parents?
* Convince David to come out. You want to be supportive, but you're having a harder and harder time keeping the relationship a secret, and you want to be able to ask his parents' permission before proposing.
* Decide whether you want to accept Eleanor's offer to groom you to take over the business.

What you think of the neighbors

The Rossis - Eleanor and Anthony are nice, and good employers and sort of foster grandparents. Anthony's been coming into work less often lately, and has been moving more slowly when he is around. You hope he's okay. David has lived with them since his parents left. You're pretty sure his grandparents would be okay with him being gay, but you also don't want to pressure him. You know he's been researching his family history for Fred's book, though he hasn't talked to you much about what he's found.

The Kessenichs - Fred is a writer and a basketball coach at the school. You've never been particularly close with him, but he's the only one you can talk to about David, and you need to talk to someone. Jennifer is your mom's very good friend, and is also Anthony's sister. She and Eleanor have been like foster mothers to you, though recently you haven't seen them much apart from the monthly barbecue; when you and Sam hang out it's been at your place, and you haven't hung out with Sam since the night you slept together.

Brittany Oswald - The Kessenichs have recently taken in a tenant in their second-floor apartment. She's about the same age as your parents, and you haven't really gotten a chance to get to know her well.

Samantha Kessenich

Age: 17
Gender: female

History

Ever since you were a kid, your family's been getting together with the neighbors for these friendly monthly barbecues. Your neighbors to the left, the Rossi's, have been in the neighborhood the longest; they're also your aunt and uncle (Anthony Rossi is your mother Jennifer's older brother) and have run your late grandfather's furniture business since before you were born. Their grandson David, your second-cousin, has been your good friend since you were kids. The Lees, your neighbors to the right who do the books for the Rossi's business, arrived shortly before you and their son Nathan were born. You've lived in the little town of Hope, New Jersey all your life - you've been here forever... on the same street, with the same people, doing the same old routine. Well, until now. As much as you love your friends and family here, you'd been growing impatient with this boring old town, wishing something new and exciting would happen in your life. Perhaps you should've been more careful of what you wished for.

Being a precocious student (and fluent in English, French, and German), your efforts were rewarded with an early acceptance letter to Yale University right before you graduated high school as valedictorian. No one from Hope had ever gotten into such a prestigious school, so you've been the pride of the town - and your family - ever since. You were sad thinking about leaving your home and your best friends with whom you've grown up, but you were excited to start this new chapter in your life this fall. Since the news, your parents have awkwardly done their best to brush off the impact of the financial burden your education is going to cause them, particularly with money being tight as it is. Your dad's still waiting to hear about his recent book deal, and your mom's been between jobs for months. They won't really talk to you about it, but you felt guilty for your part in the family struggles. So, you took matters into your own hands to at least earn some money for your books and fees.

For a few months now, you've been getting Oxycontin pills from a schoolmate and have been selling them to your uncle Anthony Rossi to help with his pain from his worsening arthritis, telling him you're getting them from your school nurse for your basketball injuries. You haven't told anyone else of course; you don't want to think about what would happen if you were found out. And besides, it's been a little bit of a thrill to counter your otherwise routine life. But this morning when you went to bag the next oxy delivery for your uncle Anthony, you realized it was missing from your backpack -- holy crap, did someone steal it? Did you drop it and lose it somewhere?? If someone finds out you've been selling oxy, your Yale plans could go up in smoke and you could end up behind bars. And what will you tell poor uncle Anthony at the barbecue??

And speaking of the Yale plans, now you've got another growing bump in the road. You found out a few days ago that you're pregnant, and now you don't know what to do - you've only told

one person, your parents' new tenant Brittany Oswald whom you consider a friend. You haven't known her very long, but she seemed very "solid" - like she'd be good in an emergency. You were terrified when you saw the 'positive' on the pregnancy test after your missed period; you ran up to Brittany's 2nd floor apartment in your home and banged on her door, crying. You showed her the test and sobbed into her shoulder and asked her for help. Brittany was understanding but not overly supportive, just calmly telling you that "it'll be OK" and "there are lots of options." You didn't tell her who the father is, but you did ask her to take your pregnancy test kit and throw it out in someone else's garbage can during her morning jog so that your parents don't accidentally find it.

The father is your lifelong love and still close friend Nate. You've had feelings for Nate for as long as you can remember. Since you were babies you've seen each other practically every day; your mothers even delivered you in the same hospital in the same week. You're so close that he's the only one who can call you Sam, and only you call him Nate. Nate was your second-grade 'boyfriend' and since then you dated him until freshman year of high school, holding hands in the hallways and kissing after school. You broke up fairly amicably after Nathan told you he'd realized he is bisexual and wanted to explore these feelings more, and besides you were about to skip a grade ahead to junior and wouldn't have any more classes together and even less time for him anyway. You'd had this fantasy that you and Nate would be together forever, so for a while it was a hard transition to just-friends and going back to your friendship triangle with him and David - but over the last few years you've managed it ok.

However, about six weeks ago on a Saturday night Nate called you, sounding upset about his parents fighting but not wanting to discuss it further, and asked if you could just come over and hang out. You went, and found yourself in Nathan's room watching 'Friday the 13th' while his parents were out. You got scared and without thinking snuggled up close to Nathan, who put his arms around you... one thing led to another, and you had sex for the first time. You cuddled briefly afterwards, having to leave to get back home before the Lees returned and your own parents suspected anything.

If you had to lose your virginity to anyone, your first love and close lifelong friend is who you'd have wanted to do it with, particularly as you haven't dated anyone since him what with being busy with school and basketball. But, now what?? You're not sure how you feel about Nate, whether you should or want to get back together with him especially if you're going to be having a child. There were certainly those same old sparks there when you and Nate cuddled and made love, and you feel like you could readily go back to having those feelings for him if it was to be mutual. Since that night though, you've tried to get him to talk about what it meant but he's shied away, so you went along and pretended like it was nothing, trying to go back to normal; you were going off to Yale soon after all and leaving him behind. But now that you're carrying his baby, how do you tell him and how will he react? Will he want to be with you again and have your child together, and do YOU want to be with HIM? And what about Yale - you can't exactly have a baby in the middle of your freshman year! Does this mean you'll be staying in Hope and forgoing your ticket out that you'd worked so hard to earn, or are there other options? Either way, you'd better figure it out real fast.

Meanwhile, parallel to your friendship with Nate, since the breakup you started to spend more time with your other best friend and second-cousin David, although in recent months you've noticed he's been kind of aloof with you as though there's been something wrong. He's had a tough life, being adopted by his grandparents (your aunt and uncle) after his parents left. He hasn't been willing to talk about it with you, nor does he seem to know what to say when you share your feelings about Nate with him, and you respect all that... but still, you'd really like to know what's been going on recently with your lifelong friend. You haven't seen him in a while, but since he's here at the barbecue it might be a good time to approach him again, and maybe you can tell him your secret. You could really use some advice, and not just from Brittany's vague platitudes - although you've already confided in her, so if you approach her again maybe she'll be more helpful this time.

Goals

* Have a good time at the barbecue. This may be the last one you'll be able to attend due to your upcoming orientation at Yale.
* Confront Nathan about the pregnancy. Where are you going to go from here??
* Decide what you're going to do about the pregnancy. Will you still be able to go to Yale, or drop all your plans for this baby? Maybe you can talk to Brittany again and ask for advice.
* Catch up with David - what's been going on with him anyway?
* What happened to the missing Oxycontin for your uncle Anthony? If someone finds it and traces it back to you, you could be in serious trouble.

What you think of the neighbors

Anthony Rossi - Your uncle on your mom's side. You sell him Oxycontin to help him with his arthritis pain, and to help yourself with fees for Yale. You're worried about his health and wondering what's going on with the furniture business as a result.

Eleanor Rossi - Your aunt. She really likes Nathan, who works for Rossi Furniture along with David. She seems nice enough but she can be a tough lady to butt heads with.

David Rossi - Your other best friend next to Nate, and your basketball buddy. You grew up together and have always been close, but lately he's been more distant and you'd like to know why.

Fred Kessenich - Your father and former co-ed basketball coach. Mostly harmless. He's a writer who's trying to get his new book published and stays at home a lot (unfortunately), which is why you often go to Nate's or David's to hang out. He loves you and you love him back, but isn't what you'd call a 'hands-on' dad. In fact, he spends almost more time with Nate and especially David than he does with you. You don't know how you'd tell him about your pregnancy or how he'd react.

Jennifer Kessenich - Your mother, who is also mostly harmless - though it annoys you every time she tries to be 'the cool mom' and calls you Sam. Dammit, only Nate can call you that!! She's been home a lot too since she was laid off from her job as a librarian, and you sense she's been pretty miserable about being unemployed; although like the family's financial issues, she's very reluctant to talk to you about it. You don't know how you'd tell her about your pregnancy or how she'd react.

Brittany Oswald - The new second floor apartment tenant. She's about 20 years older than you, and you consider her enough of a friend that you confided in her a few days ago when you found out you were pregnant. She doesn't know who the father is and wasn't overly supportive, but maybe talking to her more will prove helpful.

Charles Lee - Nate's father; he likes you just fine, but every time you visit you've been increasingly sensing that things don't seem quite right with the family. What's going on?

Margaret Lee - Nate's mother. She loves you like family and seems to always be trying to nudge you and Nate back together.

Nathan Lee - Your best friend and boyfriend for years until you broke up over his need to explore his emerging bisexuality. You're still close despite your history, although Nate's been distant since you two hooked up 6 weeks ago.