

## Breaking Up With My Mother

By Matthew K. Weiland

Characters:     *Matthew (mid-40s)*                     *Sally (70-ish)*

IN THE DARKNESS

The sound of an approaching car on an otherwise empty highway, speeding at about 80 miles per hour.

FADE IN-EXT-EARLY EVENING

Looking slightly upward from a tree-lined meridian, an approaching sedan comes into view accelerating across Interstate-80 through middle Pennsylvania going west into the dusk.

CUT TO

Rear shot of the car continuing into the distance down the road toward the lowering darkness.

OVER-MATTHEW'S NARRATION.

MATTHEW'S NARRATION

The day my dad died I drove home from New York to be with my mom and my sisters and their families and we all sat together and handed each other Kleenex and prepared to go coffin shopping the next morning at McGorrys...

CUT TO-EXT-KING JAMES NORTH CONDOMINIUM DEVELOPMENT-NIGHT

The car pulls into the King James North development in suburban Westlake, two six-floor condominiums surrounded by individual houses, an indoor pool complex and a pond with a fountain, all lit-up in the darkness, the car eventually pulling into a parking spot.

OVER-MATTHEW'S NARRATION.

MATTHEW'S NARRATION

...That night, after my sisters and their husbands and the kids have all gone home, an hour or so after my mom has gone to bed, I check in on her...

CUT TO-INT-SALLY'S BEDROOM DOORWAY-NIGHT

MATTHEW appears in the shadows of the doorway.

CUT TO

Sally's in her bed, lying on her side away from the door.

CUT TO

MATTHEW looking, listening to see if she's awake, before turning to walk out.

SALLY

Matthew?

MATTHEW

Yeah, Ma?

(Pause.)

SALLY

Come lay next to me?

CLOSE-IN ON MATTHEW'S FACE -HOLDING

MATTHEW processes what he's just heard, briefly looking at the camera for effect.

*BEGIN TITLES: The Collective-NY presents...*

CAMERA BEGINS PULLING BACK FROM MATTHEW'S FACE AS IF RETURNING FROM MEMORY

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

INT-SALLY'S LIVING ROOM-AFTERNOON-PRESENT DAY-THE FOLLOWING SPRING.

MATTHEW is surveying the living room.

*TITLES CONTINUE.*

PAN ACROSS THE ROOM

The living room is teeming with the chaos of comfy clutter: afgans and pillows, folded towels and folded clothes, unopened mail, and rolling mounds of glossy catalogues. Most notably there are – on hangers and in two or three boxes – men's clothes – shirts, pants, etc. – all cleaned and pressed and ready for packing off.

CUT TO

MATTHEW staring at the shirts on the hangers until finally resting his gaze on a blue suit coat hanging on the hook inside a closet door, fresh in dry-cleaning plastic wrap.

CUT TO

A large post-it note, with the words "JIM's / for MATT" in SALLY's handwriting, taped to the front.

CUT TO

MATTHEW takes the hanger off the hook then the dry-cleaning pastic wrap up off the suit coat then the suit coat off the hanger.

CUT TO

MATTHEW holds the suit coat up in front of him. He then puts it on and looks at himself in a hallway mirror. It fits him nearly perfectly.

CLOSE-IN

MATTHEW continues looking at himself in the mirror, looking at his face, casually reaching his hands into the pockets and discovering in one an envelope.

CUT TO

The envelope, the name 'MATTHEW', written in SALLY's script, emblazoned across the front.

CUT TO

Matthew's irked response at seeing the envelope in his hand.

CUT TO

MATTHEW takes the suit coat off, returning it to the hanger, then returning the suit coat to the closet door, gripping the envelope in his hand.

CUT TO

MATTHEW gets a handful of empty hangers out of the closet and begins re-hanging up pants and shirts.

CUT TO

SALLY enters through the front door, carrying yet another armful of shirts. SHE is startled by MATTHEW standing there.

*TITLES CONCLUDE*

SALLY

Oh! God-damnit. (Catching her breath) – (Flatly.) I thought it was your father standing there. – How'd it go?

MATTHEW

(Referring to the boxes.) What's with this?

SALLY

It's exactly what it looks like. – How did it go?

MATTHEW

I don't know. Not well.

CUT TO

SALLY searches for then hands MATTHEW a specific shirt.

SALLY

Here. Try this on.

MATTHEW

No thank you.

SALLY

They're all fairly new...

CUT TO

SALLY approaches MATTHEW and holds it up as if to measure it beside him.

SALLY

...They should just about fit you.

CUT TO

MATTHEW stepping away.

MATTHEW

How many times I gotta say, No? – Jesus. – I promise you, I will never wear these.

SALLY

They might be good for interviews.

MATTHEW

No.

SALLY

Then I'm taking 'em down to the St. Vincent De Paul. Whatever you don't want, I'm giving away.

MATTHEW

Why? Why this great rush? Can't we just... keep things intact for a time?

SALLY

Seven months is time enough intact. What am I saving them for?

MATTHEW

I don't know, it just...Still seems a little fresh. I mean, don't you think – ?

CUT TO

SALLY holds out another shirt.

SALLY

Here. Try this one.

MATTHEW

I'm not trying it on! – Ma, don't you think – ?

SALLY

– I think I'm doing what I need to do. And I think you need to worry about the same yourself. Why didn't it go well?

CUT TO

MATTHEW picks up a handful of catalogues strewn at his feet.

MATTHEW

But we're saving these?

CUT TO

SALLY continues sorting through shirts.

SALLY

Why didn't it go well?

MATTHEW

But we're saving these?! Every catalogue traveling over the transom? – But dad's clothes, they have to be exiled? Today? I mean, Jesus – *This* is what's important? – Getting rid of *his* stuff? How about your shit? How about getting rid of the flea market of tchotchkes? Or putting the clean towels away? How about watering the plants? I mean, Christ, we're running a hospice for house plants! – But *this*! This is vital: Packing off dad's stuff to clear out some closet space.

SALLY

This is my home.

MATTHEW

*You're ruining my Fen Shui!* How am I supposed to get my game together when there's this-this continual...churn of bedlam? – No regimen. No routine. Just... Eternal entropy and-and-and perpetual pandemonium! – You're chaos infects me, too, you know! All these catalogue swamps. Advertising all this glossy consumption! It's sinful!

SALLY

This is my home.

MATTHEW

How long you gonna play that card?

SALLY

Why didn't it go well? What did they say?

MATTHEW

They said they'd get back to me. – What, it's all on me?

SALLY

Well?

MATTHEW

It not my fault times are tight. Or that I get the stink-eye from human resources. I don't know. What do you want from me?

CUT TO

SALLY. Who doesn't say anything.

CUT TO

MATTHEW

It's not like I'm not trying.

SALLY

I didn't say anything.

MATTHEW

Actually, you did.

CUT TO

SALLY gestures toward the suit jacket on the open closet door.

SALLY

Do you wear a blazer to interviews?

MATTHEW

No. I don't.

SALLY

You might at least try it on.

MATTHEW

I feel constricted.

SALLY

– It's not always about how you *feel*.

MATTHEW

It feels like I'm wrapped in Saran.

SALLY

– I'm just saying, it matters to some people. People who hire.

MATTHEW

Ma, you know how many gigs I've gone after since coming back? – I'm trying. And it can't be all because I'm not wearing a blazer.

SALLY

Maybe the time has come to quit looking for 'gigs' and to find a 'job'. – I'm sorry. I just... Look, if you don't want any of these, then we're getting rid of all of it.

CUT TO

MATTHEW holds up the letter in his hand.

MATTHEW

What's with this?

SALLY

Have you read it?

MATTHEW

I have no intention of reading it. What is it?

SALLY

Some things I feel the need for you to hear. About your anger. About you getting your life together. About finding work and paying me the money you owe me.

MATTHEW

Then just say it to me!

SALLY

Relax your tone.

MATTHEW

Then just say it to me. – Don't write me notes and hide them in coat pockets.

SALLY

Okay. – It says I think you might need to readjust your sights.

CUT TO

MATTHEW. Who doesn't say anything.

SALLY

Matthew, you know I'm on your side. That I root for you more than anyone –

MATTHEW

– You know, Ma, I've tried taking the road less traveled – Just like everyone said to –

SALLY

– Maybe it's time for some proven avenues... You know, there's no shame in... in... In not aiming so high for... I don't know. Whatever it is you're aiming for. Sometimes you have to adjust.

MATTHEW

This is how you root for me? Encouraging me to aim toward middling?

SALLY

Middling would be delightful right now.

CUT TO

MATTHEW. Who doesn't say anything.

SALLY

Maybe it's just time to consider other options. Or another... I don't know, 'destiny'?... Something.

MATTHEW

I don't have other options! – You know what? Fine. Whatever. Done. – But just say it to me! Don't write me notes. Quit putting prayer cards in my pockets. – I'll tell you what: I'll 'readjust *my* sights'. And you readjust yours. Quit looking at me with that... that longing... and yearning... and that-that-that... sad, sad gawp!

SALLY

Excuse me?

MATTHEW

Quit seeing me as him. – I know, I get it. I'm the last man standing. Fine. But God, the inconsolable loneliness of every hour. Quit putting it on me. And quit giving me the gawp. This is hard on me, too, you know! All of it!

SALLY

Gawp?.

MATTHEW

Don't act like you don't. – I mean, Christ, I get it. *I* hear the sounds of his keys in my pocket. See his arms coming out of my shirt sleeves. I clear my throat, it's his phlegm. – Then you, wanting to dress me up like some Dapper Dan in his blazers and cardigans.

SALLY

You're the one who wants to put it in a tabernacle. *I'm* getting rid of it!

MATTHEW

The clothes aren't – They're just... atmosphere. They're not hurting anyone. –

SALLY

It's hurts me to see his clothes around..



MATTHEW

Oh, Jesus. No one suffers more than you. – You know, Ma, I think about Dad every day. And I miss him. Wish he were here. But you, you let it define you. The sadness. The endless void. The so-loneliness. Talking about him incessantly. Canonizing him. This hagiography surrounding Saint Dad. – And then you look at me like I'm... You sit there looking at me like you're waiting for me to say, 'Let's go grocery shopping.' Or, 'Let's go for a walk.' Or, 'Let's drive up to Marblehead.' This isn't the Jim and Sally hour anymore. I'm sorry. But you keep looking at me like it is.

SALLY

Then why do you care if I get rid of everything?

MATTHEW

I don't know! – Because I like the look of his clothes still around. And I can't help but think that maybe if we got rid of all this other *shit*, we could pack his stuff neatly away so it wouldn't intrude on our...on this 'transition'. But no chance! Instead we're swallowed up by all your comfy, cozy infinite indulgence and instant gratification! I can't deal with it!

SALLY

I don't care. I can't worry about your inability to deal with life. I have to worry about my own.

CUT TO

MATTHEW holding up the letter in his clenched fist.

MATTHEW

I can't deal with this!

SALLY

Lower. Your. Voice.

MATTHEW

NO! I won't lower my voice! Don't write me any more letters!

CUT TO

SALLY finishes packing a couple of boxes and prepares to take them down to her car.

SALLY

I'm done listening to your lip.

CUT TO

MATTHEW

Then listen to this! Your letters? They drove Dad nuts. All your hectoring. Whining. Ambushing. He told me. Didn't even bother reading 'em. Told me one day when I was, what, seventeen? – In fact, he said to me, 'If you ever repeat this I'll call you a liar to your face.' He said that to me. – And he told me, 'I don't even open the envelopes. I find 'em in my jacket at work and toss 'em right in the dumpster.' –

CLOSE-IN

MATTHEW further crushes the envelope in his hand, throwing it across the room.

MATTHEW

– And you, every day, sticking another ambush letter in a different pocket! You drove me nuts with this shit! Drive all of us nuts! You and your Goddamn letters!

CUT TO

SALLY stands for a moment, absorbs the thrust, then quietly puts on her coat.

SALLY

I need you to start making payments on the money you owe me. This month.

(Pause)

MATTHEW

Ma – I didn't mean it like that –

CUT TO

SALLY hoists the boxes into her arms and readies to leave.

SALLY

Like what?

CUT TO

MATTHEW. Who says nothing for a moment.

MATTHEW

I'm sorry.

SALLY

Don't apologize. Just...Pay me the money you owe me.

CUT TO

SALLY opens the door and begins to exit.

MATTHEW

Ma –

SALLY

What.

MATTHEW

I didn't mean to say that. I'm really sorry.

SALLY

I don't care if you're sorry.

CLOSE-IN

SALLY begins to exit, then stops.

SALLY

I miss your father so much, I could crawl into that bed in there and never get out of it. I feel paralyzed. All the time. It's all I can do to brush my teeth. You think you can remedy or replace that? Or that I would ever want you to? Just...pay me the money you owe me. And start thinking of a plan. I need you to move on. Preferably sooner than later.

SALLY exits, closing the door behind her.

CUT TO

MATTHEW, who stands a moment, angry with himself.

CUT TO

HE goes after the crushed letter, picks it up, and tries creasing out the crumple.

CUT TO

MATTHEW approaches the closet door and looks at the blue blazer. He reaches toward it, then in behind it, taking out a hanger on which there is an old, red, beaten, autumn jacket, one of his dad's favored casual coats.

CLOSE-IN ON

MATTHEW takes the old autumn jacket from the hanger and tries it on. He smells the collar as he looks at himself in the hallway mirror. It too fits perfectly.

OVER-MATTHEW'S NARRATION.

MATTHEW'S NARRATION

I was 44 years old living in New York the day my dad died and I drove home to be with my mom and my sisters and their families and we all sat together and handed each other Kleenex and prepared to go coffin shopping the next morning at McGorrys...

CLOSE-IN ON

MATTHEW reaches into the pockets, setting the items he finds out on a table – all the half-finished things from his father's last days: A set of keys. A half-pack of Parliaments with a book of matches. A dollar thirty-eight in change. A pack of Certs...

MATTHEW takes one of the Certs and puts it in his mouth...

FADE OUT

MATTHEW'S NARRATION

...That night, after my sisters and their husbands and the kids have all gone home, an hour or so after my mom has gone to bed, I check in on her...

FADE IN

BACK TO-INT-SALLY'S BEDROOM DOORWAY-NIGHT

MATTHEW is in the shadows of the doorway, looking, listening to see if she's awake, before turning to walk out.

SALLY

Matthew?

MATTHEW

Yeah, Ma?

PAUSE

SALLY

Come lay next to me?

CLOSE-IN ON MATTHEW'S FACE-HOLDING

MATTHEW processes what he's just heard.

MATTHEW

Okay.

CUT TO

MATTHEW walks toward her bed feeling as though he is six.

CUT TO

SALLY slides over and MATTHEW crawls in beside her, into the warmth of the sheets and her pillow case wet with tears.

CLOSE-IN ON

MATTHEW lies beside SALLY and cradles her head on his shoulder and chest.

OVER-MATTHEW'S NARRATION.

MATTHEW'S NARRATION

And as I lie beside my mom, I can sense her listening for his beating heart – My dad's heart, the last time she's able to listen to it and hold some semblance of him so close to her. The last incarnation of the him in me, a synthesis of hearts echoing her father's and her brother's and now her husband...

SALLY

What am I gonna do?

MATTHEW

I don't know. But I guess we'll figure it out.

THE SCENE FADES TO DARKNESS.

THERE RISES THE SOUND OF A CAFÉ.

MATTHEW is heard speaking.

MATTHEW

...So anyways, I was thinking about maybe giving it a go.

FADE-IN ON MATTHEW

MATTHEW

Telling our tale. Writing it up...I don't know...Maybe calling it, 'Dumping My Son.'

CUT TO

SALLY, looking at MATTHEW a bit quizzically.

SALLY

Who did this?

MATTHEW

What do you mean, Who did this? I'm talking about us. Writing about our...About this. Our dynamic. The night dad died. Us living together.

CUT TO

SALLY. Who pauses.

SALLY

We did that?

CUT TO

MATTHEW

Are you kidding me? Who'd make that up?

PAUSE

MATTHEW

It was only the most defining moment of my life. My call to arms. (Pauses to see if something registers.) You have got to be kidding me.

CUT TO

SALLY smiles.

SALLY

I'm sorry. I just don't remember that.

CUT TO

MATTHEW, who looks at her for a moment then looks at the camera.

CUT TO

Sally smiling, oblivious, sympathetic.

FADE OUT

End.