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The Adventures of James Tully

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE ADVENTURES OF JAMES TULLY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Joseph Alan Lapin

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Joseph Alan Lapin, and entitled *The Adventures of James Tully*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Campbell McGrath

Michael Gillespie

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2011

The thesis of Joseph Alan Lapin is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Kevin O'Shea
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my brother, Jason Lapin.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
THE ADVENTURES OF JAMES TULLY

by

Joseph Alan Lapin

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

THE ADVENTURES OF JAMES TULLY is a novel in stories depicting James Tully's experience growing up in the light of his mother's mental illness and the discovery that his family has secrets important to his understanding of himself. After trying to negotiate these difficulties in his working class home town of Clinton, Massachusetts, he embarks on a search for the place where he really belongs. THE ADVENTURES OF JAMES TULLY spans the protagonist's life from the age of ten through the period following his graduation from college at twenty-one. The book is divided into three sections.

As is typical in the bildungsroman form, the protagonist is a young man who forsakes his home in the search for experience and spiritual enlightenment. Ultimately, James builds a new sense of self as he moves from seeing his world as horrible and frightening to finding in it the promise of beauty.

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**Section 1:
The Blood Tie**

“There may come to be new places in our lives that are second spiritual homes closer to us in some ways, perhaps, than our original homes. But the home tie is the blood tie”—
Eudora Welty.

**Chapter I.
Describing a Night Vision to Heron**

To: Heron Freeman
Subject: Night Vision
3:00 a.m.

Dear Heron,

I'm sharing this with you, because you wanted to know about my dreams and visions. At first, I didn't want to tell you about them, because I was scared that you would think I was crazy. (It's so early in the morning here. No one is up.) I know, however, that you won't judge me. And it is a way for us to remain close, even if California feels so far away from Miami. Distance means nothing when you can share dreams. I know that now. Well, last night, my vision caused me to jump out of bed. Remember, sometimes at night, when we lived together in our old home in the Grove (the one I can see from my new home), I would jump out of bed, thinking a stranger had broken into our place. I wanted to protect you and Hendrix. Even though Hendrix is the dog and should be protecting us. No one was ever in our house. So about ten minutes ago, when I was sleeping in this new bed that I'm too tall for, I jumped out of bed and right out of my dream. There was a tremendous noise outside. I opened the window in my tiny room, and I saw a cloud of purple smoke billowing and growing exponentially. America was

under attack. Enemies were dropping bombs. I saw fire consuming everything like Dresden being swallowed by napalm. How could I protect you and Hendrix now that you were on the other side of the country? I tried to speak to my grandmother, an invisible person in the room, and pleaded with her to protect you. Then I realized that wouldn't help. Violence has no sympathy for prayer. What other options did I have? The bombs were still coming. We were actually under attack. Steel exploding sounded like lightning striking the bed of a truck. And then suddenly, all the clouds of smoke receded from my sight, and the world of the invasion became my actual window. I was suddenly staring at the trees in my parking lot. The vision disappeared from my sight like water draining from a bathtub. The purple explosions morphed into the poinsettia being lit up by a street lamp. This was my vision. I miss you so. I'm really working hard on this book. One day, baby, I'll give you the world. But I'm worried about the wars, the crusades—maybe I'm just paranoid?—when will they interfere with our lives? When will the distance between us become longer than time?

Love,
James

Chapter II. Streets in My Blood

All I wanted was to get to the hospital, have a doctor replace the temporary cast on my wrist, and return to school before lunch period, but instead, my mother kept carting me around Clinton, running different types of errands, and appearing as if she were driving through a dream. We had already driven around town (which was about 8 square miles) three times, and she started to give the impression that she was enjoying herself, as if this was some sort of *family outing*. Behind the wheel of her blue Grand Am, my mother was smiling and watching everything in the town so precisely I thought she was trying to memorize every brick, every crevice, every neighborhood, presupposing some sort of massive change in the town's architecture. Sometimes she stared at me at red lights and stop signs, and I wondered if she had thought I was disappearing, too, trying to capture my face, my hands, my arms. I began to wonder what it meant to be manic—a word I'd heard doctors and my grandparents throw around.

“What a beautiful day,” she said. “Truly a beautiful day.”

“Are we going to the hospital, yet?” I asked.

“Who said anything about a hospital?” She grabbed a cigarette from the console and lit it with the car cigarette lighter. “Relax. It's a beautiful day.”

Flicking the cigarette, my mother dropped the ash into a cup holder in the center console. I looked at my mother to judge if she was joking. My grandparents, who helped raise me, originally planned on taking me to the hospital, but this morning, my mother interjected and said she would be the one taking me. I was her son after all. My grandparents, Mimi and Poppy, were both apprehensive, but they conceded, deciding that

driving me to the hospital was a simple enough task, though sometimes even the simplest tasks with my mother became complicated journeys. We all knew that, but hoped maybe this time would be different. I thought she seemed serious about forgetting about my appointment, and I couldn't get over how happy she appeared. Maybe she stopped taking her medicine again.

It was truly a beautiful day. She was right. And for November, it still felt like early fall. The weather had been so indecisive. A week ago it snowed, and there were still pockets of dirty powder melting away on the street. The looming threat of winter weighed heavy on my mind. I hated being trapped inside of my house while snow piled up. Soon all the beautiful days would be gone and everything would be gray and cold. And winter seemed to be the time my mother was always the strangest. As if, when the days got shorter, she lost her ability to maintain mental stability. Winter, for us, was a litmus test for sanity.

My mother had stopped at a red light and looked down at some letters resting in her lap. When she stepped into the car that morning, I saw my mother holding the bundle of letters and hiding them behind her back. I hadn't given them much thought at first, but now, when she saw that I had been looking at them, she shoved the letters into the compartment on the door, and I became more curious.

"Who are the letters for?" I asked.

She looked down, but all she said was, "Just letters."

My mother put the letters in the side-door pocket and the light turned green. We drove into the center of the town, through High Street, for the third time today. All the shops were familiar. I knew each one of the side streets, all the shop window displays

and the names of all the shop owners and whether they lived in old Victorian houses on Water Street overlooking the Nashua River or in apartments on School Street. I knew each angle of that street individually. I belonged there. The NYPRO plastic factory at the end of High Street was home. Even the empty Bigelow Carpet factory on Main Street was my home, too. Sometimes I would sneak into the carpet factory and try and imagine the place filled with workers in the glorious days of the Industrial Revolution, when Clinton, Worcester County, and most of Massachusetts had the feeling of prosperity, technological innovation, and progressiveness. That was all ancient history now. The population diminished to about 13,500. But all 8 square miles of Clinton was mine, because I knew where it was and where it would always be.

“Don’t you remember?” I asked, pointing to my wrist. “The permanent cast.”

“We’ll get there,” she said.

“You’re really going to be like this again?” I asked. “Just focus. Think about the permanent cast.”

“Nobody likes a smart ass.”

I had broken my wrist watching a Clinton Gaels high school football game at Fuller Field. Everybody in town was fanatical about high school football. The town lived for Friday nights in the fall, and when the day of the game finally arrived, the town was ecstatic—the closest many people would come to rapture.

My father wouldn’t let me play football. His father didn’t let him play football, either. But I wanted to be a part of that team so badly. I could catch anything thrown my way. I had great hands. Even my father said so. But he said I wasn’t aggressive enough to play.

So that Friday night, my buddies and I were playing pick-up tackle football behind the stands, and I was pretending to be a part of the team. I had stopped with the football when I heard the fans cheering, and I ran up to the crowd to watch one of the Farraghers sprint down the sidelines in his green and gold uniform, chased after by the defense from our rival school, Nashoba Regional—the rich-kid high school—and everyone in the stands was cheering and hugging each other while the band began to play the Gaels' fight song. The football players appeared immortal on Friday nights. Back then I had no idea they were dying young. Back then I had no idea that the pinnacle of their lives would be playing four quarters every Friday night and walking off the field to the high school band playing while the town cheered another generation to their fate. Back then I had no idea that the names—the O'Malleys, the Kilcoynes, the Dickhauts—would die before the man.

And that's when Ryan Gorman tackled me from behind. I tried to brace my fall, but I had landed on my wrist. I knew that my wrist was broken, but none of my buddies believed me. They told me to play through. When I sat against the fence, they poked my wrist and called me a pussy.

When my father picked me up, he, too, thought I was faking. He was living by himself in Sterling at that time, and when we got back to his place that night, he told me to go to sleep. I rested in bed trying to forget about the pain, until I begged him in the middle of the night to believe me, something was wrong; I needed to go to the hospital. I was right. My wrist was broken. It started to swell up. But he was right, too. I wasn't aggressive enough. I had broken my wrist watching a football game.

Meanwhile, my mother continued down Main Street, passing the Fung Wong Chinese Restaurant (the old converted Victorian on the hill), the water filtration plant (which always smelled like shit), and the Dairy Queen. Behind the Dairy Queen was a huge empty field where I hung out with my buddies. I wished I was there now. My mother seemed out of it, and I doubted that she was really paying attention to the road. As she came around the bend, I thought she was going to slam the car into the telephone pole.

“Watch it!” I said.

She continued along the road, and we passed the telephone pole. I imagined us there—the car totaled and blood pouring over the dashboard. I had a tough time being a passenger in her car. Accidents just seemed inevitable.

“What is your problem?” she asked.

I couldn’t help it. I didn’t trust my mother behind the wheel anymore.

“Please,” I said. “The hospital.”

She continued down Main Street and took a left onto School Street, her wheels screeching. We passed the elementary school and the high school that was built on a sinking marshland, all in the opposite direction of the hospital. Then she stopped at Seafood & More—the take-out restaurant where Chip McGrail, her boyfriend, worked.

Chip was the first man my mother saw after my father. He was basically living at my mother’s place. I hated him. He grew up in the projects and bragged about how tough a childhood he had. Compared to your life, Chip would say, I lived in a third world country. The projects weren’t so bad in Clinton. We would hear of murders and many of the white people in town decided never to go there, but I didn’t think it was so

scary. My buddies and I used to go play basketball there at night, and we would be offered drags from blunts and pulls on forties. At first, I had turned down their offers.

Chip was a strong contrast to my father. It was hard for me to understand what my father's job was. I knew he was some sort of manager at a computer leasing company. It seemed so abstract, but I knew it had status. And because everyone knew everything about everyone else in Clinton, they surely talked about my mother's fall from the social status of housewife and how she started to dating a cook at a local fish-fry. I mean, because of my mother's behavior, someone might as well have put a red A on her and told her she couldn't come back into town. My father never said anything about Chip, but I wish he had.

"I'll be right back," she said.

"Can we go to the hospital after this?" I asked.

She shut the door and left the car running so I could listen to the radio. When she went into the restaurant, my mother brought with her the bundle of letters. From the Grand Am, I could see inside the restaurant through the large glass window. They were preparing for lunch. Jim, the owner, was stirring soup in large pots, while Chip prepped fish to be put in the oven. My mother walked straight up to the counter. She was fearless. If she had something to say, she was sure as hell going to say it. I couldn't quite make out what she was saying, but she kept pointing to the letters, and Chip was saying something back. He looked upset. Maybe he was trying to convince her not to send them. I watched her turn around without saying goodbye, and she opened the door, got back in the car, and started the engine without saying a word.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

My mother put the car into reverse and backed out of the parking space. She was about to reverse back into Main Street traffic when a car beeped its horn and she slammed on the brakes.

“God damn it,” she said. “People drive me crazy sometimes.”

“Who are the letters for?” I asked.

“When was that any of your business?” She backed into Main Street, cars piling up behind her, and put the car into drive. We stopped at the light in front of the fire station. The empty Bigelow Carpet Factory was on our right.

“I’m your son,” I said, believing this entitled me to truth.

“Tell me,” she said, “what does *truth* have to do with these letters? You’re just like me. You think you want to know everything. You’re just like me, though.”

I wondered if that was true.

“You’re not making sense,” I said, “I don’t care about the letters.” I held up my wrist again. “Remember?”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You don’t have to worry about these letters anymore. I’m sending them to the Bronx.”

“The Bronx?”

My mother pulled into the post office parking lot and hopped out. Who were those letters for? I had no idea who we knew in the Bronx. I imagined she had some cousins out there. Or maybe she had a lover out there she was writing to. That would explain Chip’s reaction. Or maybe they were letters to another son that she kept secret from me. Anything was possible.

Sitting in the car, I watched people from the town walk in and out of the post office. I knew almost everyone by name. Mrs. Gorsky, Mr. Bonci, Mrs. Peet, Mr. Philbin and his wife had all come to the post office. Everyone would know me by my name, too, so I sank below the seat, trying to hide my face. If anyone recognized me, they would want to know why I wasn't in school. And I would have to make up some lie. I couldn't let anyone know about our family's business. Not anymore. Not since what happened.

I sat in the car, watching the cigarette lighter glow amber around the coils. I took a cigarette out of her pack, twirled it around in my fingers, and thought about smoking it. I scanned through the radio stations—Sheryl Crow's *If It Makes You Happy*; Chumbawumba's *Tubthumping*; and Meredith Brooks' *Bitch* were all on the radio. After about 15 minutes, she finally finished, and on the way out, she started talking to Mr. Chase, a postman.

My mother had this big, mad laugh. She would tilt back her head and rock back and forth, calling attention to herself. Mr. Chase couldn't have known I needed to get to the hospital. I honked the horn and held up my wrist over the dashboard so they both could see. My wrist was covered in a neon green cast to show "school spirit." Boy, how ridiculous was I, believing in all that school crap and town tradition? All over the cast were names and little sayings written in a black marker. That was the one cool thing about the cast—the attention from girls. But I couldn't wait to get this freaking cast off so I could finally scratch my arm.

"That was rude," she said when she entered the car.

“You’re forgetting about my appointment,” I said. “Would you take me to the freaking hospital already?”

“Watch your mouth, young man.”

If I wasn’t careful, this could turn into a standoff, and I would never get to the hospital. In fact, now she was driving away from the hospital. I thought about just getting out and walking to the hospital, but I knew that would cause a scene. She might even just drive the car next to me as I walked, screaming for me to get back in the car. I knew we had to be careful around my mother. No one really knew what would set her off. I had to remember to have patience when she was in these moods, but this was getting ridiculous. Sometimes I wanted to explain her behavior to her explicitly so she could see how she was being irrational and absent-minded. And about this time, I knew it was my mother who really needed to go to the hospital again.

In order to deal with my mother, I had to check my emotions. It was difficult because my father wasn’t around to mediate between us. Provide some sort of mature order to the household. And since she had been dating Chip, it was even harder to deal with my mother, because Chip was always trying to protect her. Chip would step in and try to be the disciplinarian, and he believed my mother’s logic outright.

Chip didn’t see the other side of my mother. My mother was his golden ticket, and he only saw the side he wanted, whereas my brother, Benjamin, and I saw all sides of her at once, like a cubist painting, wondering which side would dominate her personality. Boy, I haven’t even told you about Benjamin yet. The sweetest kid in the world. Most of the time, when Chip was at the house, I believed I had to protect Benjamin. But

Benjamin loved Chip. They got along so well. And I hated Chip for hoodwinking my brother and my mother. I was on to him.

Chip had it made with my mother. She received child support and a disability check, while her father paid most of her rent. I don't think Chip even paid rent. He didn't have much money. He didn't even have a car. My mother drove him everywhere and picked him up, even, from work.

Maybe Chip was right sometimes. I was probably out of line. He thought I needed discipline and all that other bullshit, but he just had no idea what world he was walking into. He'd never been to a mental hospital. He'd never tried to make sense out of the things she said when she was sick. He'd never had to try to understand her when all the chemicals began to mix, confusing memory with fantasy, reality with hallucinations, family with strangers. He would eventually know, however. And for the time being, he was just lucky to be in our house. My mother was blindly in love with Chip. She didn't care about money. She didn't care about his job. She didn't care about anything else. And maybe, sometimes, she was actually happy.

So imagine my surprise when my mother stopped on the border between Clinton and Lancaster to pick up another man. She parked in front of a house, right over the train tracks, on Old Bolton Station Road. The hospital was close now. I could have walked, but I didn't dare.

"The hospital is right down the street," I said.

"I'm picking up someone." She lit a cigarette and rolled down her window. She blew the smoke towards the middle of the road.

"Who?"

That's when I saw Manny Figarora swing open a screen door and step out of one of the houses. I knew he wasn't staying there. He was 6'5 and 230 pounds, and he had a short jerry curl on top of the biggest head I've ever seen. He was Puerto Rican, and he had grown up with Chip in the projects. They were on the football team together. And from what my mother told me, Manny and Chip hated each other. Very competitive. They were both really into hard drugs. Maybe they were selling. But no matter if Manny was a drug dealer or just a guy with a bad reputation, I knew it was wrong for my mother to be hanging out with another man, especially Manny Figarora.

"What is he doing here?" I asked.

My mother took a deep inhale on her cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. "Why don't you sit in the back, sweetie," my mother said.

"I'm not getting in the back."

And before I thought to switch the lock, Manny opened the door and said, "Excuse me, little man. Grownups in the front."

I couldn't believe it. Instead of taking me to the hospital, she picked up this jerk. All I wanted was to get back to school. How many kids actually wanted to go back to school? Well, I was one of them. School felt normal. At least as normal as it could get. So, there I was, in the middle seat in the back of the car, and every time my mother looked into the rearview mirror she would see my face. They were talking in the front seat, just driving around. I couldn't figure out what type of errand she would need to help Manny with that was more important than my wrist. It seemed like they had nowhere in particular to go.

We ended up driving right past the turn for the hospital, all the way back through town, and right by the middle school. It was recess, and everyone was outside playing, throwing the football, and girls were running after the boys. I could almost hear their screams and the basketball bouncing. The teachers yelling. It all sounded so normal and routine and healthy. I watched it all happening from the back window of the Grand Am.

“Hey, little man,” Manny said.

I turned around, and he was staring at me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Real nice kid,” Manny said, looking at my mother. “Real nice kid. I hope my boy is like you. I would teach you some discipline.” He took another drag on the cigarette and seemed to enjoy what he was going to ask next. “How would you feel if your mother was pregnant with my kid?”

“What?” I said.

“How would you feel about a little brother?”

“Stop it, right now,” my mother said. “Why would you say something like that?”

“Something wrong with that?” he said. “Is there something wrong, James, with Manny being your stepfather?” He reached for my mother’s cigarettes, and he plopped one of the sticks into his mouth. “It might be fun,” he said, the cigarette bouncing between his teeth as he spoke. He lit the cigarette with a match he took from his pocket. I watched it light quickly, the flame falling down the matchstick. Manny licked the end of his fingers and put the match between his index finger and thumb. Curling smoke extended from the match, and I watched it slithering in the car, like the smoke from the engine of a train. “We could be pals.”

My mother laughed that mad laugh of hers, and I wondered whose attention she was trying to seek. Maybe she was laughing because Manny was joking. Maybe she was laughing because she knew there was nothing she could say now that the truth was out. Maybe she was just laughing at the absurdity of everything, laughing at the abyss she was standing over in her mind, laughing at the world spinning round and round and the insignificance of being a mother, having a son, knowing love.

I wanted to tell Manny what a scum bag he was and how he didn't deserve to breathe the same air as my mother. I wanted to tell him to go to hell. I wanted to curse his entire family and the possibility of him ever having a son on this earth. But I didn't say anything. I just stared out the window onto Main Street, watching the rain come down now, dripping over the buildings, the factories, the water forming on the windshield like a thousand stars, drowning and peeling away any resemblance to home, stripping away a feeling that I belonged.

"It's not true," my mother said. "Don't pay him any attention."

"Don't listen to me," Manny said. "Just forget everything I said. It's all a nightmare."

I wasn't a fool, however. I knew there was probably some truth.

We were driving on the bridge over South Meadow Pond. Houseboats were floating on the slate-colored water, and rain was breaking the surface of the pond. Sometimes when the sun was out, you could see fish darting back and forth under the surface of the water. But the water was too dark now.

"Can we please," I said, "go to the hospital?"

"What do you want to go to the hospital for?" Manny asked.

*

After my mother dropped off Manny on High Street near Breakaway Billiards, she finally brought me to the hospital. We were three hours late. So after I went through an hour of X-Rays, bending my wrist into uncomfortable positions, a layer of lead protecting me from radiation, splitting atoms, I was sitting on the hospital bed, the crinkling paper below me, and my wrist free of its temporary cast. My wrist felt raw, and where the temporary cast had been, it felt like my wrist didn't belong to me anymore.

The doctor came into the room and started to wrap my wrist in a wet cloth that looked like papier-mâché, and a nurse asked me questions. The doctor was furious the paperwork wasn't finished before he saw the patient. My mother was standing in the corner of the room, her arms crossed, staring at a space in the room no one else could see.

"How old are you?" the nurse asked.

"Twelve," I said. "I'll be thirteen in August."

"No." My mother said. "You're ten."

I watched the nurse write down 10.

"No," I said, "I'm twelve."

The doctor continued to wrap my hand.

"Have you had any surgeries?" the nurse asked.

"No."

"Have you had any serious illnesses?"

"No."

"Do you smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol?"

"No."

“Are there any previous illnesses in your family?”

I looked at my mother staring into the empty space in the room. I shook my head no.

“We don’t know yet,” my mother said.

The nurse and the doctor turned around.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” the doctor asked.

“Don’t listen to her,” I said. “There are no illnesses in my family.”

The nurse stopped looking at her form and waited for my mother to answer.

“I was adopted,” my mother said. “I just found and met my real mother. I’ll know soon about our predispositions.”

“Don’t listen to her,” I said. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“My father’s last name was Kelley. We don’t know anything about him yet.”

“What are you talking about? Please,” I said to the nurse, “don’t listen to her. Let me answer the questions.”

“Those letters, James,” she said, “they were to our real family.”

“You’re lying,” I said and turned towards the doctor. “She’s sick,” I said. “Can’t you see? Now that she’s here you can examine her.”

I could hear somewhere far off, a room filled with different types of clocks. Electronic alarm clocks beeping, hand wound alarm clocks with small hammers clinging against small bells, grandfather clocks tolling, church bells all ringing at the same time. Wind chimes and fingers running up and down a harp. A fist banged against a key board. Gongs. Metal. Time.

The doctor looked at the nurse and back at my wrist. The cast was finished. It was heavier than the last, as if my hand had been set in concrete. He said, "We'll leave you two alone. Check with the nurse on the way out."

The office was white with fluorescent lights bouncing off the white-tiled floor. There were three other beds in the office, but there were no other patients. I was alone with my mother, again.

"I was adopted," my mother said.

"You're lying."

She moved closer, but I stayed glued to the bed. If I let go, I was afraid that I would fall off the face of the earth.

"No," she said. "Those letters were for my family. They're living in the Bronx." She put her hand on my shoulder, but I threw it off. "My mother just died. I met her in a hospital in the Bronx. I have a sister and two brothers. The sister lives in the Bronx, and my brother lives in North Carolina."

"North Carolina?"

"My father," she said. "Your grandfather. Nobody knows what happened to him." She was staring right at me, as if she had planned this conversation the entire time, as if she wanted me to understand the shock of discovering the mysteries of my blood, body, mind. I was suddenly ashamed of the blood running through my veins.

"So Mimi and Poppy," I said, "are not my real grandparents?"

"No," she said.

*

On the way out of the hospital, I saw my mother standing against the car, waiting for me, looking happy again. It seemed like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, but I was the one who had to carry that now. Digest the revelation of secrets.

“Where to now?” my mother asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s a beautiful day. We should just keep driving.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“We can stop and get some lunch. What about the Clinton Café?”

“The only thing I want,” I said, “is to walk home.”

The hospital parking lot was on a hill, and I could see the whole town below. I could see past the town to Wachusett Mountain. Bolton, Berlin, Hudson, even the beginnings of Worcester were somewhere out there. I couldn’t see far enough though. But it was all wide open. And I wanted to walk to the end of the other side of the country. I watched the town and the streets—all the stoplights, the cars, the mothers walking their children in their carriages—the veins that have fed my youth. I used to know this town. But I couldn’t recognize it anymore. I didn’t belong here. I knew that now.

Chapter III. The Lawn

It may seem that it's not a big deal to find out my grandparents weren't my blood relatives. But you have to understand something. My grandparents, for a large chunk of my life, raised me. They were the only people I really had who were stable and loving. Of course, my father and mother loved me, but they had so much to work out. I don't even really blame them for not being around and involved with my brother and me, because I had Mimi and Poppy. Plus all of the cultural traditions, the pierogi, the apoutek on Christmas, being Polish and Irish, knowing that clearly I came from certain parts of the world at certain points in history, all vanished, leaving me with an enormous black hole for my past. I already had enough confusion on my father's side. My grandmother, Freda Tully, immigrated and settled in Philadelphia with her mother from Poland in the 1920's. Now, they immigrated from Poland, but my family was born in Russia. They fled, supposedly, Russia to Poland. It's all craziness to me. The worst part about it was that Freda and her mother, and everyone else who had any tie to the past, refused to talk about it. The older relatives would spit onto the ground at the mere mention of the old country. Something terrible happened in that part of the world with my family. They were Jewish. In fact, they still are Jewish. After studying about that part of the world in my history classes, the pogroms, Kiev, Jews being accused of bloodletting, I can use my imagination for what they were fleeing from.

You have to understand another thing. For large portions of my life, my mother has been sick. My father was a very hard-working man. So he couldn't be around all the time. That might be hard for you to swallow. And when my mother was in the hospital,

trying to regain her grasp on reality, my grandparents were the ones who stepped in and brought back order and a semblance of normality. Without my grandparents, there is no telling what could have happened to Benjamin and me.

My family and I had a lot of good times in Clinton before my mother got sick. Our house was a blue, two-story colonial with maple trees and oak trees growing in the front yard. All the kids from the neighborhood would come to my house because we had this big back yard that was perfect for whiffle ball and football games. Plus we had this long driveway that extended from the side of our house like a granite tongue. And I had these three wheelers and a yellow peddle car called the coupe, all bought by Mimi and Poppy. I even had my very own basketball hoop with my initials engraved at the base. It was so unbelievably awesome.

I had everything a kid could ask for. I enjoyed school. My teachers bragged about me at parent teacher conferences. I had great grades. My development exceeded my age. They even pushed me ahead in school. And I enjoyed coming home after school. My mother was always there, waiting for me. As I walked up the street to my house from the bus stop, I could hear my mother downstairs at the upright piano we had in the basement. Boy, she had an amazing voice. Really, I used to think she was an angel. You could hear her down the street, singing psalms and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” I didn’t really know many of the songs that she used to sing, but there was nothing better in the world than listening to her. I remember this one song called “Hallelujah.” It seemed like the entire time my mother just sang the same word, “Hallelujah,” over and over until it seemed like a word that made sense—a word that was meant to be sung rather than said. I liked that.

My mother taught me a lot about music. She bought me a small electric guitar, a pair of drum sticks with a small drum set, and even a voice recorder. My mother sang at church, and she would even let me come up into the pulpit and play the triangle or the tambourine, basically any instrument that wouldn't distract the rest of the band, but they would at least make me feel like I was part of the music. And there is really no better feeling in the world than being part of the music.

My father never came to church. He's Jewish. It was pretty cool growing up and celebrating both Christmas and Chanukah. That meant more presents for me. You might even say it spoiled me a bit. But I know that when I have children, I plan on spoiling them when they're young.

In Clinton, my mother was kind of a celebrity, because everyone in town went to St. John's Church. Clinton is an Irish Catholic town. Everyone went to church. Sure, there were different churches, but St. John's was easily the most popular and probably the most beautiful building in the town. When I was playing in the band with my mother, I sat in the pews staring up at the arching ceiling. There were all these great murals of Biblical stories on the wall. The one I remember the most is of a man holding onto the edge of a furnace, his feet dangling in the fire, while a man and a woman ate fruit, without paying any attention to the man about to be engulfed by flames. It seemed to say that hell was a real place and anyone can end up there, but also that we shouldn't help the people who are on the way there.

My father had a good job. I never wanted for anything, even though I really wasn't sure that I wanted anything in the first place. I was a happy kid who safe. But then all that changed. My mother and father weren't getting along. Mimi and Poppy

were over at the house more. Something was happening between my parents that I had no idea about at the time. Now, I believe it was post-partum depression, but even today, it's hard for me to wrap my head around what actually happened to her. Then the day came when nothing would be the same again.

When I was ten years old, the police came to my house to take my mother away. Before the police arrived, my father and mother were screaming at each other in the living room in our house in Clinton, Massachusetts. My hometown is a quiet, working class town. Jimmy Carter once came to Clinton to give a speech. He picked Clinton because it was a very typical town, filled with hard working Americans who were married with children. Pretty normal. On the outside, it looked so much like Small Town, U.S.A.—the picket fences, the ice cream parlors, the mom and pop shops—any person driving in from Boston must have thought our town was created with movie props. And that night, as my mother yelled at my father, her voice must have broken through the silent town like a wolf baying at the moon.

“You’re trying to make me look crazy,” she said. “You want me put away for good.”

“No,” my father said. “I want you to just calm down. Everyone in the neighborhood can hear you.”

They were both circling around the dining room table, and it was impossible to tell who was chasing after whom. My father couldn't stand the thought of our neighbors hearing them scream. The idea that others knew they had marital problems was a disgusting thought. Over the past couple weeks, however, their arguments had been growing perpetually worse. Becoming more and more paranoid about my father trying to

lock her up so he could take her children away from her, my mother finally decided my father was out to get her. Something just snapped. The paranoia became a reality. For good.

“You’ve been telling the whole town about me,” my mother said. “Haven’t you? You’re trying to put me away.”

“You should just sit down,” my father said. “Gain your composure. Have a cigarette.”

“I bet you want me to have a cigarette.”

My brother and I were on the stairs, listening to them argue. My brother was only three years old at the time. He had auburn hair and his cheeks were fat. He was seven years younger than me, and I felt an obligation to protect him. But there was nothing I could do. So we walked back to the basement away the stairs, and I turned on the television and hoped he would sit still and forget everything else. The black upright piano my mother played was sitting in the corner of the basement, looking heavy and silent as a coffin. I wished my mother was playing that piano right now, filling the house with music, instead of arguing with my father. She really had—still has—one of the most beautiful voices I’ve ever heard. When I was little, I used to think it was the voice of God.

“I smelled the gas you left on this morning,” I heard my mother say. “I know now. You were just waiting for me to light a cigarette. I could just imagine you coming home to our house smoldering to the ground, pretending you didn’t know anything. But you’ve been planning it all along. You’ve been planning my destruction.”

My mother, when she was sick, sounded like a movie star in a suspense thriller uncovering some dastardly plot. And when I was a child, it was really easy to believe my mother was actually uncovering some plot by my father.

“You’re sick,” my father said. “Out of your mind. You need help.”

“There you go again. Trying to convince me I’m crazy.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I screamed up the stairs. I wanted them to stop arguing and just be a family again. A normal family. And they had stopped arguing for a moment. The innocent cry of a child surely should have stopped them. But then I heard something crash on the floor. From below, it sounded like thunder. I told Benjamin to stay where he was, and I ran upstairs.

“What is going on?” I asked my father.

“Nothing,” he said, holding a phone receiver to his ear. There was a broken vase and broken plates scattered across the kitchen floor. “Hello police,” my father said, “Yes. 7 Walden Terrace. The blue house.” He listened into the phone. “So someone is already on the way. Thank you.”

I walked down the hallway towards my mother. I wasn’t scared of her, though. I knew she would never hurt me. In the hallway, all the lights were off and all the doors to the rooms were closed. I felt like I was walking in someone else’s home, in someone else’s dream. Even though I wasn’t scared of my mother, I worried there was a stranger in the house, a maniac, a figure who would jump out of the shadows and grab me, pulling me down into a secret compartment in the house, locking me away from the rest of my youth.

I knocked on my parents' bedroom door. There was no answer. Nudging the door open, I walked in and found my mother sitting on the bed, staring out her window into our backyard. My father's garden was out there, bursting with cucumbers, cantaloupe, melons, yellow squash, and cherry tomatoes, all ready to be picked. The lawn stretched out far, and there were basketballs and footballs in the grass. We had a great backyard. One of the neighborhood's finest. All the neighborhood children used to come over and play in our backyard.

The moon was intruding into the room, and there was a square of silver light on the floor next to my mother. It was an incredibly bright night. The moon was full.

"Are you okay?" I asked my mother.

I became aware of how still the house was, and I hoped my brother was still downstairs watching television. I could hear the night's music though—crickets rubbing their legs, owls hooting, and wind moving through the pine trees. I smelled sap.

"Mom," I asked again, "is everything okay?"

"Did you hear us arguing?" my mother asked. "Did you hear us arguing?"

I sat down next to her on the bed and she put her arm around me. I nodded yes.

"I didn't want you to hear," she said. "I didn't want you to know. But your father is a bad man. He is a bad man."

I heard a heavy knock at the front door downstairs. Someone had come into the house. They were talking to my father, and he yelled upstairs, "James, why don't you come down here?"

"He is saying that I'm sick," my mother said to me. "Whoever shows up at our door, he tells them that I'm sick. You think I'm sick?"

I looked at my mother, and she seemed different, somehow not the person that I knew. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not sick, Joseph.”

“It’s James, mom.”

“I’m not sick,” she said. “You must remember that no matter what. Promise me.”

I heard my father call again. I didn’t know where to turn.

“I care about your safety,” my mother said. “I only want you to be safe.”

“James,” my father demanded, “come here right now.”

I hugged my mother and walked back down the hallway, leaving my mother to stare out the window. When I came to the top of the stairs, there were two police officers standing with my father. They smiled at me and said, “Hello son.” The tallest one with a mustache put his hand on my shoulder. I couldn’t stand his hand there. Through the front door, I could see police cruisers parked on our lawn. There was a fire truck and an ambulance, too.

“These men,” my father said pointing to the police, “are going to take your mother for a ride. Wait downstairs with your brother.”

The more people who came into my house, the more I felt strange in my own home. I waited downstairs with my brother. It was silent again. The television was still on, and the Red Sox were playing the California Angels. Jerry Remy was announcing the game, and my brother was sitting in front of the television. I sat down next to him, and we watched Mike Greenwell at the plate. He hit a bloop single to left field. And walking up from the on-deck circle strutted our favorite player—John Valentin. He had an

unorthodox stance—kind of leaned over the plate—and my brother and I both liked him because he was small and an underdog.

I tried to ignore the creaking of the police officer's boots against the hallway floor, heading towards my mother's room. It was as if the walls were closing in on her, and I wasn't even sure if she had any idea. I wanted to save her from the policemen and my father. I heard voices from upstairs. Then I heard my mother yelling for the police to get out of her room. I ran to the top of the stairs, and I watched the police drag my mother out the front door, kicking and screaming. There were these old candy store signs hanging above the entrance to our house. A girl who looked like Goldilocks selling candy canes for five cents. Above the stairs, on the wall, was a reprint of Monet's Water Lilies. My brother was still at the bottom of the stairs. And when they brought my mother outside and placed her into the cruiser, the whole neighborhood was outside, standing in the dim gray light of the moon, watching from their lawns.

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My grandparents moved into the Blue House with my brother and me while my mother stayed in the hospital, and my father moved into a small apartment in Shrewsbury. The courts had forced my father to leave. My grandparents took over. As my grandfather told me, they weren't technically my parents, but they had custodial custody. Every other weekend, my grandparents would take my brother and me to visit my mother at Baldpate Hospital in Georgetown, Massachusetts. The car rides were always silent—the ticking of the turn signal, my grandmother running her fingernails over an emery board, and the wind coming through the crack in my window. They never played any music either. The radio always stayed off. Loud music distracted my grandfather from the road.

The ride seemed so long, and in order to kill time, I watched the woods pass by from the back seat. I remember imagining that I was on a dirt bike, bouncing in and out of trails and dodging trees. I remember the way the power lines and phone lines ran with the car. I remember everyone else staring out their windows, imagining we were driving somewhere else. And I remember when we finally arrived at the hospital, it looked like a castle.

When we entered, all the patients were sitting in comfortable chairs, and there was even a fireplace. I was afraid to touch anything. Everything seemed very fragile. We could have been walking into anyone's home. We checked in at the desk and my mother came down the stairs from her room. She was wearing a white gown. Her eyes looked heavy from crying, and her hair was shorter than before she left home. She tried to appear happy to see us, and made a big show of giving my brother and me a hug. She sat down on the couch next to us and said to Benjamin and me, "Do you like my hair?"

"Tell your mother it looks pretty," Mimi said.

"I got my haircut," my mother said, "because I knew my boys were coming today."

"You look very lovely," Poppy said.

My mother refused to talk to my grandparents. It was as if they weren't there.

"Everyone is an artist here boys," my mother said. She came in close to us on the couch. "Every day I wake up in the morning and sing," she said. "There is this one man who paints every day. He is painting my portrait."

If I were to paint my mother then, it would be in a cubist style, pieces of her body contorted away from normal perspective, her eyes and ears and mouth all separated and placed in different locations around her face.

“Have you boys been practicing your music?” my mother asked. “Have you been singing? It is important to practice your music every day.”

“Not since you left,” I said.

“But boys,” my mother said, “you must practice every day if you want to be great musicians. You need to practice your major and minor scales. Why don’t we practice now?” she asked. “Why don’t you start, Benjamin?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Poppy said, placing his hand on my mother’s shoulder.

“Don’t put your hand on me,” my mother said to Poppy. “If I want my children to sing, they’ll sure sing.” She turned towards Benjamin. “Now why don’t you start on Do.”

“He doesn’t want to,” I said for Benjamin.

“Well why don’t you start?” my mother said.

I wanted to know when she was coming home. Mimi and Poppy had instructed us not to bring anything up about home. But I needed to know. “When are you coming home? We can play music then.”

At first, she didn’t answer my question. She just stared at us. I imagined she was trying to decide what was real. She started to cry. “Soon,” she said. “Soon. I will be home to take care of you soon.”

Then she stood up. She wanted to leave. She didn't want to see us anymore. Just like that she left us again.

When we were finally leaving the hospital, the head psychiatrist followed us to our car. I remember the pine trees towering over our heads and the click of my grandmother's cane against the asphalt. The doctor started to explain what was wrong with my mother. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. It sounded like he was describing why our television wouldn't turn on. This synapse wasn't connecting to that synapse. Electrical currents in the mind. Protons and Neutrons and Electrons.

The doctor had big glasses and was bald except for the wings of hair on the side of his head. He grabbed my shoulders and said everything would be fine with my mother. She was a strong, good woman, who loved her family. I thought he was Jesus. I just thought there had to be someone out there watching over my mother. Even if I couldn't. So I asked him if he was in fact Jesus. Everyone laughed, probably because I was only ten and children made strange comments. But at the time, I really believed he could have been Jesus. I was hoping there was actually someone out there to take care of the sick and helpless.

*

After a few months, the doctors thought they found the right balance of medication, and they agreed to let my mother come home. It was winter time. Everything was sad.

There was one condition—my grandparents had to stay in the house and monitor her behavior. They agreed, and when we drove up to Georgetown to bring her home we were all excited to have her back. I was looking forward to playing music again. I was looking forward to everything going back to normal. Fixed, I thought, she must be fixed.

When my mother came into the car, she didn't say much. We all tried talking to her, but she just stared out the window. She looked so tired. So drained.

We were about to get onto 495, when my mother said from the backseat. "I feel sick. Pull over."

"Can't it wait till we get home?" Poppy asked.

We all just wanted to go home and be as far away from the hospital as possible.

"I'm going to vomit," my mother said.

Poppy looked at Mimi. "It must be the medication," he said. "She needs to eat."

"Please," she said, "pull over."

My grandfather pulled to the side of the road, and my mother burst out of the car and started to vomit near some pine trees. Rubbing his hands on Mimi's shoulder, Poppy kept whispering, "It's going to be fine," he said. "It's going to be fine."

Because my mother needed to eat, we stopped at an IHOP near the entrance to the highway. We all ordered breakfast, even though it was lunch time. Benjamin and I loved to eat breakfast when it was later in the afternoon. He ordered strawberry pancakes with whipped cream, and I ordered chocolate chip pancakes with bacon. I loved to dip my bacon in the syrup. My mother ordered scrambled eggs with rye bread. Mimi and Poppy just drank tea. They concentrated on trying to make Benjamin and me laugh by telling stories from when they were children. My grandfather told us the story of how he would bring home stray dogs from a park in Brooklyn and try and hide them from his mother in the house. He would even bring home baby ducks and put them in his bathtub.

I noticed Mimi and Poppy were holding hands, and in Mimi's left hand, she held rosary beads, turning them over and over in her fingers. I was sitting next to my mother

across from my grandparents, and my brother sat at the head of the booth in a high chair. When my mother finished eating, she wiped the plate clean with her rye bread. She had her head down towards the plate the entire breakfast, and now we were only waiting for the check. My mother looked up from her empty plate and said, "I'm not getting in that car unless I drive."

Poppy put down his mug. "You know what the doctors said. You're on too much medication."

"I need to drive," my mother said. "Your car makes me sick."

"Sylvia," Mimi said, "you can *not* drive home. That's final."

My mother started to raise her voice. "I'm driving."

I watched the families at other tables turn their heads, and I wondered if they knew my mother had just left Ballpate. They all looked so normal, staring at us. I hated them for it.

"Don't make a scene," Poppy said.

"Just let me drive."

Poppy put a fifty on the table, and we walked outside towards the car. My mother was still badgering my grandparents on the way out. She wouldn't quit. "I need to drive," she said. "Just let me drive. I'm not getting in that car."

Finally, Poppy walked over to my mother, grabbed her by the arm and said, "You're not putting our lives in danger. You hear me?" He let go of her arm, but I could see the anger in his eyes. "We can just bring you back to the hospital."

On Poppy's threat, my mother finally gave in, and we drove home in silence—the turn signal clicking, Mimi's fingers running against an emery board, and the wind whistling through my cracked window.

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After two months of my mother being home and Poppy and Mimi living in our house, our mother demanded my grandparents leave. She wouldn't let them stay in her house anymore. She wanted to take care of her own children. The doctors cleared it, too. So I watched Poppy and Mimi make and put away their bed in the downstairs of the blue house for the last time. They were so strong. Every day and every night, they uncoiled that bed, made the bed, and slept in it, just to be there for us. That bed was so uncomfortable, especially for a retired couple. Mimi and Poppy had a beautiful home in Fairfield, Connecticut, but nothing mattered to them except for my mother, Benjamin, and me. My grandparents, two people I had always believed to be my blood until that day with my mother in the hospital, were always there. Always there. Always there.

At this point, the doctors believed my mother had regained her equilibrium, and she was taking her medicine with regularity and watching over us fine. My mother being on her own, according to the doctors, was essential for her to truly recover. My dad would be around every Tuesday and every other weekend. We all just wanted to get back to being normal.

It was hard to keep up the appearance of normalcy, because right after my grandparents left, my mother and father started arguing about who would cut the lawn. She said it wasn't my father's job anymore. She didn't want him over at the house. He should pay someone. My father didn't want to pay someone to cut his own lawn. He still

thought of the house as his. He would cut it. He was paying the bills, after all. But my mother refused to let him stay at the house for that long. He could plant something. Or try tapping the lines. Or try blowing up the house again. And as they continued to argue about who would cut the lawn, the grass just continued to rise. It grew and grew until it was above my knees and it looked more like spears sticking out of the ground rather than grass.

Lawns attracted attention in our neighborhood. Especially at our house. The neighborhood always envied our lawn, the maple trees and oak trees in the front yard. We had a two story house with three bedrooms, a basketball hoop, and a long driveway that stretched out to the yard which was perfect for whiffle ball games. The basketball hoop was first base, the end of the driveway was second, the other side of the grass was third, and home plate was the garage door. There were plenty of other children my age, and we used to play sports every day after I finished my homework. Mostly everyone came over to our house. There was Pat and Brian Naughton, Pat and Bry Lawless, Travis Saint Blair, Stan and Katie Pregano, Kate Freel, Paul Downing, and countless others. It seemed like everyone stopped coming over to my house around the time the lawn started to grow.

All the other neighbor's lawns were cut so perfectly. Husbands came home after work and talked about each other's lawns. They admired each other's work. So the neighbors started to discuss our lawn, and I knew this because they would always ask me about it. All the neighbors on Walden Terrace seemed so nice. But that was a load of bullshit. I remember the night my mother and father were waiting for me on the steps when I came home from school to tell me they were getting a divorce. I couldn't control

how upset I was. My brother had no idea; he was much too young. But I screamed and yelled, thinking that my complaints could stop their decision.

“The neighbors will hear,” my father said. “Get control of yourself.”

“I don’t care if the neighbors hear,” I said. “I don’t care what they think of me.”

The next morning at the bus stop, I saw Mrs. Peete, our next door neighbor who surely heard the argument, walking her daughters to the stop. I tried to stay in a corner and not talk to anyone. I was much too upset.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mrs. Peete asked.

I didn’t say anything. I was searching through my backpack pretending I was looking for a pencil.

“Why won’t you answer me?” Mrs. Peete asked.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” I said.

All the other kids were shocked. Nobody ever talked back to a grown up.

“I heard you crying last night,” she said, looking around at the other kids, then back at me. “Did the poor little baby have a bad night?” She sounded more like a kid than an adult. Mrs. Peete’s development must have been rather slow.

All the kids at the bus stop started to laugh. We boarded the bus when it arrived, and on the way to school that day, I had to sit in the middle of the bus because the front seats were already taken. All the kids from the neighborhood were there, and the bus driver didn’t care how everyone acted. Everyone was throwing papers and jumping back and forth between seats. I stayed in my seat, hoping that I would be left alone.

When the bus stopped on the corner of Bolton Station Road and Water Street, I heard the kids in the back screaming. I saw someone throw a piece of paper lit on fire out the window into someone's grass.

"What are you doing?" I said. "You can burn someone's house down."

The bus driver said nothing. I was standing up on the seat.

"Quiet, Tully," Brian Naughton said. He was the older brother of my best friend Pat. Brian always tried to start fights with me. He hated me. For no reason. "Just sit down," Brian said. "Mind your own business."

"Someone could lose their home," I said.

Another piece of paper went out the window. The bus drove away. I thought for sure someone's house burned down. Fire seemed so dangerous.

"You shouldn't have done that," I said.

"You going to tell?" Brian asked.

Everyone on the bus started to laugh.

"You're a jerk," I said. It was the worst thing I could think to say back then.

"And you're just upset because your mother is a Looney Tune," Brian said.

I wanted to kill him. To pound his face to a bloody pulp. But he was bigger and older. So I just sat back down.

"You going to cut your grass?" Brian asked. "It's ruining the entire neighborhood."

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The grass continued to grow, and I spent less time at home, avoiding my mother. To kill time, I used to walk around the paths behind our neighborhood and into the woods. I

would sit underneath trees and watch the squirrels gathering acorns, the blue jays and cardinals building nests, and try and find salamanders underneath rotting pieces of wood. A lot of times, I would hang out with my buddy, Pat Naughton. Sometimes he would come on these walks with me, and he'd invite me over to play Sega Genesis at his house. He was younger than me, but we used to play whiffle ball and basketball a lot. I always hoped his brother wasn't home. He always messed with me.

One night, I didn't want to go home, and Pat invited me over to his house to play basketball. They had a two story house just like ours, but they had a pool, too, and a very well-kept lawn. In fact, the neighborhood all envied their grass and pool.

Mrs. Naughton walked outside and watched us playing basketball. I always liked her. She had this sweet outer appearance, but as I grew up, I often thought that underneath her smiles, there was a deep depression. Looking back on it, she was trapped in her marriage to Mr. Naughton—a fat firefighter who worked in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. She was trapped by her pool, trapped by her yard, trapped by her children.

“Dinner will be ready soon,” Mrs. Naughton said. “James, would you want to stay over for dinner?”

I always wanted to eat over someone else's house any chance I could, so I didn't have to go home. I waited for the opportunity.

“Yes, please,” I said.

“We're having pizza,” Mrs. Naughton said. “But I have to ask Mr. Naughton first.”

When Mr. Naughton came home in his black pickup truck, he watched me shooting the basketball and didn't say a word. He walked right into the house and left the front door open. I heard him say, "He wants to stay over for dinner again? Doesn't his mother feed him anymore?"

"You know what's going on," Mrs. Naughton said.

"I don't care," Mr. Naughton said. "This is not a charity house."

Mrs. Naughton came to the door. I heard the screen door slam shut. "James," she said, "maybe you could come over to dinner another time. You can wait here for Pat if you want."

Pat went inside, and I sat on the porch, picking up and tossing the granite stones they had for a walkway.

"Is he just going to sit there, messing up our front yard," I heard Mr. Naughton say.

"He's waiting for Pat," Mrs. Naughton said. "Give the kid a break."

I heard a chair move, and he opened the door. I was watching Mr. Greg across the street. He had brought out his telescope and was adjusting knobs. He loved to invite the kids from the neighborhood to peer into space in his driveway. It was getting dark now, and he'd spend the rest of the night staring out into the ether.

"James," Mr. Naughton said, "why don't you go home and see your mother?"

"I don't want to," I said.

"You know," he said, "when you go home, tell your mother I will cut your lawn. I'll even cut it for free." He put his hand on my shoulder, and I wanted to knock it off. "It's an eyesore on the whole neighborhood."

“Go to hell,” I said.

“You’ve got a real attitude problem, boy,” Mr. Naughton said. “You need some discipline.”

I started to walk home, but Mr. Greg called me over.

“Where you going?” Mr. Greg asked. “Don’t you want to look through the scope?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I need to go home.”

“What are you in such a rush for?” he asked. “Come over here.”

I walked over to Mr. Greg’s driveway, and he had his compass and star map on his chair next to the telescope.

“I just aligned the finder scope, and I have the coordinates all ready to see Venus.” He pointed to the sky and said, “You see right there. That’s where Venus is. Just below Leo’s Sickle. It will look like the moon.”

“Mr. Greg,” I said, “I need to go home.”

“What do you need to go home for?” he asked.

“To cut my lawn.”

“It’s seven at night,” he said. “That’s not a job for someone your age anyways.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “It needs to be done. It’s an eyesore. Ruining the whole neighborhood.”

“Forget all that. Just look through the scope. You’ll be able to see Venus now.”

I peered into the scope, and at first, I couldn’t see anything, but then I saw an orb start to glow like a marble in the sky. It seemed so small and far away. I was grateful that there were places in the world other than Clinton.

“Do they have grass on Venus?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

*

Later that night, I tried to start the lawnmower in the tool shed. I examined the red lawnmower for a way to start the engine. I turned the key and tried pulling the cord. I was much too small. I had no idea about a choke, gas, or anything. I figured I could turn a key and it would start. I tried moving it out of the tool shed, but it was much too heavy. I just wanted to cut that god damn lawn. Not even to mention my father’s garden. It was overrun with weeds, and I saw my father’s gardening equipment in the tool shed, unused like ancient artifacts. People knew. The lawn showed that things were falling apart. The grass was a sign that something was wrong. I wanted everything to be normal again. Cutting that lawn would fix everything.

I gave up trying to work the lawnmower and found some hedge trimmers in the garage. It was a two-car garage. I remember we used to have birthday parties in there. The place was always filled with children on my birthday. But now there was just my mother’s Crown Victoria.

So I went around the entire yard with those hedge clippers, taking wild strokes at the grass. It was as if I had a sickle, chopping down grain. I was lucky I didn’t cut my hands off. I actually thought I could fix the whole yard with those freaking hedge clippers. I was sweating, trying to fix the lawn. Maybe if I could just take some off the top, everything would start to look normal again.

“What are you doing?” my father said.

I turned around, shocked to see my father. I had been crying. “I’m cutting this lawn,” I said. “It needs to be cut. It’s an eyesore on the entire neighborhood.”

My father put his arm around my shoulder and brought me towards his car.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Mom doesn’t want you here.”

“Let’s get some ice cream,” he said.

Chapter IV. You're Going to Carry that Weight

The day after I had my temporary cast replaced, I decided that right after school I would confront my grandparents to find out if my mother was adopted. During the period from when I was ten till this time, so many changes happened. My grandparents moved to Clinton, because they grew more worried about my mother, Benjamin, and me. The doctors didn't believe it was healthy for Mimi and Poppy to live with us, but they wanted to be near us, just in case. No one could stop them from moving closer. So they sold their house in Fairfield and bought a condo in Ridgefield, where my mother, Benjamin, and I had been living since my father sold the blue house. My father was looking for houses around Clinton. And meantime, he was living in a small apartment on Route 9 in Shrewsbury. I missed the blue house, my friends, and hated living in Ridgefield with lonely young professionals and retired couples. Benjamin and I weren't even allowed to play whiffle ball behind our house. Everything was suddenly so different. So strange. But it was good to have Mimi and Poppy close.

So right after school, I walked back to the old neighborhood and saw the blue house. Just to remind myself childhood was a real place. I felt strange with the cast on my arm. It felt so heavy. As if I was returning to the old neighborhood carrying a stone. And when I got to the blue house, there was a new family living there. Some kids were playing basketball on *my* basketball hoop. They were running and playing on *my* driveway. They were sleeping in the rooms where I had slept. I couldn't stand the sight. They were living *my* life. I took off, talking to myself about the unfair train of events.

So after seeing the blue house, I went straight to my grandparents. I wanted to know the truth. It couldn't have been true. I didn't believe my mother. She had made up stories so many times before. I expected it to be easy. They would tell me my mother was lying, as usual, and I would go home still unable to trust or understand my mother's behavior.

But when I arrived, Poppy and Mimi were sitting down to their afternoon tea, and I knew something was wrong. They looked concerned. Maybe my mother already came to them and explained everything? They knew something was wrong. I could tell by the way Mimi kept offering me cookies and cake. This was normal, but it was the way she offered the desserts, as if she was hiding something in her eyes. She wouldn't look at me straight. Kept getting up from the table and walking around. She would try to hide her nervousness by being the perfect hostess. While Poppy just seemed to be waiting, taking small sips from his tea, as if fully aware of my inevitable question.

"I have some pierogi," Mimi said. "All I have to do is take it out of the freezer."

"No," I said. "I'm fine."

"How about some ice cream?" Mimi was brushing the crumbs from her placemat into her hand. "Or I could make you a sandwich. How about a kielbasa sandwich?"

"No," I said. "I'm not hungry."

I had an itch underneath my cast, and I wanted to scratch it so badly.

"It won't take long," Mimi said. "How about—"

I slammed my hand on the table. "I'm not hungry."

"You have something to ask," Poppy said, "so ask it."

I looked around their house. I saw the painting of Prani, Italy, painted by some uncle, saw the mantle with pictures of all of us when we were younger and living in the Blue House, and I saw a portrait of my mother, when she was a child, wearing glasses. My mother looked just like the Virgin Mary that hangs above the altar at St. John's Church. So, I swallowed my tea and asked, "Are you my real grandparents?"

"Why wouldn't we be?" Mimi asked. "Who would have said such a thing?"

"Was Mom adopted?" I asked.

"Of course not," Mimi said. She started to rearrange the papers she had on the table. "We are your grandparents."

Poppy put his hand on Mimi's arm. Their hands looked old. Mimi had age spots all over her hands, and Poppy's skin wrinkled around his knuckles. Poppy picked up the tea, took a sip. "No," Poppy said. "We adopted your mother when she was a baby."

"Raymond," Mimi said.

"It's time he knew."

"Why does he have to know?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

I stood up from the table and walked into the kitchen, then back into the dining room. I was furious, out of my head, screaming words I could not remember. I walked over to the pictures and picked up a photo of all of us standing in front of the fireplace in the living room in the blue house. I threw it across the room. "It's all a lie then? How could you keep this from me?"

"We didn't want you to think differently of us," Mimi said.

"We didn't plan on it happening this way," Poppy said.

“Well it did happen.” I wanted to break something. I looked around the room at the lamps, the pictures in glass frames, the paintings, the record player, the old records, the glass mirror above the liquor cabinet. I couldn’t find anything I wanted to scatter across the room. But I wanted to make something tangible feel the way that I felt.

“Sit down and let me explain,” Poppy said.

“James,” Mimi said, “calm down.”

“I am calm,” I said. “You don’t want to see me not calm.”

“I know this must be tough.” Poppy stood up from the table and walked towards me. “You must let me explain”

I started to hear a noise, like a train chugging over the tracks in a lonely part of the woods, the train going faster and faster till it was about to run off the track, collapsing down an embankment, and I heard an explosion, metal banging and colliding into fire. A bow rifling against a cello. A machine gun rubbing against sandpaper.

“I don’t know if I can talk to you,” I said.

“I know you’re upset,” Poppy said, walking closer to me. “Please listen, James.”

Mimi said, “Don’t leave so upset.”

I was standing in front of the front door. I didn’t even realize where I was for a second. I had been moving around the room without knowing it. I was holding a lamp in my hand.

“Put the lamp down,” Poppy said.

“Calm down,” Mimi said. “Please, James.”

I didn't realize that I had a lamp in my hands. My mind seemed to skip like a scratched CD. I placed the lamp on the ground and walked to the table. When I sat down again, I said, "So explain it to me already."

Poppy sat down on the table and caught his breath, taking a deep inhale and a loud exhale. "We tried to have a child eight times. Each ended in miscarriage." He was trying to catch his breath. "This was hard on Mimi and me. So we applied to adopt a child."

Mimi said, "Would you like some more tea? All I have to do is put the water on the stove."

I looked into my cup and saw the tea bag stuck to the side of the mug. "No thanks."

"I'll get you some tea."

Poppy laughed as Mimi hobbled away from the table to make more tea. He started his story again. "We applied to adopt a child. But the agency said because we were an older couple, the priority went to younger couples. So we waited. And we waited. And heard nothing. We gave up hope. We both wanted a child. We kept trying, and we kept failing. So Mimi started to volunteer at a foster home."

"It was so sad there," Mimi said, pouring tea into my mug.

"It was run by nuns. And this foster child, Terri, about six years old, became so attached to Mimi. We arranged for her to come over to our house. She spent the night, and we asked her if she wanted to live with us. We needed her real father's permission, because the parents of these foster children only dropped them off temporarily until they could take care of them on their own.

“So the father reluctantly gave us permission,” Poppy said. He took a swig from his tea. “And then the craziest thing happened. We never saw it coming, James. It was as if God was testing us.” He pulled the tea bag up by its string and placed it back in the mug. “Terri was supposed to come over the next day when we received a phone call from the adoption agency. They told us to come pick up our baby. Tomorrow. Just like it was a car in the shop or an order of laundry. We had nothing prepared.”

“We didn’t have a crib or anything,” Mimi said. “How could we take care of a child?”

Mimi and Poppy looked at each other and smiled. They loved each other. I have never witnessed love as strong as theirs except for in books. When they stared at each other, I could almost see the stories and memories they shared passing between their eyes. They almost seemed to share the same consciousness.

“I don’t know how we ever pulled any of this off,” Poppy said. “But we arranged to pick up our baby, your mother, from the agency. When we showed up, they found out we arranged to have a foster child. They refused to hand over the baby. It turned out the two agencies, the foster care and the adoption agency, couldn’t work together.”

“One was Catholic,” Mimi said, “the other was run by the government.”

“The organizations didn’t even talk to each other,” Poppy said. “So we hired a lawyer, met with a priest and a social worker from the agency to prove we could create a stable environment for both children. And we fought for both children, James. We fought and fought and argued and argued, and finally, we became the first couple in the state of New York to have a foster child and an adopted child.”

“But I’ve never heard of Terri,” I said.

“How about a cookie?” Mimi asked.

“He needs to know Eleanor,” Poppy said. “Terri ran away from us. Just snuck off one night. She was so jealous of your mother. We tried to adopt her, but Terri’s father wouldn’t allow us to call her our own child. He didn’t want a Polack and a Mick taking care of his baby.”

“He’d rather have her stay in a foster home,” Mimi said. She was trying to disguise crying by reading a piece of paper she had picked up off the table.

“But the reason we never told you,” Poppy said, “is because the general theory back then was to introduce Sylvia as an adopted child. So we said this is Sylvia Sheridan, our adopted child. No doubt that changed her. Even though we tried to make her feel like our daughter, we always knew she never felt like she had a real family. When you and your brother came along, we wanted you to know you had a family. No matter what.”

“We just never wanted you to feel like you weren’t loved,” Mimi said. “God knows you’ve been through enough.”

“I haven’t been through anything,” I said.

They were holding each other’s hands—a portrait of family and commitment. I stood up from the table. It didn’t seem real that Mimi and Poppy could stay together. How could anyone be happy?

“Where are you going?” Poppy asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t know anymore.”

“We can still talk.”

I thought about the way my mother acted, the erratic behavior, the words manic and depression. Am I the same person as my mother? Am I my father? Will my child be me? Just like God can be three people at once, could I be my mother and father and the Holy Ghost too? But that all seemed like bullshit. How could the blood running through my veins really impact who I was?

“I have one more question,” I said. “What is wrong with Mom?”

“There’s been enough for today. How about a steak?” Mimi said. She stood up and started to hobble around on her bad knees. “I’ve got a Delmonico in the freezer. Needs to defrost.”

“Please,” I said.

“He needs to know, Eleanor.” Poppy took a sip of tea, looked at the ceiling, and was about to begin his story. Poppy took another sip from his tea, and I knew he was bracing for a story. Poppy and I spent hours talking to each other. I loved to listen to his hardboiled stories about growing up in New York City during the Depression. Everything seemed so alive, so vivid, when he described that time. There was no one in the world who could put things in perspective better than Poppy. Even if he was wrong, whatever he said felt right.

“Your mother has an illness. Just like a cancer patient has an illness. Just like a virus or a cold. But this illness affects her mind. Don’t ask me for an exact diagnosis, because it seems to change all the time. It’s hard to tell when she started to act differently. Your mother wasn’t sick before she was married.”

“Was it my father’s fault?” I asked.

I saw something in Poppy's eyes. It looked like rage. Like the rings on a stove turning red. It was the look he got when someone insulted Mimi, or his daughter, or his grandchildren. He was so protective. He would have fought a 25 year-old kid at the age of 75 if he thought Mimi had been insulted somehow.

"Let it go, Raymond," Mimi said.

"Fine," Poppy said. Something was there he repressed. He looked back into his tea for the energy to continue. "She's different now. It all started on the day you were born."

"When I was born?" I asked.

"It was a terrible pregnancy. We all thought we were going to lose her. We could hear your mother screaming from the waiting room."

"The doctor was an idiot," Mimi said.

"Your father chased him out of town after the pregnancy. He refused to give your mother any drugs. She was in terrible pain. You were breach. So the doctor had to do a C-Section. She almost died. We thought you were both gone."

"She almost died?" I asked. "Because of me?"

"But once she survived and recovered," Poppy said, "we started to notice that her behavior was different. She wasn't normal."

"I was over her house one day," Mimi said, "helping her watch you while she ran some errands. I was feeding you apple sauce at the dining-room table in the old blue house, when she stormed in. Everything was fine, but she looked at me and demanded to know what I was doing there with her son. She didn't even recognize me. She kicked me out of the house that day. It was almost as if she was possessed. She didn't think I

was her mother. She has resented me for so long. My own child,” Mimi said, “she is my child.”

“Eleanor,” Poppy said, “that wasn’t her. You know that. It wasn’t her.” Then Poppy turned to me. “The doctors called this post-partum depression.”

“That’s when we first noticed her acting differently,” Mimi said, “after you were born.”

I couldn’t help it, but I felt guilty for my mother’s illness. As if it was my fault for being born.

“But it got worse,” Poppy said. “Your mother and father weren’t getting along. Several years went by. They were trying to make it work. Really tried to stay together for the children. She seemed to be acting normal for a while. Until they decided to have another child.”

Mimi said, “They thought another child would fix their marriage.”

Poppy said, “And give you some company.”

There was a long stemmed candle lit on the table. The flame was dancing and the wax was dripping down into pools. I wanted to put my hand in the flame, let it burn until it became cold.

“So once they had Benjamin,” Poppy said, “we all noticed a dramatic shift in her behavior. Your father and mother were arguing more and more.”

Mimi put her hands over her eyes. “It was awful for you to see.”

Poppy took a deep breath and continued. “One day, your mother and father got into a terrific fight.” He looked back into the tea. “Your mother was taken away that night by the police and sent to a hospital for the first time.

“You were young,” Poppy said. “Your mother was sent to the hospital. They said she had post-traumatic stress. The doctors said, after analyzing her, it looked like she had been through a war.”

“Will she ever be fixed?” I asked.

“Just see her as someone who is sick. Be patient with your mother. Let her yell at the wall when she gets upset.”

“I’ll try.”

“Are you okay?” Mimi asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You want the steak?”

I shook my head no. “Am I like my mother?”

Poppy and Mimi looked at each other, as if they had thought about this question before, whether they looked at me and saw the same problems awaiting me.

“No,” Poppy said.

“Are you upset with us?” Mimi asked.

I wasn’t sure how I felt, what I was supposed to believe, but I knew one thing for sure. “Blood has nothing to do with family.”

Chapter V. The Can Man

My buddy, Justin Pupecki, and I were standing on high bridge—the train tracks in the woods behind my neighborhood—passing back and forth a bottle of Canadian Whiskey Pupecki had stolen from his parents. I was in eighth grade, thirteen years old, and it was about a year after I found out my entire family had been lying to me. This was my first time drinking whiskey. I was taking small sips (it tasted like gasoline), while Justin was taking heroic swigs. Staring through the cracks in the bridge, there was about a hundred yard drop into the Nashua River (which once powered the mills and helped make Clinton an industrial powerhouse), and I wondered if I would feel the impact upon hitting the rocks in the river, or if I would just instantly die, all the lights and chemicals just clicking off without pain.

My mother went back to the hospital during the past winter, after she told me about Mimi and Poppy, and she got out again in the spring. She'd been recovering. It was fall again, and I worried winter would bring on the same problem.

“So good,” Pupecki said, taking his lips off the bottle. “I could sit here all day.”

“I think it tastes like shit,” I said.

“You're just a rookie,” he said. “I know whiskey better than you.”

Pupecki and I were always competing about who was more mature or more adventurous. But I didn't care about all that right now. I really didn't seem to care about anything. At this point, I had stopped listening to my parents. I started hanging out with the wrong crowd. My mother, no matter how illogical or irritating she was, always reminded me that the kids I was hanging out with were no good. And at the time, I didn't

believe her. I just wanted to be cool, rebellious, have friends that shared a similar feeling of being misunderstood. We were reckless and liked to feel like we were outsiders and roughnecks.

One of my buddies, Cal Andrazyk, would beat the shit out of me when he was stoned. Sometimes he would take tabs of acid and just be so unpredictable and out of control I would actual fear for my life. He wasn't on the tracks, but I kept on the lookout for him. Once, when we were all hanging out at the pit—a sand dune that looked like God had scooped the dirt straight out of the earth—he was so fucked up on whatever drugs he was doing that day I was just waiting for him to start beating me up. We were all blazing, and after I let out a puff of smoke, I saw Cal come from behind me with a plastic bag. He pulled the plastic bag over my head and started to choke me. I couldn't breathe. I started kicking him and trying to pull his hands off my neck. Cal was laughing. Pupecki was too. They were sons of bitches. He had the bag over my head for twenty seconds, which seemed like forever. When he took the bag off my head, I started crying, thinking of how fragile my life was around these guys. I tried to fight him, but he was much too big. He threw me to the ground and kept laughing. Just laughing. And no matter how much I hated these guys, no matter how bad they were for me, I couldn't stay away from them. I felt I belonged. I felt like I had no other life except smoking and drinking with them.

“You tell Cal we're here?” I asked.

“No,” Pupecki said, “he'd drink all our booze.”

“My mother wants me to meet her sister,” I said. “We’ve been avoiding it so long, but she’s insisting now. Giving us the guilt trip. I still can’t believe everyone’s been lying to me,” I said. “My grandparents, my mom, my dad.”

“Who cares? That was a year ago. Get over it.” Pupecki said. He handed me the bottle of whiskey—the brown liquid swirling inside of the bottle. “There are worst things in the world.”

“Like what?” I said. I took a sip of the whiskey, and my throat was on fire.

Pupecki picked up an empty bud light bottle lying next to the track (we weren’t the only kids who drank down there), and he smashed it against the rail. “You could be dead.”

I thought Pupecki might actually be a good guy. My mother always told me not to hang out with Pupecki. She always said he was a bad kid. But I didn’t believe her. He was always nice to me. We’d smoke pot, watch *The Doors* old concert footage in his room, and go swimming in his pool. It was much better than being home with her. The week before, Pupecki and I were playing basketball in his driveway when I asked him why he doesn’t have the same name as his father. The guy he was living with, Mr. Shortsleeve, was married to his mother, but as Justin told me, Mr. Shortsleeve was not his real father. Pupecki’s real father didn’t come around anymore. I shot the ball, and he grabbed the rebound. He told me his father had AIDS. He was really sick. He couldn’t remember the last time he saw him. I asked him if he had AIDS because he had the same blood as his father. He said of course not.

I looked down at the tracks, thinking about Justin’s father. “I’m so sick of being in this town,” I said.

“Me too. I want to go to Austin,” Justin said.

“I want to go to California.”

“Alaska.”

“Mexico.”

“Timbuktu.”

“The Mississippi River.”

We both looked down the tracks, the woods dense on both sides, and I imagined the cities somewhere out there, just a train ride away.

“I’m going to hop one of these trains,” I said. “I’m just going to leave.”

“You’re not going to do shit,” Justin said. “You don’t have the balls.”

I had a problem back then, and I still do, because the moment someone tells me not to do something, well, I’m sure as hell going to do it.

“I’ll prove it to you,” I said.

We waited a half an hour, and when I heard the train blow its whistle and saw the steel horse slicing around the bend, exposing itself like a nightmare, I braced myself for the jump. I could feel the train rumbling through the tracks, and as it came around the corner, I ran next to the train, the machine roaring, and I jumped onto the side of one of the cars, grabbed the ladder, pulled myself up by my arm strength, and swung into an open box car. I sat down on the metal, and I couldn’t believe I did it. I never thought I could ever leave Clinton, but now, as I sat on the metal box car which smelled like dirt and sweat, I watched Clinton fade from me like a flame gently extinguishing on a matchstick. It was a good feeling. I saw Pupecki standing there, watching the train leave. He looked furious that I had the guts to go for a ride.

I figured that I was heading West, out towards Springfield, because Mt. Wachusett was in the opposite direction. I sat near the open door, trying to remain somewhat in the shadows. I knew a little something about train hopping from all the railroad stories I had read. Poppy loved to read train stories, and he passed all his old magazines on to me. In those old pulps, the bulls were the meanest sons of bitches in the country. I was terrified of being arrested. But I was enjoying watching the New England countryside gallop past the open door, knowing that I was leaving everything behind.

And I wasn't blue about leaving it all behind either. I didn't care about leaving my parents. It was better this way. I didn't even care about leaving my grandparents anymore. They all had been lying to me. The only person I would miss was my little brother. It was hard to imagine my brother growing up without anyone to watch over him. But I had to put that all out of my mind. I started to imagine all of my future stories: crossing the border into Canada on Christmas Day while the snow piled up on the Earth, catching salmon and frying it over a campfire in Oregon, and falling in love with women in each region of the country. Women who slept outside and made love. (I wasn't sure what making love was back then, but I knew I wanted it.) And somewhere out in Kansas, I'd work for a man painting his house and he would pay me with my first guitar. *An instrument I played at your age*, he would say, *but I can't find the time anymore*. Then I'd ride the trains at night, picking old folk songs like *Do Re Mi* and *I Ain't Got No Home*. Those old bulls would never catch me. I'd always be free.

I took my time to watch the scenery. The moon was full, and it was warm for early November. The weathermen were calling it an Indian Summer. I could see birds

flying over a swamp that was passing on the right side of the tracks. The wind was cool, but it was loud colliding into the cars. Barren trees rose out of the algae-covered water and birch trees dotted the landscape. A few more minutes, and the Nashua River came into view, running next to the train. The moon reflected in the water. Sometime after that I fell asleep.

I woke up as the train started to slow down, and I saw red crossing signs. When the train came to a stop, I heard someone say, "Come here, Kid. I got something for you."

I stuck my head out of the car, and I felt someone grab me by the collar. I was thrown out of the car, and I slid down the embankment on my back.

The voice said, "Stay off my fucking train."

What a lousy trick. I couldn't believe I fell for it. I stood up and dusted the dirt off my jeans and rubbed the dust out of my eyes. My back was sore, but I was glad he hadn't socked me one and broken my nose or blackened my eye. Well, it was only an aching back, and I was right next to the Nashua River. He wouldn't fool me next time. I was terrified, but after the train was gone, I felt my bravado return, and I just had this feeling that nothing in the world could harm me, though I had no idea what was waiting for me in those woods.

I walked down the track a bit, trying to see if I could find the perfect spot to call home for the next couple of days. I was hungry, and I had a candy bar in my pocket, but it was smashed from when I had fallen out of the train. I also had about a buck 45 in my pocket. I walked about a mile when I saw a red glow behind a few pine trees. Further down into the woods, I could see the land drop in a gradual incline beyond the Nashua

River. As I approached the glow, I realized it was a campsite. I heard pieces of wood crackling in the flames. Closing in on the site, I noticed a half dozen or so aluminum cans scattered near the tracks. It wasn't just beer cans, though. There were Coke cans, orange-soda cans, cranberry and tomato juice cans—a collage of every type of can I had ever come across. And next to the entrance of the clearing were four or five gallon garbage bags filled with cans too. I wondered if I should turn around, but I couldn't let fear hold me back now. I needed to go forward. Anyway, I knew, from reading all those train stories, hobos were a community. They even had their own terminology. They stuck it out together.

I came up the track toward the fire carefully. The fire was off to the right side of the track in the center of a few pine trees. I could only see the light from the fire. Walking through the open trail covered in pine needles, the forest began to shrink from the camp fire light. All the light from the fire caught my eye and blocked out most of the hilly countryside behind me. The flames carried the light to the top of the pine trees. The fire was bright now, and there was a man sitting by the fire on a log, his hands covering his face. I waited behind a tree and watched. The man looked to be alone. He was covered in dirt. He removed his hands from his face and was staring into the fire. Then I recognized him. He was the only homeless man there was in Clinton. Everyone knew him as Kim the Can Man. I stepped out from behind the tree and walked into the firelight.

“Hello!” I said.

Looking away from the fire, Kim nodded and smiled, revealing a toothless grin. He didn't say anything back.

Kim went around Clinton in the Spring, Summer, and Fall, collecting aluminum cans and cashing them in at Shaw's or Victory's for five cents a pop. People would try to hand him quarters, but he would refuse in his broken English. He accepted cans only. He was always smiling when you saw him. Seemed like the happiest man in the world. No one really knew how Kim ended up in Clinton, but the rumor was that he came over from Korea, after the war, and every week he would send his can money back East to his family. He was trying to save to bring them to America. Everyone in town thought his story was a fine example of the American Dream. No one really knew where he slept at night, and when I looked around at the campsite, I couldn't seem to understand whose dream Kim was living.

"I didn't expect to meet you out here," I said.

He nodded again. Always smiling. Dirt covered his face. He wore a knitted skull cap that was also covered in dirt. I figured that was the dirty and careless lifestyle I would have to get used to now.

"Tonight's my first night," I said, hoping he understood me. "My name's James."

"Kim," he said, nodding and smiling, always nodding and smiling.

Next to Kim was a canvas bag, and on top were a skillet, a few sets of silverware, and an extra set of clothes. There was another bag on the log next to Kim. There was a sleeping bag stuffed into another sleeping bag.

"I'm finished going back home," I said. "Never again."

Kim just kept nodding and smiling.

I said, "I ran into my first bull tonight. He threw me off the train. Next time I see him I'm going to fight."

Behind Kim, near a bunch of ferns, was a collection of tires stacked in a circle, and it looked like a box was being used as a door. Over the tires was a tarp, and I figured that was where Kim went when it rained and maybe even when it snowed. This life wouldn't be so bad. From behind me, a man walked into the campsite and across the clearing to the fire.

“What the hell are you doing here kid?” the man asked.

I turned around to face an old man, probably around my grandfather's age, with gray hair and a red face. I figured the red face meant he'd been drinking. He was white, but his skin looked like rubber from being out in the sun. He had a gray goatee right on his chin. He was tall. Maybe about 6'7. The way he walked around the campfire looked like he was walking on stilts. He placed a carton of eggs and a package of ham next to the fire, and he held a loaf of white bread underneath his right arm.

“It's my first night,” I said. “I'm trying to find some adventure.”

“So,” he said, “you're running away from home?”

“No, sir,” I said.

The man handed Kim a bottle of water, and Kim drank it quickly.

“People call me Queeney,” he said. He sounded Irish or English or something like that. “You got a name?”

“Tully. James Tully.”

Queeney took a stick of butter out from the canvas bag and placed a slice onto the skillet. He held the skillet over the fire. “You hungry?”

“Sure am.”

Queeney said something to Kim in another language that sounded really strange to my ear. I thought it was Chinese. Kim just kept nodding and smiling.

“Where did you learn Chinese?” I asked.

“Korean,” Queeney said. “We’ve known each other since the war.”

The butter was crackling, and Queeney cracked the eggs and dropped them in the skillet. I could hear the eggs sizzling and he threw the pieces of ham on the skillet next to the eggs. It was a heavy-looking skillet, and the veins in Queeney’s arm stood out from his skin as he held it over the fire.

“This is great,” I said, looking out past the camp fire and into the hilly countryside. The stars were bright, and I tried to see if I could find Venus. “Where do you think we are? New York? Canada? The Nashua River runs forever, right?”

“You must be crazy, kid. You’re in Massachusetts.”

“In Mass?”

“Almost in Nashua,” Queeney said. “Where you coming from?”

“Iowa.” I couldn’t help lying. I wanted Queeney to think I was far from home, especially since it seemed Kim didn’t recognize me. I thought I could get away with any old story.

Queeney stoked the fire with a stick. “I like my yoke runny,” Queeney said. “It’s really an art form, you know. You have to watch the eggs carefully.” The eggs were going from clear to white on the skillet. “If the yoke is cooked all the way through, then the eggs are ruined. No point in even eating them.” He flipped the ham onto the other side.

Kim was staring into the fire, watching the pieces of wood glowing amber. He kept tapping his foot as if he were keeping beat to a song in his head. Kim said something to Queeney, and Queeney shook his head no. Queeney kept shaking his head no, but Kim just continued smiling and nodding, smiling and nodding.

“Why you running?” Queeney asked.

“Not running. Starting a new life.”

“You’re just a kid. Get back on home.”

“No reason for that.”

“No family?”

“Depends on what you mean by family.”

Queeney slid the spatula underneath the outside of the eggs. He said, “Can’t have the bottom too burnt either. That’s what makes keeping the yoke runny tough.”

“My family’s dead,” I said. For some reason, it felt better to imagine them dead instead of alive and worrying about me. Maybe I could convince myself that was true, but I couldn’t handle the thought of my brother being killed. “All except my brother. He survived the plane crash.”

“Plane crash?” he said. “You’re too young to be alone.”

“I’m not alone.”

“Believe me, kid,” Queeney said. “Out here, you’re alone.”

He opened the bread and put six pieces along the outside of the fire. He was watching the eggs, trying to gauge the yoke, his eye squinting above the pan. “It’s almost ready.”

Kim was staring at me again, smiling and nodding. His eyes creased at the crevices of his eyelids when he smiled, and I could see the fire reflecting in his pupils. He slid his shirt over his head, and there were burn marks all over his body, and I could see dirt lines around his biceps. He was skinny.

“After this sandwich,” Queeney said, “you’re going home.”

“I’m never going back,” I said. “Never in a million years.”

“Listen kid. I know better than you in these matters.”

Kim’s foot kept beating against the Earth, keeping time. His legs were shaking.

“Are you running?” I asked Queeney.

Queeney slid the eggs in between the pieces of bread. Then he placed the ham over the eggs. “This is my home.”

“Right here?”

“Close enough.”

I said, “Are you alone?”

“Watch it, kid,” Queeney said. He handed me my sandwich. “Eat and go home.”

I grabbed the sandwich. “Never again.”

Queeney handed Kim his sandwich, and we all started to eat. When I pushed the two pieces of bread together, the yoke started to run onto my fingers.

“Perfect,” Queeney said. “It’s perfect.”

Queeney and Kim both ate quickly, but I took my time. I didn’t want to leave yet. I wanted Queeney to tell me some train stories so I could see what was in store for me. I was about to ask, but they started to argue in Korean.

After they finished arguing, Queeney said, “Why don’t you take that sandwich with you on a walk?”

“I want to stay,” I said. “You could tell me train stories.”

“Train stories?”

“Ever been to Alaska?”

“Boy, kid, you’re really alone. Time for you to go.”

I licked the yoke from my fingers. “I don’t want to.”

“Kid,” Queeney said, “I don’t ride the trains for adventure. Like I said, this is my home. You better leave now. I can’t help you when Kim gets his ideas.”

Kim was smiling and nodding, smiling and nodding.

“You don’t ride trains?” I asked.

“You see those burns?” Queeney said. “All over him.”

I looked at Kim, saw the marks all over his body, and nodded my head.

“How do you think he got those?”

“From riding the trains.”

“He was branded,” Queeney said. “After the war, a bunch of men from his hometown caught him doing something with a boy. For punishment, they took scalding metal to his skin.”

“For what?”

“You don’t want to know,” Queeney said. “Kim likes the way you...” He was trying to find the right words. “He thinks you look pretty.”

“Pretty?”

“Go home,” Queeney said. “He’s going to make you scream, kid. Go home.”

Kim was smiling and nodding, smiling and nodding. He stood up from the log.
“Get out of here,” Queeney said. “Go home.”

I ran from the fire, down the tracks until I figured I was far away from Kim. I could hear Kim and Queeney laughing. My legs were burning. I kept wondering if the Can Man was following me, so every couple minutes I would sprint again. I walked down the tracks, towards home, until an hour or two later, I saw a train light coming around the corner and illuminating the night, heading back in the direction towards Clinton. I hopped the train, and I watched the landscape pass by the open door. I didn't fear those bulls now anymore. They were nothing compared to Kim. I was being slingshotted back into the past, and this time, I understood that I had never actually moved, but everything else, the ground, the Earth, was moving beneath me. I had to find another way out.

Chapter VI. Bloody Queens

My mother drove Benjamin and me to Flushing, Queens, to meet her new (maybe I should say original or bloody) sister and her daughter. My mother informed us that we should refer to her sister as Aunt Cindy, and Aunt Cindy's daughter's name was Jolene. I didn't want to meet them at all, but my mother told us this was important to know *who we were*. Strangely, up until this whole incident with her "blood family," I had never once thought about who I was. Or that I was any different than those around me.

Benjamin sat in the middle seat, and I was in the front. At six years old my brother was the most precious sight. You should have seen him—auburn hair, fat cheeks, big head on a tiny body—and when I would look at him in the back seat, he'd just wink at me. Boy, was that incredible. That wink could solve all the world's problems. He was way too cool for five. It was dangerous to be that cool. I kept watching him to make sure he was okay with the drive. We were lost somewhere in Queens, and I wanted him to remain calm. I couldn't stand to see him upset.

"I know it's around here somewhere," my mother said.

"What you looking for?" I asked. "I thought we were meeting Cindy."

"I told you it's Aunt Cindy." She looked at the street signs. "Where is Tenth Street?"

"What's there?"

My mother stopped at a green light and the Mack truck behind us laid on his horn.

"Jesus," my mother said.

Benjamin started laughing in the back seat.

“It’s green,” I said.

“I don’t know where to go.”

The Mack truck honked again.

“Go!” I said.

“Quiet, James.”

My mother drove straight onto a side street. She looked at all the row homes, trying to find something in the windows. To me they looked like eyes—the same tired face, the brick complexion. Somewhere here was the past.

“Now I recognize this,” she said. “The house is right around the corner.”

“Whose house?”

“Almost there.”

I turned around to look at Benjamin swinging his feet against the back of the center console.

My mother had explained that Aunt Cindy and Jolene had grown up in the Bronx. So I knew we weren’t looking for their old house. So maybe she was looking for an old house of someone on Mimi and Poppy’s side. Plus, I didn’t picture Aunt Cindy growing up in this section of Queens. The way my mother describe where Aunt Cindy had grown up in the Bronx made the place sound like an old nuclear bomb test sight—huge potholes, crumbling buildings, wind pushing trash through emptied streets. Aunt Cindy’s family didn’t have much growing up, compared to my mother. And my mother didn’t even have *much*.

Almost a year ago, my mother finally tracked down her real mother. They met in a hospital, while my mother watched her bloody mother dying of cancer. (I didn’t know

about this at the time. It was all hidden from me.) They met in a hospital in the Bronx, and my mother sat by a stranger who gave birth to her, slowly disintegrating before her eyes. An image of herself in the future. An image of the possibilities of who she could have been. It must have felt like watching your own death taking place on a parallel universe. My mother had found out in that hospital that her real father's last name was Kelley. He had run away one night, hopping a train towards nowhere. That at least explained my inclinations.

So my mother decided to get to know her blood sister, Aunt fucking Cindy. (At least Chip wasn't coming.) They decided to meet at a restaurant in Flushing overlooking Flushing Creek. Flushing was a place my mother knew where she wouldn't get lost. So much for that idea.

"That's it," my mother said. She pointed at one of the units on the block of row homes.

"What is it?" I asked.

Benjamin was swinging his feet and humming to himself. Just such a happy kid. He had no idea what was going on. What does blood mean to an six year old?

"Conrad and Sophia used to live there."

"Who are they?"

"Very special people," she said. "I can't believe you don't remember them. Aunt Sophie, Mimi's sister. Uncle Conrad was married to Sophie. She taught me how to play the piano and sing." She pulled into a parking spot on the street. "They were artists."

"Artists?" I asked. "They have any money?"

"They were artists for a living."

“They lived for art?”

At the time, I had no idea what my mother was referring to. Being an artist, to me, sounded like believing in aliens and ghosts. Who knew actual artists? Like seeing the Loch Ness monster. And I was supposed to have two in my family? But they weren't my blood family. Being an artist didn't seem to make sense.

Suddenly, my mother opened the car door and walked to the house.

“Stay in the car,” my mother said.

“Don't we have somewhere to be?”

I watched my mother walk up the granite walkway—all those row homes extending like mirrors reflecting into each other. She knocked on the door. An old man answered the door. My mother said something, and the man shook his head and shut the door on her. She came back to the car, and we drove away.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“I wanted to see if the house looked the same.”

It was impossible for me to know then, but later Uncle Conrad and Aunt Sophie would become integral in my life, without me actually ever remembering meeting them.

*

At the restaurant overlooking Flushing Creek, Aunt Cindy and Jolene sat at one side of the booth, and my mother and I were on the other. Benjamin sat in a chair at the end of the table. My mother was buttering the complimentary bread and eating fast. When she was nervous, she made a lot of racket at the table—adjusting her water glass, resetting her silverware, asking everyone else what they ordered even though she already knew.

It was difficult to talk at first, especially since Aunt Cindy looked so mean. She had a red beehive hairdo, penciled eyebrows, and a general demeanor that said, “I don’t take any shit.” She looked like Queens, old, strong, immovable, and stubborn, unlike my forty year old mother who looked like she was 28. A woman who always laughed and always talked. A woman who looked kind and innocent. Even though I knew being kind, innocent, really wasn’t true. She had seen a side of the people in the hospitals that most people didn’t even know existed.

Jolene, compared to her mother, was pretty, with a fair complexion and brown hair past her shoulders. She was wearing a Spice Girls tee shirt, and I kept teasing her about girl power. She was two years younger than me, and she made me feel strange. I kept thinking about kissing her, but I had to remind myself that she was, in fact, my first cousin!

“So James,” Aunt Cindy said, leaning in over the table as if about to ask a personal question, speaking to me in that voice adults used to speak to kids that sounded interested, even though they really didn’t give a shit. A voice that sounded like it was her duty to speak to a youngster to bolster my communication skills. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Oh,” I said, “a homeless man.”

“James,” my mother said. “Don’t be sarcastic.”

I don’t know why I said that, but I felt, back then, that her stupid question deserved a stupid answer.

Aunt Cindy looked at my mother, trying to figure out what kind of a child she had brought to lunch.

“Maybe a musician,” I said.

My mother said, “Just like his mother.”

“How about you, Benjamin?” Aunt Cindy asked.

“He’s six,” I said.

“Kids have dreams at six, don’t they?” Aunt Cindy lifted up her pencil eyebrows, making a sort of sideways question mark.

“President of the United States,” Benjamin said.

Then Aunt Cindy burst out laughing. “That is precious,” she said, turning to my mother. “Your kid actually believes that he can be the president? Truly priceless. If we only had such optimism growing up.”

“You know,” my mother said. “We grew up really close to you. I lived in Mineola.”

“Oh sweetie,” Aunt Cindy said, “Mineola is really so far away from where we grew up.”

“I can’t believe we’re sisters,” my mother said. She laughed and put her hand on Aunt Cindy’s wrist. “What was the Bronx like? Our Mother? Oh, please tell me.”

I could have really cared less about where Cindy lived or what their lives were like. I just wanted to stop thinking about Jolene. She didn’t say much. Just kind of sat there. Said nothing. And I just kept making fun of the Spice Girls while Aunt Cindy and my mother talked.

“The Spice Girls, huh?” I said to Jolene. “Tell me you want, what you really want.”

Jolene just rolled her eyes, knowing that by quoting their lyrics, I was patronizing her. I didn't want to be mean to her, but I knew no other way of processing these complicated emotions.

"My life was so different than yours," Aunt Cindy said. "You couldn't even comprehend what growing up was like."

The waitress brought over our food. Steam rose off all our plates. I took the top bun off my hamburger and looked at the charred cheeseburger. I wasn't very hungry, but I ate it anyway. I wanted to fill the empty space I felt inside of myself.

"A couple years back," Aunt Cindy said. "We received a collect call from someone in Jamaica who said he was our brother. I knew my brother was in the Cape working on a boat. So I took the call anyway. Well, it turned out that this person, this man, was our half brother on my father's side. Did one of those blood tests and went through the adoption network. He hired a private eye to track us down. We talked briefly and I haven't heard from him since."

"Isn't it exciting to know you have a new sister?" my mother asked.

"I already have two brothers and a sister."

Benjamin was devouring his chicken fingers, and I pretended to be lost in my cheeseburger. Benjamin was just smiling. Just smiling. It seemed that he was right about the age of understanding the world he had been born into. I wanted to delay that for him as much as possible. Boy I loved that innocent smile, every wink. It is hard to say now, sitting at this desk, how much I love Benjamin. It hurts to think about being so far away from him. We are survivors.

"You're so lucky," Aunt Cindy said.

“Lucky?” my mother said. “What do you mean by lucky?”

“You’re sheltered. Mineola, hah. Do you know what it was like to grow up in the Bronx?”

My mother looked shocked. She had her fork in her hand and was thinking about scooping some more food into her mouth. “I didn’t have it easy.”

“You don’t know what work is.”

“Can we change the subject?”

“To what?”

“I came here,” my mother said, “to get to know you better. Have our kids meet.”

“How about them Red Sox?” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Why did you even contact us?” Aunt Cindy asked.

That was a great question. I wanted to know that answer as well. Everything was somewhat fine—except for her illness and the fighting and the unhappiness. I guess everything was messed up, but this just made things way worse. Bloody family.

And while my mother stared into Aunt Cindy’s eyes, trying to negotiate what to say next, I heard that same room, the clocks tolling, the blood rising and drowning the sound. Now only I heard the voices of men and women talking. I couldn’t quite hear what they were saying. But they were screaming. And their voices seemed to be drowning in the blood, too. What were they trying to tell me?

“Because I have to know who I am,” my mother said. “Who I was. Who I will be. Who my kids are.”

“Jesus, Sylvia,” Aunt Cindy said, “I don’t even know who I am, how can I help you?”

“I need to know about our family. Has anyone ever been sick in our family? Doctors say that I’m sick. But I’m not. I want to prove it.”

Aunt Cindy took a sip of her water. “My brother is mentally retarded, and I’ve had to take care of him my entire life. Protect him and make sure he’s safe. Do you know what that’s like?”

“I do,” I said.

They both looked at me, as if remembering there were children at the table. I could not see the resemblance between my mother and Aunt Cindy. Could this be my home?

“My late sister,” Aunt Cindy said. I hated calling her my Aunt. “She developed an addiction to heroin. One night, she went into a mental hospital because she was trying to kill herself.”

Hearing those words, kill herself, sent my nerves firing off each other. How could someone want to kill themselves? Could my mother try and kill herself? Blood was everyone on the table, clocks ticking, voicing screaming.

“Stop that noise,” I yelled. “Stop the noise.”

The whole restaurant turned and faced our table. I felt like the whole world was looking at us, magnifying our problems.

“James, please,” my mother said.

The whole restaurant went back to their food.

“Should I go on?” Aunt Cindy asked.

“Please.”

“They put her in a padded cell, and in through the slit in the door, they gave her food. On the tray was a plastic fork and knife. She spent the night using the knife on her wrist. But she wasn’t dead yet. She couldn’t feel anything, but she managed to really get into her wrist. She needed immediate attention. They rushed her to the hospital. She didn’t make it.”

“That is awful,” my mother said.

I looked at Benjamin and I could see that he was listening. It was hard to know if he comprehended yet. And at the time, Aunt Cindy’s story seemed to make sense, but now it just sort of seems like bullshit.

“So,” Aunt Cindy said, “you get what you wanted from me?”

“I want a sister,” my mother said.

Aunt Cindy turned towards the waitress who was walking by and asked for the check. Then she turned back to my mother. “I’ve got a lot of family.”

“I don’t,” my mother said. “Can you ever have too much family?”

Aunt Cindy never answered the question. The table was silent. My mother was moving her silverware around, brushing the crumbs out of her plate. Jolene was staring out at Flushing Creek. Benjamin was kicking his feet against the table. Aunt Cindy was tapping her wallet against the table. And I listened to the room full of clocks. Time was running out.

Chapter VII. Bloody North Carolina

About two months after meeting Aunt Cindy in Queens, my mother, her boyfriend Chip, Benjamin, and I flew down to Atlanta where we were picked up by Uncle Sammy (we were to call him uncle too), and drove back to Murphy, North Carolina, in his white four-door Chevrolet truck to a campsite for trailers that he managed. I had never been to the South. I was shocked, at first, to see Confederate flags. Uncle Sammy explained the flags were not meant to symbolize racism or white supremacy, but they were used for “Southern Pride.”

I saw Uncle Sammy’s point—symbols can have different cultural context depending on who is viewing them—though it was tough for us Yankees to swallow. Our racism, up north, wasn’t so out in the open. It was disguised behind a Northeastern intellectual superiority and quaint small towns—much like Clinton—that promoted family values. Boy, we were so full of shit.

Uncle Sammy was a pretty good guy, which surprised me after meeting Aunt Cindy. She was a bitch. Uncle Sammy had this yellow mustache, large teeth, a wide frame, and a large laugh that came straight from the belly. When I met him, he shook my hand so hard I thought he was going to crush my bones. Maybe having another family wasn’t such a bad thing.

The ride to the trailer park took forever. It was a three hour car ride from Atlanta to Murphy, and not once did Jimmy complain. I started to get excited about the trip, until I saw where we were staying.

Uncle Sammy pulled into the trailer park, and it was *really* a trailer park. My mother said it was for mobile homes. Like a mobile home to a trailer park is a freaking yacht to a boat. In Murphy, there was not much going on. The trailer park was down a dirt road. There was a cabin at the front, where Uncle Sammy and his wife, Barbara, stayed. Barbara was out of town, traveling around the flea market circuit, trying to sell all these portraits of different people she met in Murphy. She made them into rugs. Uncle Sammy's son, Joey, stayed there too. He was my age. His birthday was actually a week away from mine. Then further down the road, past all the cabins, were the trailers—the trailers without wheels set up on blocks, the overhanging covering plastic chairs, the bras and underwear hanging on clotheslines.

Back home, I only knew one kid who lived in a trailer. His name was Billy Babcock. All the other kids called him farm boy. And one day, in fifth grade, after I was done making fun of him, he sat down right next to me and started talking to me about hunting. How he could shoot a deer two hundred yards away, even if the wind was strong.

“Uncle Sammy,” I said, “where are Benjamin and I staying?”

He looked back at me in the rearview mirror and said, “Why, in the silver bullet with your Mom and Chip.”

“The silver bullet?”

“It doesn't matter anyways,” my mother said. “We're just happy to be here with our new family. Right, James?”

“Yeah, James,” Chip said. “Be happy with what you got.”

“Just asking,” I said.

Benjamin sat next to me in the back of the truck. He started smiling. He thought this was some great adventure, but to me it felt like a trip to an alternate reality where we could see what would have happened if our parents and grandparents had made different life choices.

The truck stopped outside of one of the trailers. It was shaped like a silver hot dog. On the side of the trailer was the word, Airstream.

“Here we are,” Uncle Sammy said. “Home sweet home.”

“This is it?” my mother asked.

“What about being happy with what you got?” I asked my mother.

“Oh,” Chip said, “this is the silver bullet. We used to camp in one these as kids.”

“In a trailer,” I said.

Uncle Sammy hopped out of the truck and grabbed our luggage out of the bed.

“Any hotels?” I asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chip said.

Uncle Sammy picked up my mother’s bag and let out a groan. “You got rocks in here?”

“I packed light,” my mother said, stepping out of the truck.

I followed Uncle Sammy into the trailer. He opened the screen door, put the key in, and opened it up. Reliving this terrifies me. Being at the mercy of someone else’s rules, having to answer to another adult who is supposed to know better, forced to be under authority—where to sleep, what to eat, what to wear, how to speak, what God to worship—all that is really fucking terrifying when you think about it. Like a dog who

knows his boundaries, a child has parents. I was with a group of strangers, opening a door to a trailer with a hundred flies covering the ceiling.

“What about the flies?” I asked.

“Oh,” Uncle Sammy said, placing my mother’s luggage down. “Someone must have left the door open this morning.” He opened a cabinet above the sink. “Here,” he said, placing a can of Raid in front of me. “It could be a game.”

“The fly killer,” Chip said, carrying in the rest of the luggage. “This is great. Reminds me of when I was a kid.”

“It’s hard to imagine you as a kid,” I said.

“All right,” Uncle Sammy said. “Why don’t you guys wash up, take a look around the place, and meet us for lunch at the pavilion.”

“See you then,” my mother said, stepping into the trailer. She took a look around. I knew she had never been camping or spent any time in a trailer before. But she turned to Uncle Sammy and put her hand on his shoulder—her shoulder, the shared blood—and thanked him for all he was doing.

“All these flies,” I said.

“Go get ‘em,” Uncle Sammy said. “The fly killer.”

Uncle Sammy left, and I watched Benjamin from out the window, playing with a basketball he had found.

“Here’s the beds,” Chip said. He reached up into the walls of the trailer and pulled a lever. Out popped two beds. They looked like gurneys I saw being wheeled around the mental hospitals my mother had stayed at.

I eased into the bed and watched the flies on the ceiling, buzzing and moving around, unable to comprehend that all they had to do was fly out the window or the open door to escape. How could they understand such a concept without the word for freedom? Then I saw, vividly, right before my eyes, the Atlanta airport, all those different people walking around the terminals, through the food courts, passing through security, searching for their way home. Aimless and thousand-eyed. How can we be free without a word for freedom? Our words have lost their meaning and become commonplaces of the tyrannical.

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At lunch, we all met Uncle Suggs, Cindy's and Sammy's brother. Uncle Suggs was mentally retarded. During his birth, the umbilical cord got stuck around his neck. He lost significant oxygen to his brain. The doctors saved his life, but there was nothing the doctor could do to bring back his ability to develop normally—severe and irreversible brain damage. Why didn't that happen to me? How did I get so lucky?

Uncle Suggs talked loud, slow, and with a lot of spit. When his mouth moved, the spit stuck between his lips like rubber bands. When anyone talked to him, they talked to him like a child. And there was no one (in the bloody family), who was more excited to find out he had a new sister than Uncle Suggs.

“Sylvia,” Uncle Suggs said. “So happy,” he said, “you could.” His lips quivered. “Be here.”

My mother and Uncle Suggs hugged, and my mother handled him beautifully. She talked to him like anyone else. Had a lot of patience.

“Great to see you, too, brother,” my mother said. “I want you to meet my sons.”

Benjamin and I stuck out our hands, but Uncle Suggs pushed them away and gave us a huge hug.

“Family,” he said. “Family hugs.”

Uncle Suggs smelled like sweet potatoes.

I was waiting to meet Joey, but he was off somewhere dirt biking. It would have been nice to hang out with someone my own age. Everyone sat down at the green picnic table. Uncle Sammy placed an aluminum tin filled with hot dogs and cheeseburgers down in the center of the table. We all dug in. I sat next to Benjamin on the side with Uncle Suggs and my mother. Uncle Sammy and Chip were on the other. Uncle Suggs had to sit next to my mother. He was just so excited about her being here.

“Well this is nice,” Uncle Sammy said. He took a bite out of a hot dog, and he had ketchup on his mustache. “Not every day you get new family.”

“I can’t believe it,” my mother said, grabbing a cheeseburger from the tin. “I never thought I’d have two brothers.”

“We’d never thought we’d have a sister out of the blue, either.”

It was hot in North Carolina. I kept hearing this buzzing. It sounded, to me, like the sun. But I would later find out it was the cicadas. There were hawks circling in the sky. Spring was here. It had been two cold months since we saw Aunt Cindy. Was this place, the South, Bloody North Carolina, where I belonged?

“Why North Carolina?” I asked Uncle Sammy.

He was caught off guard by my question. He still had a mouth full of hot dog when he started to laugh. “You’ve got quite a kid here, Sylvia. Full of curiosity. Says what’s on his mind.”

“He’s beyond his years,” my mother said.

“Or just out of line,” Chip said.

“He’s a good kid.” Uncle Sammy took a swig of his soda. “I didn’t plan on being here. I left the Bronx at 17, the first chance I could, and never looked back.”

I was interested even more now. “You just left?”

Uncle Sammy said, “I had to work hard. I worked at the docks in Hyannis for a while. Made good money. Not at first. But they liked me down there. I was a commercial fisherman. Traveled the country. Saw the ocean. You’ll see stuff out in the middle of the ocean you can’t believe. As if you were hallucinating. Then I landed up in North Carolina. Met my wife down here when I was fishing. Fell in love. You know that story. Got offered to run this place. Just kind of happened. Didn’t plan it.” He took a swig from his soda can. “You know John Lennon?”

“Of course.”

He took another bite of his hot dog. “That guy said life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.”

“I’ve always wanted to travel,” my mother said.

“It’s all a choice,” Uncle Sammy said. “Anyone can do it.”

So it was a choice? I could get out of Clinton after all. Maybe I could even stay here? Maybe he needed some work? Even now, so far away from Clinton, I felt it pulling me back. I still felt I was there. Still next to all those abandoned factories. Still next to the train tracks and the dam. Still next to my family.

“Some people just always come back home,” Chip said. “Can’t ever get away. I came back.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Uncle Sammy said.

A fly flew onto my cheeseburger. Just sat there rubbing its legs together, waiting to spit all over my food. I started thinking about all the flies that were swarming in the trailer.

“I guess I’m guilty of curiosity too,” Uncle Sammy said. “Sylvia, why after all this time have you decided to search for us?”

My mother swatted away the fly on her hamburger. She started to laugh. That mad laugh. “He wants my food.” She pointed at the fly.

Uncle Suggs started cracking up. He thought his new sister was the funniest, most beautiful woman in the world. Well, he just met her. It looked like we all were a family for a moment—eating, talking, laughing, but I didn’t like all of it. What about Mimi and Poppy?

“Benjamin,” I said so no one else could hear. “Should we feel guilty about Mimi and Poppy?”

He looked up at me with that precious face of his, and he just simply said, “They know we love them.” And it was true. He was amazing.

“I’ve always looked for you guys,” my mother said. “I’ve looked for you when I was living in Mineola. In my high school. I’ve looked for you on the news.”

Boy, this was making me sick to my stomach. It was almost like she had this speech planned. I kept thinking about those flies, swarming and breeding in the place where I was going to sleep.

My mother said, “I wondered what you would be like every day. I’ve always wondered.”

Then she told them about her search for medical information for her kids and this spiritual journey to find herself. She kept saying it was for the kids. And back then, I believed it. That taking my brother and me through these situations that were way beyond our maturity level was somehow for our well being. I wanted to just go kill some flies.

“May I be excused?” I asked.

“We’re with family,” my mother said.

I rolled my eyes. Chip caught me.

“Let him go,” Uncle Sammy said. “We’ll catch up later. Get some ice cream.”

“Take Benjamin,” Chip said.

So Benjamin and I walked back to the trailer, and I told him to play outside with the basketball while I killed the flies. I had to rid the cabin of these freaking flies. When I went into the trailer, it seemed that they had doubled in numbers. It was war.

I grabbed the can of Raid and a fly swatter and went to work. I sprayed the Raid directly at them on the ceiling, caking some of them with the liquid. Some fell right from the ceiling and died. I ambushed a few of the flies with the swatter, but most of them were too quick for me. As soon as I went for one of them, they flew away. It was as if they knew I was going to move even before I knew.

But they couldn’t escape the Raid can. I’d catch them on the window, and spray them. I felt like I was getting dizzy, but I pushed through. I could hear the basketball bouncing. The room was full of mist. I had sprayed about the whole can. I was really dizzy now. I sat down on the ground. Looked at the floor. Dead flies, they were everywhere, but some buzzed around the trailer. I couldn’t get rid of them all.

*

Later that night, Uncle Sammy drove us all into town. We went to a Dairy Queen for soft serve ice cream, and then to a giant flea market. We looked at pocket knives, hand-knitted scarves, old baseball cards, and all this other crap that people use to fill the hollowness in their lives. Chip was in heaven. He bought two pocket knives, an old comic book of Iron Man, a shirt that said “North Carolina is Great,” and a Neil Young ticket stub.

My mother kept asking me if I wanted anything. I kept telling her no. I kept thinking about Mimi and Poppy. I wondered if they were feeling betrayed. Like we were doing something wrong. I just didn't feel right.

That's when we passed a vendor selling cigars. For some strange reason, I wanted a cigar. I begged my mother for this one particular cigar. At first she didn't want me to have it. But I could tell I was breaking her down a bit. It was a cigar with a wrapper that had a picture of Monica Lewinsky on it. Of course, we all thought this was hilarious. Bill Clinton was going through his sex scandal, and all over the radio, late-night talk shows, school, basically in any public setting, people were talking about the blue dress and the cigar. I wasn't sure how Bill used that cigar, but I knew it was something adult. I wanted to be in on the joke. So my mother actually bought me the cigar. I couldn't believe it. She said I would learn from it. What the hell was she talking about it? I thought.

When we got home, I went and sat by the pool—which no one ever used because the water was green—and smoked the entire Monica Lewinsky cigar. I inhaled the entire thing.

Now you've got to remember, this was my first cigar. I had no idea people didn't inhale cigars. I thought I was such a bad ass, sitting by the pool, my uncle ran the place, trying to blow smoke rings, execute the French inhale. Then Chip and my mom walked by.

"You look so cool," my mother said.

"Very sophisticated," Chip said.

They both walked away laughing. As if on cue, my head felt like it was filled with helium. My stomach felt like a washcloth having the water rung out of it. I looked at the cigar, the glowing amber tip, and put it out on the ground. I left it there. I ran back to the trailer, kicked out the door, ignored all the freaking flies, and went straight to the toilet.

I threw up everywhere. I threw up everything that I had eaten in North Carolina. I threw up so loudly I thought someone might think there was a murder happening. God, it was a mess. And the worst part was—I missed the toilet. I wasn't even in the same time zone.

My mother woke me up off the bathroom floor. I'm not sure what time it was. Maybe I was there for about an hour, right next to my puke.

"You okay?" my mother asked.

"I don't feel so good."

"I hope you learned. Cigars are bad for you."

“You were trying to teach me a lesson?”

“Come on,” she said, “I’ll help you clean.”

I looked at the toilet, the vomit all over the floor. Ants were swarming around the pieces of food. First flies, now freaking ants.

*

I really didn’t see Joey until the end of our stay. I sort of figured he didn’t like me. We said hello a couple times, but that was as far as it went. He was really into dirt bikes, and I wanted to give it a shot. I told Uncle Sammy, but my mother didn’t want me to ride the bike. I occasionally rode my buddy’s ATV back home, but Joey didn’t want me anywhere near his dirt bike.

Joey, well, looked a lot like me. We were both thirteen. Except he was skinnier, had longer hair and a straggly mustache. I didn’t like that there was someone out there that looked like me, had my genes and blood, and I didn’t even know who the hell he was. Honestly, it creeped me out. I’m sure it weirded Joey out too. He didn’t even seem to like to look at me. When we looked at each other, well, it was a mirror. So I was really surprised when Joey decided to go swimming with us at the lake on one of the last days. How could he like looking at himself through me?

We all had to hike there. It was about five miles. Not so bad, but I wasn’t in the best shape back then. I stopped playing baseball—the sport I was destined to play. My grandfather, my dad’s father, played for the Philadelphia Phillies farm league. He got offered a contract, and he turned it down because he was homesick. He was famous for hitting four home runs in one game, and then the next game getting struck out four times

by Satchel Page. He was on a team called the Sons of David—a whole bunch of dudes with beards—who played teams from the Negro League. My dad was pretty pissed I quit playing baseball. Plus, I started really putting on the weight. My dad hated fat people.

Besides not being able to keep up with the other guys walking through the woods, I was pretty happy. I was just happy to be in the woods. Walking over the pine needles in the dirt path. Benjamin was right next to me the entire time. He never left my side. Chip was ahead of us, walking fast, wondering why we couldn't keep up. Then Uncle Sammy and Joey. My mother and Uncle Suggs stayed home.

“What's the hold up?” Chip asked.

“I can't walk as fast as you,” I said.

I knew, however, that Chip was just mad because he looked like such a jerk. He had on shorts that were just too short, aviators, and a stick he found on the side of the road that he used as a walking stick. Uncle Sammy was wearing boots, jeans, and carried a towel and a bathing suit in his backpack. This guy was someone I could look up to. Chip was just someone along for the ride.

“So slow,” Chip said.

“Short shorts,” I said.

“Wise guy. Keep it up.”

“Come on boys,” Uncle Sammy said. “We're almost there.”

What I really wanted to tell Chip (I just didn't have the vocabulary and concepts back then) was that he just kept picking on me because he felt insecure about himself. That he felt so inferior to Uncle Sammy in every way. Uncle Sammy was taller, more

successful, friendlier than Chip so he had to put down a freaking thirteen-year old kid to feel better about himself.

We continued in silence until Benjamin started singing. I thought he was singing some song he heard on the radio. Really precious, you know? Something about a red cardinal singing a different song when he is free in the woods than when he sings in a cage. Nice stuff.

“Where’d you learn that?” I asked.

“Nowhere?” Benjamin said.

“So how do you know it?”

“I made it up.”

He was a smart kid. He was only six years old, and he was writing songs. That’s when I saw the red cardinal fly out of a tree and over the path. It was amazing. We were heading through a widening path, now, that came to a wooden bridge. I could hear kids screaming and water splashing. Parents calling out for their children.

“We’re here guys,” Uncle Sammy said.

I didn’t know what to expect, but when we turned the corner, it was like watching someone else’s dream. We were at a river bend. And in the open area, there was a small gradual waterfall that flew into a small pool, and then continued down the rocks. It was like a little sauna in the middle of a flowing river. A large oak tree was sticking out of the pool. It had fallen in a storm. Young girls and older women were sunbathing on huge stones. Kids were sliding down the rocks like they were water slides. A guy with tattoos was somersaulting from the tops of trees into the pool. Other kids were swinging from a rope swing. Everyone was happy. The sun was shining. It didn’t seem real.

Even Joey stopped being too cool for school and jumped in the water. This was childhood. It was fun. Where had this been? Maybe I was meant to be there forever? Maybe Uncle Sammy would let me stay?

The water was freezing at first. But once I got in, it warmed up. I always thought peeing in the cold water would help. So I did that. Don't worry, I was away from everyone else. Then Uncle Sammy, Joey, and I started wrestling in the water. Uncle Sammy kept trying to get me to talk to some young girl in a bikini, but I was too nervous. Chip and Benjamin were sliding down the rocks. One thing about Chip I couldn't take away was that he loved Benjamin. He treated Benjamin well. Always gave him attention. I liked that about Chip.

We spent the next hour swimming in the water, swinging from a rope swing, and sliding down the rocks. Uncle Sammy and Chip were exhausted, but Joey and I wanted to keep going. So Joey told me he knew about this secret pool in the woods.

We walked through the woods, pushed pine trees and bushes out of our way. Dragonflies were zooming in and out of my sight. It was great. Joey started to run, and I chased after him. This time I was keeping pace.

“Almost there,” Joey yelled.

A clearing opened up in the woods. Two older guys, maybe about 18 and 19, and one gorgeous blonde who must have been younger, were standing over a hole about the size of an above ground pool. The hole was filled with water. The boys were arguing over who was going to go in the water first. They both had goggles in their hand.

“We have to jump at the same time,” the boy with a crew cut said.

“Fine,” the boy in the red trunks said.

“I’ll keep the time,” the girl said.

“I’m going to destroy you,” the boy with a crew cut said.

“You can’t hold your breath longer than me,” said the boy in the red trunks.

They both dove in with a splash. The girl started to count.

“There are tunnels down there,” Joey said. “Everyone says it’s like an entire tunnel system down there.”

“Ever been?” I asked.

“Too scared. People get lost in there all the time.”

“Quiet, boys,” the girl said.

There was water dripping down her thighs. When she turned around, I could see that her nipples were hard. So I elbowed Joey in the side, and he seemed to already know what I was talking about. We both laughed.

“One minute,” she said.

We sat there, looking into the hole, wondering where they were. The water was much too dark. We all became conscious of time.

Then the boy with the crew cut came up and asked what his time was. He was down there for two minutes. That was pretty impressive. But the other boy was still down there. Then another minute went by. Then another.

“You need to save him,” the girl said to us.

I didn’t know what to do, so I looked at Joey who had no idea what to do either. When another thirty seconds went by, the girl started to cry.

“Save him,” the girl said.

Then the boy with the crew cut jumped into the water. We were about to run and get help when the boy in the red shorts popped out of the water. The girl started to yell at him and call him a jerk. She secretly loved it.

Joey and I walked back. Uncle Sammy stood next to me while we walked back through the woods, and Uncle Sammy stood by me.

“You’re a good kid, James,” Uncle Sammy said. “Don’t listen to Chip.”

“I never do,” I said.

*

The trip went on. We went white water rafting, Joey let me ride his dirt bike (without my mother knowing), and Benjamin played a lot of ping pong on one of the tables in the pavilion. We had fun.

If my mother was expecting some huge epiphany to reveal who she was, or if she was going to learn something about her past that would reveal her present, well, it never came. Nothing happened. We just had fun. We had so much fun that I actually wanted to stay. I begged Uncle Sammy to let me stay and work for him, but he just couldn’t take me away from my mother. It was for the best I suppose.

We left North Carolina with the promise of meeting again, but we never did. Except for the occasional phone calls, I just learned to be comfortable that there was someone with my blood, my genes, my features that had no bearing on my life. It was strange to think about.

Chapter VIII. The Lesson

When my mother was in the hospital the first time, I got really into rap music. Wu-Tang Clan, DMX, Onyx, and other hardcore, main-stream rappers out of New York City would blare from the stereo in my room. My family thought it was strange I listened to *that music*. I loved rap. It seemed to speak to me. My grandparents, when they heard I was listening to rap, said that was black music. Not yours. And, of course, I was partially listening, though the boy could never admit that at the time, to rebel against my family, but I found rap's aggression and angst similar, no matter how different culturally, to my experience.

My friends called me a wigger. I started to dress in baggy jeans and black sweatshirts. I even started to romanticize life in the "ghetto." It was a good thing I could wear baggy clothes, because it hid how much weight I put on. I ate a lot for comfort. To fill the hours alone in my house.

I began to believe that if I wanted to be a part of the rap world—see concerts, meet other fans, even start rapping—I had to hang out in the rougher sections of the country. Like the Bronx or Compton. I had family from the Bronx now. And in my love for rap music, I was trying to find a new identity that was foreign to my own background. Rap music seemed like another way out. And when Vick, a thirty-five year old black man my mother met in the mental hospital, came to stay with us in our home, I figured it was destiny.

My mother met Vick at Ballpate Hospital. They were both patients. When my mother was leaving the hospital to come home, Vick had told her he had nowhere to live

once he was out, and my mother, realizing she would be getting out before Vick, offered up our condo in Ridgefield as a place for him to get his feet underneath him. Vick was in the hospital system for almost two years. It's hard to know if my mother thought Vick would actually call. But this was a something that was remarkable and completely terrifying at the same time about my mother. My mother didn't care about what anyone else thought. No matter what, my mother wanted to help Vick. My mother didn't even give a second thought about what people in Ridgefield—an all white community where old women walked *little yippy dogs* and the closest person to a black man was someone who came back tanned from a vacation—would think about a black man staying in our home. It surely would not have been responded to politely, to say the least.

My mother wanted to help Vick. Just give him a place to readjust to the world. My mother understood how hard it was to adjust. She talked about leaving the hospital as if it was leaving a prison or returning from a war. A person gets used to the walls. She told stories of how hard it was to readjust to normal life after living in a place so devoid of logic and emotional balance. She told stories of other patients screaming and hurting themselves. Stories of other patients who would spend their lives locked up in an institution. Stories of how inmates started to love their cage, forgetting about the world outside of the hospital. Stories of men who went willingly into electric shock therapy because nothing else was working. What is the difference between a mental hospital and prison anyway? What is actually sane? Sanity is just a stupid word when you think about it.

Now, I know my mother's decisions potentially put my brother and me into a dangerous situation. And I don't expect you to see my mother inviting a stranger from a

mental hospital into our home as a representation of ‘good parenting.’ Most of the time, however, I wonder if this quality is almost angelic, a trait of compassion we have nearly ripped off the face of the Earth.

When our mother told us about Vick and how he was coming to stay with us, Benjamin, Chip, and I were sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast. She had just gotten off the phone. Chip had moved out of his old apartment and was officially moved in. My mother and Chip had been dating now for almost two years. I knew Vick coming here was going to cause a problem. But Chip had no say about what my mother did in her home.

“You can’t be serious,” Chip said.

“He’s a really nice man,” my mother said. “Just down on his luck. Boys, you’re going to love him.”

Benjamin was still too young to comprehend fully. He just looked up at us all with a smile. What does it matter if one of our mother’s friends stayed with us? When he was younger, Benjamin had the chubbiest cheeks you’ll ever see with such a skinny body. Plus that auburn hair of his. It killed me. Really, you couldn’t have looked at my brother without smiling. It’s very strange to see him older now. I still smile every time I see him and all. But now he has a hairy chest and a lot of muscles. It’s just different. He’s hitting .516 right now in Varsity. You would love him if you could meet him. I swear to god.

“It’s just not safe,” Chip said.

My mother cleaned away our dishes from the kitchen table. She said, “He’s a good friend of mine.”

“What if he steals?” Chip asked. “What if he...What if he’s a murderer?”

“Don’t frighten my children.”

“You’re about to bring a stranger into our house,” Chip said.

“My house.”

It’s funny, because now I realize how many strangers were in my house over the years. Chip was a stranger who thought he was a member of the family. My mother, over the years, just seemed to be collecting lost souls, people who had lost their money and their minds. And the more strangers that came into our house, the more I felt like a stranger.

“This is my house,” my mother said, “and I choose who comes in and who goes out.”

The line was clear. Chip had nothing else he could say. Especially in front of Benjamin and me. It’s hard to know if Chip acted in actual consideration for our well-being, or if he was protecting the boundaries he had spent time creating around our household to make sure his position was stabilized. He had it made at our house. Someone to take care of him. A nice house. A huge jump in social status. Not that there was anything wrong with wanting a better life, but I just hated that he was getting it from our family.

“What does he look like?” Chip asked.

It’s hard to remember how it came out that he was black, but once it did, I perked up.

“Does he like rap?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” my mother said.

Chip asked, “A black dude?”

“What’s wrong with that?” my mother asked.

Chip went into the refrigerator and grabbed a pitcher of iced tea. He threw ice into a glass. He’d started drinking a ton of iced tea because my mother wouldn’t let him drink beer in the house anymore. It was a healthy substitute. Chip drank it down like bitter medicine.

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Chip said, after putting down the entire glass. He wiped the iced tea out of his beard.

“Maybe he can teach me about rap?” I asked.

“Just because he’s black, James,” my mother said, “doesn’t mean he likes rap music.” My mother walked over to Benjamin and gave him a big kiss. After she was out of the hospital, our mother really doted on us. Kissed us. Hugged us. Made sure we knew she loved us. It really can drive a person crazy though.

“Where you think *this guy* is going to take you, James, to listen to rap music?” Chip asked.

“The ghetto,” I said.

“The ghetto?” Chip said, choking on his second glass of iced tea. “Why would you want to go to the ghetto?”

“That’s where the rappers are,” I said.

Chip started to laugh from his belly. “I’ll tell you what, one day, I’ll drive you up to Roxbury or South Boston, drop you off, and see how much you’d like the ghetto.” He had to stop talking because he laughed so hard. “You wouldn’t last five minutes.”

Because Chip had grown up in the Clinton projects, he said he used to fight all the time, so he knew what it was like to grow up tough. Knew people who were killed. But the Clinton projects didn't seem so bad. They were tucked into a nice neighborhood. His rough-youth attitude seemed like a load of crap. A lot of the kids who lived there were my classmates, and I got along fine with them. It didn't make sense that people I knew, people that lived in the same town with me, people who shared the same water and schools, could be violent. It was hard for me to imagine a place where crime and violence were a reality like the places I heard about in my favorite rap songs. Not just bar fights or small-town drug dealers. Of course, we had violence in Clinton. But those who actually committed a criminal act were already known to be bad apples. Like the Puritans had predestination, Clintonians had those who were destined to live a life of crime, and no amount of education or talking to could save them. And once they committed a crime, the town newspaper had their names published in the *Clinton Item*, ready for the "criminals" to be ostracized and ridiculed. It wasn't a mystery. Clinton knew who was dangerous. Most people would stay away from them. But a place where anonymous violence sprang from the streets was something I couldn't fathom then.

One time, a guy named Kovac (Maybe he was buying drugs. Who knows?) was supposed to meet one of his buddies at the Woodlawn Cemetery on Greely Hill. When Kovac got there, it was pretty dark. A bunch of dudes jumped out from behind the tombstones and beat Kovac to a bloody pulp. They left him there until one of the groundskeepers found him. Boy, the town was outraged. Father Walsh preached in the pulpit how devastating it was that a few street punks could ruin the sacred grounds of Woodlawn cemetery. It was in the newspapers. On everyone's tongue. Even my school

teachers were talking about the beating. You couldn't expect crimes like that in Clinton. Not at a sacred place like a cemetery. But once they happened, we showed sympathy for the victim. It was hard to imagine a place where there was no sympathy for the victim. Surely, that was the world Chip was trying to help me envision. It was a lesson he wanted me to learn. That outside of Clinton was a violent and unpredictable place.

"You don't understand," I said to Chip.

"Sure I do," Chip said. "You'll learn your lesson one day. It's a scary world out there."

"I'm not scared."

"Let me tell you something. And don't you forget this. You might leave Clinton one day, but everyone comes back. It's just a better place here than out there."

I didn't know quite where the line was between here and there, but that saying has haunted me ever since he said it. Clinton felt like it was always waiting for me to fail, to be down on my luck, waiting for me to return to the house my mother keeps for lost souls, and Clinton would say I told you so. You're just a Clintonian. Bear the stone you roll up the hill with happiness. Well fuck that. I really do believe Chip was trying to help Benjamin and me, but he just had no idea how. He was the one who needed help the most. A passage of freedom from the chains he didn't even know existed.

And then my mother said something she always said, even when she was sick again. "James, you can go anywhere you want in life."

"Sure," said Chip, "and I can be the president."

*

I told my father how excited I was for Vick to come stay with us. I told him how much I was going to learn about music. It was a Tuesday night, and my father was driving us back from his apartment in Shrewsbury—which was about a thirty minute ride from Ridgefield—where we ate dinner on Tuesday nights. I kept telling him how I finally would have someone who appreciated the music I liked. My father wouldn't allow me to play Jam'n 94.5, the hip hop and R&B station, in the car. He wouldn't let me buy the Coolio or TLC album, stating that I just didn't understand the lyrics about red light specials or the drug references. He was very vocal against hip hop.

But when I told my father about Vick, he didn't say much. What could he have said? He had no control over the situation, and he must have wished he could have saved me from the approaching embarrassment and disaster. My father must have felt miserable, two strange men living with his ex-wife and two children. He was helpless.

*

The day Vick arrived we all greeted him with a smile. All except Chip. Vick pulled into our driveway in a taxi. He stepped out of the cab, and he had on tan Lugs boots, faded jeans, a Carhartt sweatshirt, and a wool skull cap. He was black all right. I wondered if people were looking at their windows, all those elderly gossipers somewhere out there, waiting to spread the news around town. Paranoia runs deep.

It was the middle of spring. There was an apple blossom tree blooming in our front yard, and there were large pine trees along the side of our house. The condominium complex prided itself on landscaping and maintenance. They even had this stupid 'R' out of shrubs on the hill you past when entering the complex. Just in case you thought you

weren't in Ridgefield, the stupid 'R' was there to remind you. To me it was the opposite of home. But for Vick, who had nowhere else to go, it must have looked like heaven.

"I'm so happy to be out, Sylvia," Vick said. "I'd never thought I'd leave that place."

"I knew you could," my mother said.

"It's all because of you," Vick said. Then Vick turned to Benjamin and me.

"Your mother saved my life, you know."

"Oh please," Chip said.

My mother told us stories, sometimes, about her time in the hospital. My mother said, even though she was supposed to be a patient, she was always helping other patients. My mother said that other people, even people that you thought were crazy, just needed someone to talk to. My mother said she helped the other patients more than, yes, the doctors. Even the nurses, supposedly, asked my mother for help. Could that have been true? Well, I have no freaking idea. It's nice to imagine though.

There were these patients, my mother used to tell me, who were in the hospital that were actually dangerous to themselves and even others. I wondered if my mother was ever dangerous, but I never felt that way growing up, and I don't feel that way today. It was just a thought. So the doctors, because of these *certain patients*, wouldn't allow sharp or blunt objects in the hospital that could be used to hurt anyone. Seemed fair.

But the hospital had soda machines. Harmless enough, right? Except to my mother. One day, my mother played with the tab on the aluminum can, and she marched into Dr. Shapiro's office and pointed out that the sharp edges on the tabs could be used to slice open someone's veins. My mother could have looked at those cans and been

worrying about herself. What she would do. I don't like to think about that, however.

The next week, all the soda machines were gone from the patients' floors.

When I looked at Vick for the first time, I didn't see his black skin, but I started to wonder if he was one of those patients who wanted to hurt himself or others. Judging by his smile and his friendly demeanor, Vick seemed safe. But I started to think about all the objects—knives, scissors, staplers, baseball bats—that could have been used for destruction.

"I've heard so much about you two," Vick said. "I hear you're all excellent at sports. Plus, I hear, James, that you're a musician."

"Been practicing the guitar," I said.

We were still in the driveway, and Vick kept looking at us and then at the house, us and then the house.

"Guitar," Vick said, "I can show you some licks."

"You can play the guitar?" Chip asked.

"And you must be Chip," Vick said. He reached out his hand, and I noticed that his palm was pink. I had so many questions, curious questions, about what it was like to be black, but I knew I wasn't allowed to ask them.

"Nice to meet you," Chip said. Chip took Vick's hand. There was silence for a moment, and Chip seemed to shake Vick's hand a little too long.

"Nice to meet you too," Vick said.

"How long you staying here?" Chip asked, still holding Vick's hand.

"I've got some prospects."

"Like what?"

“Plenty.”

“Let’s go inside,” my mother said. “You two boys stop holding each other’s hands.”

Chip let go of Vick’s hand. They both looked a little embarrassed. Vick walked next to me, and my mother and Chip were behind us. Benjamin was already inside. I could hear my mother whisper something to Chip. I watched Vick step through the door, crossing some invisible boundary that I had become aware of. And now Vick was in the house, and there’s nothing I can do, sitting at this desk, to warn the boy.

*

My mother made a big dinner for our guest. She cooked lasagna, broccoli with cheese, salad from a bag, and garlic bread fresh from the oven. My mother wasn’t a great cook, but she tried hard. We passed around the serving bowls and scooped the food onto our ceramic plates and asked Vick polite questions. Vick laughed and gave charming answers to all our inquisitive questions. It was easy to tell Chip was grilling him, asking him where he grew up, what was his vocation, where he went to high school, etc. It turned out Vick was from New York City, and once I heard that I couldn’t hold back anymore, I had to ask him if he knew any rappers.

“You like the Wu-Tang Clan?” I asked Vick while passing him the salad.

He held the bowl in his hands, staring at me a moment, obviously trying to gauge my question. “The Wu-Tang Clan?”

“Here we go,” Chip said.

Vick said, “You mean the RZA, Ghost-Face Killer, Old Dirty Bas—” He stopped himself from finishing the word bastard. “I love them all.” He scooped the salad onto his ceramic plate.

“I like DMX and Onyx the best.”

“Now,” Vick said, “KRS-One and Rakim—those are the best.”

“Let’s talk about real music,” Chip said. “How about Black Sabbath? Or Jethro Tull? The good stuff.”

“He doesn’t understand,” I said to Vick.

Vick started to laugh. My mother placed some salad on my brother’s plate. But Benjamin refused to eat.

“You know any rappers?” I asked Vick.

Chip said, “Of course he doesn’t know any rappers—”

“Pass the lasagna, Chip,” my mother said.

Benjamin’s head just came up over the table, and he reached for a piece of the garlic bread.

Vick stopped eating and looked at me again. “Would you want to meet the Wu Tang?”

I nearly jumped out of my seat. “You know them?”

“Grew up with them. We were all from the same block.”

“No way,” I said. “That’s so awesome.”

I know that it’s crazy that a fourteen year old could like hardcore rap so intensely, but I was crazy about it. I would stand in front of my mirror in my room, the music blaring, the bass drum pounding, all while rapping into a comb.

“That’s bullshit,” Chip said.

“Watch your mouth,” my mother said.

“You don’t know any of those people,” Chip said. He placed his fork down on his plate.

“Stop it, Chip,” my mother said.

Vick looked at me so Chip couldn’t see and rolled his eyes. “I know them,” he said. “Believe me.”

And I did. I believed him without question.

*

Later that night, Vick, Benjamin, and I were sitting on the couch, watching the Red Sox. Vick was a Yankees fan. We let that slide because he was a guest. Benjamin sat on the floor in front of us. He was focused on the game. Benjamin loved to watch Nomar Garciaparra. My brother must have been Normar’s biggest fan. Benjamin wanted to be a short stop. Everybody in town always said that no one from Clinton could ever make it to the big leagues. But I know that if my brother wanted to, he could be the next Nomar. He’s that good. It doesn’t matter where he’s from in my opinion, or his height, or his weight. If he wanted it, then he could go out and get it. You should see him play. Our dad warned my brother, however, not to imitate Nomar’s side-arm motion when he threw from the hole or on the run. It just wasn’t the proper way to throw, my father would say. And sure enough, when Nomar left the Sox, he was converted to third base, then to first base. But my brother loved the way Nomar played. All heart and hustle.

“So how long have you known the Wu Tang?” I asked.

“Since I can remember,” he said. “Method Man and I knew each other since we were running around in diapers. He’s a third cousin on my mother’s side.” Vick put his hand on my shoulder. “You seem like a nice kid. How would you like me to set up a meeting?”

“I would love it,” I said. I sat on the edge of my seat. Right then, I thought Vick was the coolest man I had ever met.

“I’ll have Method Man—his friends call him Meth—send a limo up one day, and we’ll cruise to New York City in style.”

“How about this week? Can my friends come?”

Vick laughed. “Sure your friends can come. I’ll give Meth a call.” Then he patted the breast pocket in his jacket. He turned around to make sure my mother wasn’t around. Then he asked, “Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes.”

Vick reached into his pocket and pulled out a brown bottle that looked like old medicine. I could hear Chip and my mother in their room, trying to talk softly. I knew, whatever was in the bottle, was not supposed to be in our house.

“It’s blackberry whiskey,” Vick said. “My favorite.”

Vick drank from the bottle, and his neck twisted as the whiskey went down his throat.

“Can I have a sip?” I asked.

“How old are you?”

“13.”

“Never too early.” He started to hand me the bottle, but he stopped. I thought he was changing his mind because of my age. But he said, “If you never say sip again. You have to say swig or pull when you’re talking about whiskey.”

“Can I have a swig, please?”

“You sure can, old boy.”

Vick handed me the bottle, and I took a swig with confidence. I had tried whiskey before, but never in my own home. I felt like an outlaw. Pretending to enjoy the taste, I bit my lower lip so Vick couldn’t see my disgust. It tasted like Robitussin. I wondered how much of his whiskey you had to drink before it started to taste better.

“I’ll leave the bottle right here,” Vick said, placing the booze below the couch. “It will be our little secret.”

I’m glad my brother never turned around to watch me drink from the bottle. For some reason, I felt like I was committing a crime, and I wanted to protect Benjamin from the knowledge that even his big brother made mistakes.

*

The next day at school, I couldn’t wait to tell my friends about going to New York City, in a freaking limo, to hang with the Wu-Tang Clan. I figured the best moment to tell them would be right before gym class, which was sixth period. The day went by slow.

The gym locker room was small and they had showers, but nobody wanted to strip down. High school would be a different story, Mr. Bocci told us, making fun of our fear of the showers. We heard rumors that in high school, football players filled cups with piss and dumped them on freshmen when they were in the shower. It was weird.

Before gym started, we hung around on the benches and waited for Mr. Bocci to call us into the gym.

Kyle, Cal, and Chuck were there. They were the kids who smoked pot and listened to rap music. Kids who I wanted to like me. They were my friends, but I always felt I needed to impress them. Cal wasn't beating me up as much anymore. He was arrested for drug possession. It was weed, so they slapped his wrist. After that he tried not to make many mistakes, but I was just waiting for him to snap. And for some reason, I really wanted them to think I was cool. They thought it was funny that I had never smoked. I was the innocent gullible kid, but I knew that going to New York City in a limo would impress them. So I told them about Vick. I told them how he was black, but I probably said African American. I told them about the limo. I told them about the whiskey. I told them Vick said all my friends could come.

“We could all go,” I said.

I waited for a high five or something that showed how cool they thought I was now. But they all looked at each other when I had finished, trying to gauge what everyone else thought before anyone said anything. Then Chuck, the one who we all thought knew the most about smoking pot and rap and girls, burst out laughing. And then everyone else followed and started laughing too. I heard one of them say nigger. The word sounded like a chain saw cutting through an oak tree.

“You're so full of shit,” Chuck said.

“Don't be so stupid,” Cal said.

“The Wu-Tang wouldn't want to hang out with you,” Chuck said.

Cal punched me in the stomach. They were all still laughing when Mr. Bocci called us into the gym.

“I swear,” I said. “Vick grew up with them.”

Kyle stayed behind when everyone else left. When the other guys were around, Kyle could be a wicked prick, but alone, Kyle was a good friend.

“I’d go with you,” Kyle said.

“You’ll be happy you trusted me.”

*

A week went by, and Vick was still in our house. He said he’d been making some phone calls to his family, but no one ever heard him on the phone or knew if he was going to a pay phone or anything. Chip grew more and more suspicious of Vick, and a few times during the week I thought Chip would lose it on Vick. My mother seemed to control him somehow, but Chip was ready to explode. He kept telling us we’d all learn our lesson with people like Vick. Vick was a straight up liar, he would say.

Then one night, Chip found his evidence. Some of his money was missing from his money clip. Chip didn’t believe in wallets or banks. So he carried wads of bills in his money clip like he was a gangster or something. Now here’s where it all started to come undone.

“Where’s the money?” Chip asked Vick. Chip had walked out of his room and confronted Vick who sat next to me on the couch. We were watching The Simpsons. Homer was being punched around by Dredrick Tatum when Moe flew in from the rafters to save Homer’s life.

“What money?” Vick asked.

“You know damn well,” Chip said.

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to fucking calm down. I want my money back.” Chip was very impetuous. Never really took the time to think before he acted. Especially when it came to his money clip. He didn’t trust a soul, except my mother.

“You probably counted wrong.”

“I counted five times,” Chip said. “On your feet.”

My mother walked into the room. Chip towered over Vick. Chip looked like a pit bull, his chest sticking out, fists clenched so I could see the white on his knuckles.

“Everyone calm down,” my mother said. “It’s all a misunderstanding.”

“You can’t trust this guy,” Chip said. “Stand up.”

“I’m not going to stand up,” Vick said. “I didn’t take your money.”

Benjamin walked out of our bedroom. He stood in the doorway watching with a tiny rubber basketball in his hands.

“Vick wouldn’t steal,” I said.

“James,” Chip said, “you can’t really see him.” He slapped Vick on his shoulder.

“But I see you, old boy. I’ve seen you since the moment you walked in.”

“What is your problem?” Vick asked, still sitting on the couch.

“Where did you get the money for the booze I smell on your breath?” Chip asked.

“I don’t drink,” Vick said.

I looked at Vick, and he caught my eye. I remembered he had said the whiskey was our little secret. So I didn’t say anything. I figured a little lie wasn’t so bad.

“I’m telling you all right now,” Chip said. “This guy is a thief.” Chip looked at my mother and put down his hands. “You’ll all learn your lesson.”

*

That night, when I went to bed, I stared at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep. Benjamin and I shared a room. I heard him snoring next to me. The dimensions of the room seemed strange. As if the walls were lopsided, the far end of the room falling into the earth. It was probably just the night playing tricks. Benjamin was snoring in the bed next to me. I couldn’t fall sleep because I was scared. Vick lied to Chip about the boozed. Then I lied to help him. Chip was just looking for an excuse to fight Vick and kick him out of the house. So was Vick lying about stealing, too? I heard the Patriots clock ticking in the bathroom. Hearing that clock tick made me miserable. I didn’t want to be a part of this house anymore. I wanted out. There was only so much time. Go to New York City. Be a part of another life. A life that seemed to matter. A feeling that I could be somebody. Out of all the billions of people, was there anyone thinking of me?

I thought about my mother, again, telling me, about the patients who hurt themselves and others. I tried to shake it, but I kept seeing a woman with a plastic knife opening her wrist, and it made me sick. Back then I actually believed that I had an aunt that tried to kill herself, after all. Maybe it was in the blood? Maybe Vick was one of those people? No, I thought, those were bad ideas. Vick was a good person. My mother said so. I had to learn to trust her again. The doctors fixed her. But I couldn’t help being scared, and for the first time since Vick had been there, I wanted to lock the door to our room. My brother was here, too. I had to protect him. Vick was sleeping on the couch right outside of the door to our room. He would hear the door lock. There were so many

objects in the house that could be used to hurt someone. But Vick wasn't a bad guy, I knew that, and I left the door unlocked.

*

I had woken up, and my eyes adjusted to the green numbers on the alarm clock. 3:00. It was dark outside. I heard an air conditioning unit outside working. I picked my head off the pillow, looked around the room. Our bedroom door was open. That's when I saw Vick standing over my brother's bed, staring at him, blankly, as if he was not even looking at him, but through him—into his blood, his arteries, his organs.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Vick just stared at my brother. He didn't move. Didn't say anything. He was holding something in his hands. I couldn't make it out. His shirt was off. He had scars all along his back. As if someone had been hitting him with a belt.

“Vick,” I said. I stood out of bed, throwing the covers to the ground.

“Go back to bed,” Vick said.

“Get away from my brother.”

Benjamin had begun to wake up, though he was still not aware other people in the room were awake and moving around.

“He looks,” Vick said, “looks like an angel. Nothing could disturb him.” He put his hand down on the bed. “So innocent. He has nothing to be scared of yet.”

“Get away from him,” I said.

When Vick sat down on the bed, I sprang up and got in between them. I pushed him away from the bed. That's when I saw he had a screwdriver and a wooden mallet in his right hand.

I pointed to his hand. “What are they for?”

“To fix him. So he never has anything to be scared of.”

“Mom,” I said. “Chip!”

In his other hand, Vick held a set of car keys, and when I screamed, he seemed to awake from a trance. As if he suddenly realized where he was. That’s when he ran down the stairs. I heard him falling down, and the door to my mother’s room burst open. I heard Chip yell.

“You’re okay, Ben,” I said. “Stay in bed. Stay right here. Go back to sleep.”

The lights in the house started to turn on and the house awoke. I heard the garage door opening, and my mother’s Crown Victoria start in the garage. I ran downstairs to see Vick driving away in the car, pulling out of the driveway. Chip sprinted after the car. The car went down the hill towards the front entrance of the complex, and Chip bolted through the short cut in through the woods. So I ran after him. I sprinted through the woods, the same path Chip had taken, as fast as I could run, knocking ferns out of the way. The moon was full. A spotlight illuminating my way. I ran through the field. I ran and ran until I reached the front of the complex. I just couldn’t keep pace.

Chip had caught up to the car, and he stood right in front of it, blocking Vick’s escape.

“You’ve got nowhere to go,” Chip said. “Sylvia called the police already.”

Vick turned around to see if he could back up. There was only one way out. When he turned around, he saw me standing behind the car. He had nowhere to go.

Chip slammed his palm down on the hood of the car. “Get out of the car. You fucking piece of shit.”

Vick put the car in park.

“Don’t move,” Chip said. He started to walk slowly around to the passenger door.

“Don’t hurt him,” I said.

“Go home, James,” Chip said.

Vick said from inside the car, “I’m coming out. I give up. Just don’t hurt me.”

“You fucking piece of shit,” Chip said. Spit ran down into his beard, caught there like spider webs. “Open the door.”

“Not until you calm down.”

That’s when Chip shattered ripped open the car door and pulled Vick out of the car. Vick still didn’t have his shirt on.

“Don’t hurt him,” I said.

Chip threw Vick to the ground, kned him in the face, then just left him on the ground. Chip got back into the car, furious. “Get in, James.”

“No,” I said. “You’re a psycho.”

“Fine,” Chip said. “I hope you learned your lesson.”

Chip put the car in drive, made a u-turn, and circled back to the house, leaving me there with Vick. He seemed harmless now, broken, destined for jail.

“Vick.”

“Hello, James.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said. Vick stood up, his hand pushing on the pavement, his legs pushing up slowly. His knees were bleeding and so was his nose. “Not the first time.”

“Where will you go?”

“Listen, kid,” Vick said. “I’m sorry for everything. You’re a good kid. Tell your mom I’m sorry too.”

“New York City?”

There was a great distance between Vick and me. I was afraid to get to close now.

“Sorry. Truly sorry,” Vick said.

That’s when I lost it. “Don’t you ever come near my family. Never near my brother or mother. How could you lie to me?” I started crying. I couldn’t control it. I could tell it made Vick feel terrible. He kept apologizing, but I wouldn’t allow him to be heard. “I hate you. You’re a thief. You’re a liar.”

“God forgive me.” Vick turned the opposite direction and started walking down Old Bolton Station Road. The cops picked him up about half a mile down the road.

It must have been difficult, no matter how messed up Vick was, to hear a kid confess such hatred. To lie to a child. But, I guess, people must do it all the time. My family sure did, too.

After the incident, my mother finally broke up with Chip. I was very happy, but Chip did leave me with a couple lessons. He was right about that. I learned how easy people lie. I learned that I could lie without even knowing why. I began to question everyone around me, all those freaking liars out there, just waiting to find a sucker. And I learned that there was intelligence—a street smarts—that I knew nothing about, and if I was going to ever leave Clinton, I had to start learning.

Section 2 Leaving Home

Chapter IX. First Love

I was seventeen at the time of my first love, just a junior in high school. It happened in the summer of 2002. I was living in Sterling, Massachusetts, with my father, dying for my senior year of high school to be over so I could get as far away from home as possible. I needed to taste freedom, even though I could not have comprehended that word at the time. Clinton was only fifteen minutes away from Sterling, but in comparison to Clinton's crowded neighborhoods and all the people I knew, Sterling was rural, spread out, and isolated to the point where I felt I was in another world. Plus I was starting to become aware of these visions I had been having. As a child, I had never questioned them, but I had these moments, the only thing I could think of was either they were hallucinations, dreams, or vision—I had no idea what was going on—and I didn't think I could tell anyone. They might think that I was crazy and try and lock me up like they did my mother.

Other than watching television, playing music, or reading at my father's house, I spent my time saving money for college by working at Broderick's Mega Maze—the largest and most amazing corn maze in the world. (Most people would think this would be in Iowa, but most people don't realize that Massachusetts can be an extremely rural place, especially central and western Mass.) Because my father worked so much, I had a lot of freedom to wander. Often, I would take days off or call in sick from work. But I didn't want to let my father know; he would lecture me on the importance of work. My

father was a very caring person, but he valued work and whatever made money as the highest credit to a man. My days off, however, meant everything to me.

I will never forget those days. The weather was warm. I used to sleep in, walk along the river behind our house, and take naps against a large oak tree, waking up to watch a caterpillar crawling across my arm—the hairs on my arms were starting to darken. Sometimes I would bring my guitar and try to write a song. Other times I would bring the poetry books from my literature classes. I hardly opened them, but when I did, I would turn to Wordsworth, wondering about the importance of nature and tranquility. There was so much energy running through my veins, and I had no idea what to do with it. I was tremulous and waiting.

There was a special place I liked to walk to. It was a small airport near my father's house, for small planes and gliders. I'd watch the motor planes pull the gliders into the sky and let the gliders free to drift amongst the winds. I would go so often that a man one day noticed me staring. He called me over and asked me if I was interested in flying. And before I knew it, I was up in the sky, the propellers slicing through the air, looking out my window down at the place where I had grown up. It seemed so small, and I could see for miles. The pilot told me to take the controls, and I felt the plane respond when I moved the wheel and placed my feet on the rudders. I couldn't believe it was so easy to fly. Now landing and taking off were a different story.

The pilot pointed out the window. "You see that? That's Mt. Wachusett."

"It's so small," I said.

Mt. Wachusett looked so large from the ground, but from above it was nothing but a hill. Cars were driving through the streets, those old veins, and everything looked

like a miniature world, a playground for gods, and I felt that I could simply rearrange my hometown, moving mountains and rivers, homes and people, with a simple movement of my hand.

“Everything is smaller up here,” the pilot said.

And just from being able to see the neighborhoods where I had lived from the sky, from a completely different vantage point, to come away from everything on the ground, I knew there was something bigger and greater out there, better than anything I could ever know. I was ready to start searching for whatever that was. Just one more year, I had told myself, one more year. And until I left, the pilot had offered to give me flying lessons once a week. For free.

*

At the time, it was hard to know that I was craving the body of a woman, the connection to the hydrogen jukebox cosmos, simply the sound of a woman’s voice that only spoke for me. And on the way back from the airport, I desired to explain to someone how great of an adventure I had just undertaken. I wanted a woman to recognize my bravery. For a courageous act seemed nothing without a woman’s recognition.

The house my father had bought was part of a condo community. It was rural on all sides, but in his complex there were about thirty smaller houses. And not in a single one of these condos was there a single girl my age. So imagine my excitement one day when I saw a moving truck unloading. Maybe there was a family with a young girl moving in? The furniture was much nicer than my father’s furniture. And I saw an older woman ordering around the movers much like a queen. That night at dinner, I asked my

father who had moved in across the street. He was on the community board, so I figured he would have heard already.

“The Stillmans,” my father said, “from Concord.”

“How many people?” I asked.

I didn’t come out and ask my father if there was a girl my age. I thought he would laugh.

“A single mother,” my father said. “And a daughter about your age.”

I felt an ocean rising and falling inside of myself. Finally there was a girl in the neighborhood.

“She’s pretty,” my father said. He stopped eating the pasta he made for the both of us and smiled at me as if he understood what I had been waiting for.

“Is she my age?”

“Maybe a little older.”

I wondered how I would get to meet her. Then my father saved me.

“Why don’t you bring over this basket?” my father asked. “All the new neighbors get one.”

The basket was filled with important phone numbers and contact information people would need when they first moved into Sterling. There were also some cookies, salami, cheese, a bottle of wine—a basic welcome package prepared by the neighborhood community program.

“Should I go right now?” I asked.

“It’s too late,” my father said. “Go after work tomorrow.”

*

That night I could not sleep. I felt so alone out here in Sterling. I wanted someone to talk to. My father was always at work during the day. I missed Benjamin who was still at home with my mother. I just needed to get out of her house. So I basically moved out.

That night, I tried to listen to music to help me fall sleep, but that didn't work. I tried to watch television, but the glowing tube only made me feel restless. I even tried to masturbate, but it left me dissatisfied knowing that my father was upstairs and he might hear me moving around in my bed. Back then I was ashamed. I wanted to connect with a girl.

So instead of wasting time trying to fall asleep, I went on a walk. I opened the front door quietly. The floorboards squeaked, but my father was passed out; he was only going to wake up for his alarm clock and the long work day ahead. I closed the screen door softly behind me and kissed my fingers and then placed them on the Mezuzah. I wasn't religious at all, but I figured I could use all the help I could get. Maybe I could just catch a glimpse of this new girl. Just the sight of her would give me something to dream about.

I walked down our driveway and watched a chipmunk scurry in front of me. The lights were off in every house. I walked towards the girl's house, and when I got there, there was one light on upstairs. It must be her room, I thought. Just one glimpse. I walked past her house, and my conscience kept trying to convince myself not to look in her window. It just wasn't right. But the window was right there, wide open, as if asking me to just take a peek. It would have been so easy. I just wanted to see her. Just for

tonight. Then I would never look in a window again in my entire life. I kept walking, battling with my conscience. What did she look like? Was she beautiful? What color was her hair? These were the questions running through my mind.

Then a laugh. It was a girl's laugh. Freely, as if it weren't night, as if the whole neighborhood was awake.

A white beam shot onto my feet. A girl's voice said, "Come out with your hands in the air. You're surrounded." The voice was coming from in front of me on the street, but I couldn't see the figure because the light was too bright. All I knew was that there was a woman in front of me holding a flashlight. I didn't move, terrified that the voice understood my motives.

The light moved up my body, climbing over my legs, over my chest, and rested as delicately as a kiss on my face. The light stayed there and so did the voice's eyes. Then the light wandered around where I had been standing, then straight back to me.

"Listen, stranger. I'm holding a small handgun. I can shoot straight, but maybe not to kill. So if you're unlucky, you might die slow."

The voice had an accent that I wasn't familiar with. A harshness in the consonants that felt heavy as she brushed through syllables.

"You don't have a gun," I said. "Let me see it." My voice sounded like somebody pouring milk into a glass.

"Oh—a smart ass." The voice sounded playful now.

I still did not move, just in case she really did have a gun. I felt like a perpetrator, being caught even thinking about looking in someone's window. The light came back on

my face, and I could feel the voice examining and judging me. I stayed put, scared and hoping the voice was the girl I had been envisioning.

“Put the flashlight down,” I said.

“Don’t you move,” the voice said. “You’re surrounded.” Playful now, the voice.

“Who are you?”

“I asked the questions around here. Who—*are—you?*”

“Tully. James Tully. I live here with my dad.”

“Prove it,” the voice said. Then she laughed again, that laugh with the disregard for the sleeping world.

“I don’t have any identification.”

She started laughing again, and now I just played along. The way she laughed made her sound young. Like she had no worries in the world. That she was protected by her family from the evils of the adult world. This must be my girl. I didn’t want that laughing to stop.

“You sure take some risks,” the voice said.

I moved forward. The flashlight wandered quickly.

“Stay where you are.”

I stopped again. The voice shut off the light. I enjoyed being outside with her, able to see the moon and smell the sap being carried by the wind. I could see the outlines of her figure being lit up by the street lamps. She was skinny, and she had good size breasts. Then I saw the outlines of her face. I couldn’t make her face out in the dark. My eyes were still adjusting.

“Go ahead,” the voice said. “I saw you.”

She clicked the light back on and handed me the flashlight.

Placing the light on her face, I saw her blink. She had a small face with large brown eyes. High cheeks. Her hair was long and brown. Long eyelashes. She blinked often. It was a very pleasing face to see, even in the darkness that had consumed my neighborhood.

“Your hair is brown,” I said.

“Expecting something different?”

“Can I have your name now?”

“Vika Stillman. And don’t go calling me Victoria.” She grabbed the flash light back. “By the way. What you doing out here at night? You’re not a peeper, huh?”

“Oh,” I said. “Never peep. No. Can’t sleep. In fact I was going to ask you the same thing.”

I could lie so easily.

“Can’t sleep either. I like to read at night. Old private dick books. Makes me restless sometimes.”

“I live across the street.”

“Well, I’ll see you around then,” Vika said.

And just like a dream, Vika Stillman turned around and walked back into her house, keeping herself away from me, tantalizing me until tomorrow. That night, I turned over her figure in my mind, examining every angle, sometimes using my imagination, until I had fallen asleep.

*

I thought about Vika all day at work, and I couldn't wait to get home to deliver her the basket and leave work. My high school summer job was different than most. Once school was out, I built and constructed an 8 acre corn maze for June and July, and in late August, the maze opened to the public, fully equipped with bridges, a concession stand, and an in-maze sound system that played the same two hundred songs that had anything on the theme of being lost, like J Giles, "I must have got lost," plus songs of encouragement like "Eye of the Tiger."

So many people would come to the maze, spending twelve bucks a pop. It seemed absurd to me, but people always came. Maybe by getting lost in a corn maze and finding the way out, people felt better about the confusions in their own lives. Who knows? But I sure felt strange building the maze. Most of the kids who worked there were cool, most were high school and college kids. Our bosses, Larry and Doug Broderick, were about the best bosses a kid my age could have asked for. Larry was the business man, always on his satellite phone, brushing his long hair out of his face, wearing sunglasses even inside, whereas Doug was a real farmer, always wearing a cowboy hat and getting his hands dirty. He used to laugh at me when we would work together.

One day, Doug and I built about a mile of fence, and the stories he told me kept me up at night. Doug told this one story about a calf giving birth. The baby calf was breach, and if they didn't get the baby calf out, the mother would die. So Doug put on these gloves, reached inside the mother, and tried to pull the baby out, only to pull out half of the baby's body. The baby had died weeks ago and had been decomposing in the

mother. I wanted to throw up. The cow had died giving birth. It was almost like the story of my birth that Mimi and Poppy told me.

That morning in late June one day after meeting Vika, I was working with Al—the strangest man I had met at the maze. Al was a carpenter, and we were building the front entrance of the maze, which led to the first path and into the section of the maze where the “gatekeepers” introduced the rules of the maze to the lucky customers. Al was really fucking nuts. A drunk. But he somehow always worked hard. Al lived in a house next to the maze. He lived on the bottom floor of an old white Victorian. It looked like a house out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie or one of the lonely places painted by Edward Hopper.

Al spent that morning telling me about jam bands, road trips, the women he had fucked, and the effects of drugs like mescaline and peyote, which were the best to take, as he informed me. And strangely, I enjoyed listening to him talk. His stories sounded like adventures. And that’s what I really wanted—to live, explore—I wanted to be so far away from home and work, and I fantasized about running off to Miles, Iowa, meeting people in the small town, washing dishes in an Italian restaurant, or heading down to New Mexico and living with a woman in an adobe only to leave her when the life was too tough.

“Hand me the hammer,” Al said. His voice sounded like sandpaper.

“Where is it?”

“Just fucking hand me the hammer.”

I lifted up some of the pieces of wood looking for the hammer.

“You need to know where the hammer is AT ALL TIMES,” he said.

I found the hammer underneath a poster board for the maze. I handed it to him. It was heavy in my hand, but he flung it around like a conductor's baton. He worked so fast, too. The way he built the gate for the park was the way Jackson Pollock painted. Al took the hammer, didn't even size up his swing, and wacked himself in the finger.

"Jesus Christ," Al said.

"All right?"

"I'm fine." He went right back to work. "Fucking slaves."

"Did you say slaves?"

"Hold this board right here," Al said.

"How about you hold the board, and I take the hammer?" I asked.

"I said hold it."

So I held the board, and closed my eyes, hoping he wouldn't wack me. But then before he swung, Larry bawled my name. I dropped the board and ran over to Larry, thankful to still have my thumb.

"I need you to take the truck," Larry said, "And bring over about a hundred stakes."

Larry smiled at me, as if he knew that he was saving me from Al. It amazed me that he hadn't fired Al. But maybe Larry knew this was all Al had to hang onto in his life. Al was peering over a cliff. I mean, in the morning, when we showed up to work, we'd find beer cans all over the parking lot and throughout the maze, as if he had been wandering through at night. Sometimes, when he opened the bed of his truck, beer cans would fall out. And once, I only heard this story from another coworker, so not sure if

it's true, he was found asleep one morning, with a woman, camped out below a bridge in the corn. Not sure though.

I thanked Larry and took the truck over to the storage barn, wondering how someone could end up like Al. What happened to him along the way to end up like that? Was it a chemical imbalance? Or was it simply being unhappy and lonely? I kept checking my watch to see if it was close to five. I couldn't wait to get home so I could deliver that basket to the Stillmans.

The storage barn was also a strange place. It was an old barn filled with all the old maze decorations from previous themes like the compass map, the dinosaur map, or the secret agent map. It was right off the main road, but tucked away. It was in this old farm house. The entrance was in the back, and I drove the truck up a cement road. The back had cages and fences. They were out in the open, and above the animals was an attic. In the back of the barn, there was this section where they kept the stakes for the fence for the parking lot outside of the maze. There were also barrels of old whisky. But what made the place really strange was that all the reject animals came from the petting zoo. It was a shame, really. If the pets were ugly they would scare the children. I guess it makes sense if there's a deer that can kill a child, you should probably keep it away from children. Thinking about those helpless animals always made me blue. The cages for the rejected animals reminded me of mental institutions. It was starting to look like a menagerie.

Once I got out of the truck, I could hear the emu screaming at me. That emu hated everyone. It was this big, ugly fucking thing, with beady eyes, a small furry head, and a body covered in black feathers. It basically looked like an ostrich. He was fenced

in under the barn, and once he saw me, he started running back and forth over the hay floor as if he wanted to kill me, or at least gather enough speed to fly away. He sounded like a trumpet being played for the first time. I wanted to set him free—he reminded me of Al—but I knew that I could never do it. The emu always just seemed so angry at being locked up.

There were these other animals that grazed by the reject animal barn. They were behind a fence about twenty feet away from the road. I could see them so clearly from the truck. They didn't come from the petting zoo. They were sold for their meat. There were hogs. Each hog had something wrong. They mostly had tumors on their backs. They were sad. Then there were the bulls. They were so loud, screaming out from behind the fence. I couldn't understand why they didn't break free. They looked strong enough.

I loaded up the truck with the stakes, listening to the chorus of animals, and I spent the rest of the afternoon hammering the stakes into the ground with a rock, watching the sun lower to the horizon, waiting for my watch to tell me that I was free.

*

When I got home from work at 5:30, I showered, combed my hair (which I hardly ever did), put on a pair of jeans and the nicest shirt in the house—which was my father's old polo shirt—and grabbed the welcome basket and started to practice my smile. All the houses in the neighborhoods were built on the same model, but when I knocked on the Stillmans' door it just felt different somehow. I could hear someone home. A woman was talking on the telephone inside. I stood there for about a minute and then knocked

again, this time louder. Another minute passed. I readjusted the basket in my hands, and then the door was finally opened.

Ms. Stillman stood before me. She looked just like Vika. Brown hair, brown eyes, long eyelashes. But she was small in stature and had a little bit more weight around her thighs and stomach. Her age was starting to show. Even though she had a very pleasant face like Vika, Ms. Stillman looked weathered.

“Hello, young man,” Ms. Stillman said. “You caught me at a terrible time. I don’t have my face on.” When she smiled, her wrinkles showed over her face.

“Welcome to the neighborhood,” I said, holding up the basket so she could see it better.

“Come in. Set that on the kitchen table. You must excuse me for taking so long to get to the door. I used to have people for that.”

“I understand,” I said, even though I didn’t quite comprehend that she meant a butler. I have never met anyone before who had a butler. It seemed like a joke that butlers even existed anymore.

I placed the basket on the kitchen table and looked around the house. There were boxes everywhere. The house smelled of candles, and I noticed these candles burning, filling the house with vanilla. I watched Ms. Stillman walk around the house, lighting new candles. The place had a lot of expensive-looking furniture. There were cotton lace antimacassars over the wood furniture. The couch was leather and a wrap around. In front of the couch was a flat screen television which was so sought after at the time. I looked for Vika.

“I didn’t get your name,” Ms. Stillman said.

“Tully. James Tully. Live next door.”

“Of course, and your father is Mark Tully. A very respected man.”

“As respected as any other,” I said.

“Why don’t you have a seat?”

I sat down at the kitchen table.

“How about in the living room?” Ms. Stillman asked.

I stood up straight as if I had made a mistake. Ms. Stillman ushered me into the living room, and I sat on the couch.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” she said. She sort of bowed with her hand out as if she was resting herself in the air and balancing herself. It was supposed to be a grand introduction, but I already knew her name, so there was no suspense. But she sure thought her name was important. I didn’t give a shit. All I wanted was to see Vika. “My name is Patricia Stillman. And please young man, don’t go calling me Patty.”

Ms. Stillman sat on the couch and stared at me for an uncomfortable moment. It seemed as if she was judging me by my bone structure.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen soon.”

“Tell me about yourself,” she said. “I supposed I have the right to know about my neighbors.”

I didn’t know how to respond. So I just said what first came to my mind: “Not much to tell. I go to Clinton High School. I wanted to be a musician one day. I work for the Brodericks, at the corn maze.

“You’re a very good-looking boy, too,” Ms. Stillman said with a smile. “Where’s your mother?”

“She’s around. Sometimes in Clinton. Sometime not.”

“I’m divorced too. But where does she stay?”

I asked, trying to change the subject: “Did you like the basket?”

“So you don’t like that question. Everyone has their secrets.”

I wanted to see Vika, even if for just a moment. I felt a bit uncomfortable talking to Ms. Stillman. She was wearing a skirt, and her legs were crossed. I couldn’t help looking. She had nice legs. Smooth and long. She slapped her sandal against the back of her heel. On her toes, there was a pink nail polish. Uncrossing her legs seemed like winding a clock. She headed into the kitchen and brought me back a glass of iced tea.

“What do you know about me?” Ms. Stillman asked. She had a drink in her hand now and jiggled the ice around the glass and looked inside.

“Not much. You’re from Concord. I know you have a daughter.”

“You do?” Ms. Stillman took her eyes off the glass and smiled at me. I could see her wrinkles again. “Nothing else?”

I shook my head.

Ms. Stillman stood up and started to move around the room. She moved closer to the window and ran her finger over the lip of her drink. I would come to know these moves as part of her performance.

“I used to live in Sterling,” she said, “up until the age you are right now. Strange to be back. She turned around towards me. “You don’t watch the news?”

“Sometimes,” I said, even though I was lying. I wanted to sound older and sophisticated. Good enough for her daughter.

“Have you heard of my name before?”

“No.”

“Has your father?”

“Don’t think so.”

“That is wonderful. Truly wonderful. What a town.”

At first, I didn’t know what Ms. Stillman was trying to conceal from me, and I could care less. All I was thinking about was Vika. Vika. Vika.

“Tell your father,” she said, “that maybe one day we can help each other out.”

“Who is here?” a voice called from behind a closed door. I knew that voice. It was Vika.

“A young man named James.”

“I don’t know him,” Vika said.

I was confused, because I knew we had met. Could she have forgotten me that easily? Maybe she couldn’t remember my name? Regardless of why, it hurt that she pretended not to remember me. I wanted to turn around, but I felt compelled to place the image I had in my mind with her figure.

“Go ahead, James,” Ms. Stillman said.

I left Ms. Stillman, tumbling the ice around her glass, staring out the window. She started to laugh. At what I wasn’t sure.

When I walked into Vika’s room, she was sitting at a desk in front of a mirror, running a comb through her brown hair. Vika looked at me through the reflection in the

mirror. She didn't even turn around. Then she smiled. Her eyes were so brown it almost hurt. The moment I saw Vika, I forgot everything else in the world. I forgot work. I forgot the reject animals in the storage barn. I forgot the crazy carpenter. I saw only her, and everything else in the world faded into the background behind the light that emanated from her body. I wanted her. Everything. I wanted to possess her hair, her eyes, her body—even the mirror which so delicately held her image. I wanted it all to be mine.

“And you are?” Vika asked.

“We met yesterday,” I said.

“We did?” Vika looked at her hair as she ran the brush through it as if trying to search for answer. “I don't remember meeting a boy.”

“The flashlight?” I had no idea how to play it cool.

Vika stopped combing her hair and put the brush down on the desk. The back of the brush had a fancy design. It looked like something from France. Something really fancy and beyond my knowledge. Then she smiled. Real playful. There were no wrinkles on Vika's face. She tilted her head to the side and started flicking her eyelashes. This look was supposed to make men melt and take possession of boys.

“Of course I remember you, silly,” Vika said.

“Why did you—”

“Did you miss me?” Vika walked around me in a circle, finally taking her eyes off of the mirror, as if sizing me up before she swallowed me whole.

“I dropped off a welcome basket.”

“How sweet,” she said.

Vika sat down on her bed, and I wanted to sit next to her, hold her, kiss her, until she mine. All mine. For a moment, I took my eyes off of Vika to notice that there were boxes scattered around her room as in the living room. On her bed were many pillows and teddy bears. Too many. It looked like a child's room, but everything about the way she sat on the bed, her legs crossed like her mother, her eyelashes flicking, showed that she was a woman. And I wasn't sure if I was ready for a real woman. But I felt compelled, pulled towards her as if she was the moon and I was the waves rolling against the beach.

"Sit down," Vika said and patted the space next to her on the bed.

I happily obliged. I would have done anything to just sit on the bed with her. I couldn't stop looking at her. She was magnanimous, a flame, and I wanted to just be in the same room as her to feel her glow. I was pathetic.

"Have you kissed before?" Vika asked.

"A girl?"

She laughed. "Of course."

I was a bit taken back by her impetuosity, even though I had kissed two girls before and reached second base with one of them. Reaching second base back then was about the best thing that could happen to a boy.

"Oh sure," I said, not wanting to sound inexperienced. "Plenty."

"Kiss me?"

"Kiss you?"

Vika nodded yes and closed her eyes. Out came her lips. I looked around the room. All the boxes stacked on each other reminded me of the stacks of rocks climbers

left to mark where they had reached. I felt the ocean rising inside of myself again, and I kissed her lower lip. I went to kiss her again, but she pulled back, opened her eyes, and smiled.

“Just a kiss,” she said.

I reached in for another, to taste her again, when someone knocked at the door.

We sat on the bed looking at each other.

“My mother hates answering the door.”

I followed Vika into the living room where she opened the door to a man still in clothes from work. The man was wearing construction boots, steel-toed.

“Vika,” the man said. “Where’s Ms. Stillman?” He kept looking past us for something. I don’t even think he noticed me at first.

“Hello, Peter,” Vika said. “She’s upstairs.” Then Vika pointed towards me.

“Peter, this is our neighbor, James.”

Peter looked at me for the first time.

“You live here?” he asked.

I nodded yes.

“Good luck,” he said, and then looked at Vika. He walked past us and headed upstairs. I watched him walk up the steps. Each step was laborious. Then I heard a door shut. Peter reminded me of Al, the way he walked, as if he was humping a wheelbarrow.

Once he was gone, I said to Vika, “I thought that was your father.”

“Heavens no,” she said. “My mother knew him when they were growing up.”

“Where’s your father?” I asked.

Vika turned away, and for a moment, I saw the light disappear from her face.

“Would you show me around?” she asked. “I don’t want to be here right now.”

*

There was only one place I would have taken Vika that day. It was the walk I always took when I needed to get away from everything and try to obliterate all my memories. I spent a lot of time obliterating my memories, and now I’m trying to excavate them out of the bottom of a sunken chest. The walk went near the river and ended by the airport.

There was a river that ran behind my house which led all the way up to the airport. A blazed trail ran along the river. The cold water ran over rocks and moss grew fat on stones and trees. There were ferns along the outside of the path, sometimes in between, and tall birch and maple trees that stood at attention like soldiers guarding a tomb of an unknown soldier. Vika walked with me. She pointed to a tree. Someone had nailed planks along the trunk so someone could climb. So I scurried to the top of the tree.

“Stop showing off,” Vika said.

I climbed down the tree, jumping when I reached the second to last plank.

“Boys are always showing off,” Vika said.

“This is my favorite spot,” I said. I wanted to tell her about the songs I wrote and the poems I read. I wanted to tell her about nature and tranquility. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked. Like a bright flame. For some reason, I just couldn’t. “Like this place?”

Vika looked around. Then at me. She swatted a mosquito on her leg. “Too many bugs.”

We walked along the river, and I listened to the blue jays and the cardinals and the doves singing in the trees. I listened to the river, and I watched the sun fall through the trees in checkered patterns, and I watched Vika walk in and out of the light, or was the light walking in and out of Vika. I couldn't tell. All different shades of color illuminated the country, and I believed Vika was responsible for the resplendence.

Vika reached into her pocket and took out a pair of red sunglasses. The red plastic contrasted so sharply to all the green. I could see her eyelashes flutter behind her lenses. It appeared that she was crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Tell me. Please. You should not be crying."

"Boys always want to know what's wrong," Vika said.

It seemed that I couldn't do anything right with her at that moment. I should have just let her be. But I couldn't. I didn't know any better.

"You can tell me," I said.

"I miss home," Vika said. "I miss my father."

Even though I had been wondering about her father since I met Peter, the subject seemed sensitive, and I wanted to allow her the time to divulge her secrets. I hated when people cried. It made me feel that there was something terribly wrong in the world.

"This is terrible," Vika said. "I can't be sad on a day like this. It's much too beautiful." A tear rolled down from behind her red sunglasses, and when the tear touched her lips, like the beginning of rain storm falling into water, she smiled.

I wanted to try and kiss her again, but even when I was so full of unexplained energy, I knew that it was not the right time to make my move.

“We should make the best of our situation,” Vika said. The light was back in her face. She took off down the path, sprinting as fast as she could, her brown hair blowing out behind her. I took off after her, trying to catch up to her, not knowing what I would do when I caught her. I thought about pinning her to the ground and kissing her.

Bobbing in and out of trees, Vika left the blazed path and headed down to where the old train tracks were near the peat farm. I kept knocking ferns and branches out of the way. I lost sight of her, but I could hear her laughing, and I just followed that beautiful sound. I would have followed that music anywhere. I could have reached a point where I was no longer standing on the ground, like the coyote chasing after the road runner, and I would have forsaken gravity and kept running after her laugh. Even if it was not possible.

Then the laughter stopped, and the sound of her feet had stopped as well.

“Vika,” I said. “Are you all right?”

I heard nothing.

“Where are you?” I called.

The woods were thick where I stood, and I knew the tracks would be somewhere around where I was standing. I brushed more ferns out of the way and came out of the brush into a large clearing. Vika was there, standing on the old railroad tracks facing the Old Stone Tunnel. It was part of the old railroad. The land Vika and I were standing on used to be filled with water. It was a retention pond for the reservoir that was being built.

A long long long time ago. They would head through the tunnel. It was discontinued and rumored to be haunted.

“Boys are always worrying,” Vika said. “I’m not a damsel in distress.”

“Trouble then?” I asked.

“You must like it.” She tilted her glasses and showed me her brown eyes, as if casting a spell. “You followed. Looking for another kiss?”

I must have blushed, because she started to laugh.

“Let’s go in there,” Vika said, pointing to the tunnel.

I had approached this tunnel many times before, and I knew it was stupid to go inside. It was a dark empty place. I knew that I would have a vision. I didn’t want to be around her if I had a vision. It was the strangest thing, because every time I went into a place that people called haunted, or a place where memories were really strong, I would have these freaking visions. No one could know. They would think I was insane.

“No way.”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

“You don’t understand.” I looked inside the tunnel. I couldn’t even see light at the other end. “Nobody goes in that tunnel.”

“All the reason to go in.”

“I don’t know. There could be bears or something in there.”

“Really? Bears?”

“How do you know? Maybe even a serial killer. Who knows? Plus, it’s haunted. Just can’t do it.”

“Don’t let fear control you,” she said.

“It’s just stupid and dangerous.”

“Only a tunnel.”

I kicked a rock at my foot towards her. I looked up at her. She was smiling and the flame burned bright. I would have done anything for her.

“My father,” she said, “you asked about him earlier. Well, he’s dead.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I didn’t know why I apologized for his death, but I felt that I had to.

“Don’t apologize. He used to scuba dive. You know, a real adventurous type. Like Jacques Cousteau. And he wasn’t afraid of anything. NOTHING. And one day, he went to feed sharks out in the Caribbean. A bunch of bull sharks came out of nowhere, and one bit his thigh, punctured his artery, and bled to death before he made it back to the boat. And you know what, if he made it back alive, he would have gone right back in the water.”

I didn’t know how to react. Vika grabbed my hand and pulled me into the tunnel. I could feel the train tracks against my feet, but I could no longer see them. The darkness closed in behind us like someone had shut the blinds. I waited for my eyes to adjust, but it was so dark. I knew the vision would come soon. I had to hide it. Her hand was cold in mine, and I felt her grip tighten the further we got into the tunnel. I kept listening for a moment, but all I could hear were our steps and the gentle falling of dripping water. Vika pulled me close, and I could feel the warmth of her body. I had never felt so close to a woman.

Then I saw someone. It was a man, obviously homeless, staring at me through the darkness. I could see his eyes moving. He lit a match, and I saw his face illuminate and

show a beard. He started to laugh, and I saw madness. I turned to Vika, but she didn't see this man. So we walked on without being afraid. I saw another woman emerge from the darkness and walk right in front of us. Her hair was sticking up, and it appeared that she had not washed her hair in years. She put her finger to her mouth as if to say be quiet. Vika didn't see her. But now I started to walk faster. And suddenly, I saw a man on the ground, his head rotating a hundred and eighty degrees like an owl. He was a projection of my father. Vika either pretended not to see or didn't actually see. But I saw all these people. They seemed to be waiting for me. When would I feel the sharp fangs of a snake bite into my legs or the rough hands from one of these strangers, wrapping his paws around my neck? These images were the forgotten men and women who are waiting in the dark to reappear when the time is ready. These people were projections of those who once believed in love. And I wanted to feel the repercussion, pain, of such a vision.

At one point, the tracks underneath my feet were gone, and I thought maybe the floor would give out and open up into a great abyss, but that never came either. Nothing came. We just kept walking and holding each other's hands. I wondered when a ghost would whisper fatal warnings into my ear about someone killing my father. But that never came either. The only thing that came was the light from the other side of the tunnel, like the sun setting over an approaching cold night. Then Vika's laugh. The sweet music of safety. We stepped out of the tunnel, and I felt like a conqueror. I had reached the other side and felt so connected to Vika I thought we were no longer individuals.

“Nothing to worry about it,” she said. “Didn't I tell you?”

“You did.”

I guess she didn't see the strangers. And this time, I grabbed Vika and kissed her. I didn't wait for her permission. I traced my hand down her shoulder and her side. I felt the curve around her hip. We stopped, and I saw a plane fly over the top of the trees. I had forgotten about my lesson. But I didn't care. I only wanted to be with Vika.

*

Three weeks had past. I had only two days off. I was working more now. I wanted to take Vika out to dinners and lunch. But I finally had taken a day off from the maze. I needed it. I wanted to hang out with Vika. So I just called in sick. My boss didn't care as long as I came in ready to work the next day. Of course, my father didn't know.

I took Vika out to lunch at the Old Meadow Café, a bar overlooking an apple orchard and the downtown of Clinton. It was a place that I thought showed experience and maturity. I thought that was what Vika wanted. I hadn't even been to lunch there without my parents before, and being there with Vika, paying with my own money, I felt older and sophisticated.

Vika ordered a chicken pot pie, and I ordered a ham sandwich with a root beer. Plus two pieces of homemade apple pie for dessert. I took the food out to the patio on a tray, and we sat on a picnic table overlooking the orchard. Vika sat there, bright as ever, almost blocking out the image of Clinton behind her. It was still back there, however, like an albatross. Clinton was so saturated with houses, and it seemed to just be sitting, waiting there to swallow me whole.

“I grew up over there,” I said pointing to Clinton.

“You haven’t taken me there.”

“No reason.”

“What about your—”

She wanted to ask about my mother. But she understood that we both had secrets, something I liked about her.

Vika and I considered ourselves together. We were on the verge of love, if not already there. It had been three weeks of bliss. True adolescent rapture. And though when I look back on those three weeks, knowing all that happened, there is no way to take away that feeling. My father said Vika was deceptive. Not what I thought. All that bullshit. Couldn’t believe him. I was falling deep.

Within the time I had known Vika, we had gone to third base (which meant some time underneath the panties), ate steaks at a restaurant, drank beer and wine in the woods, puked, cried, found one another, believed in the other, shared, cried, and felt something bigger than ourselves. I had experienced so much with Vika, except making love.

“Why can’t I meet your family?” Vika said.

“You’ve met my dad,” I said.

“Your brother and mother.”

“It’s too soon.”

“How come you don’t talk about your mother?”

“Look at the orchard. In October, we can pick apples.”

Trying to find solace in silence, I took a bite of my sandwich.

“Mom says there’s something wrong with a boy with no mother.”

“And she would know.” I chewed my food. “I have a mother anyway.”

“I just want to know who I’m dating.”

“She’s sick, okay,” I said, slamming my hand onto the table. “A mental patient. Wack job. Whatever other name you want to call her. She’s been out of the hospital for a couple weeks.”

Vika didn’t say anything at first. She stared out at the apple blossoms. A fly buzzed onto her chicken pot pie, and I watched it connecting its legs as if rubbing its hands.

“You worry?” Vika asked.

“About her?” I asked. “Every day.”

“No. About yourself?”

The fly flew away, and I watched the fly buzz around my head in orbital motions.

“Like,” she said, “ever worry about getting sick?”

“Every day.”

Vika smiled again, that smile that was supposed to make everything right. “I don’t think you’re sick,” she said.

“Hard to explain.”

Vika grabbed my root beer and took a sip. She put her red glasses on, and her eyelashes flashed behind the lenses.

“You know,” she said. “Next week is our month anniversary.”

“Nice.”

It seemed like I had known her forever, impossible to know how the first love is just a speck in the whole space of time. It feels like everything—impending heartbreak.

“You planning on getting me a present for the anniversary.” Vika smiled again. She was a flame now.

I started calculating how much money I had in the bank. There was about \$1,000 in my account. I wanted to save at least another \$1,000. Even then, I would never have had enough money saved for college. I started to think about how much time I had left to work. Maybe I need to start working more?

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I love jewelry,” she said.

“What kind?”

“It just has to sparkle.”

I said, “I don’t know anything about jewelry.”

“Your present will be great.”

“How do you know what I want?”

“You’ve always wanted it. All boys want it.”

She crossed her legs, trying to give me a hint. It was clear. I reached down to touch them, but she pulled her legs back.

“You’re just going to have to find out,” she said, wagging her finger.

*

I was assuming that Vika was talking about sex. I was a virgin, but I have envisioned it many times, especially with Vika. Now as for the mechanics of how I envisioned sex, I was as clueless as trying to imagine what it was like to walk on the moon. Of course my other guy friends at school talked about sex, but I could tell they had no idea either. They

would talk about the clitoris and draw diagrams at lunch, but they were so far off. My guess was that all I had to do to find out about sex was buy Vika a piece of jewelry. Then I would no longer have this problem. So I started figuring out my money and working longer hours at the maze. I had about three weeks. I asked her for another week to exchange gifts because I could use the time to work. At first, I felt great, watching my bank account rise, but as the three weeks went on, I saw Vika less and was always tired when I actually did see her, always thinking about how to buy her a present.

“You’re working so hard,” she’d say after I fell asleep on the couch. “Doing this for me?”

Whenever she said something about me working hard, it kind of made me sick, knowing that the next day I would spend slouched over, walking through the maze, tossing stones into the corn and out of the walking paths. That’s what we did most of the time. Cleared away the rocks from the walking paths to avoid lawsuits if someone fell. It really sucked. Whenever I complained, Doug would tell me stories of the Jamaicans that came up in the fall. They would move rocks quicker than anyone in the world. They were down on the dirt like crabs, flinging stones like they were feathers. And we only had so many days till the maze would open. It opened the first week of August. Right now we were just preparing the maze, trying to shape the corn for people to get lost. Time was running out on us. But instead of work, I just kept thinking about how sweet it would be to make love to Vika. It must be amazing, I thought. There must be nothing like it in the world. I couldn’t think of anything else. Making love to her was all that was on my mind.

Workdays were getting hard. I had worked a 7 day week, and I started milking my breaks like some of the older workers. You basically just took breaks in the corn. Some people would even fall sleep. I mean, what are the odds that the boss would find you asleep on your break when you worked in a maze? Doug was usually working heavy machinery, and Larry was usually in his office on the phone.

One of the days—all the days started to run together—I was working with this guy Brandon. We were down at the reject-animals barn. Brandon was older than me and in college. He had brown hair and a full beard. He was in art school, and I'd always ask him about painting, and he would act as if he was too smart for me. Brandon was a real prick when it came down to it. But I was interested in him, and I kept asking him probing questions.

“You got a girlfriend?” I asked.

Brandon was shoveling mulch from a pile behind the bar into a wheelbarrow that we would hump over to the bed of the truck, then unload it again, beginning the cyclical mulching process once again. It was so boring. I started trying to discipline myself by not looking at my watch so often so the day would seem like it was going faster if I had no measurement on how much of my life I was wasting.

“There’s about six yards of mulch to move,” Brandon said. “Is it necessary to get personal?”

I put my shovel under the mulch and felt the shovel scrape against the asphalt, throwing the mulch into the red wheelbarrow.

“Just making conversation.”

“What makes you think I care about conversation?”

Brandon threw the shovel into the mulch, and it stuck. The emu was running around behind its fencing underneath the barn, screaming and appearing as if it was trying to fly away with its pathetic excuse for wings.

“That fucking bird,” Brandon said.

“I don’t see why talking is bad?”

The emu kept screaming.

“Holy shit,” Brandon said. “I’m going to either shut the bird up, or you. Which one’s it going to be?”

I watched Brandon point his fat finger at me, and I noticed a plastic brace on his wrist. He couldn’t have broken a bone or he wouldn’t have been able to work today. I wanted to ask him about it, but I knew it wasn’t the right time.

“That’s what I thought,” Brandon said.

That bird, however, was still squawking. Brandon picked up a stick for the fence, next to the truck, and ran towards the emu. He banged the stick against the fence enclosure, and he screamed: “Shut up. God damn bird. Shut up.”

So I ran over to Brandon and pushed him. His feet went out from underneath him, and he slipped on the hay.

“Leave the bird alone,” I said.

“All right,” Brandon said. “We’ve got a tough guy.”

Brandon stood up, brushing pieces of hay out of his hair. The emu kept screaming, running back and forth along the fence as if to show who was left standing.

“Let’s just work,” Brandon said.

We worked the rest of the afternoon, humping wheelbarrows full of mulch to the truck and then unloading it; which felt like trying to take each grain of sand from the beach and move into to the backyard behind my house. I kept looking at Brandon's hand. Finally, as people started to walk towards their cars to go home, I decided to ask him.

"What happened to your wrist?" I asked.

Brandon looked at me as if I had just walked in on him while he was taking a shit.

"What's it to you?"

"Curious."

"Cut myself," he said. "You being so curious."

Brandon usually worked the roto-tiller, but today Larry moved him over with me.

"Happened on the tiller?" I asked.

"Don't you get it?" He put his shovel down. "I CUT MYSELF."

I saw the slice marks all over his wrist. I had never known anyone personally who tried to hurt himself who was my age. He walked towards his car. The day was finally over.

*

I couldn't understand why Brandon would wanted to hurt himself. I couldn't understand, either, how anyone would want to try and take his own life. It just didn't make sense. I mean I had known a lot of pain in my life, a lot of sorrow, seen things I shouldn't see, but there is just always so much in life that takes my breath away, that is so beautiful that to not exist, to not be an individual, is the most painful thing I can think of. At least, I

couldn't understand people feeling that way until I went to the jewelry store to buy Vika her one month anniversary gift.

"This piece right here," the Macy's saleswoman said, holding a necklace above her neck, "is only 150 dollars."

"Did you say 150 dollars?"

"Yes sir. Is this a gift for mother?"

"No ma'am," I said. "My girlfriend."

"How about a ring?"

"I want something that sparkles."

"Well how about an engagement ring?"

The saleswoman said this with a smile, a pleasant customer service smile that said I eat shit for money. My reflection was in the glass case, and all the jewelry sparkled in the light. The saleswoman had on a large blue crystal necklace, two rings on her right hand, and a wedding band. It looked like she was wearing a wig, and she had a bit of lipstick on her two front teeth. I hated her.

"An engagement ring?" I asked.

"Why not?" she asked.

"How much?"

"Well," the saleswoman said, moving around the keys, until she found the right one. "This one here." She opened up the glass case and pulled out a diamond that sparkled so much I couldn't even keep my eyes off of it. "12."

"12 what?"

"12,000."

I kept staring at the ring, thinking about Vika wearing it, and the ring sure did sparkle. Then what she said finally registered, jarring me out of a hypnotic trance.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

The saleswoman put the ring back in the case. “I just guess you’re not ready,” she said.

The diamond shined from inside the case, and I started to devise plots on how to steal it.

“Listen,” I said, “I want to find something for my girlfriend.”

“Want her to like you?” she asked again with that shit eating grin.

“To love me.”

“Then get her this gorgeous piece.”

It was a necklace, gold, with a little bit of diamonds around the word “LOVE.”

“250,” she said.

“For love?”

“For love.”

Without thinking about my savings account and college and how many days I would have to work to pay this off, I bought it.

*

My dad went to his girlfriend’s house, and Vika and I had the place to ourselves to celebrate our anniversary. It was hard to tell if my father knew I had plans or not. But he left anyways. I didn’t question it much. He spent a lot of time at his girlfriend’s house. When she stepped into my house, Vika gave me a kiss on the lips, her tongue slithering

around my mouth, and as she walked by, I could smell her perfume, which smelled like jasmine. Vika was wearing a black dress, with spaghetti straps so I could see her beautiful shoulders. She was wearing black heels, and she sounded like a horse crossing over cobblestones as she walked over the linoleum kitchen floor.

“Smells great,” Vika said. “What are you cooking?”

I had sautéed onions and mushrooms with olive oil and basil, cooked the chicken golden brown and put it to the side, stirring the marsala, chicken broth, and butter into the pan with the mushrooms and onions. I put the chicken back into the pan, and it smelled like I had been cooking memories instead of food.

“A little bit of this,” I said. “A little bit of that.”

“You are too much.”

Her hips were obvious in her dress. I wanted to just grab her right then and make love to her, but I had to play it cool, otherwise I would ruin the mood. Earlier that day I had bought condoms, ribbed for her pleasure, and I’d stored them downstairs by my bed.

“You excited for your present?” Vika asked while crossing her legs.

Boy, about the only thing I could think about were those legs. That’s when I heard the marsala popping and spraying all over the kitchen table.

“Shit,” I said. “The meal.”

Vika started laughing, and I ran over to lower the heat and clean up the mess. The oven ring was glowing amber. I sliced the parsley up for garnish, and I watched the pan cool down. I put the meal on the plates and sprinkled the parsley over the gravy and the chicken.

“Looks fantastic,” she said. “I can’t believe you made this.”

“Don’t judge it before you taste it,” I said.

She took a bite of the chicken, and I watched her lips moving against each other, then the thought registering, and she smiled.

“Very good.”

We both ate the food, and I felt strange, eating food that I cooked at a table at my father’s house, as if there was some sort of preview—a movie trailer—of the rest of my life. That my nights would be spent trying to recognize whether Vika approved or had pleasure from something that I had done.

“So,” Vika said, swallowing her last bite of food. “My present?”

I pulled the jewelry box from my pocket and slid the box to her across the table. She smiled. Her hair was curly today, and it rested on her shoulders. On her collarbone there was some sweat. Pulling on the bow, she undressed the box, opening the chest and pulling out the chain, delicately, like a surgeon removing a heart.

“Pull back my hair,” Vika said.

I pulled back her hair and smelled her perfume. I watched her shoulders, and I looked down her shirt at her breasts. I saw a pink-lace bra. She closed the clasp on the back of her necklace and locked it into place.

“It sure shines,” Vika said, admiring the necklace.

“Just for you.”

“So,” Vika said, “you love me now?”

It was hard for me to answer her question. It was even harder for me to imagine loving anyone. And it was hard for me to imagine anyone loving me.

“I guess so,” I said.

“I love the necklace. It’s a great first present.”

“First present?”

“You want yours?”

Uncrossing her legs like a ball of string unwinding, Vika stood up and headed for my room downstairs in the basement. She looked back at me with a smile. “Well, you coming?”

I jumped out of my chair, left the dirty dishes all over the dining room and the kitchen table and ran after her. She ran ahead of me, laughing and leaping down the stairs. I tackled her onto the bed, and the gears squeaked, a noise that usually terrified me, and I felt her legs wrap around me, capturing her prey.

“Your first time?” Vika asked.

“Isn’t it yours?”

I just assumed at our age it would be her first time too. I wanted to believe it was true for the both of us. With her lips against mine, I felt her hand run down my thigh.

“Of course,” she said.

Vika flung her hair over her left shoulder with a whip of her neck. We kissed on the edge of the bed until I could no longer take just kissing. I need to possess all of her.

“You know I’m your present,” Vika said.

“Can I have it now?”

She nodded, and I reached under the pillow and pulled out the box of condoms. I undressed down to my boxers, and I pulled off her jeans and t-shirt until she was only sitting in her bra and panties.

“Like how I look?” Vika asked.

“Love it,” I said, but I was busy reading the back of the condom box, trying to figure out how to put them on right. I knew if I had a kid, then I would never get out of this freaking place.

So I took the condom out of the box, and it felt like a slick balloon. (I had no idea how using this thing could be sexy.) The direction read—1. Check the expiration date. (Who knew that condoms spoiled?) 2. Don’t keep the condom in your wallet. 3. You will find the condom rolled up, and at this point, you need to differentiate the inside from the outside. You can tell by making the condom look like a sombrero—rolled-up part on the outside—so you can roll it easily over the erect penis.

“What’s taking so long?” Vika asked.

“I want this done right.”

5. After you know which side of the condom is the inside, you need to make sure there is space at the top, and if there is a nipple at the top, make sure that isn’t full of air. (This was getting complicated.) The reservoir tip will allow semen to collect at the top, and will prevent the condom from breaking. I had enough of all these directions. I put the condom on.

“I’m not ready,” Vika said.

Without understanding what she meant, I let her adjust herself and asked, “Are you ready now?”

It took me a while until it felt right, but once it did, Vika seemed like she was in pain, or at least pretending to be. It was hard to move at first inside of her, but after a while, she seemed to enjoy it.

“Should I stop?” I asked.

“Staring to feel better.”

Her breathing grew heavier and her nipples started to swell. It was like watching a flower bloom.

“Feel good?” I asked.

“Maybe soon,” she said.

“Want me to stop?”

“No.”

“Sorry.”

“Maybe I should get on top.”

Once she was on top, sex got a lot better for the both of us. She told me to just lay there and not move, so I happily listened. And suddenly, I felt as if I was going somewhere, like a plane about to take off, and I had to just sit back and wait for the wheels to leave the ground and feel that first heaviness of being off the ground, and I didn't want Vika to stop until I got to where I was going. Then I arrived, and Vika started to giggle. I looked around the room and everything seemed different.

“You feel that too?” I asked.

“Sure.”

Vika rolled over on her side and started to dress herself. We just lay next to each other, her in her jeans, and me naked, staring at the ceiling fan, rotating, rotating, rotating.

After some time passed, we had sex again, but this time, Vika tried to teach me about the clitoris. I had heard of this area of a woman that drove them crazy on HBO late night and with my buddies, but I thought that was just an urban myth. She took my

fingers and showed me where it was, but I thought she was lying. It seemed so far away from the actually goal.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” I said.

“My mom said some men just wouldn’t get it.”

I should have known right then something was wrong.

*

A week later I went to the airfield. It had been a long time since I had been, and I was let out of work early, so I walked over before I went to Vika’s house for dinner with her mother. (I was over there quite a lot now.) And on the way to the airport, I watched a red truck drive past me, then stop, and reverse backwards towards me. Peter Corbett, Ms. Stillman’s ‘friend,’ was sitting in the front seat. His face and hands were still covered in dirt. He worked construction. Corbett Construction was pasted on the side of his truck. He had a beard, brown hair, and a red plaid shirt. He had dip in his bottom lip, and he kept spitting into a Dixie cup in his hand. He was staring at me as if he was on the top of a ladder.

“Joe right?” Peter asked.

“James. James Tully,” I said.

“That’s right,” Peter said. “That’s right.” He looked at my shoes, then my pants, and finally at my eyes. Then he looked away, as if he saw something he didn’t like.

“You live over there?” He pointed to my house and spit out the window to the left of where I was standing. A big black blob jiggled on the street.

“My father does.”

“I grew up here. Moved down the way. Closer to work now.”

I didn't know what to say. Something I noticed about construction workers was that they all knew how to greet another man, stand right next to them, and never say a single god damn word of importance. They were masters. Talk was unnecessary. And the silence seemed to be some sort of way to wheedle around what they actually wanted to say. And sure enough, once they bullied through the silence and found their opportunity, they pounced.

“You should be careful,” Peter said. “Take it from me.”

“With what?” I asked.

“The Stillmans.”

“What you trying to say?”

“Once you let yourself,” Peter said, “let yourself fall, there's no getting back up.”

“I don't know what you're getting at.”

“You will. You know about Vika's father?”

Peter spit a wad of black goo to my right side this time.

“Is that something we should talk about?” I asked.

“What Vika tell you?”

I kicked a rock off the street into the grass. I didn't want to talk to Peter anymore.

“Moved to Alaska? In prison in Paris? Believe me, Joe, I have heard them all.”

“It's James.” I kicked another rock. “It was a shark attack.”

Then Peter let out a peel of laughter that sounded like a saw slicing through a piece of wood. “Priceless. That's priceless.”

“Not funny.”

I started to walk down the road towards the airport. The pine trees were blowing in the wind. It was a great day for gliders. Peter backed up the truck, following after me.

“Hold on, Joe.”

“If you call me Joe one more time, I’m going to kick the shit out of you.”

Peter was construction worker strong, much bigger than me. I was glad he didn’t take my proposition seriously.

“I like that, James. You’ve got fight. Reminds me of me.”

“You can really laugh about her father’s death?”

“She’s lying to you.”

“Please,” I said. “Why would she lie to me?”

“Look it up.”

“No. I trust her.”

“Oh boy.” Peter spit into the Dixie Cup and dumped all the goo from the cup out the window and onto the street. “You’re in for it, kid. Stay away from her.”

“Take your own advice.”

“She’s not what you think.”

“What about her mother?” I asked.

“You still have a chance.”

Peter drove away, and I walked to the airport, unable to believe that Vika was lying to me. I watched the airplanes take off and I felt so far away from ever leaving this place.

*

I didn't say anything to Vika about Peter. It seemed like Peter just wanted to mess with me—maybe even to keep the Stillman women all for himself. So I had the idea of Vika lying to me buried deep within myself, right next to the place where I kept my fear of waking up one day in mental hospital. And I really didn't think of it again until one night, late July, when I went over to the Stillmans' house for dinner.

In the last week of my junior year in high school in Mr. Stinn's Literature class, Mr. Stinn read "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot. I didn't think much about it until Mr. Stinn started discussing the poem. He was tall and of Welch decent and had grown up outside of New York City and ended up teaching in Clinton. Everyone thought he was gay, because he talked with his hands, wore pastel shirts, and loved poetry.

"What do you think about the poem?" Mr. Stinn asked, pacing the room, looking at the students staring into their books of poetry without seeing any of the words.

I, however, kept staring at the last stanza. I knew I was going to start working soon, and the last stanza somehow reminded me of work. "This is the way the world ends./ This is the way the world ends./ This is the way the world ends./ Not with a bang but a whimper." It hurt to read that line. Why? I had no idea then, but I couldn't stop reading it.

"It's bleak," Pupecki said. "Depressing. Why the hell would I want to read a guy who hates life?"

"Great question," Mr. Stinn asked. Mr. Stinn accented each word like a percussionist hitting a bass drum. "Why would we read something that is bleak and depressing?"

“I don’t see the point,” said Caitlin who had her hair in a pony tail and chomped on gum. “It makes me sad.”

“I don’t see this as sad,” I said.

“Who said that?” Mr. Stinn asked.

I raised my hand.

“Well, well, Mr. Tully. Please inform us,” Mr. Stinn said.

The words didn’t come right away, but I felt the ocean rising and falling within myself once again. “Because there are people in life that are hollow, straw men, as meaningless as wind in dry grass. Those are the people who will end in a whimper.”

I didn’t know where my words came from, but I felt embarrassed as if (in a moment of madness) I had revealed deep secrets.

“And how is that not sad?” Mr. Stinn asked.

“Fucking weird, Tully,” Pupecki said.

“Because I’m not one of them.”

This is what I thought about when I walked into the Stillmans’ house. I felt hollow, despite what I had said in class. I was losing something that I had once possessed. And I thought of Peter and Brandon and Al the carpenter, and I just felt awful for seeing them as hollow. But what else were they?

When I walked into the house in late July, Vika and her mother were sitting on the couch, and they stopped talking when I had come inside, as if they had been talking about me.

“Sit down, James,” Ms. Stillman said.

I sat down on a chair in front of the couch. It was a small chair, and they were both higher up on the couch, as if they were the jury and I was the accused.

“Vika tells me that you want to leave home, leave New England, for college. She says you’ve been saving up. Says that you want to experience a different part of the country.”

I nodded yes. Vika was wearing the necklace I had bought her. And “love” shined when it was hit by the chandelier. In front of Ms. Stillman on the coffee table were several pamphlets.

“Why do you want to go so far away from home?” Ms. Stillman asked.

I had no idea what ‘home’ she was talking about.

“What’s wrong with here?”

It had been a week since Vika and I first had sex, and I wanted to just get done with dinner, this weird talk, and practice making love again.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s a feeling. Adventure or something.”

Ms. Stillman took the pamphlets and stacked them in front of her like she was stacking poker chips, playing with her treasure as if trying to intimidate me into folding. What she wanted me to fold, I was not so sure of.

“What about Vika?” Ms. Stillman asked.

Vika was sitting on the couch, looking around the room as if trying to pretend she wasn’t there, kicking her legs nervously underneath the coffee table.

“There are plenty of schools right here,” Ms. Stillman said. “Real good ones, too. What about Holy Cross or Clark?”

Ms. Stillman handed me the stack of pamphlets. They were brochures of local schools like Anne Maria, Worcester Hill, Fitchburg Baptist. Then there were the better schools—WPI, Holy Cross, Clark. They were all schools in a place I had known my entire life. They all had the appeal of white bread compared to a baguette with baked brie and honey. I had managed to keep a high g.p.a. and a decent list of extracurricular activities. I had a good chance of landing a major scholarship at a few respected schools far away. Florida seemed like the place for me. There would be adventure out there. I wanted to go to school for music or writing. I wasn't worried about a job. Something inside of me, the moment I saw those pamphlets, was telling me to run. But I didn't want to listen.

“There are quality schools right here next to Vika,” Ms. Stillman said. “Close to home.” The way she said home sounded like someone shutting a jail cell. “You know Vika can't get into the schools you're looking at.”

“I'm going to Ave Maria,” Vika said. “Imagine us at the same school. Wouldn't it be great?”

“I guess,” I said, turning over the pamphlet for Ave Maria. The average g.p.a. was a 2.3, well below my own. Maybe I was supposed to go there? Be with Vika? Maybe I was even supposed to marry her? We both had one more year of high school. We could be high school sweethearts. The only problem was that she went to Nashoba Regional—the rich-kid high school—and I went to Clinton the home of the Galloping Gaels.

“It would be great,” Vika said, “to go to school together.”

“James,” Ms. Stillman said, “you know I was pregnant with Vika at 17?”

I nodded no, looking at the smiling faces of the students in the brochure, and I began to wonder if Vika told her mother about us having sex.

“You have to be careful about sex. You don’t want to make the same mistake. Vika’s father is a scoundrel.”

“A real scoundrel,” Vika said.

“Hope you’re not a scoundrel,” Ms. Stillman said.

I handed the pamphlets back to Ms. Stillman, and she handed them right back.

“If you want to continue seeing my Vika,” Ms. Stillman said, “then you’ll hold onto these.”

She put the pamphlets back into my hand.

*

That night at dinner, it was Peter, Vika, Ms. Stillman, and me, sitting around a mahogany table, serving ourselves from aluminum trays filled with Caesar salad, meat lasagna, and sautéed mushrooms with onions, delivered courtesy of Turini’s Catering.

“Food’s cold,” Peter said.

“The microwave is in the kitchen,” Vika said, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t be wise,” Peter said.

“We have a guest tonight,” Ms. Stillman said, waving her hand in my direction. It looked like Ms. Stillman was holding back a smile. “A proud member of the Tully family.”

Peter hadn’t looked at me the entire dinner. If we made eye contact, even for a second, everyone would know that Peter had conspired with me. But I didn’t even want

to be in the same room as him, because, I thought, he was truly a liar. A filthy fucking liar. And we had successfully ignored each other, until now.

“James,” Peter said, “did you know I saw your mother today?”

I kept eating my lasagna, searching through the cheese to find some meat. He could have brought this up to me before, but I realized he was trying to make a spectacle out of it in front of Vika and her mother.

“Came here,” Peter said. “This house. Don’t know how she knows—”

“Stop it,” Vika said.

“I think he should hear this.” Peter took a swig from his bottle of beer. “She thought something was wrong with you.”

“So?” I asked.

“So she wouldn’t leave us alone. Kept thinking we kidnapped you or some crazy bullshit.”

“Don’t call my mother crazy,” I said.

“I didn’t.”

Ms. Stillman was swirling her ice in her glass, staring into the liquor. Vika looked at the sun coming in through the blinds.

“She wouldn’t leave,” Peter said.

“Mind your business,” I said, searching further into my lasagna. The pasta looked like blood and the pasta like skin.

“My—what fire. You should work construction. You’d be great.”

“Never be like you.” This time I took my eyes off of my food and looked him right in the eye.

“Let’s change the subject,” Vika said.

Ms. Stillman took a piece of ice from her glass and chomped on it. “Good idea.” She turned towards Vika. “How’s Robert?” It seemed that Ms. Stillman was on the verge of bursting out laughing.

“Who’s Robert?” I asked.

“Mother?” Vika said, slamming down her fork on the table.

“Robert’s just a friend I introduced to Vika.”

“He’s no one,” Vika said.

“He’s attending Worcester Polytech in the fall,” Ms. Stillman said. “Staying real close to home.”

“James, please don’t worry.” Vika put her hand on my forearm.

“Yeah, James,” Peter said. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

After we ate dinner, Peter fell asleep on the couch after his fourth bottle of beer, and Ms. Stillman served Vika and me ice cream. It felt like I was being rewarded with a treat for putting up with Peter’s bullshit. As we ate the ice cream, I felt Vika’s foot rubbing against my leg. Then I felt her hand on my thigh. Or course, Ms. Stillman couldn’t see, or didn’t want to see. Vika gave me a nod towards the back of the house.

We got up to leave, when Ms. Stillman asked us, “Where do you think you two are going?”

“For a walk,” Vika said. “Want to come?”

“I’ll clean up,” Ms. Stillman said. “Don’t be gone too long.”

When we got outside, we walked to her back yard. It was still hot even though the sun had gone down. The crickets were chirping golden music, and I asked her where

we were going, and then she pulled me against the side of the house, kissed me. I was getting excited. She pulled me deeper into the backyard, and I could see Ms. Stillman in the window, clearing the dishes.

“Who’s this Robert?” I asked.

“Condom?” Vika asked.

“No.”

“It’s okay.”

Vika laid down on the grass, pulled me down to her, and lifted up her skirt. I had never seen Vika that turned on before. She was digging her nails into my back. I pulled my jeans down, let her put me inside of her, and we fucked right there in there in the backyard, while her mother was cleaning dishes in the window. It was dark outside, and we both could see Ms. Stillman clearly, without her seeing us.

Vika started pulling me closer to her. She bit my arm to stop from screaming. She grabbed me closer to her, so I couldn’t move, and then I felt all the tension in her body release, leaving her panting for breath. All this happened while her mother was scrubbing the dishes.

I drove home that night, trying to fight falling asleep at the wheel. It might have been easier to just let sleep take over. I kept thinking of that poem. This is the way the world ends.

*

A week went by since dinner and I hadn't heard anything from Vika. It was August. Ms. Stillman would answer the door or the phone when I called, always saying Vika was out, and I couldn't help but seeing a smile on her face.

At the time, I was working harder than ever. More hours, including weekends. I kept looking at my bank account, judging myself by the numbers. I started to worry that I hadn't heard from Vika, so I began to think of what I could purchase and leave a present on her doorstep.

Someone had told me about this company where you could build customized stuffed animals. Sure it was lame, but I just wanted to have some alone time with Vika again. Any means necessary. I missed her laugh, the way she crossed her legs. There were so many secrets I wanted to unlock in her body. So I built this stuffed animal, a bear, on my own (there wasn't a store anywhere near Sterling), so I bought the fabric, the stuffing, and the needles and worked on the bear every day after work. The bear was pretty pathetic. The whole face was so disproportionate it looked like Miro had tried building a god damn stuffed animal. But I thought all that mattered was the thought. Boy was I wrong.

I dropped off the bear on her stoop, and I waited to hear back from her. That night I kept imagining Vika with another man. I kept visualizing this guy, Robert, Ms. Stillman brought up at dinner. I imagined him possessing all the physical and mental attributes that I didn't. Robert was taller, bigger in all the ways women liked men to be, and better looking—even freaking better bone structure. And at one point during the

night, I found it ridiculous that bone structure or size had any bearing on love. But that thought quickly went away, and I began again to compare myself to an invisible man.

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I finally heard from Vika two days after I dropped off the bear. The bear did its job. She wanted to meet. So after work, I picked up Vika at her house in my '95 Subaru Legacy Wagon—five-speed stick shift—to take her for ice cream at Rota Springs. The ice cream there was home made, and we only had an hour before Ms. Stillman wanted Vika home. If I didn't make it back in time, Vika wouldn't be let out at all next week, including the weekend.

On the road, I kept wondering if Vika had been hanging out with another man. All that money I had spent on her. I kept thinking about Brandon wanting to kill himself, the scratches on his arm, the reject animals and the screaming emu, the pigs with tumors growing on their backs. And before I knew it, we were at the ice cream shop and the entire car ride went by without Vika and me talking to each other.

All the cows that supplied the milk for the ice cream were behind a barbed wire fence. There was a white barn—the farmer's house—on top of the hill. The ice cream was fresh, and I felt bad for the cows, living their lives for our enjoyment, but I just loved ice cream. What could I do? I put that all out of my mind and ordered butter crunch in a cone, and Vika ordered a black raspberry in a cone with jimmies. Vika kind of kissed the ice cream as she ate.

“Why aren't you talking?” Vika asked, wiping ice cream off my chin.

“Work's on my mind,” I said.

“Summer will be over soon.”

“Going to work fall season. Need the money.” I licked around the place where ice cream and the cone met. “Saving for college.”

We sat down on a picnic bench overlooking the cows. It smelled like manure and mulch, so I slid in closer to Vika so I could smell her perfume which smelled like jasmines.

“Saving a lot of money?” Vika asked. She was licking the ice cream that had run down the cone. Her lips were covered in black raspberry.

“Not as much as I wanted to,” I said. “But it all depends...”

“On?”

I bit into my cone and threw the rest of the ice cream cone into the trash can. I didn't feel much like ice cream anymore at that point. I kept thinking about Brandon cutting himself. How could he actually take a razor and put it into his skin. The pigs, the emu, the maze. Madness, it was all a bunch of madness, everyone pretending to be who they weren't. Who was Vika? That's what I wanted to know. Who was she really?

“You still thinking about leaving for school?” Vika asked. “You remember what my mom said, right?”

“I remember.”

“She only wants the best for me.”

“Well,” I said, “who wants the best for me?”

At that point, I felt like a decision about love came down to whether one person cared more about the other person than he did about his own life. And I hated to think about it, but I did care a hell of a lot about myself. But watching Vika lick that cone, her

lips covered with black raspberry ice cream, her legs sticking out of her jean skirt, I just wanted to go crazy.

“There’s another boy,” Vika said. “He’s studying at WPI. Going to have a good job.”

“Time to go,” I said.

I had about ten minutes to get Vika home before her mother basically put me in exile. I shifted gears and left my hand on the stick shift, hoping Vika would put her hand on mine. If I couldn’t see Vika, then there was no way I could steal her back from this boy Robert. We were passing into Sterling now, when the roads opened up to a higher speed, because there was nothing really around. But there was this god damn dump truck in front of me, going incredibly slow. I knew that soon the road would allow me to pass. But I was right on the truck’s ass, trying to find the right moment to slip by. I had to get Vika home on time. I might not even see her again if I didn’t. The other boy would swoop in and steal her away for good. I couldn’t let that happen.

“Why don’t you forget about going to school,” Vika said. “I really like you around.”

“It’s hard to know these things.”

“*He’s* going to be here a while.”

I said, “I heard you the first time.”

All I wanted was to get past the freaking dump truck. It was going so god damn slow, and rocks were coming out of the top and hitting my windshield. But there was nowhere to pass yet.

“This boy—”

Vika said, "He's just a friend."

I didn't want to give up leaving Clinton, but I didn't want to lose Vika to another man either.

"Don't bullshit me," I said.

"You should stay here."

"What really happened to your father?"

"What do you mean?"

"Peter said you were lying to me."

"I told you what happened to him already." She looked out the window. Trees were zooming by. "He was killed in a plane crash."

"You said he was eaten by a shark."

"Okay," Vika said. "I lied. He's in jail. You happy? Thirty years. He created a Ponzi scheme. Stole a bunch of hard working people's money, and now we are in this hell-hole of a town."

We had finally reached the passing zone, and I peeked around the dump truck and gazed into oncoming traffic. There was some space, but not much. The time was now. I down shifted into fourth gear, and I swung the car into the passing lane. I passed the truck with ease. I could hear the engine gasping for breath. The wind was blowing through the open window and Vika's hair was being scattered around the car. And after I could see the dump truck in my side mirror, I didn't pull back into the lane. It was dusk and the cars on the other side of the road had their headlights on, and something about those lights pulled me in, and I didn't get back over to my lane.

"Get over," Vika said.

I watched this all take place from another vantage point. I was hypnotized by the yellow lights. This is the way the world ends. I didn't want to get back over. I didn't want to go back to work. I didn't want to ever see Brandon or the emu or the pig ever again. I didn't want to be them anymore. I didn't want to be hollow. I wanted to feel something, even if it was pain. I was a ringing bell, all the sound reverberating away from me.

“Pull over!” Vika said.

The truck coming from the other direction, barreling towards us at 60 m.p.h, laid on its horn. I stared into the lights. All that noise. And at the last second, I jerked the wheel and hit the brake—the car coming to a rest in the breakdown lane. A burst of wind, then the dump truck zoomed by us.

Vika was crying and slapping me in the shoulder. “Are you trying to kill us?” she yelled. “Are you sick?”

And suddenly, I looked over and saw Vika's brown hair turn to wire, her lips bleed dry and turn pale, and her face wrinkle like a piece of paper burning in a flame. I saw the ugliness that would consume her. I knew, then, somewhere out there was a greater love.

Chapter X. The Castle on the Hill

My senior year of high school, Mr. Crawley, my A.P. psychology teacher, brought our class on a field trip to visit and study the closed-down mental hospital called Mass State Insane Asylum. We had studied the place in class, and it was disgusting the way they had treated mental patients—placing patients in chains, hydrotherapy, the glowing machines of electric shock therapy, medicine that tunneled through their minds. It was all nuts to me. Mr. Crawley wanted the class to understand the dramatic changes and fads in the mental health practices in the last two hundred and fifty years and the conditions the patients each endured. Somehow, Mr. Crawley told the class, this would bring light to today's mental health climate. But, boy, that sure seemed like bullshit to me.

I didn't want to be there, for obvious reasons, and I sat in the middle of the bus, staring at the seat in front of me that looked like the skin of a rhinoceros. My visions were getting more intense, and I was terrified they would come out today, in front of the entire class, especially since I had such a connection to mental hospitals. I didn't want to go, but I couldn't get out of it. Mr. Crawley wanted to know why I couldn't go, but I didn't want to tell him about my mother. I was close with him, but not that close. And I really didn't think I would tell anyone about my mother again since what happened with Vika. Secrets were a commodity. I even thought about just hanging out in the woods, but I didn't want to run into Cal. He hardly went to school anymore, and I just had this feeling he'd be waiting for me on the tracks. I thought about pretending to be sick, but that would mean I would have to be home with my mother.

I could hear laughter and other students yelling. Someone was hurling rolled up pieces of paper at the “nerds” in the front of the bus. I sat in the middle. I wasn’t a nerd or a cool kid. I didn’t want to belong to any of those stupid groups. I heard Mr. Crawley yelling, but it all seemed to be happening away from me, far away, as if from another planet, even though we were all contained neatly in this god damn freaking yellow school bus. Jesus, I hated riding on the bus.

We were driving East on Route 2, what was once the Mohawk Trail. It was fall and the trees were on fire with warm colors—reds, yellows, oranges, and the infinite frequencies in between the solid colors, like the harmonic spaces in between the frets on a guitar or the keys of a piano, places you need to bend to reach. I loved those places.

Mr. Crawley was talking about how the Indians used to trek on this path to meet other tribes and hunt. That’s when the visions started. All in front of me as if it was the most natural thing in the world, Indians were walking with their families, Mohawks, tomahawks, hair dresses, shamans—a lost and ancient world. The medicine man was begging and pleading of me from the side of the road, dancing and dancing, imploring me to understand something with the rhythm of his body, an archaic language that could transcend time.

“What do you want me to understand?” I asked towards the window.

“You say something?” Peto asked, his chin hanging over the bus seat. He was a friend of mine. One of the few. A strange kid. He didn’t belong in Clinton either. He was just here by some cosmic mistake. We both talked about it often. How we wanted to get the fuck out of Clinton. But I still didn’t want him to know.

“Nothing,” I said.

Then Peto sat back down. I would have to be more careful. Sometimes I found myself talking out loud. That would be a dead giveaway that madness runs through my blood.

I could smell the cigarette smoke coming from the bus driver. At least she had the window down. She always smoked. Her name was Agnes. Agnes had been driving this same bus for twenty years. She smoked every day, and she made it clear to Mr. Crawley, when he got on the bus this morning, that she was sure as hell not going to change her habits for no big-shot teacher. And when I got on the bus that morning, listening to Agnes tell Mr. Crawley how things were going to be, I had noticed there were leaves underneath my seat—Agnes must have left the window open the night before. Now I was rotating one of those leaves by the stem, looking at the veins, infinitely small, and the sections of tissue, of skin, and I couldn't help but see the similarity to my body, the destiny of my flesh. That's when Kat Sullivan sat down next to me.

“You're quiet,” Kat said.

“Nothing to talk about,” I said.

I didn't want her to know I was struggling with the idea of visiting a mental hospital. I didn't want her to know that I'd been in one before. I didn't want her to know that I feared it was my destiny to end up in a hospital too, unable to control my mind, my logic, my body. That I could not be strong enough to survive.

“Smoke?” Kat asked.

“You crazy?”

“No pun intended?”

Kat reached into her leather jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. They were 100's. She made me nervous and excited. That ocean was beginning to rage inside of me again. I couldn't think of anything to say. I just kept looking at her bomber jacket, the white stuffing on the top. Then I snuck a glance at her dark jeans wrapped tightly around her thighs.

"Crawley will smell it," I said.

"Not while Agnes the terrible is smoking."

Lighting the cigarette, Kat took a deep inhale with her large and soft lips. She wore a bright red lipstick. I could see the cracks in her lips like the veins running along the leaf.

Kat rolled down the window, reaching over me, her breast resting gently on my shoulders. She blew the smoke out the window. From outside came a smell of leaves burning. The air was getting colder this time of the year, and it meant the days were getting shorter, shorter, shorter, until it felt that night was an inescapable prison.

"What you think about all this?" Kat exhaled smoke towards the window.

"You're going to get in trouble," I said.

"I don't care about trouble. I mean what do you think about the crazies? Must be ghosts there, right?" The red tip of the cigarette glowed. "All those insane people living in one place. You can't get rid of something like that. It must stay with you forever."

This was good, I thought. She had no idea about me. Didn't know my story. And it made talking to her today somewhat easier. I hated when people knew. So I looked out the window. The bus was getting off Route 2 and heading into a densely

wooded area. The leaves were falling from every tree. Each one dying right in front of us. No one seemed to notice.

“I bet you,” Kat said, “that place is so creepy. I’m going to sneak off and explore.” She blew smoke out the window, and this time I felt her black hair on my shoulder. It smelled like spring. “Come with me?”

“We’ll get in trouble.”

“Oh,” she said. “You worry too much about trouble. Trouble this. Trouble that. What you so scared of?”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“Do you know,” Kat asked, “Vika Stillman?”

“Why?”

“She’s a friend of mine. Says you’re an interesting guy. Says you’ve got a lot of plans.”

Maybe Kat did know something about me after all. That’s when I noticed Mr. Crawley walking down the aisle of the bus, his hands resting on the top of each seat. He was a cool teacher, liked to really make you think, but he would never have tolerated a student smoking on the bus.

“Who is smoking?” Mr. Crawley asked, his voice ending all talk in the bus. All that could be heard was the tires going over the asphalt, the wind coming in from the open windows, and the bus gears shifting and chugging. The smoke would soon give Kat away. And I didn’t know why at the time, but I grabbed the cigarette and held it between my fingers. The smell made me want to puke. I put the cigarette in my mouth, and I raised my hand. A smile went across Kat’s face, and I felt her hand on my knee.

“Who is smoking?” Mr. Crawley asked again.

I raised my hand.

“My. Tully?” Mr. Crawley stood in front of me now. “I would have never expected this from you. What do you have to say for yourself?”

I looked at Kat, and she smiled. All the students were watching me. I felt on a stage. “Want a drag?”

Everyone on the bus broke off a peel of laughter.

Mr. Crawley grabbed the cigarette and threw it out the window. “This isn’t like you, Mr. Tully. I’ll be watching you.”

For some reason, either the laughter from the bus or Kat putting her hand on my knee, I wanted to be on my absolute worst behavior for the rest of the trip

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Mr. Crawley made me sit next to him in the front of the bus. He wanted to keep an eye on me. Kept asking me if I was feeling all right. And I kept telling him that nothing was bothering me. That I was fine. But he kept telling me that he knew something was wrong, and if I ever needed someone to talk to, I could talk to him. Fuck that bullshit, I thought. I’ve heard all that bullshit before. From family therapists, coaches, parents. They were all a part of this machine trying to swallow me whole, make me like them, tell me what I was feeling was just normal and a part of growing up. Yeah, what the hell is not a part of growing up? Well, I couldn’t help wonder who the hell Mr. Crawley thought he was, Jesus Christ?

The bust took a sharp and sudden turn, and I could feel gravel crunching underneath the bus tires. We were climbing up a steep hill, oak and maple trees surrounded the road, every once in a while a birch tree for contrast. The bus approached a black gate, and a security guard, dressed in a green uniform, walked up to the bus. The bus driver opened the door, and it closed in on itself like an accordion.

When the security guard walked into the bus, I noticed he had a gun in a holster. Why the hell would he have a gun was beyond me at the time. So I listened to what Mr. Crawley and the guard talked about.

“Jimmy,” the security guard said. “Long time.”

Mr. Crawley hugged the security guard. “Frank. Always a pleasure.”

So they knew each other. I listened to their conversation, and I heard them talking about high school. They must have went to high school together. Maybe grew up together. I didn’t care. But the next part of their conversation really piqued my curiosity.

“Nobody leaves the group,” the guard said. “It’s so easy to get lost. We close down at three.”

“I’ll watch them carefully,” Mr. Crawley said.

“I’m with you the entire time.”

“That’s fine, but I think we’ll be safe.”

“It’s not safe. Homeless people break in all the time. Leave their little *parties* all over the place. And be careful, anyone gets lost in the tunnels they might be gone for days. Then it’s my ass.”

“Don’t worry about my kids,” Mr. Crawley said. “They’re real good.” Then he looked at me. “I’ll keep an eye on everyone.”

From studying about the hospital, I knew there was a series of tunnels that connected each ward. Used for transporting patients and so the doctors could move from ward to ward and didn't have to be in the snow. Most of the other students in the class didn't do the reading, but I always did. Mass State seemed like a prison.

The security guard stayed on the bus, and Mr. Crawley and him caught up on *old times*. We drove up a hill, the road curving through the trees, and it was impossible to tell where the road was heading. And then the woods started to clear, fewer and fewer trees, until we left the woods like coming out of a cave. The first thing I noticed was an old cemetery with pathetic looking gravestones, a cemetery that seemed as old as the Revolutionary War.

"There she blows," Mr. Crawley said. "Mass State Insane Asylum. Opened in 1843 and closed six years ago in 1992 due to, allegedly, budget cuts, changing medical practices, and lawsuits claiming massive abuse."

All the other kids were hanging out of the windows, looking at the monolithic brick structure, spires stretching to the sky—a castle standing on a hill like a great bird of prey. A nightmare, really.

"The hospital is set on 180 acres of land. A real estate developer's dream."

I didn't even want to look at the hospital, but what struck me was the size, and the sense that this was a city, a medieval town, not a hospital.

"This is where the crazies lived?" Peto asked.

"That's exactly the type of attitude I'm trying to correct," Mr. Crawley said.

"I'm joking," Peto said.

The bus came to a stop at the main entrance of the hospital. Graffiti covered the brick walls near the ground. Neon reds, greens, and blue, indecipherable words, my generation's cave paintings.

“Remember,” Mr. Crawley said, standing up now, “actual people lived here. People who were told they were sick. People that you might even know. People much like you.”

The bus stopped and we filed out of the bus and in the entrance of Mass State Insane Asylum.

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“Opened in 1843, Mass State Insane Asylum was the crowning achievement in the field of the clinically insane,” Mr. Crawley said. “Quickly the hospital gave way to overcrowding, neglect of patients, and eventually closed in 1992 due to budget cuts, deinstitutionalization, advances in medication, and wide spread reports of abuse.”

While Mr. Crawley lectured, repeating himself, all twenty of us were standing in the main entrance of the hospital. We peered around the room. The wallpaper was peeling off the walls as if time had licked it. Peto walked around the room, gazing down hallways. The security guard was standing around us, making sure none of us took off in flight. There was a large staircase towards the back of the main entrance, and some steps were gone like a mouth missing teeth. There was white trimming in floral patterns running along the sides of the stairs. Peto started to walk up the stairs when Mr. Crawley and the security guard yelled at him, momentarily stopping his conversation.

Mr. Crawley picked up the conversation again: “The hospital was designed in a style called Kirkbride architecture, a revolutionary idea that patients need a rural setting, a connection to nature...” Mr. Crawley walked around the class, trying to find someone who wasn’t paying attention. He used awkward silence to keep our focus. But I was just looking around the entrance, staring up into the dome ceiling, listening to the sounds of feet, which I was positive only I could hear, shuffling upstairs. Though if the other students actually listened, they could hear it, too.

“Mr. Tully,” he said, catching me staring off. “The hospital extends from this main entrance here in two wings, stretching two hundred yards to the east and west.” Mr. Crawley looked at me as if he thought I had an answer for him. “Know why?”

I knew why. I did the reading, but I didn’t fucking know why was he riding me. So I just shook my head no.

“The opposite ends of each wing, the farthest back you can on the ground level of the complex, were used for the patients considered to be the most violent and deranged. So as the patients recovered, the idea was that they would be moved through the wards, eventually to leave the hospital through the main entrance. To be sent back into the world.”

Mr. Crawley turned towards the west wing. The security guard opened a metal door with wire covering a small window. The door opened to a hallway with a metal divider. On the right side was a sign for patients. On the left was a sign for staff and doctors. Instinctively, the other students walked along the side for the doctors. I walked along the side for the patients, watching my class through the spaces in between the

linked steel. The security guard tapped on the gate, letting me know that he was watching me.

“Patients used to be committed for behavioral issues, which, today, would be considered eccentricity or even developmental challenges.”

I walked through the gate, when I noticed Kat walk around behind me. I turned around and she smiled. None of the students were talking, and the silence made the hospital feel like we were walking through a church.

Mr. Crawley opened the door at the end of the hallway into the first patient ward. “Soon after the hospital opened, the rooms became overcrowded with beds. Men and women, often naked and emaciated, sat on their beds waiting to be seen by the doctors and nurses. Each day, a doctor had to see over two hundred patients. An impossible task.”

The room was empty except for the stains left from the area where beds and furniture used to be. From the ceiling, water was dripping into a puddle on the red cement floor. I looked into the puddle and saw my face. Then Kat’s too. She was so close to me. I could smell her. I wanted to get her alone.

“Patients were committed for diseases like Monomania with pride—a pauper or someone with lower-class status possessing the ideas of wealth and grandeur. Funny how dreaming of moving up in class status was an illness.” Mr. Crawley smiled at his buddy the security guard. “Religious Monomania—a person who conceives herself to be immortal.” Mr. Crawley cleared his throat and said, “Not sure how that is different than church on Sunday. Then there was Depression Monomania—a disease found especially in females, defined by grief over the loss of a loved one.”

Kat stood next to me, and she whispered, “Let’s sneak off.”

The whole class walked into the next ward through another steel cage. Through the doors was the kitchen. Steel tubs like hollow timpani surrounded an open grill with a vent overhead, so large the oven could have cooked for an entire army. The class walked into the next ward, through another steel gate, and the walls of that ward were covered in graffiti. The windows were broken, spider webs hung in between panes of broken glass, and the hardwood floor looked like it had been stripped away by rototillers. That’s when I grabbed Kat by her hand and pulled her into an open doorway. We walked down the stairs, stood in the dark stairwell, and listened to the voices of the class fade away. I could feel Kat’s hand clutching mine, her breath on my neck, and I didn’t want to move away.

Kat started to move, and I heard a spark and saw the flame from her red lighter. I saw her face, her lips.

“See a light switch?” She moved the flame around the stairwell until she found a switch. Hanging above the light switch was a flashlight that had a harness that went over the forehead. She flipped on the light switch, but no lights turned on.

I picked up the head lamp and put it on Kat’s head. It looked like a crown of thorns. I took the red lighter from her. “You take the light. I’ll take the lighter.” I believed that if we got lost, then she would be the one who had the best lamp.

“My hero,” Kat said, and she kissed me quickly.

I wanted to grab her right there.

“You ready?” I asked.

“For what?”

“You wanted to explore.” I tilted her head so the light pointed further down the hallway, and it looked like we were staring into a bottomless well, the space where light and shadow met looked like a black ocean. “There’s a bunch of tunnels that connect the entire hospital.”

“What about trouble?”

“I like it,” I said, “since I’ve been talking to you.”

We walked down the stairs, the light bouncing off the walls, revealing muted graffiti. The walls were sometimes brick. Sometimes cement. I could hear water dripping from a pipe.

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“You’re really not scared?” Kat asked.

The tunnel was descending, and on our right were steel cages that ran through the hallway. The aisles were musky. Kat ran the flashlight along the wall, and we saw words, written in candle smoke and spray paint. I couldn’t make out their meanings, but they looked sometimes like they could be names, other times messages from the dead.

“Maybe a little.”

“I can tell you are,” Kat said. “See it in your face. I’m not scared though. Nothing scares me.”

“Everyone has their fears.”

“Everything is an adventure, James.” Kat reached into her pocket and pulled out her box of cigarettes. Because the light was on her head, every time she looked at me I was blinded. “Want to smoke?”

This time it wasn't a cigarette. She lit the joint, and I smelled the sweetness. I didn't like to smoke. I got paranoid. "You brought weed on a field trip?"

"How many people can say they smoked in the tunnels of an insane asylum?" She took a drag and moved her light to the side so it didn't blind me. "You're not scared, are you?"

I took the joint and drew on it defiantly. I prayed that I wouldn't cough as I watched the smoke illuminated by the flashlight.

I asked, "You think they're looking for us yet?"

"Crawley and that security guard are probably flipping a shit."

We both laughed.

"So what's your deal today?" Kat asked. "You're acting strange."

"I hate hospitals," I said.

"It's just an old building."

"Not to me."

Kat sat down against the wall, and I sat against the wall opposite her. The wall was jagged and cold. But I didn't mind because Kat's legs were close to mine.

"Vika told me a lot about you," Kat said.

"Give me a cigarette."

"She says you've got a lot of pain. Says you're trouble." She reached up and put her hands on my temples. Then she kissed my forehead. "Tell me something she never knew about you."

Hanging me a cigarette, I opened the flame on the red lighter. I puffed and prayed, again, not to cough. "Why?" I asked.

“Because if I know you better, something about you, I’ll be willing to give you a longer kiss.”

“You can give me one anyway.”

“Tell me why you’re acting so strange.”

I looked around at the tunnel, darkness thick on both sides. “Besides being here?”

She nodded yes and put her hand on my knee. “Tell me what you’re so scared of?”

“Fine,” I said. I held the cigarette and watched the paper burn. “I’ll tell you why I usually hate cigarettes.”

“No risk there.”

“Wait,” I said. “When my mother was institutionalized in a hospital, smaller than this, the doctors wouldn’t allow my mother outside often. In fact, they didn’t allow many patients outside. So my mother noticed that people were allowed outside if they were smokers. So she started smoking. And when I see cigarettes, I think of my mother watching them, as if watching a clock, hoping the fire would never burn out.”

Taking the cigarette out of my hand, Kat extinguished it on the wall. Then she leaned in towards me, as if sharing the secret was an aphrodisiac, and she kissed me with those big lips, her tongue slipping against mine, and I felt her hand rubbing my chest.

“Tell me your secret,” I said.

She stopped touching. “If you can catch me?”

Then Kat bolted, running down the sinuous avenue, the light fading down the tunnel like watching headlights drive away on an empty street. I ran after her, not

wanting to be alone in the dark, not wanting to be away from her. We were heading into a part of the tunnels where no words were written on the walls.

Kat stopped around the next turn, and she was staring at the ceiling. There was a grate, and a ray of muted light was coming into the tunnel. We walked in and out of the light—that commodity—and suddenly Kat ran down another random path. There were more and more paths now, and we ran down each, chasing after the other, without any care for direction, without any fear, running through the darkness without any idea of where to stop; we ran for the pleasure of it, for running together.

Trying to catch her breath, Kat stopped in front of me, allowing me to be nearer to her. That's when I noticed the flashlight was fading. But I didn't want to make a big deal out of it and scare Kat. So I grabbed her hand and pulled her into an opening in the wall.

"I told you already," she said, "there's nothing to be scared of."

She turned behind her. There was a metal cage. On the wall in the cage were newspaper clippings taped to the wall and some black and white photographs. There was an empty chair with restraints on the arms. And that's when I heard the first scream.

"Know where we are?" Kat asked.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?"

"I think we missed a turn."

"Oh no," Kat said. "We're lost."

"So you didn't hear that scream," I said.

"You didn't leave a trail?"

I walked over to the wall and sat down. The light started to flicker. “Shit,” I said. Then the light went out.

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We sat in the dark, listening to the water plunking into a puddle, slowly; with each drop, the water dripped in time and became, dramatically, stalactites and stalagmites. The puddle became a subterranean lake, which stretched into darkness.

“I had no fucking idea,” Kat said. “How did we get so lost?”

“I’ll get us out of here,” I said like some cartoon adventurer. “Maybe we are closer to the end wings?”

“Closer to where they keep the violent patients?”

“Where they kept,” I said. “We’ll be fine.”

The light flickered back on, illuminating a puddle and the shadow of a man far down at the end of the hallway.

“Shit,” I said.

“What’s wrong?”

“You see something?”

“No!” Kat said. “Did you?”

Kat was holding onto me now. Fear, as well as secrets, seemed to be an aphrodisiac. That’s when I heard the next scream, a lightning bolt in the darkness.

“Oh man,” I said.

“What now?”

The light flickered off. I couldn't quite tell the gender of the scream. It reverberated as if the walls were made of ringing bells.

"You didn't hear?" I asked.

"Hear what?" Kat asked.

"The scream."

"Don't fuck with me right now."

"Nothing to be scared of."

"Now you say that."

The flashlight flickered on again, finding some life. And again, I saw the shadow, closer now, maybe fifteen feet away, and with each flicker of the light, the shadow was closer, like someone walking through a strobe light.

"When I say go," I said, "get ready to run."

I felt her hand tighten. "You see something?"

"Ready?"

Then Kat took off running down the hallway, away from the shadow, the light flickering on her head as she ran. I ran after her, trying to follow her voice, until I found myself completely in the dark, alone, without the sound of her voice. I still had the lighter, and I wished that she had it now with the head lamp going out. I ignited the flame and tried to find my surroundings. The screamer could be anywhere now.

That's when the visions started. A light appeared behind me. A white light so bright I felt pulled towards it like a magnet. I turned a corner and approached a room. A doctor walked into the room. A patient was sitting on a bed. I saw the doctor making motions for his patient to stick their fingers down their throat, inducing vomit.

“Keeping the bowels, James,” the doctor said, “in free action is indispensable in all cases of insanity. In melancholia, vomiting is decidedly more useful than in mania.”

The doctor was talking to me. I kept telling myself that this couldn't be real. That it was just another vision. But it felt real.

“The madness is in the patient's blood.” The doctor said. “Removing the blood will help fix them. You start by abstracting blood by puncturing in frontal, nasal, or orbicular veins, or in the venae raninae under the tongue.” Then the doctor laughed. “Bleeding from the feet or ankles is my favorite method.”

Behind the doctor, the patient was bleeding from his ankles, his nose, and the space under his tongue with a look of terror so profound he had become an animal, the doctor a great large bird waiting to peck out his kidney.

Then the vision vanished like a movie projector shutting down. I clicked the lighter back on. Water dripped from black pipes. I heard Kat scream. I moved down the hallway, using my hands to guide along the walls, trying to head towards the sound of her voice. “Kat!” I said. “Can you hear me?”

“James!”

Her voice sounded different. I saw the light again pronouncing another vision, that magnetic white noise, coming from around a corner.

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The vision took over the hallway, and it was illuminated by that strange white light. Then I saw a tub in the middle of the room, and three orderlies dragged a boy, kicking and screaming. The boy was about my age.

“As you can see, James,” the doctor said. “The boy is being dunked into the water. Each time he is held under twenty seconds, trying to shock his madness into submission.”

Each time the boy came out of the water, he was too out of breath to scream. Though he tried. Boy did he try. Until he was dunked in the water again.

A patient in a hospital gown was wheeled on a gurney into the room. The tubs disappeared but the room stayed. There was something in the back of the room, hidden in the shadows. The doctor walked over to the patient. He had a needle now in his hand and pressed down on the plunger: “Patient is being given thiopental, a temporary anesthetic.”

The doctor stuck the patient with the needle. He pushed down on the plunger. The doctor placed electrodes on the patients’ head. The power was turned on and the patient was sent into a seizure, the pain threshold measured by age and sex. The electrodes stopped sending pulses, and the patient came to a rest like a potato at the end of a microwave cycle. From the patient’s head were wires, glowing like nerve endings in the temporal lobe. The light grew and followed the wires, revealing that the wires were connected to a large black machine, throbbing like a heart. Men in gowns were recording numbers on paper from the dials on the machine. It was a perfect machine—quiet, still, but imposing.

I was frozen, in awe, really, of the machine, glowing neon, and it struck fear into me so intense I thought the blood running through my veins would just stop. I couldn’t quite make out all the parts of the machine—it seemed infinitely complex—all the electrical work, the gauges, the high definition computer screens. It was obvious that the

machine could exist without the assistance of a human, but it could not work without the poor, poor patient to provide nourishment. The machine had been feeding.

Another scream. The light in the room disappeared. The sound of the scream was close now. I turned around the corner, when I saw the shadow again. This time, I didn't move, and I clicked on the lighter and waited for the shadow to step into the light. I wouldn't run away again. I wanted to define the shape—the thing that terrified me. Then the shadow walked into the light, and standing before me was the geometry of innocent bones, a sun bleached skeleton, a jaw dropping and opening, dropping and opening as if controlled by a ventriloquist. Then the scream. All I could hear was the scream, pounding on my ears like bass drums. The scream. The scream. The scream.

“James!”

I could hear Kat now. Nothing was before me anymore. My body was still together. I was still breathing. Kat sounded near. “Keep calling my name,” I said.

“Are you close?” Kat asked. “Tell me you're close.”

“Keep talking.”

“I'm so scared James.”

“I'm about there.”

I turned around a bend in the tunnel, and I could hear Kat's voice.

“James,” Kat said, “I'm over here.”

I clicked on the lighter, and I saw Kat crouching in the corner, her leather jacket draped over her shoulders.

“I'm scared James. I'm not so tough. Don't tell anyone. Please don't tell anyone. Just get me out of here.”

I grabbed her hand, and we walked together down the hallway.

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It seemed like we had walked a couple miles when I saw the light again, glowing like headlights approaching from the opposite side of a desolate road. I thought it was another vision. I didn't think I could take another one. But when we got to the light, it suddenly opened to blue sky and the reds, yellow—the colors of autumn. Leaves were falling from trees onto the green grass, resting like splashes of paint. I was holding Kat's hand. She was holding mine, too. There was a steel gate that had been broken open. We walked out through the gate.

In front of us was the cemetery, and the hospital was behind us. It was where the patients were buried. Instead of names, the tombstones had numbers on a cross. And on the hill, overlooking the tombstones, I saw the same medicine man on Route 2, and he was dancing, holding incense in his hand, his body moving to music that he could only hear. He was singing a song over that music, standing next to a tree that was on fire with the autumn foliage. But the tree, actually, looked like it was engulfed in flames. His voice sounded deep and rough. The branches were crackling and falling to the ground. Kat wasn't looking at the Indian or the tree. She was just staring into the tombstones. She couldn't see the Indian or the tree. If only she would open her eyes.

Once again, the vision was gone, and I looked at all the trees and focused solely on the red leaves. I reached down and picked one of the red leaves off the ground. Holes were torn through them and they looked like they had been partially devoured. Now I understood what I was supposed to see. A red so dark that I knew that our country, our land, has been stained by a blood so deep it runs through our roots

underneath trees, the tissue in leaves , our skin, our veins. That our visionaries, our prophets, have been buried under logic. But maybe visions, madness, mental illness was a gift.

Behind us, Mr. Crawley and the other students were running towards us, screaming our names, asking us if we were all right. But I paid them no attention.

“What are you looking at?” Kat asked, still holding on to me.

“It’s just a crazy world.”

Chapter XI. **Thirteen Ways to Say Goodbye to Home**

1.

My sky-blue Subaru station-wagon was packed with my clothes, books, a guitar, some photographs, and my baseball glove from high school. I had my varsity baseball uniform in the car, too, which I needed to drop off at my coach's house. It was finally here.

Tomorrow morning I would actual leave Clinton. I was heading to Florida, driving down the east coast, to attend Carver University. I'd finally figured my way out—scholarship, grants, financial aid, plus a little help from my family. I couldn't believe I was about to start a real adventure, and I wanted to say goodbye to some people and places before I left.

I drove down high street, looked at all the stores selling useless junk, the Simple Man Saloon, the brick apartment buildings that were once factories, and the NYPRO plastic factory at the end of the street. I've been driven down these roads so many times by other people, and now I had the control of the car, of directions, for what felt like the first time in my life. I took my car up School Street, passed St. John's Church, and drove behind the plastic factory that stretched about three hundred yards to Apple Country Market and the Clinton Savings Bank. I was heading to the paths behind Beacon Hill that went to the reservoir.

I parked next to the park on Beacon Hill and walked up to the water tower and to the path behind my buddy Ben Stice's house. It was a hot August day, and I was sweating. Mosquitoes flew onto my arm, and I tried to swat them away. This was where

I used to run for cross country. I would come to the path that wound through trees and opened up to the reservoir. The sun was bright and sparkled on the water. I walked to the edge of the path where the barbed wire protected the drinking water. It was a shame, all that water, and no one could ever touch it. I sat there for a while, thinking about what this town would be like if they opened the water up for tourism. People would come from all over just to ride a pontoon boat and drink beer. But I was glad there was a piece of land untouched, all that water, that appearance of safety, protection, and I said goodbye to all that.

2.

My varsity baseball uniform was in my car. Coach wanted it back before I left for college. It was a nice uniform. Green and gold, yellow embroidery around the number 68. There was even a Gael patch on the shoulder. The uniform was on the floor in the front seat of my car next to a few water bottles and the dirt from my friends' shoes.

My car was parked right outside Coach's house on Elm Street. I was standing on his doorstep ringing his doorbell. He lived in a gray Victorian with a large garden. Didn't know how a baseball coach had such a nice house.

This past spring, I wanted to play baseball so badly, but this son of a bitch wouldn't play me, let alone start me. I played one freaking inning against Assabet Regional, the vocational school, who we were beating by twenty god damn points. I had a canon for an arm. I struggled in junior varsity, but I was getting back into the baseball shape I used to be. I just needed plate appearances. I know this might sound like a kid

with a grudge, but I wanted to play ball more than anyone else, and I deserved it. The Tullys were a baseball family.

So when coach opened the door, he extended his hand. I threw the uniform at his feet, told him it was a pleasure riding his bench, and said goodbye to that sad old man who felt like the king of the town because he was a small-town baseball coach who won one freaking lousy state championship.

3.

My car was packed with shit for college. And as I was sitting in the wagon, staring at my old blue house on Walden Terrace Road—the house where everything once felt safe and comfortable, where I had friends and birthday parties, the basketball hoop with my initials in the cement, the room where I had slept and watched the sun creep into my room in the morning—I thought of all the shit that was once in that house, and I was glad I didn't have it anymore. I was glad that it was all moved into boxes and separated throughout the state in the differences houses my parents occupied.

I stepped out of my car and walked up the walkway. I remember when my mother did this same thing in Queens at Conrad's house. I stood in front of the blue door, and I could hear a dog barking and children playing. I knocked on the door, and all the sound in the house stopped except for a dog barking. A woman's voice tried to quiet the dog. Then the door opened, and I saw a woman about forty years old, holding a dog by a collar. She had shoulder length blond hair and a great smile.

“Hello,” the woman said.

I looked past her into the house. A young girl and two boys were standing at the top of the staircase, staring at me. The stairs used to be hardwood when I was there. Now they were carpeted. The living room was completely different. There was a chandelier, wallpaper on the walls, and a family portrait taken on a beach somewhere. It made me sick. Some other family had stepped into my American Dream. Everything was different but the same.

“I used to live here,” I said.

“That’s very nice,” the woman said, holding back the dog who tried to sniff me.

“I know you’re probably busy,” I said, “but I was wondering—”

“You want to look around?”

“Not exactly sure what I want to see.”

The woman looked me up and down. Then back at her kids. I wouldn’t have let me in the house either.

“I’m sorry,” I said, stepping back from the door. “I’m leaving for college.”

“That’s nice,” the woman said. “I’m going to close the door now.” She started to move the door.

“But I just wanted to say…” The door was now completely closed. “Goodbye.”

4.

I drove down to my father’s house in Sterling. On the way, I picked up my last paycheck at the maze. The maze had its grand opening the day before. It was later this year because of the lack of rain. I was so happy not to be working, standing on the bridges,

trying to help people find their way out of the maze when they had enough of being lost. Plus, this year the Davis' were making their employees wear costumes.

When I got to my father's house, he was taking a nap on the couch in the living room. The walls were so boring and white. My dad had hung a couple of paintings on the wall, but the white was so strong and antiseptic that it seemed to swallow anything my father had put on the walls with its blinding cleanliness.

I didn't want to wake him, so I walked outside and down the street. I walked to the river and watched the water flow over rocks. The gliders from the airport flew over head. Then I heard a voice from behind me.

"I saw your car," the voice said.

It was Vika. I knew the timbre of her voice, and I could have heard anywhere in the world and knew it was her. Her voice was the sound of cold water running over rocks.

"You followed me?" I asked.

I had moved back to my mother's house after the start of my senior year of high school. I felt bad for my mother, and I missed living with Benjamin. Plus I knew if I lived with my mother, I could put her income down on my Financial Aid packet and not my father's income. My mother had no income, so my estimated family contribution was zero. I received a bunch of grants and enough work-assistantship to attend a private university in Florida. It all seemed to work out.

"Haven't seen you here in a while," Vika said.

"Been busy with work," I said.

"You leaving for school?"

“The car is packed.”

Vika still had those red sunglasses, and her eyelashes still fluttered behind them. She still had those lips, and she still had those long legs sticking out of her jean shorts.

“I didn’t apply to school,” she said. “Thinking about cosmetology.”

“You sure know what looks pretty.”

Birds were talking in the pine trees. It was hot. About 90 degrees in the shade. I was sweating. She had on a tank top, and there was sweat around her breasts. Vika moved in closer to me.

“Shame you’re leaving,” Vika said. “I’m single again.”

“Not sure if that would make any difference.”

Vika circled around me now, her sandals slapping against the back of her heels.

“You ever wonder about you and me?”

“Just wanted to say goodbye to the river and my father.”

“You want to say goodbye to a river?” Vika started laughing. “That’s just like you.”

Vika stood as close to me as possible without our bodies touching. I could see her bra through her tank top. I wanted her again. I could smell her jasmine perfume. Then she grabbed me and started kissing me. Her tongue moved into my mouth. I pushed her away.

“I want you,” Vika said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Vika started to unbutton my pants.

“I don’t have a condom,” I said.

“Who cares?”

That’s when I pushed her off me and started walking back to my father’s house.

“Where are you going?” Vika asked.

“Away from a trap.”

“Talk to me,” Vika said. She was crying. “Talk to me just five minutes. Just five more minutes before you go.”

I hated to see her cry. So I stopped. Turned around and said, “Fine, we can talk.”

I stood in front of her, and she kissed me again. I pushed her away again.

“I’m not going to play that role,” I said.

I walked away, and I didn’t turn around. I could hear her crying.

“Don’t leave me alone here,” Vika said. “I hate it here. It’s like a cage. I don’t want to be left alone here.”

5.

My father was sitting on the couch, brushing sleep out of his eyes.

“I had the strangest dream,” my father said. “My dad was alive, playing a violin on our doorstep. But we were living in Russia.”

“He played the violin?” I asked.

“No.”

Standing up off the couch, my father headed into the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of iced tea.

“I came to say goodbye,” I said.

“You leaving already?” my father asked.

“In the morning.”

My father sipped from his iced tea. “You got your oil checked?”

I nodded.

“How about your tire pressure?”

I nodded again.

“The antifreeze?”

“It’s all checked, Dad.”

My father leaned against the kitchen table. Above his head on the shelf was a menorah and a black and white portrait of his mother, my Grandma Freda. I said goodbye.

On the way out, I pulled out of the driveway, and I saw my father waving goodbye in the rear view mirror. I shifted into second gear and took off down the winding roads back to Clinton. The Subaru was my father’s car before he bought his new Subaru. He gave it to me. Without it I wouldn’t be able to drive to Florida. The Subaru had about 125,000 miles on it, but my dad took such good care of it I would be able to drive it for another 100,000 miles. My father was the one who taught me how to drive a stick. He taught me about how to spend my money and not go into credit card debt if I didn’t have to. He told me to stay off the treadmill as long as I could. I was thankful that he taught me how to drive this machine before the machine drove me.

It was around three o'clock, and I knew Czermak and Peto, the only real friends I had in Clinton, would be out on Czermak's boat that he bought with a 28 year-old construction worker who blew all his money on expensive toys and still lived at his parents. It was a small boat without a lot of power, but Czermak got a good deal from one his buddies and picked up some parts at the junkyard he worked at. Czermak worked all throughout high school, and he saved a lot of money. The boat wasn't the greatest, but he loved it. We all loved it. The only thing that mattered, to us, was that it floated and moved.

Czermak pulled up to the shore at Mossy Pond where he kept the boat. It was just a pond. Very small. I got in the boat, and Peto handed me a beer. We putted around the pond, telling stories from the summer, like the time Peto found a squirrel, picked it up in his arms, and started petting the freaking squirrel, all while Czermak was being questioned by the cops for public drunkenness, and I was so drunk that I was holding onto the ground for fear of falling off the Earth. We laughed about the time in the third grade when we were playing football, and I went for a pass and ran, teeth first, into a dumpster. I had a couple of beers, looked at the woods surrounding the pond. Czermak was going to school in Boston. Peto was going into the Navy. They dropped me off on the shore, and I said goodbye.

7.

It was late afternoon, about four o'clock, when I headed over to high bridge to say goodbye. It seemed like so long ago that I took that train ride and ran into the Can Man. I wanted one last look at the place where I wasted my time.

I walked over High Bridge and saw through the slits in the tracks down to the Nashua River. A buddy of mine, Ron Sobman, had fallen off the bridge when he was drunk and survived. It was hot, and the dragonflies swarmed me as I walked on the tracks. I listened for the train.

That's when I saw Cal step out of the woods. He stumbled, and he didn't see me at first. I hadn't seen him since he was arrested. It had been downhill for Cal since he got busted by the high school principal for carrying a bunch of acid tabs in a hollowed-out cigarette. I saw him the day he was arrested. That day he showed up to my bus stop. He was out of his gourd. He kept hitting me in the stomach and laughing about it, but I didn't fight back. I didn't know what Cal was capable of. I just wanted to play along with his game until the bus came.

The last I heard of Cal before seeing him on the bridge was that he was in Concord Maximum Security Prison. Peto had told me he was getting out soon, but I didn't expect to see him today. He was wearing jeans, steel-toed boots, a white tee, and a Boston Red Sox Cap. He met me at the end of High Bridge, blocking my way to the end of the bridge. If he didn't move, I would either have to go past him or turn around down the other end of the bridge. I knew he wanted trouble. He always wanted trouble.

"Tully," Cal said, "you big fucking pussy. I haven't seen you forever."

"Hi Cal," I said.

"I've been great, thanks for asking," Cal said. "Been in Florida on vacation. Can't you see my tan?" He pointed to his pale skin and started to laugh. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up with his Zippo. I tried to walk by him, but he didn't move. He bumped me with his chest.

“Where you going so fast?” Cal asked.

“Away from you.”

“Now, now,” Cal said. “What did I ever do to make you so upset?”

I remembered how Cal held a plastic bag over my head that day down at the pit, the countless beatings he gave me that he called ‘playing around,’ and the money he would steal from me when I used to buy pot. Once I smoked weed with him, and he told me, after I had smoked, that I just tried angel dust. I didn’t even really know what the fuck angel dust was, but I started to have a panic attack. He was taller than me and weighed more. He had a longer reach. He had been in plenty of fights before. But I’d been growing too, working out, hitting a punching bag and envisioning his face. I used to be terrified of him, but now, seeing how far he had fallen, listening to the slur in his speech, I wasn’t that scared anymore.

“How was prison?” I asked.

“I was in Florida,” Cal said, inhaling from his cigarette.

“Funny.” I stepped in closer to Cal and got right in his face. “I’m going there for school. Leaving tomorrow. Twenty minutes from the ocean.”

“Look at you now. Big shot.”

“How’s your ass?” I asked.

“My ass?”

“From getting fucked.”

Cal looked down at his cigarette, and before I could react, he touched the amber tip on the skin of my forearm. I didn’t even feel it. I was so angry I swiped his arm away with my hand, grabbed him by the collar, and swept his legs out from under him with my

right leg. I threw him down on his stomach, and I had his arm behind his back. I wanted to break his fucking arm. It felt so easy. Like ripping a turkey leg from the bird at Thanksgiving. He tried to stand up, but I told him if he fucking moved I'd break his god damn arm. I took his face and shoved it in between the tracks so he could see the distance to the bottom.

“You see,” I said, “how far of a drop that is. That’s where you belong. At the bottom of a fucking river.”

Cal tried to spit at me, so I knocked him in the teeth. He stopped struggling. He had submitted. So I let him go and stepped over him.

“Take it easy,” I said.

I left Cal there and walked over high bridge to the place where I had left my car. A month later, Cal would head back to Concord prison. He spent about a year there, and I heard a rumor, not sure of how true it was, that he was caught trying to sneak heroin in by putting it up his ass. After that he tried to kick his heroin habit. That’s when he got out, and Cal and some girl he dated holed up in the Clinton Motel. They were both trying to kick the habit, but Cal couldn’t. His girl came back to the hotel one night to find him hanging from the ceiling. Cal had kicked a chair out from underneath him. Everyone in town tries to make Cal into a hero now, but I know the truth. He was an asshole who got addicted to heroin. Not an asshole because of the heroin.

8.

The sun was setting. It was a little past seven, and I was running around the track at Fuller Field. No one was around when I was there, but I could see the holes the football team had left in the field with their cleats. Football practice had started. The team was running two-a-days in the summer heat. This was preparation for the Marines. I saw the stands filled with people cheering me on, and I sprinted around the track, heading towards the finish line. The crowd went wild, and I raised my hands in the air to celebrate. When I finished, I sat in the end zone, looking at the field goal posts and the sky between the uprights. That field meant so much to the town. The baseball diamond next to the football field was even supposed to be the oldest diamond in the country. But it all sure meant nothing to me.

9.

I drove back from the field, and it was dark now. I was driving down Main Street. I saw Chip walking up the hill. It was late, and I thought about giving Chip a ride. He didn't have a car. But I just drove on. I was a mile down the road when I stopped and turned around. I slowed the car down next to him, rolled down my window, and asked Chip if he wanted a ride.

Chip's eyes were glass, and I assumed he was having a tough time since my mother had broken up with him. It had been about three years, and I heard he was on a pretty steep downward spiral.

"Thanks James," Chip said. He opened the door and put the box I had on the front seat in his lap. "You moving?"

I put the car in gear and drove.

“College,” I said. “Heading out tomorrow.”

“You were always a smart kid.”

“Where you headed?”

“Water Street.”

So I turned around and didn’t say anything about him walking in the opposite direction when I picked him up. I just drove.

“Long time,” Chip said.

“Benjamin would be happy I talked to you.”

We were passing downtown. The Old Timer’s was packed. Mimi, Poppy, Benjamin, and I ate a lot of dinners in that restaurant. Mimi and Poppy loved it there. It was the closest thing to good food in Clinton, but more importantly it reminded them of when they were younger. Every time they were there, the owner came over and sang to us. All these old Irish songs that just broke your heart. He really only knew a couple songs, but they made Mimi tear up every time.

“How’s work?” I asked.

“At Clinton Seafood?” Chip asked. “I don’t work there no more. Wasn’t getting along with the boss.”

I figured that meant he was fired.

“I work down at a flower shop now,” Chip said.

“That’s great,” I said.

We were on Water Street now.

“Where should I drop you?” I asked.

“Two more blocks.”

I pulled the car over. The car was in neutral, and I put the emergency brake on.

“I’d like to talk to you sometime,” Chip said. “You want my number?”

“Sure.”

I took out a piece of paper and wrote down his number.

“How’s your mother?” Chip asked. He looked like a child, begging for five more minutes before he had to go to sleep.

“Wonderful,” I said.

“Maybe you can give her my number?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Goodbye Chip.”

“Later James.”

I watched him walk down Franklin Street. I don’t know if he had anywhere to go or if the number was real, but I threw the piece of paper out the window.

10.

I wanted to say goodbye to Mimi and Poppy before it was too late at night. They were both over eighty. Poppy was 86; Mimi was 81. I always felt like I was waiting for Poppy to die, because he was sick so often. When he was in his fifties, he’d had four open-heart surgeries. He had a heart murmur and some other problems. No one ever thought he would live as long as he did, so I worried that saying goodbye tonight might be saying goodbye forever.

As soon as I walked into their house, Mimi started frying me a steak with onions. She had everything on the stove ready to be cooked as soon as I had walked in. Mimi loved cooking for me, and I loved eating what she cooked.

I sat down at the dining room table, and Mimi put the steak down in front of me.

“Tomorrow’s the big day,” Poppy said. He had excess skin underneath his neck that moved when he spoke. I found myself staring at the skin on his neck, sometimes, more than looking him in his eyes. He wore glasses, and his gray hair was parted over to the side. Poppy didn’t have much hair, but he was proud of what he did have.

“We’re going to miss you,” Mimi said.

Suddenly I looked at both of them, the grandfather clock ticking away, and I heard that room filled with clocks again, ringing, ringing, ringing. They didn’t have much time left. I started to cry.

“Don’t cry,” Mimi said. She put her arms around me.

I just kept crying, listening to that stupid grandfather clock. It just kept ticking. Nothing could ever stop the time.

“I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing,” I said.

“Going to school?” Poppy asked.

“You sure you’re okay with me leaving? What if something happens to you when I’m gone?”

Mimi and Poppy both looked at each other. They both understood what I meant. They smiled.

Poppy said, “We’ve lived a long life, James. We don’t regret a thing.” Poppy took a sip from his tea. “You’ve got to live your life now. We don’t have much time left, and we’re okay with that.”

“We’ll miss you,” Mimi said. “Terribly.”

“You might even forget us,” Poppy said. “I can’t even remember my grandparents’ faces. It’s all fog up here.” He pointed to his brain.

That’s when I looked at them, Mimi and Poppy, their faces, their wrinkles, Mimi’s wig, the age spots on their hands, their eyes, and I imprinted them into my mind, like an image blooming on a Polaroid picture, or a rock cutter drilling words into stone.

“I’ll never forget what you did for us,” I said.

11.

When I got home to my mother’s house, Benjamin was playing a video game. He did not want me to leave. I know saying goodbye to him would be the worst. So I figured I would wait to the morning.

I sat down next to him. “You going to study hard in school?”

“Of course,” he said. He put down the video game controller.

“There’s a lot of people who will want to stop you from being your best,” I said.

He was ten years old. The smartest ten years old in the world. And I’m not at all biased.

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but you’ve got to listen to Mimi and Poppy. Watch over Mom. And enjoy being a kid. But when you’re around people who want to cause trouble, just run away. Don’t let anyone bring you down with them.”

“Okay, James,” he said. “You saying goodbye?”

“Not yet,” I said.

I played video games with him until our mother said he had to go to bed.

12.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I was too anxious about the drive. In the morning, I would drive to Philly, then to North Carolina, and finally Deland, Florida. I had never driven that much in my life. And as I was in bed, I had a vision of me driving on I-95 somewhere out in Virginia, when I was in a car crash. Blood was all over my dashboard. A woman was screaming. Glass covered my face. And I didn’t know anyone. I was helpless. The part of leaving that terrified me was that I would be alone, and my family would not be there to protect me, or me to protect them.

I woke up to my mother moving around in the kitchen. The clock said 7:00 A.M. It was time for me to wake up. I showered and got dressed. I put my final bag in the car, and I sat down to breakfast with my mother. She was doing a lot better. The healthiest I had seen her in a long time.

“Eat up,” my mother said. “You’ve got a long drive.”

Eggs, Bacon, orange juice, and coffee were all on the table. I swallowed some eggs and washed them down with orange juice. My mother wasn’t eating. After I left she planned to head back to bed.

“I’ve got a question,” my mother said, “that I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Shoot.”

“You believe in God?”

I nearly choked on my toast. “In God?”

“Sure,” she said. “Order to the universe? A higher power?”

I dipped my toast into the yolk. I looked into my coffee. Should I tell her the truth?

“No,” I said. “I don’t believe in God.”

“That’s terrible,” she said.

“I don’t see it that way.”

“Who you going to talk to when you have nobody else and need someone?”

“I don’t plan on needing someone.”

“You will,” my mother said. “Everybody does.”

She poured me some more orange juice. “I mean if you’re sick or alone. Maybe scared. Who will you turn to?”

“Maybe I won’t talk to anyone?”

“You can always come home.”

I pushed the plate away. “I’m going to say goodbye to Benjamin.”

I heard her clearing away the dishes when I went upstairs. Benjamin was still asleep. I woke him up and hugged him, kissed him on the cheek, and told him that I loved him. I walked back downstairs, got my keys, and kissed my mother goodbye. I couldn’t wait to be so far away from home that home seemed nothing more than a bad dream.

I drove through town, to 495, then the Mass Pike. I saw the sign that said, “You’re now leaving Massachusetts.” Goodbye Massachusetts. I drove through Connecticut, New York, took the Tapan Zee Bridge into New Jersey, and stopped at my Uncle Denny’s house in Philly. Uncle Denny was my father’s oldest brother. The next morning I said goodbye to Philly.

I drove through Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, a small piece of West Virginia. Got pulled over by a cop and let go with a warning. I stopped in Statesville, North Carolina. Listened to Neil Young in Uncle Ben’s basement—my father’s youngest brother—while he sang along. I said goodbye to that too.

The next morning I got onto I-95 and headed through South Carolina and Georgia, and I finally saw the signs for Florida as the sun set. The sun looked so much bigger in Florida. I had finally made it. The sky was filled with purple blushing clouds and yellows, blues, and pinks mixing. Jet streams from planes were dripping paint. I had finally made it out of Clinton. Goodbye, goodbye. I felt like I would never see Clinton again.

Chapter XII. **An Elegy**

For my English class my sophomore year in college, I wrote down the following for a creative writing class in my journal. At the time, Poppy was in a hospice, though I never saw him there. My mother was always there. I never showed this journal entry to anyone until now. A week later after I wrote this piece, Poppy died in a hospice in Lancaster, Massachusetts. He was not alone. My mother was by his side.

My Grandpa is a Scarecrow

Poppy lies on his back in plastic sheets, as silent as a scarecrow. The room in the hospice smells like wet fertilizer, mothballs, and baby powder. Poppy looks up at me from his cot. He is wearing his Harry Carey glasses and motions for me to push away his tray of rigatoni and his extra chunky milkshake. The nurses mashed his Paxil into the milkshake. He couldn't swallow pills. His hands shake as he grabs his water and spills it all over his gown. Each time the cup comes closer to his face, the straw misses his mouth. He uses a sucking technique. So when the straw comes close enough to his mouth, he can grab it with his teeth. He refuses my help. On his hands are white gauze that extend around his metacarpal to stop the bleeding from the IV. His skin is fragile. Around his face, he has a nasal cannula, and behind the plastic are pads that keep his face and neck from chafing. His skin can barely hold his blood.

“Poppy,” I say, looking into his gray, glassy eyes. “I’m here.”

“Richard,” he says, “what time is it?”

He calls me by the wrong name. At Poppy's age, he lacks the ability to take in enough oxygen necessary to further the chemical reaction he needs in his body to walk, eat, and talk. Every simple movement requires more energy than he has. From the lack of oxygen, there isn't enough energy to send the neurons from the capillaries to the hippocampus region of the brain. Without the oxygen sending the neurons, the brain doesn't require the energy needed to send the processing information (what is being remembered) from the hippocampus to the posterior lobes, which controls long-term memory. His brain can't distinguish between long term and short term memory. All of his memory is one. So he confuses me with his nephew, Richard, who is now 55. Poppy loved Richard. So I don't mind.

“No, Poppy,” I say. “It's your grandson, James. Back from Florida.”

“Oh, James.” Memory ignites the room in a burst of energy like paper engulfed by flames. “It’s great to see your face. Please,” Poppy says, “don’t remember me like this.”

*

It was late October, close to Halloween, when I went home for Poppy’s funeral. In September I had returned home, too, for Mimi’s funeral. They just couldn’t live without each other. That’s how I want to die—my heart broken because the Earth had swallowed the woman I have gone through a long life with. That’s the best way to die. The heart ripped apart and believing it will never be whole again until after death. Now I’m not writing about an afterlife, but something else. Something that I don’t think I have the words for yet or ever will.

I was sitting in the first pew in St. John’s Church while the priest gave the blessing over Poppy’s casket. The priest was wearing a green and white cassock that could not hide his large belly. Behind the priest was a gold shrine with a wax statue of Jesus and the disciples. The priest finished his blessing, and I walked up to the podium to give the eulogy. I had nothing written down, but I knew I would find the right words.

Before I started, I looked around the church. There were people in the pews, Mimi and Poppy’s friends from Fairfield, Benjamin, my mother, my father, a couple of my friends from high school, and a couple of other people from the town who knew Mimi and Poppy. But it was only a small fraction of the people Ray and Eleanor Cain had touched throughout their lives. That’s when I started.

“I don’t have anything prepared today. All I want to do is tell you a story.” I cleared my throat. “If any of you haven’t spent more than five minutes with my grandparents, you should know that they loved to tell stories.”

I looked at the casket. Poppy’s body was in there. He would have hated for everyone to be sad today. He would have wanted his life to be celebrated.

“Let me tell you about their first date. Mimi and Poppy both worked for a company called Continental Can in Manhattan after the war. Poppy was moving up through the company, and Mimi was a secretary. The way Poppy told it was that as soon as he set eyes on his future wife, he was in love. He said she had the prettiest smile he had ever seen. Plus nice legs.

“But because inter-office relationships were strictly forbidden, Poppy needed to find the right moment to ask her out when no one else was around.”

I turned around and saw the priest. He sat in this wooden chair at the top row of the altar. There were all these crazy wooden engravings on the chair. This is where my mother used to sing before she got sick. The priest had his hands on the arm rests. He looked like a real fucking king.

“So one night, Poppy was working late, and he noticed Mimi was, too. Poppy pretended to keep doing work until Mimi was leaving. He planned on following her out to the elevator. Well, Mimi was there pretty late. Poppy couldn’t understand what type of work she was doing so late on a Friday night. She finally left at about eight. It turned out that Mimi would stay late every other Friday and work on her father’s books. Her father was a mechanic.

“And when Mimi finally left, Poppy followed her to the elevator. Poppy was trying to think of how he could get her to dinner that night—he didn’t know when he would have another opportunity—when he realized he had no money in his wallet and the banks were all closed. He couldn’t go home, because he lived all the way in Brooklyn.

“It was pay day, but Poppy never went to the bank on Friday to cash his check because the lines were packed. He just kept all his checks in his desk drawer at his mother’s house until he needed some money. But he wasn’t going to let that stop him from taking Mimi out. He decided to take a chance and believe it would work out. He felt that if he asked her out now, he would be able to spend the rest of his life taking her out to dinner. It was a major assumption, but Poppy didn’t care. He knew love when he saw it.

“So Poppy turned to Mimi and said he wanted to take her to dinner, but that he hadn’t cashed his check yet and would need to borrow money.”

My mother, father, and Benjamin were smiling in the front pew. They had all heard this story many times before.

“Now if anyone knows Mimi, you would know how absurd of a request this was. Especially for the late 1940’s. Mimi used to tell this story about a boy taking her to the movies before Poppy and paying in change from a change purse. Boy, she never lived that one down. But for some strange reason, she agreed. They went out to dinner that night, and, well, we all know how that ended.

“Now I’m not sure about religion, the afterlife, God and all that mumbo-jumbo. “But just like Poppy taking a chance and believing in love in that elevator, believing in taking a risk...” I pointed at the casket. “I’m going to choose not to see this as an end.”

*

We were at the Memorial Cemetery in Clinton, and Poppy's body was lowered into the ground. The priest said a prayer. I had my arm around Benjamin. My mother was crying. Poppy was buried right next to Mimi. Everyone at the cemetery put a scoop of dirt on the casket. This was not an end. I had to be strong. I had memory. I smiled. I would miss him.

*

The dinner after the funeral was at the Old Timers. I tried my best not to act sad for Poppy. There was nothing about death that meant finality, I thought, except our bodies. I always had memory.

My mother had brought me one of Poppy's old bowlers from the fifties. Whenever certain people died in Clinton and had a funeral dinner at the Old Timers, they hung one of their hats above the bar as a memorial. So I took Poppy's hat and went down to the bar, leaving everyone else to their dessert and coffee.

The bar in the Old Timers was separated from the restaurant. I walked past the green piano and the waitresses and through a swinging wooden door into the bar. The bar was busy. I knew some of the people, shook their hands. Some gave me their sympathy for my loss. I didn't know how they knew. I sat down at the bar on a high stool.

On the ceiling were old taps from old kegs. And right above the mirror on the bar was an overhanging, which was a piece of an old roof where they hung the hats. Baseball

caps, bowlers, pill-box hats, and a Garrison Cap and an Overseas cap from the Marines. The way someone could get their hat up there was to die.

Now what happened next you're going to have a hard time believing, but it all depends on the way you look at it. Maybe it was just another vision, but the door to the bar opened and in walked Poppy. He walked right up to the bar, sat down next to me. No one else in the place seemed to notice him. I nearly fell out of my seat.

"Hi, James," Poppy said.

"This isn't real," I said.

"You think I could get a drink with you?" Poppy asked.

"This isn't real."

"It sure seems real to me. You should be happy to see me."

"This isn't real," I said.

"Get control of yourself," Poppy said. "Have a drink with me."

I held Poppy's hat in my hand. Poppy looked down at it.

"What you doing with my hat?"

"You're dead."

"I'm right here." Poppy put his hand down on the bar. "Let's get this guy's attention."

Poppy didn't appear sick or dead. He looked healthy. His skin didn't have any sores from the IVs or blue marks from his veins bruising.

"Order me a drink," Poppy said.

"I'm not 21."

“Just order like you are old enough. Don’t be nervous. Here he comes. Make it a double Manhattan.”

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Two Manhattans.”

“You drinking both?”

Poppy said, “Tell him you just want two Manhattans please.”

“Yes,” I said. “Two Manhattans.”

“Whatever you want pal,” the bartender said. He went to make our drinks.

“This place always reminds me of when I first went dancing with Eleanor,” Poppy said. “When I met her friends for the first time, she took me dancing. All her friends were Polish. They loved to drink and loved to dance. I didn’t drink or dance. But I wasn’t going to say anything. I showed up at the table and met all her friends. Instantly, they gave me a couple shots. My head was spinning. Then Mimi wanted to dance. She spun me around like crazy. She was a dancing machine. Then I started to notice all the lights and my head spinning. I was going to be sick. I went to the bathroom and threw up. But I would have done it all over again to see her smile.”

The bartender put two Manhattans down in front of me. I pulled mine in front of me. I pushed Poppy’s in front of his stool.

The bartender stared at me. “You’re not of age, are you?”

“Don’t say anything,” Poppy said.

I picked up my grandfather’s hat and showed it to the bartender. “This is my grandfather’s hat. I’d like you to hang it up.” I handed the hat to him over the bar. “His funeral was today.”

“What you doing that for?” Poppy asked.

“I want them to remember you,” I said.

“They won’t put it up,” Poppy said. “I’m not from here.”

“You okay, kid?” the bartender asked.

I pushed my grandfather’s hat towards him. “Please.”

The bartender took the hat and put it below the bar. “I need to talk to Ducky. He’s the guy that handles this kind of stuff.”

“I told you,” Poppy said.

“They still might,” I said.

The bartender walked to the other end of the bar, poured two shots of McGillicutty’s, and placed them in front of the two guys. There was just dim light in the bar. The windows were stained glass.

“This drink looks great,” Poppy said.

“Can you drink it?” I asked.

“I don’t usually drink. It all goes back to my father. He was a drunk. You know? Always would come home drunk. Left all the work for my mother. We were janitors. That’s how we afforded to stay in our place. We cleaned the entire apartment building. My father spent all our money on booze. He was an embarrassment. I’ll never forget the day he was carried back to our house in the middle of the afternoon by the men he worked with. He was so drunk he couldn’t move. He couldn’t talk. They just left him in the gutter. Everyone in the neighborhood saw.”

When Poppy talked about his father, he always got angry. He had this mean look on him that I hardly ever saw. His knuckles turned white and all the blood rushed to his face. He still had his anger after his death.

“What am I going to do about Mom?” I asked. “She’s not going to take this well.”

“She’s your mother,” Poppy said.

I didn’t want to have the responsibility of my mother. I was terrified to see how she handled Mimi and Poppy’s death. I thought for sure she would end up back in the hospital. She was doing so much better before they died. Seemed like she might be able to be healthy again.

“Maybe I should just never come home again,” I said.

“What about Benjamin?” Poppy asked.

“There’s this poet,” I said, “Frank O’Hara. He’s from Worcester. Famously lived in New York City. He had a sick mother, too. One day, when he was home, he told his little sister that he was never coming back again, and that he suggested she do the same.”

“You only have one mother,” Poppy said. “Don’t forget that. You’ll live with your decision the rest of your life.”

I turned down to the other end of the bar to watch the two guys take their shot. They took it down with a twist of their necks. I turned back to Poppy. He was gone. His drink was untouched. Maybe to be remembered is to be immortal?

Chapter XIII. A Crash in Boston

Mr. G always drove me to Logan Airport. I was waiting for him, drumming my fingers on my suitcase and hoping my mother wouldn't stop cleaning the kitchen until we had to say goodbye. And when I looked out the living room window and into our neighborhood, I saw snow everywhere, covering the Halloween pumpkins and the ghost decorations and the scarecrows in our neighbor's yard. There must be snow on Poppy's fresh grave. At first, I thought the storm was my imagination or a vision, but the old Victorian houses were actually covered in powder. I watched my breath become visible on the glass and listened to the grandfather clock ticking. I counted the seconds; then the minutes.

"James, what time is Mr. G coming?" my mother asked from the kitchen.

"You're the one who scheduled the pickup," I said.

I heard her putting away dishes and wiping down the counter tops. She kept turning the faucet on and off.

"Are your bags packed?" my mother asked. "Do you have your wallet?"

Before I could answer, she turned on the garbage disposal. Then she turned off the disposal so she could speak. She always seemed to be having conversations with herself.

"I'm nervous with you and the snow," my mother said.

"You could drive me."

"You know I can't drive."

I said, “There are a total of three turns once you get on the Mass Pike. Plus, there are signs.”

I knew this was a useless argument. Since my mother returned from the hospital, she had developed, logical or not, phobias about flying, computers, and driving into large cities. This is why she wouldn’t drive me into Boston for my flight back to Florida. She was afraid she’d get lost among the city streets, and then she’d panic and bang against the car windows—momentarily forgetting how to roll them down—asking pedestrians for directions home. She would be trapped in her car. I imagined my mother stopped in the middle of Commonwealth Ave., a line of traffic piling up behind her, and car horns trumpeting her into frenzy.

Meantime, leaving Clinton was my number one priority. The vacuous windows of the neighborhood houses were glass eyes, and I spent my time at home ignoring my mother and peeping into the open windows in the neighborhood. Sometimes I saw people. Once I saw a woman in a red dress bending over. Somewhere, I thought, in those homes, I’d find a couple making love. But I hardly witnessed two people in the same room. It seemed everyone was separated by an invisible wall of loneliness. I wondered what it would be like for someone to watch me. Would they recognize longing in my eyes?

“Are you dressing up for Halloween?” my mother asked.

“I’m not a child,” I said.

My mother promenaded into the living room and plopped down across from me on a blue, floral upholstered chair. She was wearing a green winter coat with fur around the neck and the bottom of her sleeves.

“When you were a little boy,” my mother said. “You always dressed up.”

“I’m not a little boy.”

My mother said, “You’ll always be my little boy.”

“What are you wearing?” I asked.

She had a black glove on her left hand, but her right hand was bare. In her bare hand, she held a porcelain coffee mug. Her neck and legs were showing, and they were covered in white foundation. So was her face. She wore a yellow cloche with berries at the brim. The cloche was pulled close to her eyes. Her eyelids looked painted black. She wore red lipstick. She looked like the way doctors diagnosed her.

“It’s Halloween,” my mother said. “I’m from a painting.”

I thought about her trapped in her car. “Are you the Screamer?”

“No,” my mother said. “The girl from Hopper’s Automat.” She brought the coffee mug to her lips and pointed to the cloche hat. She seemed surprised I wasn’t familiar with Hopper’s painting. She put her hand on my knee. “It’s not safe to drive today.”

I moved my knee. My mother moved her hand.

“I have to go,” I said. “I have to go back to school. I have tests and homework.”

“We could go eat,” my mother said. “We could buy you new clothes.” She couldn’t sit still. She paced around the room, picking magazines off the coffee table and placing them back in a new order. She sat back down. “We could talk about Poppy.”

I was home for Poppy’s funeral. That’s all. Not to discuss his death like some bullshit, self-help book club. Poppy was dead. What could I do about it? We’ll all be there soon enough.

“Mr. G better be here soon,” I said.

Every time I left for college, Poppy paid him thirty dollars to drive me from Clinton to the Logan Airport. But since Poppy died, I suspected Mr. G drove me pro bono.

I shouldered my backpack and moved my suitcase against the wall by the front door. I sat back down in the chair and resumed staring out the window.

“I can tell there’s something wrong with you. I’ll tell Mr. G to forget it,” my mother said.

“The only thing I want,” I said, “is to make my flight.”

I looked back at my mother, sitting in the chair, holding the coffee cup in her hand, and the furniture began to disappear. The gray wallpaper peeled back and revealed the original yellow. I watched everything fade away, like the condensation on the window from my breath, including my mother, until there was nothing left but sunlight coming through the window and the sound of the grandfather clock. At the crevices in the walls, there were shadows. I wished—to make everything easier—that my mother would actually vanish.

“There are some places light can’t reach,” I said.

“Maybe you should stay?” my mother said.

I heard a horn from outside and saw Mr. G’s black Lincoln Town Car.

“Mr. G is here,” I said.

*

There was so much traffic on the Mass Pike, and the sky was gray and filled with cumulonimbus clouds dumping down snow. The windshield wipers were swatting away

the powder, but the windows were foggy and the red brake lights looked stark against the white backdrop. The heat blasted into my face. I sat in the front seat.

Mr. G drove with histrionic precision. The Lincoln rode like a boat, and Mr. G looked like an old ship captain behind the wheel. Mr. G was a large man (maybe about 260 pounds), and he had a wan complexion. His hair was gray, and he had a double chin that jiggled when he spoke. All he needed was a sailing cap and a corn cob pipe.

“You think you can drive a little faster?” I asked.

Mr. G stopped in the middle of his story about his trip to Poland, turned on his signal, and swung into the slow lane. When Mr. G drove anyone in his car, his first priority was safety. He remained always in control, and, somehow, he managed to stay focused on the road and talk the entire trip. Mr. G had dominated the conversation through the back roads of Berlin and Hudson for the last twenty minutes. I hadn't even said a word. I worried about making it to the airport on time. He drove this car so slow. I wanted him to focus on getting me to the airport and less on his god damn stories.

“The roads are slippery today, James,” Mr. G said. “But I'll get you to the airport. You're mother wants me to make sure you're safe.”

“We're cutting it pretty close,” I said.

“This is nothing,” Mr. G said. “You should have been here back in the Nor'easter of '78. There was so much snow that I just left my car on the highway. It was great. There were thousands of cars left on the highway. Buried right in the snow. People just walked away from all that steel.”

I said, “I'd just like to get to the airport on time.”

I had been living and attending school in Florida for a couple years now, and there, without the drastic change in season, I found it easier to be happy. When I saw snow, all I could think about was bodies, including Mimi and Poppy, buried in the Memorial Cemetery in Clinton while maggots turned them back into dust.

I was trying to stop Mr. G's transition into a new story so he could focus on the road when a four-door BMW sedan passed us in the fast lane. It was amazing that it was snowing on Halloween. The weathermen were losing their minds. But the one thing you could count on about the New England weather was that it would always be unpredictable. The passengers in the BMW turned around and stared at me. The person in the front wore a Michael Myers' mask from the Halloween movies. The guy in the back wore a white mask from the Scream movies. Both masks were covered in fake blood.

"I used to be in such a rush just like you," Mr. G said. "When I was your age—"

"I really need to catch this flight."

"You ever think about slowing down some?"

The entire time Mr. G spoke, he kept his eyes fixated on the road.

"When I was your age," Mr. G said. "I drank a ton. I was an alcoholic."

I was shocked to hear Mr. G being so blunt. In Clinton, a piece of information that proved a man's weakness could be spread around town faster than winter flu. Maybe he didn't care? Regardless, I knew the significance of sharing a secret. I had always kept the secret of my mother's illness from everyone. Only talked about it with a couple people, and I regretted it every time. I liked to believe that no one knew about my mother. And I worried that if they did know, people would begin to think I was insane.

Maybe they would think it was hereditary. Then I would have to tell someone about my visions. And once you shared a secret like that, you began creating a bond and a pledge. I didn't want to play that game, but Mr. G forced me. I thought he was trying to make a trade.

"Do you still drink?" I asked. I wondered if he had ever been drunk while he was driving. In fact, I wondered if he was drunk right now.

"Been on the wagon for 6 years," Mr. G said.

"You think we're going to make it to the airport?"

Mr. G signaled into the left lane, and I felt the snow shooting off the road and up into the floor boards. It felt like we were hydroplaning.

"I'm not going to rush," Mr. G said. "Let me tell you a story."

"I've heard a lot of stories," I said. "They don't help."

Somehow, I thought he was trying to talk about my mother in a backhanded way.

"You're going to listen, James," Mr. G said. "Once, I was drinking down at Scooby's. Back before the bar moved and Scooby's was next to that tombstone place on Main Street. What a weird set up. You'd see about 30 tombstones out front on the sidewalk with no names. A crazy form of advertisement."

Mr. G put the windshield wipers on high and turned on the defroster. The snow started to come down harder, and it blurred the road. The wipers squeaked against the glass.

"I went into the bar for a beer and a shot of Cutty Sark. Nothing extraordinary for those days. Jimmy O'Loughlin was down at the other end of the bar. You know what a wicked prick he can be. He always owes everybody money. So I made him buy me

some drinks. The bartender put a brown shot in front of me. That's the last thing I remember. Next thing I know, I was in a hotel room. I looked out the window and saw freaking palm trees. I called down to the hotel lobby to find out where I was. The lady gave me the address. And I said no, what city? I was in Ft. Lauderdale for Christ's sake."

I watched a red Mustang slip off the highway and crash into the median. The other cars hit their brakes, but Mr. G just slowed down, went into the breakdown lane, and looped around the stopped cars.

"From the pieces of the story I gathered, I left Scooby's trashed. Don't even remember it. Everybody said I was acting normal. No one could tell I was even drunk. I'd perfected hiding what was really going on. Know what that's like? Best I can figure, I got into my car and drove to Logan. I could buy a ticket easy because they all knew me at Delta from driving the limos for thirty years. Took a flight all the way to Florida and bought a hotel room. No one could ever tell I was drunk. I could function fine. It's so easy to just take off."

"And your wife still loved you?" I said.

"Women, James, are much stronger than us. You don't understand that now."

"I don't know about that, Mr. G."

Mr. G stopped talking. He peered deep into the road as if he was playing a story back to himself that he didn't want to share. I watched him move that Lincoln in between traffic flawlessly. The snow didn't bother him at all. It was almost supernatural.

"Listen," I said. "I know you're trying to be really careful, but I got about an hour to get to my flight? And you know how crazy the airports are since 9/11."

“Are you not listening to anything I’m saying?” Mr. G said. “I have another story for you.” Mr. G started to drum his fingers on the steering wheel.

“The last story didn’t do it,” I said.

He looked into the rear view mirror and shifted to the middle lane. A car was barreling down behind him. “I died on a motorcycle once.”

“Come on,” I said. “How could you have died on a motorcycle?”

“Why would I lie to you?” Mr. G said. “I was driving my old silver Yamaha in Marlboro during the summer. It was six years ago. I loved that bike. I felt so free. I was driving through downtown when I went into cardiac arrest. It was as if someone from above just turned me off. I fell off the bike at 50 m.p.h and broke four ribs. Those broken ribs punctured my lungs.”

Now the Boston skyline came into view. I could see the Charles River snaking towards downtown. I saw the bridge covered in graffiti across from MIT. I saw the old Boston University football stadium. The CITGO sign. The John Hancock building.

“We’re so close,” I said. “Can’t you just...”

The Lincoln sped up a little bit. I thought I was breaking him down.

“I was unconscious for three minutes,” Mr. G said. “Three minutes without breathing. I was lucky, though. Someone gave me a gift. My accident happened right in front of the Marlboro fire department.”

Mr. G got off the Mass Pike and headed towards the Back Bay and the Sumner tunnel to Logan Airport. He never took the Ted Williams tunnel. The god damn Big Dig. He always said one day someone would die there. And sure enough, one year, the roof collapsed and killed a lady driving in the car.

“I was in a coma for 36 days,” Mr. G said. “When you’re in a coma, you’re aware of everything. I felt imprisoned in my own body. Swear on my mother’s grave. I was conscious of everything going on around me. It was as if I was in a dream where I wanted to wake up but couldn’t.”

There was a detour, and he pulled down a side street. I watched the snow falling onto the Charles River, and it vanished into the water. I looked up and saw thousands of snowflakes all heading for the same destiny. I thought about my mother at home. I thought about my grandparents. I thought about trying to catch this flight. I wished I was the one who vanished.

“You’re right, Mr. G,” I said. “There’s no rush.”

I felt Mr. G take his foot off the pedal. The Lincoln slowed down. That’s when I saw the car coming. The car came from the driver’s side, and we both turned to face what was approaching. There was no time for Mr. G to react, but everything appeared to pause. I watched the car, as if from another vantage point, far away and safe, barreling through the red light. I accepted the crash.

Now I had a moment of intense reflection, and a single memory appeared to me so vivid I felt I was watching a movie in my head. But first, it is important to note what I did not remember. I did not remember reaching into the dishwasher in my old home and pulling out a knife and holding it over my heart for my mother and father to see I wanted to kill myself. I did not remember driving on the way to summer camp, my mother and father yelling in the front seat of the car, and how I opened the back door as if to jump. I did not remember my mother, at the hospital, holding up a branch in the shape of a Y and pointing it in my face as if asking a question.

I did not remember waiting outside of a hospital room in Worcester for my grandmother to die of cancer. I did not remember reading her eulogy to her that I had written on the plane ride home, in her hospital room, even before she had died. I did not remember having to be the one to tell my grandfather that the love of his life had died. I did not remember my mother, after my grandmother was pronounced dead, lying on top of the dead body, crying and holding her hand, begging her to wake up. I did not remember the frail, hollow shell my grandfather became after his wife died.

I did not remember the hours I spent in front of the television, watching reruns of television shows and dreaming of adventures in foreign countries, climbing volcanoes and jumping out of airplanes. I did not remember how lonely the nights were, staring up at the ceiling fan in my bedroom in Clinton, trying to convince myself I would never die.

This is what I did remember. Music. A black piano. Psalms, my mother's voice, myself with drum sticks in my hand banging all over the living room floor, trying desperately to find some sort of rhythm. My father coming home and tapping on the windows to let us know he was home from work. The garden in our back yard and the cherry tomatoes, the cantaloupes, and the cucumbers my father was so proud of. I remember trying to sing with my mother and wondering if my mother's voice was a gift. I remember music being able to take me somewhere. I remember the green sound of the piano. I remembered how it all disappeared.

When the car hit, a liquid, which I knew was blood, splashed onto my face. The window collapsed, and I jolted against my seatbelt. My face smacked against the air bag. I rose up and looked around. The wipers had turned off, and Mr. G's air bag had not expanded. His head lay against the steering wheel, and the radiator was hissing. As far

as I could tell, Mr. G was unconscious. I picked up his head and saw that all his teeth appeared broken. I looked at my body—my legs, my fingers—and I felt my head. I was alive.

Section 3 The Long Way Home

Chapter XIV. Heron

The first time I talked to Heron, I knew I would fall in love with her. I tried to stay away from her. But I kept coming back. Kept running into her. It was all about her eyes. I mean I didn't want to get into a relationship; women would hold me down. Just like Vika tried to. I couldn't let that ever happen again. If a woman trapped me, then I couldn't keep traveling. I couldn't keep being alone. And I couldn't keep moving farther and farther away from home. My escape would be cut short, and I would somehow end up in Clinton again.

For the first two months Heron and I were dating, I didn't mention my mother at all, even though she called every day from the new hospital. Once, my mother called when Heron and I were sitting in my dorm watching Animal House. (She had never seen Animal House. How cute was that?) I knew I had to pick up the phone. If not I started to imagine my mother alone in the hospital. I paused the movie.

“Hello,” I said.

“Benjamin,” my mother said. “How are you?”

“It's James.”

“Of course—James.”

Heron sat on the futon with her legs crossed. It was still daylight out. The sun poked through the window, and I walked into the bathroom, hoping Heron wouldn't be able to hear my conversation.

“You feeling all right, James?”

“Feeling fine.”

“You don’t sound like you’re feeling fine,” she said. “Something is wrong with you.”

Heron was silent in the next room.

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Is your father there?”

“In Florida?”

“He has his ways.”

I watched myself in the mirror above the sink. As a kid, we used to dare each other to stand in front of the mirror and say Bloody Mary three times fast, thinking that the lights would shut off and a woman named Mary who was murdered on her wedding day would appear in the mirror, her white dress covered in blood. I shared a bathroom with three guys. It was a mess. So was my face.

“I’ll be home soon,” my mother said.

“It’s really not the best time,” I said.

“To come home?”

“To talk.”

That hurt. I could hear her rifle through her address book for the next number to call. I had pleaded with the orderlies, on numerous occasions, to keep her away from the phone because she kept calling people *on the outside*—my brother’s teachers, my grandparents’ former lawyer, her sisters, or at least people she thought were her sisters—

and embarrassing herself and her children, though she couldn't have known that at the time.

“Goodbye then,” she said.

“Wait!”

She was still there. I could hear her. She needed me to talk to her. Make her feel that she existed.

“How was your day?” I asked.

She said, “I went on a walk.”

At this point, I needed to ask stock questions to keep her talking. “How did that go?”

“Wonderful,” my mother said. “So many flowers. Everywhere flowers. In every bush, in the ground, in women's hair.”

“That's nice,” I said.

“And they were singing,” she said. “The most beautiful love songs.” The pitch in her voice raised a tone. “Sound like Philip Glass.”

“They weren't singing.”

“Yes so. In French.”

“You don't speak French.”

“No,” she said, “but the flowers do.”

She had me there.

“Listen,” I said, “I need to go. Call me tomorrow.”

“James?”

“What?”

“I love you.”

I hated hearing my mother say I love you from the hospital. It sounds so phony. If she loved me, she would get better. Take her medicine. “I love you too,” I said. “Will you please listen to what the doctors tell you?”

She hung up.

I went back to the sofa and unpaused the movie. “Okay, back to the movie. Sorry about that.”

Heron curled up into my shoulder and started stroking my hand. “No problem.”

*

Finally, I told Heron about my mother, after two months of dating, over breakfast at Graham’s Kitchen in Deland, because, well, I just felt that I had to. Our waitress knew Heron and me so well. We came there three times a week after spending the night together. As soon as we showed up, they had two mason jars filled with sweet tea and water with a lemon waiting for us at our table. I convinced myself, that morning, that I had to tell Heron about my mother if I wanted to go further with our relationship. At the end of the semester, she was heading off to medical school on the west coast of Florida. And I needed to see how she would react. To see if she saw madness as hereditary. After we finished eating and the waitress cleared away our plates, I stared at the crumbs from my food and the ring left on the table from my water glass.

“I can get the check this time,” Heron said.

“I have something to tell you,” I said. I’m sure she thought the worst because she looked at me as if I was about to tell her I was married to a thoroughbred horse. I looked

into her eyes, those big blue eyes that made me fall in love with her. So large, so striking, as if somehow a whole galaxy was contained in her irises. I felt safe. “My mother is in a hospital.”

“That’s terrible,” Heron said. “Is she okay?”

Taking a sip from my sweet tea, I said, “She’s in a mental hospital. Been in and out most of my life. So many different diagnoses.”

Heron played with her mason jar, moved the straw around the ice cubes, and poked at her lemon with her straws. I waited for her to react. Maybe Heron would see madness in my eyes. Then she said, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Think differently of me?”

“Why would I?”

“You don’t want to know anything more?” I asked.

“No reason,” Heron said. “I hope she gets better.”

We hadn’t said we loved each other yet, but at that table, Mack trucks rolling by in the street, I knew this was the great love I had been looking for.

*

It was hard to believe that I had actually found my great love, but it sure felt that way. I knew I was young and that fools rush in and all that other bullshit jaded adults say, but I had to tell her I loved her. I just needed the right time. I finally decided after a couple weeks to tell her when we were driving home from her parents’ house in Jacksonville. It was Columbus Day weekend, so we had no school on Monday. Heron’s parents had a beach home in Amelia Island. She truly had a more affluent life than me, and it made me

uncomfortable. Especially meeting her father who was a doctor. A doctor. So many mixed feelings about doctors. And on the way home, she assured me that I wasn't any different than her. Her parents were still together, too. I envied her childhood. But she somehow made me feel I had nothing to worry about.

We were in Heron's jeep, listening to David Gray. His timbre was electric, and it felt like poetry was surging through the car. We were driving across a group of islands on the border of Georgia and Florida. I had never seen something so beautiful. A beautiful woman and the Florida coast. This was the Florida I dreamed about when I was growing up in Clinton. We road on bridges stretching over the ocean, and when I looked across, I saw the moon reflecting off the water like a great mirror, like a piano striking a melody over violins, and I held Heron's hand, and I was positive, then, I was the luckiest man in the world.

I wanted to make love to her right there in the car. Her legs were crossed, and I kept rubbing my hands on them, dying to pull off the road. Though I knew I couldn't jump on her before I told her. I needed to be smooth and controlled. Wolves were baying at the moon, or at least what I imagined to be wolves, and I wanted to let the beast out of me. My heart pounded, and the music continued, churning colors inside of the car.

When I pulled the jeep into her driveway, David Gray was singing "Sail Away." I reached over and grabbed her, pulled her close to me, and kissed her. Then I stopped, looking into her galaxy, and said, "I love you."

Heron didn't say anything back at first, just kept kissing me. I thought the music must have stopped. My heart banged in my chest, the beast knocking around in its cage.

How could I have been so stupid to think she would love me back? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I just kept kissing, hoping she would say something.

Then she stopped kissing me, looked me right back in the eyes, and said, “I love you, too.”

*

That night, after we made love, I held Heron in my arms and it seemed there was nothing else more important in the world. Just her and this bed. A world unto itself. That everything I ever wanted, I had. But how could I ever hold onto this? I didn't have the means financially or mentally. It felt so unbelievable to be loved that I started to question if it was real. I wondered if such a feeling, such a concept, such an emotion was nothing more than a delusion. Maybe I would wake up to find myself in a hospital, strapped to a table while doctors peered into my mind. Maybe I was, after all, just like my mother. I had to say something before I slipped off into the ocean in my mind.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked.

“Losing you,” she said with a smile.

“Don't be corny,” I said. “Really, what scares you?”

Heron took her time to think, much more careful with her words than me. She looked up at the ceiling. She always took her time when answering. “I'm afraid of fire. My biggest fear is someone I love dying in flames.”

It blew my mind that her biggest fear was someone she loved dying, not her. I wished I could have been that selfless.

“Sometimes when I close my eyes,” Heron said, “I can see fire. I feel people’s pain. I know that sounds crazy, but I can sometimes feel fire on my skin just thinking about my family in trouble.”

I wanted to kiss her again, but there can only be so much kissing. I traced my fingers on her body. Her hips curved like the hips of the women Gauguin painted in Tahiti. How could I be so lucky? Could this be real?

“What’s yours?” she asked.

And then I answered. “That I will lose my mind,” I said. “That one day I will regain consciousness in a hospital, realizing that my entire life, everything I’ve loved and assumed was real, was nothing but a dream, a delusion. That I knew nothing.”

Heron just looked at me and let me talk.

“I wonder if you’re real sometimes.” I continued to trace my fingers over her body, moving from freckle to freckle, connecting constellations. “I want you to promise me something.”

She nodded.

“If I’m ever in a mental hospital, I want you to visit me and love me. I want you to promise not to give up on me. I won’t be sick forever. I’ll eventually get better.”

This time, she didn’t hesitate with her response. “I promise.”

Chapter XV. Guatemala in a Pick Up

It was my junior year in college and my very first time out of the country. I felt the ocean rising and falling within myself again. And from the back of Luis' Mitsubishi pick-up truck, Florencia snapped black and white pictures of the green Guatemala countryside. Her black curly hair blew in the wind. Her earrings were frozen, white-plastic rain. They swung when she laughed. She turned around to catch me staring at her, but I quickly looked away towards the clouds resting on top of the volcano.

“It's beautiful here,” she said, trying to be heard over the wind while snapping a photograph of the horizon inhaling the purples and blues that split night and day.

“I've never seen anything like this,” I said.

“I thought you were an experienced traveler.”

“My first time.”

“I'll be gentle,” she said.

Florencia was from Buenos Aires and very different from most of the American girls I knew. She seemed to always have something different to say, something bordering on prophetic. One morning on our way to breakfast, when there were no clouds in the sky, Florencia said to me, “It's going to storm.”

“Feel it in your bones?”

“We'll see lightning soon.”

I held my hands to the sky: “Tell me, great Florencia—when?”

“Now.”

And then the sky cracked, and the rain fell down, and we sprinted into the hotel as the water dropped on our heads big as walnuts. It wasn't that I wanted Florencia sexually, though I thought about it, it was that I wanted to understand her, see what she had to teach me about life. And I was waiting for that lightning strike of knowledge.

Meantime, the truck rolled to a stop in a corn field, and in the middle of the field was a house with one light on. The truck's taillights lit up the dust rising from the dirt road, and when Luis turned off the truck, it was so dark that everything disappeared except for the one light and the stars. We were in the back of the pickup, left with the darkness of a strange country. I could hear crickets chirping like silver bells and dogs wailing in the distance.

Luis jumped out of the cab and said with a grin: "Bienvenidos a mi casa."

Luis' job was in reforestation. All the wilderness and jungle destroyed by farming, well that was his job to restore. He's about 32, but takes orders from Tory—10 years his junior—our leader who is trying to reestablish Guatemala's social infrastructures—or something like that—by building youth groups. Luis was a Mayan version of a cowboy. A big ten gallon hat rested upon his head, and when he stood, he slipped his fingers through the loops that held his belt. His face was dark—a Mayan—a descendant of the land he worked. As Luis opened the door to his house, a five year old girl burst through the door and clung to his leg. "Papa!"

"Hola, hija," and waddling close behind his sister was Luisito, Luis' son, and he jumped at his father's leg fighting for room. The children saw Tory—"Tory"—and run and hugged him. The children were laughing and hugging Tory. Luis was kissing his wife and introducing her to us gringos. I was nervous, because the only thing worse than

my writing in Spanish was speaking in Spanish. But I was determined to try and show respect for the household.

I introduced myself: “Hola, me llamo Pepe Conejo,” and the boy burst out crying. They all laughed and began to speak in Spanish. They stopped and smiled at me. “Que paso?” I replied to their smiles, and again they all started laughing.

I called myself Pepe Conejo as an ice breaker—a way to make people laugh and poke fun at my own inability with their language. It meant Joe Rabbit. I thought it would be funny. Most kids loved it. Not Luisito. Some of the older women did, too, however. And Florencia. Tory didn’t like it that much. And all of the young Mayan women loved it, too. Sometimes I would see some of the young Mayan women, dressed in their tipicos, staring at me. They would smile, showing how beautiful they were, and I wondered if they were interested in me, or where I had come from. What I didn’t realize was that the association with rabbit in Guatemala was heavily associated with strong sexual performance. Maybe that had something to do with it. Regardless, in Guatemala, I became—bum, bum, bum—Pepe Conejo.

Inside of Luis’ house we strained our eyes to see because three light bulbs lit the entire place. Luis ran an extension cord from the back bedroom to turn on a light in the kitchen so we could see as we cooked. Watching from the corner, Luis’ wife stood, hands across her chest, dressed in berry-dyed tipicos. I felt so strange cooking chicken teriyaki in her kitchen (I felt like I was being very invasive), so I went into the living room with Luisito. He was still terrified of me, and I enticed him with a soccer ball. It must have been tough for him to think about playing soccer because of his enormous head. I tried to talk to him but nothing worked. Then Florencia saved me.

“Hola, Luisito,” Florencia said, holding a ball. It seemed that Florencia uttered some magic word, because Luisito jumped out of his chair and ran at her. She caught him with her long arms.

“How do you do that?” I ask.

“You mean not make babies cry?”

I nodded yes.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Luisito burst out laughing as she blew kisses into his belly.

I sat down close to her and Luisito. “You feel a little weird being here? Feel as if we’re intruding?”

She looked down at Luisito clinging on to her.

“Dinner time,” Tory said.

For dinner we brought tables together; those from America sat on the left, those from Guatemala on the right, and I sat in the middle sharing a chair with Luis’ son. He slowly lightened up, and I got him to smile when I gave him his food. The night went on with laughter and questions about America. Pathetically I spoke in Spanish. Though I received much encouragement, their responses were blank, as if they weren’t sure if I had placed my period. I would ask, “Tu comprendes?” and they always replied—“Mas o menos.”

Florencia sat across from me, swishing wine along the edges of her glass. She stared into the yellow liquid, and I watched it sprout legs. I imagined myself floating on a sail boat in her glass, lost in a sea without a compass, and I could have looked up at her eyes and thought they were the stars, following them for a passage home. Maybe

Florencia was my home? Maybe Guatemala was my true home? It was hard to know. I was confused. Being in Guatemala, I became aware of how complicated and different the world was when you moved around. Florida was a shock from Clinton, but Guatemala was another thing. The dogs just wandered in the streets, picking through trash. I saw a man sleeping on the street, fighting with a dog for scraps. But I saw this on every block. The roads were dirt, and I felt extremely luxurious wearing jeans and cotton tees. Of course there were more modern parts, but I was in the villages. And I loved it. Maybe life was better away from America? Better away from the city?

After dinner Luis took me into the back room with his wife and Luisito following close behind.

“Pepe,” Luis called. “Tocas la guitarra?”

“Un pequeño,” I said casually, knowing very well I would have loved to play the guitar. It would save me from trying to stutter through my broken Spanish. Luis grabbed his classical guitar off the wall. Before handing me the guitar he brushed off the dust and attempted to tune it. It was missing a low E string, and as he tightened the strings I heard the wood of the guitar crack. He started plucking the notes of a Spanish love song that made his wife smile, and she laid her head down on his shoulder. His voice became easy and youthful and smooth.

“Ahora, Pepe,” Luis said. “Tocas.”

He handed me the guitar. So I played the blues. An aching 12 bars. “Estoy in Guatemala,” I sang. My guitar grinding and my shoes stamping the beat out. “Yo no hablo espangol.” I closed my eyes, “Down En Guatemala...yo no hablo espangol,” I

tumbled to the fifth chord. “Pero en Guatemala...” Then the forth chord adding a 7. “Yo canto los blues.”

Luis clapped. “Bravo, Bravisimo.”

I noticed Florencia in the room. She kneeled in front of me snapping pictures with a black and white camera. Luis’ wife smiled. I started to play another song, but Luisito ran at me and started making his own music. He wouldn’t stop, enthralled with the sound of the open strings echoing through wood. No idea how to make the guitar talk, no idea how to make sounds, it still didn’t stop him from making his music. I was forced to give the guitar up to him.

The night came to end, and all of us gringos said our goodbyes to Luis’ family and drove away from them in the dim doorway light. Luis drove us back. Florencia and I volunteered to sit in the back of the pick-up. “The only way to see a Guatemalan night,” she proclaimed. Grabbing her hand, I lifted her in and her teal flowing dress caught on the edge. She laughed as I untangled her. Our truck flew through the warm Guatemalan night, and I pointed to the stars that spread like lights on a dome ceiling.

“I always wondered if I’d be able to see Orion from another country.”

“What’s Orion?” she asked, looking blankly at the sky.

“See the belt and his hands and legs extending.”

Our tail lights turned dust red.

“That’s the Tortuga. Well, in Argentina.” She drew invisible lines in space and the stars became a turtle. “You see those three stars that shape into a triangle,” she said.

“That’s the three Marias. The Mayans believe that’s where the universe was created.”

“Beautiful,” I said.

Our backs were against the cab, and I told her about living life like a movie.
“Life should be special. Now don’t look forward. Imagine the truck isn’t moving.
Imagine everything else is moving.” And we both felt like we were static and the rest of
the world was moving below us.

Chapter XVI. Dead Uncle Reserve

“In an artistic collaboration, one painter leaves a white space in the painting, also called a reserve, for the second artist to fill in.”

The painting hung above our dining room table, ordinary as a clock. My mother prayed out loud with her hands folded underneath her chin, while Benjamin closed his eyes to pretend like he was trying. I quit trying a long time ago. I had already started eating. At the center of the table, Advent-wreath candles slumped close to the end of their wick. The flames danced our silhouettes along the walls, and wax dripped onto the plastic table cover.

It was winter break my senior year of college. I would graduate in the spring. I was home. Outside snow silently hammered down upon our neighborhood, covering our windows, our cars, and our doors, keeping us all inside. I was thinking about clearing the snow away from the front door, then the driveway, and finally unfreezing my car. The heat hardly worked in my '94 Subaru station wagon, and my hands would freeze against the steering wheel. But if I cleared away the snow, then I could just drive without any direction.

“Either of you two going to say anything?” my mother asked.

“I’m finished,” Benjamin said. Dropping his plates in the sink, he ran quickly upstairs. He had grown up since I’ve been at college. It was strange. He had become quiet. He was so excited that I was home, but I could tell there was something different. I figured he started to become aware that he needed to leave Clinton, too. I figured he

knew that he still had to wait and suffer through his time. I wished I could have sped things along for him.

After Benjamin left, the silence grew thicker. Our family dinners had been awkward and silent for a very long time. Looking for something to say, I started looking at the painting above our table again. I pointed at the painting and asked, “Who painted that?”

Between its copper frame, a vase weighs down upon a grass field and a ray of light cuts the painting diagonally. The light divides the painting into the softer images of peach blossoms, red petals, and anemones, versus the harsher images of the rusted vase and the paint chips falling over onto the grass. The colors made me feel warm. The moment of the painting seemed to be continuous and alive.

“That’s Uncle Conrad’s painting. You don’t remember him?”

“Not really.”

At the time, I could only recall Uncle Conrad’s giant-garlic nose and his fluffy-gray eyebrows. I couldn’t even remember how he was related to us. I knew he was Mimi’s sister’s, Aunt Sophie, husband. I did remember my mother stopping at his former house on the way to meet Aunt Cindy that first time we met her out in Queens. But I didn’t want to bring that up. Aunt Cindy and my mother weren’t getting along.

“That was Conrad’s wedding gift to me. Don’t you remember when we went to pick it up?”

“Sort of,” I replied.

My mother said—“That was a wedding gift. I never received it until four years after your father and I were married. It symbolizes love. But now it just reminds me of

divorce. When Conrad finally finished the painting, he was living by himself out in Flushing. It was some 15 years Sophie died. He wouldn't leave the city. So I decided to drive up there with you and get the painting. I loved his work.

“We drove through the city in your father's '83 Volkswagen Fox Station Wagon. You loved driving beneath the train tracks that sliced through the skyscrapers. You loved playing with building blocks, and you kept talking about how the city was built.” She sipped from her drink. “You were always so smart. You were so impressed by the city. You loved it.”

That's when the memory hit me. We had walked beneath the shadow of Shea Stadium, the grounded saucers in Corona Park, and the steel-world Unisphere from the 1964 World's Fair. Before we arrived at Conrad's apartment, my mother made me promise that I wouldn't bring up Sophie. I didn't know why, but I promised anyway. Later I found out when someone mentioned Sophie, Conrad had spells similar to someone with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He would lock himself up for days, painting a different body part on separate canvases. In order to engage with Conrad after Sophie's death, it was imperative to walk around his memories.

On the outside, Conrad's apartment was like the rest on the block; but nothing could have prepared me for the inside. The black-steel door to his row-home apartment swung open and Conrad stood in the doorway. He looked like he was fading. His apartment stank of black-licorice Sambuca. Once we got past the smell, the walls completely disappeared behind his paintings. The room was an oeuvre of work that I could have jumped into. Colors everywhere without forms to contain them; paintings jumping across their frameworks. Another universe flowed within his apartment: an

illusion of a real place. In fact, what was once normal and domestic became strange: the brass lamps, a corduroy brown couch, and a wooden kitchen table with a coaster underneath one leg to keep it from wobbling. Even the table could have passed for a still life: tea cups stained with purple wine rings, copper plates covered in bread crumbs, and broken walnut shells scattered across the table. My mother told me Uncle Conrad used to crush those walnuts with his bare hands.

“Conrad was such a character,” my mother said. “I wish you could remember him better. You would have loved him.”

The wind had started to pick up and snow blew outside our window in flumes. The shutters slammed against the aluminum siding, and I hoped that the power would stay on.

“Was he famous?” I asked.

“He painted for NBC studios, but most of his work was backdrops for movies. Sophie used to say that Joe Szack, Conrad’s boss, stifled his career.”

Though Conrad’s painting started out as a simple ice breaker, his work became my obsession. I never thought it could be possible that someone from my family could make it as an artist. My mother always talked about being a singer, but that seemed like a delusion. I wanted to know everything about him. The rest of the night, my mother told me story after story until much later when the snow stopped.

Uncle Conrad and Sophie were so dear to my mother. I met Conrad only once, and in my memories he was a faded image. He was somewhere in my unconscious, however. I could pull him out. And the body of his work and my mother’s stories revealed a person I would have loved to have known.

As a child, my mother used to sneak down to the adult section of Mimi and Poppy's parties in Fairfield, Connecticut, to be near Conrad and Sophie. One time, my mother had told me, when Frank Sinatra's "I Like to Lead When I Dance" played on Mimi's record player, Conrad told his legendary story of Raquel Welch. The moment Conrad started telling his story, the whole party moved downstairs. Children were forbidden. But no one noticed my mother.

Working at NBC provided Conrad with such great experiences. He normally painted backdrops—he even did the work in the original *Stepford Wives* movie—but one day for a photo shoot for a movie promotion, he painted Raquel Welch's breasts. You know how sometimes women don't wear any clothes but use the paint to cover up their exposed areas not appropriate for popular consumption? Well, Uncle Conrad got to put that paint on her bare breasts.

"That was a great day," Conrad said as the party in the basement roared with laughter. Some people knew the story by heart; for others, it was their first time. "I wish you all could have seen my face when Joe Szack came and told me. I couldn't believe he didn't take the job himself."

"I don't believe you, Conrad!" Poppy yelled, holding a glass with ice and a brown liquor, trying to egg Conrad on. Poppy loved this story more than anyone.

"It's true. I swear to Zeus. Ms. Welch came right into the set, stripped, and revealed her movie-star breasts. So, I just took out my paint brush and went to work putting paint on her nipples. Real professional, of course." When Conrad told his stories, he wildly used his hands, dancing up and down along the crowd, as if herding them all closer towards the center of the room. "Then she screamed, 'Hurry up!' I had to

stop for a second and look up at her. ‘I’m just trying not to hurt you, Miss. Welch.’ She was fidgeting like crazy—completely impatient. She knew I was enjoying it. The paint was sort of cold.” He told this part to a room that held onto his words like floatation devices. “She kept messing up the paint. I finally had to tell her, ‘Miss. Welch, I’m deeply sorry, but now I’ll have to begin again. You’ve just moved too much.’ She threw an absolute fit. But I wet a sponge, wiped her nipples clean, and started all over again.”

Poppy had his shoulder around Mimi. She was beautiful when she was younger. Poppy said, “I heard Ms. Welch is a very nice woman.”

“Don’t ruin the story, Ray.”

The party burst out laughing again. Nobody cared if it was true or not.

“Hey, Sophie,” one of Mimi’s cousins called out. “What do you think of all this?”

To my grandparents, early 1970’s, rollovers-from-the-fifties, married friends, this was shocking and uncontrolled behavior—though incredibly intriguing and entertaining.

“It’s art. So it’s all right.”

The room opened to an onslaught of bickering.

“I would not let my husband do that.”

“No way. She is too curvy.”

“I won’t even let my husband see her movies.”

“Hold your horses everyone.” Conrad easily silenced the crowd. My young mother was still watching from the stairway. “I haven’t finished. The thing about Ms. Welch was that she really looks great from far away, especially in all her movies; but up close, she’s all plastic. And I still—without a doubt in the world—have the most

beautiful woman.” Conrad strutted over to Sophie and kissed the bandana that covered her bald head. Aunt Sophie was battling breast cancer. She had chemo. She was very strong.

The party continued with upper middle-class married couples sipping on Manhattans and martinis, dragging on their safe and social cigarettes, pontificating on anything but politics and religion—mostly Mrs. Applebee's pot roast and Mr. Czeskny's new Caddy. And of course, Conrad would never be an accessory to such social awkwardness. At this point in the party, Conrad would always escape.

Conrad somehow slipped out of my mother's sight. She couldn't find Conrad or Sophie anywhere in the party. So she grabbed her two cousins, Lisa and Michelle, and went to search for him throughout the neighborhood. After about five minutes, they found Uncle Conrad and Sophie down the street, sitting under a maple tree in someone else's front yard, singing. The girls sat down around them Indian style. “Tell us a story, Uncle Conrad,” pleaded Michelle.

“Okay. I have a good one.” Conrad sprung to his feet. “I can remember being born. Do you, girls?”

“Come on, Uncle Conrad! Nobody can remember being born,” my young mother said as she plucked grass from the lawn and threw it into Conrad's face.

“Of course I do, Doll.” She loved that Conrad called her doll. While brushing the grass out of his hair, Conrad continued: “I remember every part of my life.” Conrad looked back at Sophie to make sure he could finish his story. And with Sophie's approval, Conrad lowered his head to where the girls leaned as if into a secret. “I remember swimming in my mother's womb.”

“Gross, Conrad!” The girls screamed, stumbled a little bit standing up, and ran back into the party with their hands flopping wildly above their heads. At least that’s how I imagined it.

*

Before I started talking to my mother about Conrad, I never really paid attention to the paintings around my house. They were nothing more than domestic decorations. Some of the paintings were prints, of Monet’s, ‘Le Bassin d’Argenteuil,’ Seurat’s, “La Grande-Jette,” and a few Renoirs. All the women Renoir painted kind of looked like my mother. But most of the other paintings around the house, it turned out, were actually painted by Uncle Conrad. Most of Conrad’s work was strange, surreal, really out there. The flower pot he painted for my mother was actually one of the first paintings of flowers he ever did. I guess he figured painting flowers was a bit passé. Once I took the time to look, the contrast between the impressionist landscapes and Conrad’s abstract explosions caused his paintings to pop at the eyes. Some of them really came from another planet. There was this one painting that was just a side of a face with red lips and slits for eyes; the hair looked like a bird’s nest—a distorted face floated in a void. The face connected to the ground by a tree trunk.

With each one of Conrad’s paintings that I found, I began to connect my mother’s stories to his work. There was this one painting I found deep in one of the downstairs closets. It blazed with reds and oranges, almost like Conrad painted a fire. However, I slowly noticed that the colors had a definite shape. The reds and oranges were not out-of-control flames, but rather defined leaves.

Conrad painted that particular piece some time after Sophie finished chemo. The cancer had come back. He desperately wanted to paint the fall leaves in the Mohegan Woods near my Mimi and Poppy's house so he could bring back the colors for Sophie. They used to sneak off together in those woods. They called them, "an antidote to reality." But this year, Sophie was too weak to handle the drive from Flushing to Fairfield to see the foliage. Tentatively, my grandparents and my mother dropped him off at the entrance to the forest. It was around noon—Conrad had actually meant to be there by seven in the morning.

"What time should we pick you up?" my grandparents asked.

"Don't worry about it," Conrad yelled back.

"Conrad, I'll come with you," said my mother from the car window. "I won't say a word while you paint. I promise. I'll be good. I promise."

"Don't worry, Doll. I'll be just fine."

They all watched as Conrad faded into the woods on fire with the colors of autumn and with his easel that looked like he carried a cross and paint brushes cradled under his arms. Everyone in the car felt uneasy. And sure enough, at around eight at night, as my grandparents sat down to their usual chamomile tea and cinnamon-buttered rye bread, rain started to pelt their roof. They strapped into their green Oldsmobile and drove on the outskirts of the woods screaming—"Conrad, Conrad"—as if to some lost little boy.

Later that night, Conrad ended up at the door of some old woman's house, standing on her doorstep, soaking wet with his gray wings of hair matted down against his olive forehead. He begged the old woman for shelter. She called the cops. The

woman thought he was trying to be fresh with her because Conrad was wearing nothing except his underwear. He had taken off the rest of his clothes to protect his painting from the rain.

*

I had the entire family search through their homes, their garages—anywhere one of Conrad’s works might have been hiding. Uncle Conrad couldn’t sell his paintings, so he just gave them to close friends and members of his family. My father found one in his attic and brought it to me like an ancient artifact. He must have ended up with one of Conrad’s paintings after the divorce. His work had been treated like pieces of furniture. It was a shame. There was a little bit of snow around the frame. On the back of the painting, Conrad had written: “Sophie and Conrad’s first date.” Their first date was already legend throughout the family. My grandmother used to tell it to make sure everyone knew how cheap Conrad was. Of course, they were joking around.

Their first date, Conrad took Sophie to a Korean-owned grocery store. They were both 22, but Sophie lived with her family; and Conrad was dead broke living by himself.

“Why are we here?” Sophie asked as they stood in a line of elderly people holding onto their carts instead of their canes.

“Come on, just trust me.”

Inside the aisles were cramped and could only fit one person at a time. Holding up the whole line, an old man shuffled through with his cart. The cart’s wheels creaked with each rotation and someone joked, “Is that the cart, or his bones?” Everywhere, old women complained: “Get a move on, Buddy.” “We don’t have all day, here.” One lady turned towards Conrad and said, “Someone needs to direct traffic,” as if expecting

Conrad to do something about it. And at the back, an old woman haggled with the shopkeepers on the price of Matzo. “Special price for you,” the shopkeeper said, “1.99.” Conrad showed Sophie the box; it was listed at “1.99.”

Over the Korean and Yiddish words mixing, someone called out, “Bonjour, Conrad.”

“Ca va, Henri.” The two men hugged like long-forgotten friends. They talked in French; Conrad’s accent was perfect. Conrad was trying to impress Sophie. And she knew it. But it worked. He was a charmer.

“You speak French?” Sophie asked. “But you’re Italian.”

“So what? I just kind of picked it up. By the way, Henri, this is Sophie.”

Henri looked at Sophie and said to Conrad in French, “What an amazingly beautiful lady. You are a lucky man. Maybe you should keep this one.” Henri laughed.

“What’s he saying?” Sophie asked.

“Just French gibberish,” Conrad said. He punched Henri in the arm.

“Sophie, did you know,” Henri said, “Conrad is my first friend in this country. He got me this job. What a wonderful place, no?”

Old women were shuffling their feet like a needle dragging across a record. Koreans and Eastern-Europeans struggled to find a common ground in English, groups of transplanted people searching for the food of their home country, all with only the city in common. It was a carnival of language and culture.

“Yes, this is a very strange place. A very original date.”

“Here, Conrad.” Henri gave them a baguette and a bottle of wine. “Your usual.”

For years, Conrad lived on wine and bread. Said it was all he could afford. He placed the wine in a brown bag and they walked around the Queens of 1957, strolling the lamp-lit streets, breaking pieces of the bread and drinking the wine.

“Sophie, tell me something nobody else knows about you.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you stole money from your grandmother’s purse before you went to school, or that maybe you count a 100 times when you chew, or maybe, just maybe, you killed a man.”

“Conrad—you know very well I’m not capable of killing a man.”

“Well, all right.” Conrad stopped in the middle of his steps. “How about if you could do anything every day when you woke up, regardless of money, or responsibilities, what would it be?”

“It’s hard to imagine life without responsibilities.”

“Well, just try.”

“I’d probably play music. Chopin, Cole Porter, Monk. I would try my best to learn each of their sounds.”

“That’s great Sophie. Just great. Just what I wanted to hear.”

Conrad was truly a romantic, and as they found themselves lost and tired, he convinced Sophie to come back home with him. His first apartment was above a movie theater, and as they walked up the wooden stairs, the lights from the marquee lit up Conrad and Sophie in neon colors. There was nothing inside except a mattress, a table, a few sketches and water-colors Conrad had been working on, and in the corner, a brown-upright piano. The piano’s legs looked wilted.

“I know it’s not much,” Conrad said waving his hand across the room. “But it’s a start.”

“Do you play the piano?” Sophie asked.

“The people before just left it. Would you like to play?”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“You’re embarrassed? What is there to be embarrassed about music?”

“Well, would you paint for me?”

“Of course.”

Sophie opened the case to the upright piano to a long creak, and as she sat down on the bench, it sounded like a congregation falling into their pews. Sophie let the beginning chords of “Summertime” fall from her fingertips. Then she started to sing. The marquee lights went out and all the neon disappeared. Now the only lights that shown through his apartment was a small candle on a coffee saucer and the rays barging through the cracks of the blinds from the moon. The candle danced its shadow across the walls.

The piano was out of tune. The pedal stuck to the floor and the notes ran together. But somehow, Sophie still created beautiful music. Conrad watched the notes vibrate from her fingers and her throat, and to the slow rhythm of “Summertime,” he painted a woman and a man standing below a yellow moon. The woman, her hands resting on her hips, faces the man, and blue streaks of oil paint flow around her, spreading from her body like waves of blue electricity.

“That’s beautiful, Sophie.” Conrad looked at her sitting on the piano, staring back at him, illuminated by only the moon and the candle. “You play with the rhythm of an ocean.”

From that night on, Sophie could be seen in all of Conrad’s work. And indeed she was seen in everything that once hung as wall paper in Flushing and my mother’s flower vase: the red-lipped petals, the salt and pepper curls of the baby’s breath falling over onto grass, and the slim top of the vase that curved like hips. And as I started to think about loves between Conrad and Sophie, Mimi and Poppy, I thought of Heron. We had been dating for a year and a half then, and I sometimes wondered if I should explore the world and meet other women. In order to love, I would make mistakes, understand great pain, confront myself, and one day, lose that love just like Conrad would lose Sophie and Poppy would lose Mimi. It seemed impossible to love without feeling incredible pain.

*

I ran my hand along the thick, curling-blue paint strokes that flow around the woman. The man watched in awe. The waves were music; I just knew it.

“Dad, look here,” I said. “All this blue paint is music. Can’t you see it? And there’s Sophie.”

My father reexamined the painting and said bluntly: “No. No way. How could that be music? It’s just blue paint.”

I could understand how my father disagreed with my interpretations. But to me, the paintings made perfect sense. It even made me feel like the images in my own mind were not due to a chemical imbalance. His paintings reflect a deep connection—but at the same time a dark isolation—with the beauty Conrad saw all around him. All those

contorted images reflected his attempt to find the most beautiful thing in his own life. Each brush stroke expressed a mood, each color a tone, all which harmonized to create a timeless image that extend beyond the frame.

“It is a beautiful painting though,” my father said. “Your imagination is much like Conrad’s.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Dad.”

*

I was on the prowl for more of Conrad’s paintings. When my grandparents died, they left my mother, Benjamin, and me their condo in Ridgefield. For two years, we didn’t even consider going over there. We had to clean it and put it on the market. It was a final send-off we were not ready for, but on the hope that Conrad’s paintings would still be there, I convinced Benjamin and my mother to go. My mother was still struggling with their deaths, but she seemed to be simply grieving and not losing it again. When we arrived, we had to shovel the snow just to reach the front door. It was as if two years of dust had collected in their front yard.

However, once we were inside, everything in the house was still the way it was when my grandparents were alive. The bed was made, the house surprisingly still had that clean-linen smell, and the electricity, heat, and air conditioning still worked. I thought those things just automatically turned off when someone died, but my mother continued to pay the bills with the money she inherited. If she shut off the heat, the pipes would freeze.

We hoarded little tokens from our grandparents’ treasure. My brother beat me to an old German mug that Poppy had brought back from Oktoberfest. I grabbed an original

Ray Charles record, “What’d I Say” and an original record by Perry Como—the barber turned singer that my grandmother adored. Even my mother came across a couple of songs that she wrote as a child. But when I went upstairs to the attic, I stumbled upon the ocean and the sky clashing together in a rectangular-wooden frame. Everything else became unimportant.

We finished and drove home. I held the smashing ocean and the electric purple sky on my lap. When we got home, I hung it above my bed. I stared into it imagining my Uncle Conrad painting that ocean. I traced my fingers over the paint strokes to feel what he felt. On the back was written 1972, the year Sophie died.

*

The night after Sophie died, the rain showered down like glass bottles smashing. Nobody had seen Conrad since the hospital. Mimi kneeled down in front of a crucifix, holding onto her rosary beads, praying for Sophie to be accepted into heaven. After she stopped praying, she found some clean linen and boiled some water for tea. They were all preparing for Conrad; it was only a matter of time before he showed up at their house. Poppy diagrammed rough drafts for what he would say to Conrad on a sheet of paper: “It hurts now, Conrad...” or “God wanted her up there,” or “One day, you’ll see that this happened for a reason.” My mother was in her room writing a song.

Then there was a knock at the door and the whole house became still. My mother ran and opened the door to Uncle Conrad standing in the rain, smelling of black licorice and wearing his fading painting overalls. Wet mud clung to his shoes and he tracked it over the peach-coiled carpet. He sat down in front of Poppy at the dining-room table, while my grandma ran around the house trying to dry his clothes and prepare the table.

She gave Conrad a cup of tea and some sugar, but she forgot a spoon. She went to grab one, but Uncle Conrad just stirred the scolding-hot tea with his index finger, staring into the twirling-brown cup. Poppy was about to begin his prepared speech, but Conrad started first.

“You know, four days ago I laid next to her in our bed. She was beautiful until the end. I wanted her. She laughed, trying to fight against me. But I wanted to make love to her just one last time,” Conrad explained, still stirring the tea with his finger. Mimi stopped in the doorway and my sixteen-year-old mother hid behind the living room chair.

“I understand, Conrad,” Poppy said. “Sometimes, Conrad...”

Mimi placed some walnuts down in front of Conrad. He loved walnuts.

“I kept after her. It wasn’t much of a game though. She could hardly move. All I wanted to do was make love to my beautiful wife one more time. She was just too weak. So I propped her up against the pillows, and I sat down by her side. I looked up at her and she smiled as the sun broke through the cracks of the blinds and rested above my eyebrows, revealing silver dust flying between our bodies. She had the softest blue eyes.”

“It will be okay, Conrad. We’re here for you.”

“No, Ray!” Conrad crunched a walnut in his bare hands. “She’s gone.”

*

After I found the painting of the ocean, I stayed up all night staring at his painting above my bed. Papaya whip swirling into tangerine yellow, bleeding into red maple, and coiling around midnight blue—the ocean ebbed and flowed upon the shore. There was

no beach in the painting; but it had the effect that the ocean crashed against the bottom of the wooden frame. The sky bled purple through grayish-blue clouds, and it was almost impossible to tell where the sky ends and the ocean begin. But in the middle of the painting, far off towards the horizon, is a black nothingness—a space that can only be seen through careful inspection. The spot where the sky and the ocean are supposed to touch. But in that void, neither in the sky nor upon the waves, floated two white sails. So small that compared to the vastness of the sky and the mystic ocean, the sail boats seemed inconsequential. Although without the sails pointing to the sky, there would be no way to tell what was up, and what was down.

*

With Sophie's death, Uncle Conrad took on more hours with NBC painting back- drops. However, any free moment Conrad had he spent painting Sophie. The paintings were abstract and, except for the titles, no one could tell that it was supposed to be Sophie. In each painting since her death, including the white sails, a solid-white form started to emerge as a constant. It was usually in the middle of long-stroked colors. The rhythms were always so fast compared to the resting white form. They were influenced by Kandinsky's studies.

One night, by himself in his fading apartment, Conrad painted a clown. The dimensions of the clown's face seemed as if gravity pulled the top of his head toward the sky, the left side out like a swollen cheek, and the right side flat. If someone turned their head to the side and focused on the left side of the face, the painting would then resemble a woman pregnant in the likeness of the Virgin Mary.

After a fight with Joe Szack at NBC, Conrad quit and devoted all his time to redrafting abstract paintings of Sophie. He wanted Sophie to be remembered. After two months of intensive work, he showed up at the Guggenheim with Sophie under his arms. The interns at the back entrance looked at Conrad and his gray-winged hair and told him that no one can just walk into the Guggenheim and expect them to hang up his paintings.

Two weeks later, Conrad called my mother while I was in the living room building toy log-cabins. He told her about the Guggenheim, and my mother told him those interns couldn't understand love. Conrad was much older now. It had been about 18 years since Sophie died.

"Conrad, where have you been? You don't return anyone's phone calls. We've been worried."

"Doll, tell me something?"

"Like what?" my mother asked.

"If you could do anything in the world when you woke up in the morning, regardless of responsibilities, what would it be?"

She answered without hesitation: "I'd play music."

"Just what I wanted to here."

"Why do you ask?"

"I love you very much. I hope you know that." Three days later, his neighbors found Conrad's self portrait hanging on his wall.

*

Staring into the void where the sailboats floated that night I hung his painting above my bed, I flipped and twirled in a sea of colors, and at last I begin to swim out towards the

sail boats. There, I saw Uncle Conrad and Sophie on the sail boat deck that resembled Caillebotte's peeling hardwood floor. Both sail boats were tied together. They were neither on the ocean nor in the sky. They just rested on the breeze at the end of the horizon. I climbed into the sail boat, and Conrad was telling stories to Sophie as she sang and colors flowed from her mouth and mixed into the sky. They turned to me. Conrad shook my hand. I became different shades of blue.

"You look like someone," Conrad said.

"I'm Sylva Tully's son."

Reaching up he cut a small section of the white sail and handed it to me.

"Keep this in reserve," he said. "I don't know what took you so long."

Chapter XVII. The Plow Truck

After discovering Conrad's paintings, I knew that I wanted to be an artist. But I couldn't be in Clinton. I had to see the world. Know what else was out there. And even though I was attending school in Florida, I was about to graduate, and it felt like Clinton was waiting to say, "See, I told you that you'd be back."

It all seemed to hit me the day of a terrible snowstorm. The powder had been falling for hours. I would be heading back to Florida in a week. There's a saying in Clinton, as Chip had told me, you may leave Clinton, but you'll always come back. I think it was said in a positive way, like some bullshit saying like home is where the heart is, but it sounded more like something parole boards said to threaten prisoners upon their release.

My buddy Chris Czermak and I were driving around in his plow truck, clearing the streets. I kept thinking of Mr. G and the car crash, but Czermak never drove too fast and was the most careful driver I had ever seen. He was being paid by the town of Clinton, and I had just come along for the ride. I've driven around the town in his plow truck before. It's strange how much history happened in this small town. Or at least how much history happened that we were all told to believe.

For example, Clinton was once rumored to have the record for the most bars per-capita in the *Guinness Book of World Records* until our town historian came and destroyed those boasting rights. Everyone in town was pretty happy with that fact, and most people still use it today, but it's a bunch of bullshit. Then there's Fuller Field.

Supposedly it's the oldest baseball diamond in the United States which dates back to 1878. Then there's the Wachusett Dam, the world's largest hand dug dam to have been constructed with just drills, picks, shovels, and immigrants from all over the world. No heavy machinery was used. Today, Clinton is mostly populated by people of Italian and Celtic decent, but recently there's been a boost in the population of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. So many different Latino immigrants moved to Clinton that some of the geniuses in the town started to call the town *Clinton Rico*. My first kiss was in 8th grade with a first-generation Puerto Rican girl named Jessica Estrada. It happened at my friend Justin Goulet's house on Woodruff Road. I didn't know it back then, but she had already had a child before she made me the happiest boy in the world. Then there's Prescott Mills Waterfall founded by John Prescott, the first settler of Clinton, dating back to 1654. I wonder how many Indians John Prescott killed. Of course back then, in 1654, Clinton was just a part of Lancaster. Clinton was incorporated in 1850. And there's the Bigelow Carpet Mill, the relic of the World's Largest Carpet Manufacturer, which just kind of takes up space now. Clinton has an old time movie theater called the Strand. And surprisingly, Clinton has the oldest public park in America dating back to 1852. Wait, that's a lie. I can't believe I used to actually believe that crap. And let's not forget, Clinton is the birthplace of the spork, invented by the Van Brode Company. But obviously none of this history made growing up there any more interesting. And now that I have been away from Clinton, I had a broader perspective, and saw that Clinton was a cog in an industrial machine, a place where people came to find work and the American Dream. How much of that was bullshit, too?

Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and Fredrick Douglas all lectured in Clinton. When Emerson visited, Clinton was only six months old. He called Clinton “Another Nosy Mart.” Whatever the fuck that means. On Mark Twain’s visit, he was obviously grumpy about his accommodations. He wrote: “Here I am in a hotel---the Clinton House---and a villainous one it is---shabby bed, shabby room, shabby furniture, dim lights---everything shabby and disagreeable.” I guess that is how I found Clinton when I returned home. And sitting in Czermak’s truck, driving down Main Street and staring at the old factories, I felt that America had blown past Clinton, left it in the age of the industrial revolution as a hallmark to the glorious days of work and mass production. There was a lot more out there than this town. I wasn’t going to die a lonely man here. My real home was somewhere out there.

When the snow was this bad, everyone was encouraged to stay home. Not Czermak. He always took work, and I could count on a phone call from him every time it snowed. Usually I said no (who really wants to spend his night in a plow truck?), but driving around in a plow truck sounded like a better option than being home in the house with my mother.

“You bring the coffee?” Czermak asked when I entered the truck.

“Of course,” I said, handing him the cup from Dunkin Donuts. I dusted snow off my skull cap and the shoulders of my winter jacket.

“It better be strong,” Czermak said. He took a gulp and wiped his mouth on the back of his Carhartt sweatshirt and gave me a smile. “You sure know how to make a drink for plowing.”

I shrugged. There was nothing special to it. I'd buy a large coffee, dump out half, and pour whiskey to the brim. Anyway tonight, I needed the coffee to be strong. I had an important question that I needed to ask Czermak—a tough question—and the booze would make it easier.

"I'm glad you like the drink," I said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a five.

"Don't worry about it," I said.

Czermak looked at me as if he knew I wanted something from him. The heat was on full blast, and the windshield wipers were going at full speed, swatting away snow. It had been about six months since we saw each other, and I started to punch him in the arm and he hit me back. That's the way our greetings usually went. We didn't really hug each other until the end of a long drinking night, and even then it was more like bumping chests and screaming than actual affection. But it was always obvious how happy we were to see each other. There's nothing like a hometown friend.

"I've been working for ten straight hours," Czermak said. "I haven't complained once."

"Why you working so much?" I asked. "I thought you would be handing down this job to the new grunts."

"Bills," he said.

"Why don't you just stop buying so much shit?"

Czermak owned a four wheeler, a Chevrolet truck, a boat, a couple guns, a snowmobile, and a whole bunch of other toys. Then to pay for it, he'd spent just about his entire life working multiple jobs. I never thought he had to, though I'm sure he would

argue otherwise. He worked as a bus boy down at Sylvester's, operated a crusher down at the junkyard across from the Dairy Queen, he'd been a Christmas tree salesman, a painter, a carpenter, a landscaper, a construction worker with the Damico's company. In fact, we used to work construction together sometimes when I returned from college on breaks. We would ride around in a two-ton dump truck completing landscaping and small construction jobs for rich people out in Concord. We worked for a company called "U-Relax." The owner ran the business out of his house. The taillights on the two-ton were broken, so I sometimes drove behind the truck in my Subaru wagon so no one crashed into the back of us. They trusted Czermak, though, so they let us go to the jobs by ourselves. And on the way to job sites, we would just be singing country in the front seat, telling stories about women, and counting down the hours in the day till we could go home. We worked hard, though. I didn't work as much as Czermak, truthfully, so his paychecks were always more. And on pay days, we usually went down to the Fung Wong, and I'd spend about a third of my money on beer and Chinese food. It felt good though. Nothing like a day's work.

"So," I said, "what's new in the town? Any good dirt?" I was trying to see how he would react to my questions. I wanted to gauge him to see if he knew anything about my family, but I couldn't just jump right into it. I'd scare him off. Pieces of gossip were valuable information and had to be approached like trading a rare commodity.

"Tully," Czermak said, "you're never going to believe this. Where I get my haircut, you know, from the guy who bought Tony's old barbershop, looks like Manny Ramirez?" He turned to check his blind spot on the left side of the truck and pulled into a narrow street where there were cars covered completely in snow. "He's been selling

weed for over a year. A shit load of it. Right out of the barbershop. The police have been staking him out and busted him the other day. Wicked crazy, huh?"

"Makes sense," I said. "Anything else?"

He shrugged.

We were driving down Main Street, passed Scooby's Bar, the tombstone store, the old train tracks with the black and white graffiti. The town was still. Every color seemed muted, and only music could brighten it up.

I kept trying to find some dirt just in case he let something slip about my mother. Something of a general clue to what pieces of my family's life were made public. One thing about Clinton is that everybody knew about everyone else. This is nothing strange for a small town, but when you have secrets to hide the best course of action is to make sure your family's name stays out of people's mouths. There have been plenty of fights that resorted from *overheard conversations*, and I was worried about my secrets and willing to fight to keep them a secret.

"You see any of the girls?"

"Things have changed, Tully." He jerked the plow up off the gravel and plunged it into a snow bank. "They're all thinking about getting married. And it makes me think it might be pretty nice just to find a girl and a small place in town."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said. "There's so much left for us to do. You don't want to get trapped in that bullshit."

"Why?" he said. He took a swig from the coffee. "That seems like the right step."

“Everyone around here gets married and stays here. What do they do with their lives?”

“You never thought about marrying Heron?”

Heron and I had been dating for a year and half, and I had started to feel the pressure of marriage. I believed I loved her and could spend my life with her, but I really had no concept of love back then. I thought marriage was an institutional prison. That’s nothing new. I looked at my parents’ marriage and their divorce and how much they hated each other, the products of the love generation, and it was impossible for me to see marriage in a positive light. It seemed to suck the life out of my parents’ dreams, leaving them as just husks of what they once wanted to be. In fact, I even wondered about monogamy. I wondered if humans were meant to be with one person. I wondered if love wasn’t simply a product of a chemical reaction created by hormones and meant nothing. Why not just enjoy the physical world to its fullest extent? Why not gather my god damn rose buds while I may?

I reached over and grabbed the drink out of Czermak’s hand. “It seems like there is only one step.” I looked inside the old Colonial and Victorian houses covered in snow as we passed, and I could see the televisions glowing. I never saw people, though. Just televisions playing to empty houses. “Maybe I’ll try and go somewhere this summer. Maybe I’ll go to a writing workshop. There’s this thing in Prague.”

“Prague?” Czermak asked. He looked out into the snow. “I can’t wait to get on that boat.”

Czermak loved to talk about his new boat. He’d worked hard for it, and I enjoyed talking about his 175XT Bay liner. He sold the old one, and buying a new boat made him

so excited. He worked his ass off for that and will be paying it off for a while. I respected his work ethic. But once he was out on the water, nothing mattered to him, not even how hard he had worked. He just drove that 17 ft. baby around all 28 acres of covered by the water in Mossy Pond after work. Czermak, Peto, and I would be out there, drinking beers and trolling around the pond, basically just shooting the shit. But I hated it when we tied up to Billy Flannigan's house boat and floated around with Czermak's older friends. I couldn't understand it, but he loved to hang out with men almost 10 to 15 years older than him. He was always trying to be older than he actually was.

The best times on the boat were at night after a long week of work. We just floated in the boat in the middle of the pond, drinking beer. I'd watch the shore line. The night and the shadows made the pond look like a charcoal sketch. I memorized every angle of that pond. Then he would turn on the lights on the deck, and the whole shore would disappear. Really, all of Clinton disappeared, and there was only us on the boat, and the feeling of floating on an empty horizon. I've never told him that. In fact, there were many things I never told Czermak. It seemed like he always knew about my mother's sickness—his brother was my high school teacher—and it never came up. Not once. There are just certain things that are impossible to admit.

"I can't think about the boat right now, man," I said, "with all this freaking snow."

Czermak dropped the plow again, and we fell silent in the truck. I wondered if I used to make him feel like he wasn't living the right way. I took a swig from the coffee.

"I need to ask you a question," I said.

Czermak dumped the pile of snow from his plow. He pulled the plow back down and turned the wipers off and lowered the heat. He put the dump truck in park. “What’s going on?”

“You hear any other gossip around town?” I asked.

He grabbed the coffee from my grip. “You’re trying to find out something,” he said. “Come right out with it.”

“Well,” I said, “have you heard anything about my mother?” I put the heat back on. “I mean—has anyone been talking about where she’s been? Because,” I said, “I hope you’ll squash whatever they say.”

He looked at me straight, and I can still see his crew cut, his grey sweatshirt, and his black eyes in front of me like a ghost. “I haven’t heard a thing.”

I couldn’t help it, but I wondered if he was lying. I never really thought of myself as being an outsider in Clinton, but I guess I was. There were just some things I would never know.

The snow was still coming down, and at this rate, Czermak would be plowing all night. I watched the snow cover the windows so we couldn’t see out. It was like we were being buried alive.

*

Czermak dropped me off at my mother’s place for dinner around 9 p.m. Usually there were Christmas lights tangled around the tree outside of our house, but my mother wasn’t feeling very festive this year.

I opened the door, and I saw the light on in the kitchen. I knew she would be sitting there, so I turned into the bathroom by the front door. Her house was always so

clean that just walking in the door somehow seemed to mess it up. When I went into the bathroom, I ran my cold hands under the hot water in the sink, and they began to sting from the change in temperature. This sting from the cold always reminded me of the time when my parents were still together, and no one talked about illness, and everything seemed fine, and I would come in from the snow, the cold still biting my ears. I remembered there always used to be hot chocolate. I hated winter for all its memories. In Florida, there were no reminders.

Walking down the hall to the kitchen, I noticed some reprints of paintings I hadn't seen in a while. She had them stored somewhere since the move seven years ago. Sure enough, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table, in her robe, running her finger over a ceramic coffee mug and listening to Christmas music on the radio. It surprised me that she was listening to holiday music. But maybe she wasn't listening to anything. She didn't hear me walk in. Her hair was short back then. In fact, it's always been short. Everyone said she was beautiful, but she had always buried those ideas away in the back of her mind and tortured herself with self-consciousness.

"In the Christmas mood?" I asked.

She turned around, as if shocked to see me. "James," she said. "I haven't really been listening." It looked like she had been crying. "You want something to eat?" she said.

"Where's Benjamin?"

I felt bad for Benjamin. He had to wait a couple more years to leave town. He reminded me of a firefly caught in a jar.

"Dinner will be ready soon," she said.

I saw Benjamin outside playing in the snow. He tossed a football in the air, and I imagined the ball getting stuck in the air and just floating there, rotating like a satellite around our home.

My mother stood up and walked to the stove. She said, “We’ve got cauliflower, mashed potatoes, and some chicken.”

“You need any help?”

I wanted to head upstairs without eating and watch some television to forget that I was home, but I couldn’t leave her by herself, watching Benjamin out the window as if he was a memory on loop. Benjamin had recently moved into my father’s house. We were all worried my mother was getting sick again. It seemed inevitable. It was winter.

Benjamin really only came over to my mother’s house when I was home. When I was at school, there was fight between them. The house seemed dangerous sometimes. And when we were at our mother’s house, we didn’t want to be there because it felt like we had to watch every word that we said so we didn’t set her off. It felt like reporting for duty rather than spending time with family.

“How long has he been out there?” I asked.

She pointed to the radio. Nat King Cole was singing *The Christmas Song*. “This was Poppy’s favorite song.”

“I’ll call Benjamin for dinner?” I knew what would happen if we kept talking about Poppy and Mimi. I wanted to change the subject. I remembered when Mimi died. How my mother held onto Mimi’s cold body in the hospital bed and stroked her forehead as if she was trying to caress the life back into the body. “Benjamin will probably want soda with dinner.”

“Poppy thought Nat King Cole had the most beautiful voice,” she said.

It had been about two years since my grandparents died. I asked, “Should we put up the Christmas tree after dinner?”

“They’re dead, James,” my mother said. “They’re dead.”

“Let’s try another station.”

She moved away from the stove and stared out the window at Benjamin.

“They’re dead. They’re dead. They’re dead.”

“I’m not,” I said.

Chapter XVIII. Sacrifice

It was June 4th when my father and I visited Normandy. We were on the TGV from Paris, and my father had his arm wrapped around the back of my seat. He pointed out the train window at the Normandy countryside. My hometown seemed so distant.

“Think of the history,” my father said. “Just think of all this history.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Try and imagine,” my father said, “the hours spent working in the fields. Try and imagine the sweat and blood of their work. Try and imagine what it was like for those American boys about to launch a massive aquatic invasion.” He placed his hand on the cool window. “All for our freedoms.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m trying.”

I was really trying. I wanted to envision what he saw so I could understand him, but all I perceived was a quilt of gray clouds over the farmlands and the occasional old home. The wind was rocking Normandy and the rain ran in streaks across the train window. I tried to imagine and witness—all at once—the history. But it just wasn’t happening.

Last month, I graduated college and received a grant to study and live in Europe. I got into the Prague writing program, too. I was 21. I asked my father to come with me on the beginning of the trip. We would travel around France together, and he would leave me in Nantes after two weeks. The reason I asked him to accompany me was

because we had grown apart since my parents' divorce and my mother's illness. I wanted to reconnect with him.

And because I asked him to come along, I chose where I wanted to visit first—Paris and Amsterdam—but I picked Normandy for the last part of the trip because my father loved to study World War II. He loved to read the letters of Churchill and *D-Day* by Stephen Ambrose, really anything he could get his hands on about the *greatest generation*. I, however, could care less about war. My father thought heroes sacrificed their own lives for the 'greater good' (we'd been to at least 20 Civil War battlefields), but I loved musicians and artists and philosophers and pacifists. My father wanted to walk around the graves at the memorial at Omaha Beach, and I wanted to hang out at the Van Gogh Museum, walk along the Seine, and, maybe, go to the red light district in Amsterdam. He wanted to understand the reality of war. I was happy ignoring it. But I thought going to the beaches of Normandy, putting up with the boring history, would be a way for my father and me to reestablish our friendship.

The WW2 generation, for my father, was the greatest generation. He was in his twenties during Vietnam. My father was never in any war, and I wondered if his devout study of violence, as I thought about it, had something to do with a guilt for not being a part of those wars. I had no guilt. I thought the best generation was the 60s—the feeling of revolution, real change. The rebellion against violence. When I told my father this, he said that I didn't understand sacrifice.

My father was still staring out the window, watching history take place before his eyes, when he said, "The weather was just like this back in 44."

He talked like he was at D-Day, but he'd never even fired a gun, as far as I know. My father's war would have been Vietnam, but he had a high lottery number. Our family never had any ownership of an American war. Iraq and Afghanistan sure didn't feel like real wars anyways. My grandfather wasn't in WW2 either, and he never told me why his father wasn't in the war. I finally worked up the courage to ask him on that train ride.

"Why was your father not in the war?" I asked

"He had a job at home," he said. "He manned the spotlights over Philly."

"You think he felt ashamed?"

My father ignored the question and turned down the aisle as if looking for a waitress. Then he pointed to the other window on the other side of the train. "Could you imagine waiting out there in the sea for Eisenhower's orders?" he asked. "Think about all those men—your age—floating in boats. The weather was so bad Eisenhower postponed the invasion."

"Why would he postpone it?" I just kept feeding him questions. I knew he wanted to talk about the war, and I had to pretend like I cared.

"Well, they wouldn't have been able to land. Plus," he said, "there were mines everywhere."

"Wow," I said, trying to pay attention while I wrote in my journal. "Mines."

"There was this guy named Hobart." He brought his espresso to his lips and took a sip. I heard him inhaling as if he was tasting wine. "They called his tanks Hobart's Funnies. He had this one tank that thrashed the ground with these spinning arms made of metal chains, churning the soil like rotor-tillers and detonating buried mines."

Whenever a train passed in the opposite direction, heading towards Paris or Amsterdam, I felt a great burst of sound in my gut.

“They were scavenger tanks,” he said.

“Like lobsters,” I said. “Like a Miro painting.”

When I brought up surrealist painters, or any type of artist, my father looked at me like I was turning into one of those kids who wears berets and recites poetry about feeling bad for having a penis, or some shit like that. Sure, my father could walk through a museum and appreciate the art, or talk about Hemingway or Bob Dylan, but he never thought that his son could be an artist. Art had no practical applications to him. There was no money there. How could you eat on art? It was probably around the time my mother got sick for the first time when I stopped looking like the son he imagined—the kid with the baseball glove in his hand and the *yes sir* smile pasted to his face.

A message played over the train’s speakers and my father asked me to translate. I studied French before I graduated. My father didn’t know any of it, and the only reason I was learning French was for our trip and to impress Heron, and so when we were looking for the beaches, I could ask directions. But my father said it was good for me anyway. Think of the history in the language of diplomacy and love. Everything with him was think of the god damn history. I heard that mantra so many times it became just a word as commonplace as butter or mayonnaise. History. What the hell could that mean?

“Next stop, Bayeux,” I said, translating the message.

“That’s us,” he said. “Get your stuff.”

As we slowed down before Bayeux, I could see a boy, maybe two years younger than I was, sitting on a fence in the rain watching our train. He was on a work break. His

hoe was laid against the fence, and his dog jumped up and down and wagged his tail. The fence was made out of pieces of wood and a small stone wall. I envied that boy for what seemed like a simple and normal life. But, really, we were both the same young man.

“Doesn’t this bring a tear to your eye?” my father asked. “To think of the freedom we brought back to this land.”

“Dad.” I pointed to the French people in the seats across from us. “They’re staring.”

“Let them.”

“But maybe war isn’t something you should talk about,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked.

The couple looked at my father and whispered something in French that I couldn’t quite catch. I didn’t want to be one of those Americans who flocked to the beaches of Normandy like it was a patriotic Mecca, ignoring that people actually lived there, forgetting the pain some people might actually feel who saw their families die and their houses explode.

When we came to the station, people were waiting for their train on the quay. They were expressionless. It struck me strangely, thinking that people went to work in the mornings in a place like Normandy. It was strange to see them looking at their watches, boarding a train to bring them to their jobs. It’s hard to imagine going to work in a city that was so recently filled with violence. You think they would have just said screw work after that.

The train reached our stop, and my father and I grabbed our bags from the top rack. Many people got off at this stop, and the rain was still coming down. When we first got off the train, the breeze felt like it seeped into my skin. The train left us off in a cobbled-stone courtyard. There was a barn next to the parking lot. We had no idea where we were, and we needed to find a bus to bring us to the rental car.

“At 0016 hours,” my father said, “Lieutenant Den Brotheridge will have died.”

“We should find the bus,” I said.

“Den was the first allied soldier killed by enemy fire,” he said. “He was shot in the neck.”

I thought about how it would feel to be shot in the neck, gasping for air and holding my hands outstretched, asking for help.

“Dad,” I said. “What are we looking for here?”

“A bus to Bayeux. Ask around.”

Because I spoke French, I had to be the one to find out all the directions. I was struggling. What they teach you in school is very different than how French is actually spoken. The first time I heard someone say “Oui” with an inhale, I thought they were choking. There was a couple by their car in the parking lot, and I ran out of my covering and over to them. I put on my Red Sox ball cap to keep the rain out of my face. The breeze was whizzing by, and I had to hold my hat onto my head. They were standing by their Fiat.

“Excuse me,” I said in my terrible French. “Where is bus for Bayeux?”

There wasn't a train station in Bayeux. We needed a bus that would take us to the rental car station. The couple looked at me strange, but the woman smiled from one corner of her mouth. I must have sounded like a dog with peanut butter on his tongue.

"Je ne sais pas," the man who wore a trench coat said. Then the man said something else I couldn't understand. The woman he was with started to laugh. She was pretty. She had black hair, and I wanted to speak to her. Her lips were thin, and her eyes were large. She didn't mind being in the rain. She seemed to rather enjoy it.

"Peut-etre," I said, "you know where is a auto." I was trying to ask where the rental car station was, but all I knew how to say was auto. I had no idea how to say rental in French.

The man shook his head, and the woman laughed.

"Merci," I said, turning around to run back under the awning of the train station. On the other side of the parking lot, I saw my father trying to speak to a French couple. He stood in the middle of the courtyard, rain drenching his hat and running down over his nose. He used elongated hand motions as if he was a symphony conductor and, and by using his sign language, he was trying to tap into an ancient lexicon by waving his hands and drawing imaginary objects with his fingers. Now he was making out a gun with his hand, as if to signify Omaha Beach. The two men he was talking to walked away rather quickly.

"Any luck?" my father asked.

"No," I said. "It doesn't seem like it went well for you either."

"These Frenchies sure are pretty rude."

"You're not speaking their language," I said.

I felt a gust of wind through the opening in my jacket. I grabbed my cap. My father's hat blew off, and I watched him chase after it, stumbling over the cobbled streets.

*

It took us four or five hours to find the bus, our rental car, and finally, the hotel. Once we found our rental car and arrived in downtown Bayeux, I was struck by the magic of the town. It's hard to describe what I mean now, but the historic architecture and the cobblestone streets made me feel if this small town could survive Hitler and a World War, if the spirit could still be intact, maybe this civilization actually had a chance.

Before bed, my father and I found a restaurant on the main drag. He ordered a carafe of red wine, and he offered me a glass. This was the first time we would drink together. His offering was a big deal and signaled, maybe, that my father saw me as a man. He never allowed me to drink before, and he always said that he'd never been drunk in his life. (I never believed him.)

Over dinner he talked about history and how excited he was to see the American Cemetery tomorrow. We tried escargot, rabbit, and moules. My father thought it was better than anything we had in Paris, and I felt like a great adventurer for the first time on this trip, sampling gourmet cuisine and drinking fine wine.

I started to talk to my father about women. I wanted to know what he thought about the opposite sex. So I told him that I was interested in black women, hoping he would share his interests. I traced an invisible outline, the ancient lexicon he had used before, above the table with my hands of how I saw a black woman's hips, and he pulled the carafe towards his side of the table and told me I had enough.

When we were in our hotel, each of us lay in our separate beds, thinking about the next day. Neither of us could sleep because of the time change. He must have been imagining the beaches, the men sitting on the water, awaiting their confrontation with death while I watched the sun poke through the gray clouds outside our window.

“We need better weather tomorrow,” I said.

“The American soldiers didn’t need the perfect weather,” he said. “Neither do we.”

I turned on the television, and we watched a movie in French. There was a beautiful French woman who was sitting in an old Rolls Royce. She was elegant and wore white gloves. A man in an all white tuxedo came up to her, and the man put his hand on the window of her car. She placed her hand on the inside of the window facing his hand. I noticed the longing in their eyes.

The scene cut to them in their bed. The man turned the woman on her stomach, and he pulled down her skirt. He entered her from the back and she moaned. Her whole body was tanned. I couldn’t believe this was on television. I tried to pretend I wasn’t nervous in front of my father, but when she pushed his head down to her hips, I changed the channel. “Sorry Dad,” I said. “I’m just not ready to watch that with you.”

*

The next morning, we drove around in the rain, looking for the cemetery. I tried to unlock the mysteries of the map, but I seemed to be sending my father in circles. I ended up watching the windshield wipers toss away rain, counting time, instead of paying attention.

“Maybe we should just ask someone?” I asked.

“My sense of direction is fine,” my father said. “Just give me some time.”

“We’ve been driving around these streets now for twenty minutes.”

“Figure out the map,” he said, “and we wouldn’t be.”

“If you just let me drive,” I said “then you could look at the map yourself.”

We ended up far away from downtown in a residential section. There were small farms and houses made out of stone with thatched roofs. My father turned left down a small road.

“We just came from there.”

“No,” my father said. “We’re close. I can smell the ocean.”

As the small silver Fiat drove through the streets, I looked at the houses and wondered how many were rebuilt since the war. I tried to imagine myself, as a young boy, looking out one of my windows, wondering when there would be an invasion, if the Americans and British would warn us before they struck, and if I could feel anything when a bomb ripped apart my house and tore away my muscles. Maybe it was painless? Maybe there was glory in dying in war instead of asleep in a bed?

Jerking the car into a u-turn, sliding across the road, my father said, “Look, there’s a sign for the D-Day memorial.”

“Thank you Jesus,” I said.

My father pulled into a parking spot.

“When you’re around me, James,” my father said. “You’ll thank Moses.” My father smiled.

My father joked about Moses, but he put this visit into the proper context. I was born into a family of Eastern European and Russian Jews. Some of our family had disappeared during the Holocaust, and my grandmother's generation refused to talk about their lives growing up in Russia and Poland. Something horrible happened there they didn't want our generation to remember. Now we were here, and I watched the rain cover the windshield. We put on our rain jackets and ball caps, bracing for the cold rain. There was about a hundred feet to the front door of the memorial.

"You ready to go?" I asked.

"Soldiers, sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force," my father said in his best Eisenhower. "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months." My father placed the keys in his pocket and adjusted his ball cap on his bald head as if preparing for battle. "The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you." He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Good luck," he said. "And let us beseech the blessing of almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking."

And suddenly he busted out of the car door. The rain intruded into the Fiat. So I threw open my door and stepped right into a puddle. The rain felt brazen on my back, and I watched my 60 year old father sprinting towards the door and yelling "Geronimo." My father had beaten me to the door. I could not remember the last time my father beat me in a race. In my childhood, when we were heading to a grocery store, he would suddenly say go, and my brother, my father, and I would sprint to the front of the store, all trying to be the fastest member of the family that day. I don't think we raced since my mother was sick.

“I can’t believe you beat me,” I said while wiping my wet shoes on the mat in the museum.

“Your old man still has it.”

“Hello, sir,” a man said behind a Formica information desk. “How can we help you today?”

I looked around and saw the cash register, the movies lined up against the wall, and the toy German airplanes and tanks on display. My father stared at a cardboard cutout of an American paratrooper.

“Just browsing,” I said.

“Well,” the man said. “Let any of us know if we can be of assistance.”

It bothered me that he didn’t speak to me in French. This man was placed here to deal with lost Americans. I looked around and noticed the walls were covered in merchandise. I realized this was just a gift shop. This store catered to the war fanatics who craved the relics of destruction—the *Leuchtpistole*, the Nazi ceramic plates, and Third Reich Flags—as if hoarding their spoils of war, locking them in a case in their office, and preserving symbols of violence, made them feel powerful over chaos. There were posters of happy children playing with German planes and American tanks, smiling over their own simulation of war.

I went to the back of the store and browsed around the videos. There were videos from each country’s perspective. There were videos of the D-Day in color, HD, and Blue Ray—videos of men dying; videos of bombs falling from the sky and destroying Nazi caravans on dusty roads; videos demonstrating man’s attempt at playing God and destroyer and savior; videos of planes crashing into battleships; videos of Hitler—almost

portraits—that displayed the same twisted fascination we have with the jaws of great white sharks.

“This place is a tourist trap,” my father said. “Don’t these Frenchies have any respect?”

“Quiet, Dad,” I said. “They’ll hear you.”

“I didn’t travel across the Atlantic to see a gift shop,” my father said. “Those boys would be devastated to see this.”

My father walked out the front door and into the rain. I followed after him. The wind was blowing hard now and came from all directions, and I felt that I would just be lifted off the ground. The rain came from the side and hit me in the face.

“Where you going?” I asked.

My father didn’t answer, and I followed after him, holding onto my ball cap. He walked around to the back of the store, and when I came around the corner, I could see the beach stretched out before me. The wind blew the sand across the beach like old movies scenes of the Sahara Desert. I watched my father walking on the beach, the rain pouring down, and the concrete-colored ocean roaring in front of him. He looked stranded in a desert, trying to hide his face from the sand storms.

Searching for cover from the rain and the wind, I went into an old German pill box overlooking the beach. I watched my father through the gunner slits. My father walked to the edge of the ocean and placed his hand into the water. He stared out across, and I imagined myself swimming in water that turned to blood. I imagined standing in the water and a dead body brushing against my legs. I imagined a wave brushing up

against the shore carrying an arm. Now I just wanted to get out of the rain and sip an espresso at a café.

“Come on, Dad,” I said from the pill box.

But my father couldn't hear anything. My words were swiped away by the wind. They were as meaningless *as wind in dry grass*. When he came back to the pill box, all of his clothes were soaked, and he seemed to be watching each spot where he placed his feet as if he was looking for mines.

*

The next morning was the first beautiful day we had in France. Every other day had been overcast and miserable, but today, the skies were blue and sans plui. My father, however, didn't even want to go the American Cemetery anymore.

“We should just take off today,” my father said. “I don't want to be disappointed again.”

“You don't want to go anymore?” I asked. “We didn't come this far to end it now.”

“You want to go?”

I couldn't give two shits about the cemetery at this point, and I'd rather have an extra day in Paris, but this cemetery meant more to him than I could fathom. “Of course,” I said. “Think about the soldiers.”

I saw the life pour back into my father's eyes. He leaped off the bed. “We shall fight on the beaches,” he said in his best Churchill. “We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.”

There was something to fight for back then. Good and evil were clear. My father had come alive again with excitement at the thought of visiting the graves of these brave American men, and I couldn't help but wonder if there would be anything, today or tomorrow, that would be worth fighting for again.

*

We were back in the car, searching for the American Cemetery at Omaha beach, and lost again. I could see the coast and the blue water out my window, but we had no idea where exactly we were supposed to be. I had the map again.

"Maybe take a left here," I said.

"Maybe or are you sure?" my father asked.

I followed the ocean out my window. It came through the trees.

"You need to be sure about these things. You take one wrong turn," he said, "you'll screw up the whole god damn thing."

"Just let me drive then. You can look at the map."

"The rental company said you're too young."

I tried to pay attention to the map, but I was distracted by the white clouds illuminated by the sunshine. They reminded me of Monet's painting, "Le Bassin de Argenteuil," and I wanted to pull the car over, sit in the grass, and watch the light against the French countryside and imagine myself as one of the great Impressionist painters. If I could capture light and shadow so precisely, then I could begin to break the scenery down into the geometry of light and dark, good and evil.

"I don't understand why you're rushing so much," I said.

"This is important," he said. "You even understand the significance?"

“You read about this war stuff in books,” I said, “and now you want to experience it in real life.”

“You do not understand,” he said.

He grabbed the map from me and started to look at it while he drove.

I took it back from him. “You’ll get in an accident.”

The beach looked gorgeous from the car, and I wanted to pull over and go swimming. The water was the same blue in Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and the skin of Matisse’s *Nudes*.

“If you’re going to hold the map,” my father said. “Then you need to pay attention. Think about the history, James. Tomorrow, these boys would have landed here to massive gun-fire. Lieutenant Brotheridge will be dead soon.”

“You talk about this as if it’s happening in a parallel universe.”

“It’s always happening, James,” he said.

“I’m so sick of hearing about this war,” I said. “War is never acceptable. I don’t understand how we can honor people for violence.”

“They saved your life,” he said.

“You’ve never been in war,” I said. “I don’t see why this matters to you.”

“They sacrificed their lives,” he said.

“What do you know about sacrifice?” I asked. “You left us. You know that. Do you know what our mother put us through? She was sick. I had to clean up after your mess.”

My father looked at me, taking his eyes off the road, and grabbed the map. This time, I let him have the map. I didn’t care if we crashed anymore. I saw a sign for the

American Cemetery nailed to a tree, but I didn't say anything. We kept driving for ten more minutes, until I finally gave in and told him that I saw a sign pointing the other way. He wouldn't have given up until he found the beach. And being locked in this car with him was *killing* me.

Once we parked the car, as if trying to lose me, my father walked at a faster pace. He walked through the security gates and into the museum that led to the cemetery and monument. The French guards paid no attention to my father or me. They didn't say hello, even after I asked how they were doing in French. I tried not to be frustrated and told myself that must be the hardest job in the country.

I found my father inside the museum sitting on a bench, watching a video of President Eisenhower walking through the troops in England before Project Overlord was executed. All the soldiers were so excited to see him. Everyone wanted to shake his hand. When I sat down next to my father on the bench, he stood up and moved.

My father left the museum and walked outside to the beach, and I tried to keep pace with him. Once outside, I could smell the ocean, and I could see the lines of white tombstones. There were thousands of them in perfect rows, as if the order was a final attempt to make sense out of chaos. The ocean looked so blue, and I couldn't believe that such a beautiful beach could be the site of such a battle. It seemed unfair that it was such a beautiful sunny day.

I followed my father to the granite memorial. There were lists of the states and names of the soldiers who had died on D-Day. I watched my father walk in and out of the other tourists, staring at the names. Then the visions started. Soldiers were walking along the beach, holding their helmets, stretchers carrying wounded men, zeppelins flying

through the sky, Higgins boats were bringing more troops to shore, and then my father walked up to the section of the memorial with names from Pennsylvania where he grew up with his father. I snuck up behind him, and he traced his finger on the wall down the alphabet to the letter T, searching for our name. None of our family was there.

And then, all at once, I finally saw history. I saw my father marrying my mother, dead bodies piled into ditches and covered with lime; Lieutenant Den Brotheridge shot in the neck; my grandfather illuminating the Philadelphia sky to watch for Nazi bombers; bullets zooming into the ocean and cutting the muscles of Allied soldier's legs; my father leaving our childhood home for the last time as a married man; the graves being dug at the Omaha Cemetery; my father working at his job from 9-5, everyday, staring at a computer, calling other businesses about money they owed him, cleaning the old Veterans' stadium in Philly, washing dishes at a restaurant, the war he went through with the divorce. I saw the history of sacrifice. And I wondered how many more times war memorials had to be built, men and women had to die at the hands of speeding steel, and how many fathers and mothers had to sacrifice for their sons and daughters.

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We left Normandy the next morning and headed to Nantes. I had to catch a train to La Baule where I would spend the next month painting my French professor's house. My father was heading back to Paris to catch a flight to Mass. His train was earlier than mine.

"You're on your own," my father said.

I watched the doors shut behind him, and I wanted to open up those doors and give my father one last hug, one last kiss on the cheek as the son he saw wearing a

baseball hat and a baseball glove, because, when I returned home, he wouldn't recognize me.

When the train left with my father, I had to wait four hours for my ride to La Baule. I sat in a patisserie across from the train station. There were mirrors on both sides of a small hallway, and I sat in the middle, looking at myself in the reflection. The mirrors reflected each other, and I watched myself extended into an infinite labyrinth of personalities and people who sacrificed for me.

And then one last image appeared in the mirrors. It was a movie, playing the events of my life all at the same exact time. I could see it all. And I understood, there was no difference between living and dying. There was no afterlife. There was only this life—the movie in the mirrors. There was my mother, my father, Benjamin, Vika. There was the old factories in Clinton and the ocean in Florida. There was Heron, beautiful Heron. Everyone was there. And it was constantly looping, screening and being remade at the same time, somewhere in the mirrors, infinitely repeating, in harmony with all the other projections and screenings, forever alive and living within everyone. I just wanted to make sure mine was an adventure.