

May the Road Rise

Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

A collection of short stories, each told with a differing narrative structure and a different cast of characters. Some stories in the collection employ traditional narrative structures such as the frame tale and the three-act structure. Other stories borrow their structures from society at large, the bombardment of text and media Americans face every day (letters, recipes, song lyrics). The stories explore how people can read our world and possibly interpret larger shared narrative strands. These stories focus attention on human responses to illness, loss, family, war and protest, looking for opportunities to expand recognition of the range of emotions, moving beyond generic understanding to personal connection. The tone of the collection tends towards dark humor to hint at the deeper, possibly inexplicable human condition.

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CHAPTER 1

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Friday March 25, 2011

Karen Childs
Associate Editor, *Modern Women's Living*
115 Madison Ave., 9th Floor
New York, NY 10016

RE: "Psyching Yourself Up: Making Your Relationships Click with Behavioral Psychology"

Dear Ms. Childs,

First, I'd like to thank you for how much your monthly "Psych Up" section in *MWL* has improved my life. I'm writing, this afternoon because I need to ask for some personal advice. My name is Megan Claire and I'm a twenty-four-year-old publicist's assistant living in the East Village. So I'm no mastermind, like yourself, although I've been reading your magazine for more than a year now and I did take some Psych courses at Fordham. Back then it was all dogs drooling for bells and the sleep-cycles of lab rats. Not information I could exactly use. Your articles, on the other hand (especially those on holistic relationship overhaul), have worked like little charms with my boyfriend Miles, especially last night when a man harassed us outside the subway. I'm still pretty shaken up by it but we're both fine, physically unharmed at least.

Unfortunately, Miles would probably laugh at my letter and call your psych advice *checkout line counseling* or maybe even *backwardness*, a word he uses to dismiss the gamut from superstition to mild prejudice. Miles' cynical wit

drives some people away but he's sweet to me and I haven't paid for a tab or a cab home in the six months we've been together. I suppose I should tell you that we're an interracial couple, though Miles says the term sounds too *taxonomical* and I never thought race was that important to us. I've never dated a black guy before; but I've never *not* dated a black guy either. This letter, though, is at least partly about race. Miles' parents are surgeons from some saintly island in the Caribbean. My parents' came from Woodside, theirs from Brooklyn and before that I'd guess Britain at some point, evidenced in the near-translucent, Irish lace tone of my skin and in how my curly brown hair repels all straighteners. Beyond that, we don't have the foggiest idea in Old London-town which British Isle my family comes from and, anyways, I don't give two red cents about race and I have no reason to think my family would either. My parents have always been excessively polite with black people and I've been thinking about introducing Miles.

I'm trying to be honest though so I'll admit, at first, I wasn't sure Miles was black. (In fact, you're figuring his background out quicker than I did.) When I saw him across the way at the afterwork bar-grill where I met him in midtown, I thought he just had great skin, since in our family we could sunburn under a heat lamp. I didn't give Miles my compliment on his complexion, thank god, since I thought there was a chance he *might* be black (not a question I could imagine asking, even given a million mouths and two million feet to put in them). I knew he wasn't white or at least not like me so I kept my single mouth shut for once.

I'm writing a lot, I think and I'm not even close to my point yet. I'm a little nervous because I haven't written anything like this since I was at school. These days I mostly compile press releases for a children's TV show. Maybe I should just get to my story:

Our trouble started last night when we left dinner. Miles and I go out every Thursday because he doesn't like the weekend bridge-and-tunnel crowds. He's only been working in New York for a year and he's already got his Manhattan elitism down like the train schedule. Miles picked a barbecue restaurant way uptown. Ribs were a relief because Miles has been taking me to mostly what he calls *authentic ethnic* restaurants with bored and sometimes rude service. At the rib joint, we had a motherly round waitress named Gladys who called me *Sugar* and there was a live blues band so our meal felt like dinner-and-a-show in an old-timey way. Until the musicians took the volume up so loud that I told Miles it sounded like they were playing inside my head and he said *what?* pretending he couldn't hear me and so I said it again and he said if it's too loud than you're too old and I said wouldn't he know because he's a few months older than me and it was a cute little squabble (especially given all that's happened since then). I remembered your article on the benefits of "gentle teasing" and cultivating inside jokes among couples and I thought this age discrepancy could be one of ours. I made a note to bring it up the next day at lunch.

Outside on the block between the restaurant and the subway we kept up our play-argument about age—Miles called me a baby, because I was born in '86 and he in '87—and I chucked him on the shoulder. He wrapped his blazer around

my shoulders and I slid up under his arm and asked him if he would escort me home. Miles is an absolute gentleman. And gorgeous.

I didn't date much in college, Ms. Childs, because I lived with my parents in Queens and between waiting tables and school I didn't much time left for men. When Miles approached me at the bar-grill, I must say, he nearly knocked the wind out of me. He had a toned, jogger's body and wore a blue blazer and the first of many trim baby blue shirts I saw him tuck tightly into jeans. Short black hair. As he shimmied through the crowd towards me, his dark brow and darker eyes became more distinct. I've looked into those eyes hundreds of times now and know their charm is that the iris stands out and then drops deep back into his face like a long brown tunnel. His face, several shades lighter, set off his eyes and his strong jaw, held slightly up and forward like asking a question, cuts a shadow across his neck. He dealt briskly with the bartender who'd been leaning across to me. By the end of my conversation with Miles that evening, I'd found out, using several mini-guesses, he was black and it made me feel good to leave with him, especially when I saw our reflection pass by in the restaurant's window.

Last night when we left dinner, the sun sank down across the river behind the buildings on the Jersey side and the last light flickered towards us on the waves. A perfect evening, right? As we came closer to the downtown train station, the round green light above it lit up like a lighthouse beacon. But before we could pass under it to the stairs, a man bumped into Miles.

“Excuse me,” Miles said, instinctively, like he would have said *god bless you* if the other man had sneezed. The man’s plastic bag fell to the ground and the bottle inside broke. Miles frowned at the wet *plsssh* but kept walking.

A fancy vodka label drooled onto the asphalt through the bag and spikes of glass.

“What the fuck?” the man said. “Watch where you’re going, son.”

(I apologize for this language, Ms. Childs, I’m just trying to remember everything as best I can.) Miles said nothing; he clenched his jaw like a fist and picked up our pace.

“Fuck no,” the man said. (Sorry, again). Then he said, “My night’s not going to end like that. You think you can come into my neighborhood and fuck up my property?”

The man caught up and pushed past us. He was thin and clean-shaven, with dark eyes and dark skin, black specks like raised freckles across his face. Maybe I should mention that we were in what Miles called a *historically black neighborhood*. The man stood in front of us, in bunched jeans and a tank top, his body between ours and the subway, blocking our way home.

I heard a burst of music when the restaurant door opened at the end of the block and the chorus: *Ain’t nobody’s business if I do...* I remember in the January issue you said smell is the sense tied closest to memory and that we could train our partners with scents (perfume, aroma candles, fresh pastries) but what about sound? Because I know I’ll never forget the sound of that song flying out from under the bright green awning, and all that happened next.

“Excuse us,” Miles said. “We’re trying to get through.”

“You’re not going to disrespect me like that,” the man said.

So Miles said, “Disrespect you? You ran into me.” Miles had a point, Ms. Childs. The sidewalks up there were unbelievably wide, not like the stingy ones downtown by my apartment. This man clearly had gone out of his way to run into Miles.

The man ignored Miles’ logic, simple as it was, and held up his bag. The glass tinkled and more clear liquid dribbled out.

“You bumped into me,” Miles said. “I apologized, anyway. I don’t know what you want me to do.”

Miles took another step towards the subway. The man adjusted his frame again, reblocked our path. He was very close to us now and his face was surprisingly handsome, with smooth trim features only slightly thicker around the eyes, lips and nose. Skin like dark cocoa. He reminded me of Blair Underwood and I thought to myself, this man is better looking than Miles. (I remember you explained a couple months ago how we judge attractiveness instinctively, even subconsciously, based on facial symmetry and how we could use makeup to create a more balanced appearance.) But I was not at all attracted to this man because of his eyes. He had an expression I remember on the grade school girls I knew were going to be cruel before I even met them. The lids moved with a forced brightness, like he was constantly smirking from the nose up. The eyes themselves, plain brown discs.

I heard the lyrics *baby, baby, baby* and a trumpet blast fly by us on a gust from the river. The wind swirled between the line of parked cars and puffed out the man's tank top.

"I'm not going to have you disrespect me like that—as a man." With an aggressive jerk of his neck, his came face so close to us now I could smell his cologne, sporty-sharp on the breeze. Every few moments, subway riders would ease past the three of us—saying *excuse me* or *pardon me*.

"Like what?" Miles asked.

"What?" the man said. He couldn't hear because the wind had really picked up now, ruffling everybody's collars. I remembered reading your article last December about how the weather can affect your mood, and how we should try to be aware of external forces in our relationships—seasonal depression, the Santa Ana winds. The stiff current yesterday had similar effects. I pulled Miles' jacket tighter across my chest while he reached to re-tuck his shirt. This was a habit of Miles' that I came to recognize as a comfort tick, designed to give himself a sense of ease under pressure. While Miles had his hands at his waistline the other man made fast, like he'd been waiting for the chance, and took Miles' shirtfront near his ribcage with his free hand: "What the fuck did you say?"

"I said, 'Like what?'" Miles repeated. "Nobody's disrespecting anybody here. You ran into me and I held onto my bag which is at least as heavy as yours." He held up our bag of cooling leftovers, trying to create some space for us. Through all this Miles was acting unbelievably even-tempered, polite even, given the man's grip on his shirt.

“Nobody’s talking about your bag,” the man said. He toed the bag with his tan work boot. “We’re talking about my property. Understand?”

I must have moved closer to Miles because the man looked at me and I blushed.

Back in high school, I dated a little more than I did in college, which always seemed to surprise the in-crowd. I was quiet (a skill I’ve since lost) and I only had a couple friends who were more like acquaintances, like my co-workers now. And as I’ve said, any looks I had weren’t exactly stunning in the traditional sense. So when the prettier girls, the Christies and Mistys from school, saw some decent-looking guy chatting me up at a party, I drew the girls’ attention too, like my face was coming into focus for them. And then even more guys would look at me and I’m not saying every head in the party would turn but I’d feel dozens of eyes moving across me, like they were tickling my skin. Exciting and nerve-racking and a little risky. When the man looked at me next to Miles, I felt that again, except with a stronger physical threat.

“You know what this is missy?” he said.

I looked at Miles and he looked at me finally and if he felt anything like I did he wasn’t giving it away. His face was as blank as a bell.

“Your wife thinks she doesn’t have to talk to me?” the man said to Miles, as if we weren’t all standing there together. “You’re high yellow and she’s stuck up white. Shit.”

Miles flinched his eyes when a fleck of spit hit his face and he reached for the handkerchief he kept in his back pocket but stopped. The man lifted the top

half of the bottle out by its neck; the bottom was a jagged weapon. He held it up sideways to Miles face, near Miles's nose.

His island nose, his Roman nose, Miles calls it. It's set between his high cheekbones like a diamond, I told him once. And he said, *As big as the Hope Diamond*, and I said *Marquise cut*, and it was more gentle teasing. Miles' nose gives him a striking appearance and something that Miles links to his island background. He's been called light-skinned and high yellow before because he's *from the Islands* he says. He drops his family background into conversations like coins into a wishing well: *Because we're from the islands, our family has a different relationship with cannabis* or, one time after a few gin and tonics, *I'm not black, I'm from the Islands*. My first impression of Miles, I've said, was about his tan complexion, not that he was black.

I remember you wrote once about the stubbornness of first impressions and I'm not saying that you're wrong, but it came to me now that these impressions appear to be on the surface but they also go deeper. Something about Mile's face when I first saw him across the bar thrilled me; something about our attacker's face, or his eyes at least, intimidated me. I've thought about this for hours and, if I'm honest, I have to admit that Miles had lively eyes and was maybe-black and I wanted to talk to him. The man who attacked us had cruel eyes and was unmistakably black, and I would have avoided him—given him a doublewide berth on the sidewalk—if I hadn't been distracted by Miles. Thinking about whether the man's eyes or his face tipped me first that I should be scared, and thinking about what each possibility may mean twists my mind into a tangle

and leaves my cursor blinking mid-letter like an egg-timer beeping when I'd forgotten I'd even been making breakfast. So maybe I should just get on with the rest of the assault.

Broken bottle still crammed up to Miles' face, I wondered if the man had planned this moment as soon as he saw Miles. Had he seen something in Miles' face *and* in mine (something like I'd seen in his face or in the girls' faces in school?) something the man knew he didn't like—some unknown clue in our symmetry—before he even accosted us? The man said: “Then I'll ask you both again: you know what this is?”

Miles said nothing.

“Smell that. That's premium.”

It didn't smell like much of anything. By this point, people were streaming past us, eyes down, hurrying down the stairs like water over the falls.

Miles reached for his billfold.

“I don't want your goddamn money, I just want my property,” the man said again. He seemed reasonable and pathetic for a moment until he knocked the billfold out of Miles' hand and it clinked gold against the ground. “Doesn't anybody understand? This is my block. My property.”

He kept repeating himself about his property, about disrespect, spinning his verbal wheels like you said in your last article on argumentative ruts. And I thought—pattern-interrupt—how you said we should try to change the script in familiar conflicts.

So I said, “We don't know anything about your bottle, we drink bourbon.”

The man lowered the bottle back down and twisted his lips into a smile, letting go of Miles' shirt. Can you believe it was so simple, Ms Childs?

Miles picked up his bills and unfolded them. The man snatched one from Miles' fingers, said, "Have a blessed day," and was at the corner before Miles could even lower his arm. Just as the man rounded out of our sight, he turned back and shouted, "You crackers can go home now."

The restaurant's doors opened again: *You asked me there's any sugar, love to be your sugarcane...* It all seemed so ridiculous that we were ambushed outside the restaurant so that we could still hear the band singing requests, only feet from the subway home.

There was a bulky woman standing beside a minivan across the street.

"You didn't have to give him anything," she said, leaning back against the hood. "He was just messing with you."

"We know," I said.

Then she clucked her tongue at us and I felt so awful that I forgot to remind Miles he said he'd take me home and when he left the train at his stop, he left the leftovers at my feet and I ate the whole bag of ribs when I got home, cornbread too, and I should have known that eating wasn't the answer even without reading your article on comfort foods and how we should curb these desires even when we're between boyfriends.

So this is the last part, Ms Childs—the most important part—I promise. I'd been up all night, a wreck, and I looked it. At our usual lunch table I did my

best to tame my hair and when Miles showed up, his appearance hadn't changed. He wore the same blue shirt and blazer as always and a thin tie held down by a pin to match his billfold. Miles takes comfort, I think, in his buttoned-up style. His face was unchanged too except the little white butterfly bandage on his cheek, like a nurse would use. Miles ordered what he usually ordered, and spoke like he was humoring a receptionist. It was a beautiful day, as you probably remember—the breeze whistled Dixie through the branches above Central Park West, and it almost looked like the air was blowing green and gold. Miles didn't offer anything but the smallest of talk as we sat across from each other and watched my open-faced tuna brown in the sunshine. So I did what your article said I should do when I wanted to talk about something and my partner didn't. I staged a conversation between me and my ideal responses, performing both my part and Miles's part, imitating his gravelly voice:

“Were you worried that that man could have hurt us very easily?” I asked.

“*Yes, I was worried about that,*” I replied, for Miles. “*I gotta admit I was relieved when he finally let us past.*”

“Me too! It was so strange we could still hear the band. We must really be getting old if it was too loud even outside the restaurant.”

Miles just smirked across the spoiled sandwich, no hint of the gentle teasing from our last meal, so I went on full sails ahead.

“Do you think...” I said, letting my own voice trail off.

“*What honey?*”

“Do you think he hassled us because I'm white?”

“It’s tough to say but I wouldn’t want to read too much into the situation. That’s just backwardness anyways, right?”

Miles’ smirk disappeared when he recognized his phrase. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said.

“Well what would you say then?” I asked.

No response. Silent as a mime, still as a boulder. So I resumed the acted-out conversation:

“Maybe it was just that he thought we would be an easy target since we looked so carefree.

“Hahaha.” Here I imitated Miles’ throaty laugh. *“Right on the money.”*

Miles showed only the tiniest crack of a smile so I tried to think of something unexpected to jar him into conversation. Pattern-interrupt, for silence.

“You did notice,” I said, “That the wind was making him mad, didn’t you?”

“I did!”

“Do you know that some places name their winds? California has the Santa Ana and in Provence they have one called the Le Mistral? I’ve never been there, of course. But I read about it. It comes whipping down the Rhône and into the little provincial towns and everybody stands outside and throws their arms wide, and cheers because I guess it gets pretty hot there in the summer. And the people line the streets like a homecoming parade because the wind has to travel so far to get there. All the way from Iceland, across the ocean and then it barrels down the mountains in the middle of France, the Massif Central, I think.

“Centr-*ahl*,” he said with a nasally accent and then smirked again and it was my turn to be quiet because I felt like slapping him and maybe would have except that’s not how my parents raised me. *Snap out of it, you smug shit*, I wanted to say. I was alarmed and a little scared because I was so worked up. But I remembered what you said about how we should conduct civil arguments so I sighed, loud, and asked, “Can we please just talk about last night?”

“What’s there to talk about?” he asked.

“How about why that man attacked us?”

“I wouldn’t call it an attack.”

“Alright, then why he messed with us.”

“Why do *you* think he messed with us?”

“It seemed like because I’m white and you’re—” I paused, a breeze rattled in through the patio gate and blew Miles’ water glass bouncing stripes of sun across his face, like swimming pool light. “From the islands?”

“You don’t even know what that means!”

The tables were all empty but the bus boy looked over when Miles raised his voice to a level I’d never even heard before. I *didn’t* know what Miles meant, Ms. Childs.

“Well, tell me then,” I said. “Tell me what it means.”

“It means he just wanted to watch a high-yellow house-n***er squirm before he took our money.” (I’m sorry again for the language.)

“I don’t like that word,” I said.

“High-yellow?” he said, his tone challenging me to correct him but I couldn’t because I’ve never said that word out loud to him. So he said, “Deal with it.” Then he paused and said, “Or don’t.” He stood and muttered, “Excuse me,” running a hand back down his shirtfront to smooth his tie into place, all very composed, not frustrated in the least. He had beat me at my own game, been so civilized, behaved so well that he had shut down any genuine interaction.

He pushed his chair back and reached into his billfold, separated a knot of twenty-dollar bills and dropped them next to the sugar caddy. I grabbed his hand but he shucked me off. “You can’t leave an argument like this,” I said because I remembered how you said this wasn’t healthy but we’d never had a real argument before, so we hadn’t talked about the rules he was breaking. He left through the patio gate towards his subway stop and I sat there like a block while the lunch service ended, silverware plunking into washtubs and the radio behind the bussing station playing a blues channel. I heard—*baby, baby, baby* and felt worse than I did last night.

My computer just went to sleep and when the screen fizzled out, I saw my reflection in the black surface and I looked washed out and different and foreign. My eyes weren’t even a color I can name and all the angles of my face were flattened into a white circle like a paint sample. I tried to look at my face, maybe for the first time, the way others would see it, not how I made it up for them, but to look for the clues they could take from it maybe without even realizing—how they might judge me in the split second before they met me.

And I remembered Miles' smirk at lunch. I wanted to reach across my sandwich and slap him. When I saw that smug look, it was like the moment in a thriller movie where the villain (or hero, maybe) peels a gluey mask from his face, exposing what's really beneath, larger than life. And then a disgusting chain of thoughts came to me—I felt pleased our attacker had cut Miles' face, taken Miles down a peg or two. I looked back at my own face in the screen and tried to turn my reflection smug and after a few practice tries I taught myself how to twist my lips and nose into something completely unsettling, like I'd just walked into a subway car and noticed a smell that offended and angered me. This made me squirm in my cushy chair and I shook my mouse, clicking my face away and bringing back this letter.

Your tips have been a blessing, I didn't know much about dating or relationships before and you've helped me understand and earn some control. But with your thoughts on instinctive facial judgment—that faces can communicate and misdirect in ways we can't understand or express (without the help of computers, anyways to describe our contours), I feel like I've lost that what little control I learned, and more. Facial judgments must just be initial reactions? Can our instincts be racist? Even so, can we then sit down and recognize the backwardness of these primitive judgments? They may be as stubborn as first impressions and as deep-rooted as thoughts passed down for generations, carried across oceans, but that also means they're often completely off the mark. Certainly we can talk past our early thoughts.

I'm at the end of my letter, Ms. Childs, and I realize this isn't all about me and I realize that it's probably too complicated for a quick behavioral tip but I still care for Miles deeply and I want to help him. I want this to be about my relationship with him but I don't want to create a staged conversation and I don't want to manipulate his reactions. I just want a way to talk to him so he'll talk back, really talk. So how can I even begin that conversation when everything I thought I knew isn't worth two red cents?

CHAPTER 2

KENT STATE: 1970

What if you knew her?/ And found her dead on the ground? / How can you run when you know?

~Neil Young, "Ohio"

After Franklin Wright and Alan Contesta had listened to the new tape and argued about what it meant, Franklin decided he needed to tell the truth.

"I'd like to say something, Alan," he said.

The stereo clicked over the recording but otherwise the teacher's lounge was silent. Contesta turned to the sound and adjusted a few knobs. "At the memorial tomorrow?"

"No, I mean I want to tell you something."

This was the type of moment Franklin always turned from. A significant statement would well up in his mind—build and swell, waiting for a release. But he would beat the speech back, divert the conversation with some inanity, a remark about how everything was changing for the worse, a comment about the weather that could have been lifted from an almanac. But today, he said:

"I knew one of the girls, Sandy Martin."

Just saying her name aloud finally was a brief release.

"I knew her too," Contesta said. "She was friends with Tom. I had a few beers at Ray's with them one time. She was the saddest of all, if that's even something you can say."

“No, I mean I was in love with her.”

He had never told Sandy. When she had left him on the quad in front of her door, smiling her way inside, he should have called out to her.

“I love her more now than I could have back then,” Franklin said. “I smoothed down her edges until she became an impossibly perfect surface, repeating her best parts over and over again, dismissing anything negative because you don’t dwell on that, you can’t think that way about the innocent dead.”

“I never knew,” Contesta said. “I mean you never told me.”

A steely evening light had settled over the chair backs and desktops of the teacher’s lounge.

“I’m sorry,” Franklin said. “I couldn’t.”

* * *

An hour earlier Franklin had been grading his final essays on the July Revolution when he took a phone call in the teacher’s lounge from Alan Contesta, his old college roommate. He sighed but answered anyways. Contesta had news, he said, about the tape Franklin had made forty years before from their dorm room window.

“How about a drink?” Contesta asked. Franklin heard a lilt in his old friend’s request.

Contesta’s tone meant he finally had evidence that the guardsmen on the quad had received orders to fire—at Contesta and the other student protestors—and Contesta wanted to deliver the news in person. Clearly he thought the

remastered content on the tape could change something. Franklin was in no hurry to hear it.

“Isn’t it a little early for a drink?” Franklin said.

“It’s almost eight, Frank. Are you alright?”

Franklin wasn’t sure how he would react to the tape, how he was supposed to react. The news Contesta was eager to deliver meant that people close to Franklin had been purposely executed four decades ago. But Franklin remembered only discordant threats and tear gas and jostling and the heat on the Commons and the staggering end and the long years between then and now. Contesta’s joy with this discovery sounded morbid, even if the emotion had been earned after four decades of petitioning for the victims.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Alan, I’ve just still got a lot of papers to grade and knickknacks to pack away.”

“Say no more, I’ll be there in fifteen.”

There was no avoiding this meeting.

“Okay, I’m in the teacher’s lounge in the back.”

The teacher’s lounge was an oblong scrap yard for castaway furniture from the rest of Madison High School. Discarded chairs and desks and a couple of couches huddled around a rabbit-eared TV monitor, used only to view tapes for class prep. Opposite the wall of windows there was a half-kitchen with just enough counter space for a coffeemaker, burbling away even though Franklin was the only one still there. Franklin’s life had passed between this comfortably shabby lounge and his atonal classroom in the rhythm of semesters, course plans,

classes. A steady flat line that spiked and valleyed with what he considered blessed infrequency.

The school year had ended the day before; Franklin wouldn't be back when classes resumed in the fall. The faculty had celebrated his retirement on Monday in the lounge. Sitting at his desk in the now-deserted room felt like he'd outstayed his welcome at his own party. He'd clung on at M.H.S. for thirty-five years, been gently asked by his fifth fresh-faced principal if he was considering retirement. Now he was ready to leave and meet the mixed blessings of nowhere-to-be, the last challenge of a life he'd been happy to live.

"What in the world are you still doing here on a Friday night, Frank?" Contesta entered the far end of the room. He was a tall blond wire of a man who had to stoop as he stepped through the doorframe. "This place is deserted."

"I'm still pretty busy finishing up here. Last day of classes and everything."

"Yeah, I saw all the silly string and spilled notebooks on my way back. And not a soul in the hallways. I'll admit, it looks a little end-of-days out there."

Reaching to shake hands Franklin saw again the scar on Contesta's wrist—the physically inscribed memory of the shootings, a puckered almond-shaped bullet wound. In Contesta's other hand he held a small black stereo, presumably housing the CD version of the tape Franklin made on his reel-to-reel.

"You want apocalyptic? You should have seen this place at the final bell." Franklin was determined to be cheery.

Contesta laughed, a quick burst. Even his smile was aggressive, angular.

“I remember those days.”

“Do you?”

“Ha!” Another burst. “Before you even knew me? Barely.”

Contesta had made a copy of Franklin’s recording as soon as he’d been released from the student health center. With the tape, Contesta forced Franklin from their room when he played it at memorials and rallies. But at those events Franklin always felt more like a stagehand thrust from behind the curtain into startling light. He didn’t really have anything he could say about the tape.

Contesta had been on the quad with Sandy and Tom and the others; Franklin had been in his room, waiting for something else to happen. Contesta took Franklin to play the tape for a police officer who said the sound was too grainy. Forty years later, technology and interest aligned when Contesta convinced a studio producer in New York to clean up the background noise from the original recording—to better hear the officer ordering the shootings. The evidence on the tape had always been Contesta’s project.

What had Franklin done anyway but cue the apparatus and collect whatever sounds ended up on it, like an afternoon fisherman who dipped his net beneath the surface and brought up a jellyfish. Franklin had purchased the reel-to-reel a month before the shooting at a yard sale and he had only used the device a few times before. During half the previous attempts, the tape flew away from the spool and tentacled itself around Franklin’s hands and wrists. Or a trigger would spring free and Franklin would have to find somebody in the AV Club to

help him reset everything. Franklin had been an accidental and unprepared steward of history, if anything, when he had propped the machine in his window that eruptive afternoon.

Contesta put the black CD player on the desk. “I’m going to play this tomorrow for the press at Bill’s memorial. It would have been his sixtieth birthday,” he said. “But I thought you should hear it first.”

Franklin realized Contesta meant William Tiller, one of the boys who didn’t survive. “I never knew William.”

“Well, neither did I, other than by sight,” Contesta said, not lifting his eyes from the buttons on the box. “But that’s not really the idea though, is it?”

Franklin waited for the idea.

“The *idea*,” Contesta said, “is that now we can prove an officer ordered the shooting. It was intentional. They were innocent victims, intentionally murdered.”

“I don’t like the way you talk about them like that’s all they were—dead bodies on the quad. They were students. Friends. Sons and daughters and sisters.”

“Exactly.”

This was their standard disconnect.

“Maybe you should come talk at the memorial,” Contesta said. “Even if you didn’t know Bill. You made the tape.”

Franklin had mostly kept his relationship with two of the victims a secret from Contesta—kept the secret first for private selfish reasons, kept the secret at

length because by then they shared too much and it felt too late to reveal.

Franklin's relationship with the victims didn't fit easily into rhetoric.

"We'll see," Franklin said. "I've still got a lot of essays to grade." He gestured at a stack of papers that didn't even belong to him.

"Well let me at least play you the new version first, then you can tell me what you think. There's something a bit odd at the beginning, but then it's clear as a Christmas bell."

What odd bit? He hadn't heard the recording since he stopped going to the memorials and rallies, after college. He hadn't even seen the recorder again until Contesta asked for the original. The machine had looked like a pile of crumpled gray reliquary bones when he retrieved the tape from his basement. But what odd bit could stand out from the gunfire?

While Contesta adjusted the volume, he told Franklin that almost all the noise pollution was gone, tape hiss—the smoky staticky stretches of tape—had been silenced. Tape hiss happened, he said, when sounds were recorded at too high a frequency and the flaw could be resolved in a number of ways, involving rerecording and frequency modulation. Franklin shifted in his seat and shifted back. He looked at the toes of his shoes. He looked at his cuticles. Franklin knew his anxiety was probably unfounded, but what *odd bit*?

Contesta clucked his tongue and began to fast forward. He articulated frequency modulation methods as carefully and uselessly as a mechanic would explain internal combustion to a child. He pressed play. Brilliant silence. Then all Franklin heard was music. Neil Young singing. Contesta smiled at him—that

was the odd bit. Music from forty years ago, the album he had been listening to that morning in their dorm room, still playing in the distant background, when he made this tape. With only a couple bars of Neil Young's plaintive voice, all the anxiety and doubt of the last forty years was compressed and passed over in a few clicks of audio tape—

Franklin first heard Neil Young on May 3rd 1970. He was out at Ray's Place with a group of more-or-less friends, including his sort-of-girlfriend Sandy and her recent ex-boyfriend Tom. Franklin and Sandy hadn't told anybody they were seeing each other, not even his roommate Alan, least of all Tom.

Ray's Place, their college bar, had presided over the corner of Cedar and Main seemingly since the dawn of time, and before then it was a hotel. Inside, the setting looked like a cross between a tavern and a diner (exposed brick and an oak bar, checkerboard floors and rows of square card tables). Tiffany lamps cast a sanctuary glow through their stained glass. After exams and essays, students came to Ray's to unwind. Franklin had taken his last test earlier that morning. He was looking forward to some mindlessness. But Tom wanted to talk about the war and nobody else objected.

"Nixon can't even remember who we're fighting anymore," Tom said and some of the people standing around them nodded.

Franklin nodded too, but without turning his face from the bartender, whose attention he was trying to attract. Sandy nodded when Tom looked squarely at her. She was standing on the other side of the group from Franklin.

Play it cool, she had told him, *at least around our friends*. “Anytime we speak our minds,” Tom said, “Some suit wants to call it a State of Emergency.” He was met with a chorus of *yeah*’s. “Call in the Guard because somebody had an unconventional thought.”

Franklin looked around and he saw other groups laughing and tipping their beers back. The girl standing next to Sandy whispered some unheard comment in her ear and Sandy laughed. Franklin wished he had been close enough to hear her. He tried to invent some excuse to go talk to her—maybe he could mention the reel-to-reel he’d made of the demonstrations Tom was celebrating.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to hear the governor started the fire at the ROTC building himself,” Tom said. “Just so that he could blame the students and the communists.”

This seemed ludicrous, but Tom’s speech was met with enthusiasm from the other people now crowded around him. Franklin looked away. Outside he could see two police hats hovering past, moving above the script—Э’УАЯ—on the outside the bar’s front windows.

“I was the one who told Matterbaugh, here, to light his draft card yesterday,” Tom said as he put his arm around their friend’s shoulders. “He had a copy of the Constitution all set and I said, ‘The Constitution isn’t the problem, man’ and gave him a lighter. This lighter right here.”

“We were all there,” Franklin said. Sandy flashed a smile that Tom missed.

“Right on, I *know*,” Tom said. “And we need everybody there tomorrow too.” He looked around their circle as if he were performing a preemptive roll call.

Franklin reminded them he lived in Taylor Hall so he was sure he wouldn’t be able to avoid any demonstrating. Sandy was eager to answer that she’d be in class during most of the afternoon and rattled off her schedule as proof.

“Well, after class then,” Tom said and started talking to the person next to him about Cambodia. The cop hats outside moved past the script and Franklin saw a hand motioning into darkness with a nightstick. The first few chords of a Neil Young tune filtered back to them from the jukebox. Sandy started nodding her head in time to the tune, a strand of her auburn hair swaying like a soft metronome across her face. Tom mistook the movement as agreement and raised his voice to include her in his tirade.

Ray’s stained glass doors swung open saloon-style and Franklin saw through the cozy glow out into the harsh streetlights. A little scuffle was underway between a stringy haired student and two doughy, though squared-jawed men filling the police hats Franklin had seen through the window.

The group of students between Franklin and the door were recounting snatches of the altercation. “The cop said, ‘I can still smell the grass in that cigarette you just put out, young man, and you’d be wise to mind your manners with me.’ He was drawling and drawing out his vowels like some Tombstone lawman. So the kid says, ‘Fuck your manners, you fascist pig!’ Then he’s

chanting, ‘No fucking pigs on campus! No pigs on campus! No pigs on campus!’” The students by the door all started laughing.

Franklin heard the chant from outside now. The doors stayed propped open as some of the crowd in Ray’s pushed outside and picked up the chant. A group of students, filled out with bikers and other hangers-on, gathered around this exchange and took up the young man’s refrain. One of the cops circled the interior of the ring. Franklin couldn’t hear him but he could tell the officer was motioning for everybody to disperse. This was an order that was not even considered.

Back inside, the people by the jukebox in the rear began shuffling forward. The bar was emptying in a current around Franklin. Tom was already walking; he had pushed forward until he was almost at the door. He motioned for Sandy to come forward. She smiled and pushed off her stool. When Tom saw she was following, he turned his face back to the push. She looked back at Franklin and winked.

Franklin tried to strafe through the current of bodies to walk beside Sandy. Despite the brave face she gave Tom, Franklin knew her politics were complicated by her conservative family. She was sympathetic to what she called “student causes” and “the poor boys in Cambodia,” but her father, whom she loved and who supported the war, was also helping her pay for school. “I’m waiting until I get my diploma to take my fist-shaking politics home,” she said. Franklin was fine with all that. He supported most of the protestors’ ideas, but

questioned almost all their voices—issued from sheep and poseurs, like Matterbaugh, or barely informed idealists, like Tom.

Franklin found Sandy near the door and brushed the backs of his fingers down the elbow of her sweater. She smiled and tilted her head up slightly exposing the tan stretch of her neck down to the peace button pinned to her collar.

Sandy and Franklin had been secretly seeing each other for a couple months. She was trying to be discreet because of her recent breakup, she said. So they drove off campus in the evenings—to movies in distant theaters, coffee in south Cleveland diners. Or they met in Franklin's dorm room, on afternoons when Alan was at class, and listened to records. She loved rock music and Franklin began to love whatever she did. They were getting pretty serious, Franklin thought, no matter what anybody else knew.

Neil Young continued to sing through Ray's jukebox although the song had to fight against the low street chant—"No pigs on campus! No pigs on campus! No pigs on campus!" Franklin heard the song from the back at that low rankling volume where only some of the notes were audible and the rest expired just as they reached his ears like ghost whispers.

The first time, months ago, when Franklin saw Sandy he was looking down from his window in Taylor Hall. He had just woken up from sleep and he was fiddling around with the reel-to-reel he just bought, trying to record the bird songs and voices on the quad—mostly just getting frustrated with the switches on the machine. He looked up and saw a girl (Sandy) walking across the lawn below. She recognized some friend a few dozen paces away and she put her

thumbs to her temples with her palms facing outwards in this goofy moose horn gesture. Franklin had to start laughing—his frustration with any technical difficulties evaporated—and Sandy was laughing too, in sync with him as she made her way towards her next class or wherever. She was convulsing with laughter, actually, the whole way, and she doubled over a couple of times and her book bag spilled down from her shoulder. Her classmate (*Tom*, Franklin learned later) laughed politely but looked sidelong at her and then at the other students they passed in an apologetic way. She didn't care what Tom or anybody else thought.

Most of the girls around her were taller but she had this beautiful elongating posture. She held herself like somebody had told her about her shortcoming early and she had spent years practicing the exact amount of stretching herself up, holding her chin up and dropping her shoulders, to lengthen the appearance of her neck. And she had such a smooth, buoyant stride.

Franklin wanted nothing more than to meet her and make her laugh again. But he didn't have the thinnest cobweb of an idea how to approach her. And then, as fate had it, she was just standing beside him one Monday night at Ray's. He smiled at his luck and couldn't help himself from blurting out, "Hey, I think I've seen you around campus." An abysmally cornball introduction, worse than anything he could have imagined.

She didn't balk noticeably, bless her, but he saw her scanning the bar for her friends. She clearly thought he was a creep and at that moment he had to agree.

So Franklin said, “I’m sorry let me start over. I live in Taylor and I saw you on the quad the other day. You made this face.” He repeated her moose horn gesture; she burst out laughing right there on the stool next to him. She laughed so hard her face almost hit her empty glass. When she finally caught her breath, she put her hand on the hollow of her neck, between her collarbones.

“You saw that?” she said. “Oh no!”

“I’m afraid so,” Franklin said, his voice mock grave.

“Tom told me somebody would notice. I told him not to worry so much.”

Tom.

“Well,” Franklin said, brushing past *Tom* as smoothly as he could, “I thought it was pretty hilarious too.” It hadn’t really been *that* funny, but who could resist the beautiful breathless laughter jangling her body. This was the best Franklin had ever done in what Alan called mixer chatter, and now seemed like as good a time as any for Franklin to give her his name and hope she’d give him hers.

“Sandy.” Franklin said *Sandy* to himself. *Sandy*. The name swelled at first and then the syllables beat a tattoo in his mind—*Sandy, Sandy, Sandy*—an even rhythm he couldn’t imagine would ever fade.

“No pigs on campus! No pigs on campus! No pigs on campus!” The loud chant outside Ray’s was audible although they couldn’t see where the voices behind the noise came from. Sandy looked back over her shoulder and put her thumbs to her temples in the moose horn gesture. Franklin laughed. Tom was safely ahead of them.

Sandy Martin was from Sandusky. As a child, Sandy had been struck with a nasty, nearly destructive speech impediment: some sort of hell-born cross between a lisp and a stutter. She had tried to mask her affliction at first with laughter until her parents took her to a specialist to exorcise it altogether. The young Marry-Poppins-type speech therapist who helped Sandy, “Miss *Singer*, I shit you not,” she said, was like her guardian angel. Sandy had known ever since then that she wanted to help little girls and boys overcome their own impediments. That’s why she was at Kent State, to study Speech and Hearing. Franklin was studying Psychology then English then History of all things.

Outside Ray’s, the scene was worse than what Franklin had seen from inside. The ring of students taunted the two cops. Car fires. Dumpster fires. A couple storefront windows had already been smashed. Four more squad cars blocked the ends of Cedar Street. Students were lobbing crumbling bricks and chunks of asphalt towards the barricades. A handful of green jeeps arrived to block Main Street at both ends. Sandy looked up at Franklin, with an uncertain expression. Tom had already disappeared into the melee. So Franklin took Sandy’s arm and they ducked down a side street, a deserted shortcut to the quad connecting their dorms. They walked in silence, at first.

“I can’t stand when they get all riled up like that,” she said. “That’s the last thing we need. It’s so—so—so contradictory. I mean, I’m not afraid of anything but we’re supposed to be against violence, right? Isn’t that? Isn’t that what this is all about?”

“I’m not sure anybody really knows what this is all about.”

When they got to the quad, they saw some pink and white tree blossoms wet with dew at the edge of the walkway and they laughed to see the boughs shaking from some students who'd climbed them for midnight, midair picnic.

"Whatcha got up there?" Sandy asked. She was fearless; she would engage anybody.

A hand passed down a joint, trailing smoke, from the branches above. "Like the Creation of Man," she said, referring to the Michelangelo painting. She was brilliant.

"Absolutely," said the voice from behind the branches. "We're Adam and Eve, up here, and this is the Tree of Knowledge."

Sandy laughed and after she passed it to Franklin, she passed it back up. "Let me know what you guys figure out up there."

They walked the rest of the way to her dorm in silence.

"You don't have to go," Franklin blurted out as they neared the Prentice entranceway.

She smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"To the demonstrations," he said. "You don't have to go to the demonstrations tomorrow to show you're committed."

"I just want to stop by for a minute," she said. "So I can say I was there."

"Why don't you just come by my room and we'll watch them from my window? We can record it. And we can play it over and over again." He knew Alan would be in class. Everybody else would be distracted on the quad.

They were under the long awning leading to the front door of Sandy's dorm. She stood up on her toes and kissed him.

"Call me," she said and smiled. "Our hall switchboard gets pretty tied up though, so if I don't hear from you I might just stop by."

Franklin mustered up an affirmative response and she said goodnight and gave him her moose horns again and smiled back over her shoulder.

"I love you," Franklin said, testing the statement for himself. Not loud enough to travel the quickening distance between them.

Midmorning, Monday May 4th, 1970, the last day of spring term. From Franklin's window, he saw the green jeeps already pulling up to the restricted parking lots at the corners of the quad. The final cut of Neil Young's *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* played through his secondhand Hi-Fi—Young's meandering distorted cowboy ballad. Franklin himself was thinking about barely-requited love, unbalanced love. *Sandy. Sandy.* Resetting the needle, he sat back down on his cot, what his roommate Alan had taken to calling the beds in their dorm room. "Two cots and some pot," he said the week before, "this place might as well be prison or the army—except for the drugs." Alan's impressive cynicism was sometimes difficult to parse; Franklin's had abated since he met Sandy.

Franklin adjusted his headphones and lay back down, ready to close his eyes, lean back on his sheets, feel the linen on his back and the breeze blowing in from the quad across his chest, and just listen to the music. He was waiting for Sandy to walk by beneath his window. He knew when the album ended—when

the cowgirl rode across Neil Young's heart again—it would be time to get up and go look out the window for Sandy walking between her classes. Franklin closed his eyes and tried to imagine lying down with her, each sharing an ear of his headphones. He made space for her on the bed.

Franklin woke up to the needle stuttering over the end of the album. He reset the player again without thinking. Then he sat up in a panic, worried he might have missed Sandy's approach. His jerking unplugged his headphones and the music started playing through the speakers. He looked out the window and the frenzy on the quad below matched his mental state.

Little puffs of smoke hung outside his window and at first it looked like the sky had been pulled down. More smoke streamed up from the ground like it was molten. Between the sky and ground there was a large crowd of people billowing over the quad. The smoke poured from behind the bench where Franklin used to read for class. A man dressed in army green broke away from the crowd and threw a canister trailing still more smoke. Tear gas. The guardsmen wore insect masks to cover their mouths but without masks the students pulled their shirts up to their faces and backed away, their shoulders jackhammering in coughing fits. The gas hung in gauzy gray arcs over the pink and white treetops. The smoke dispersed but hung in a film above the entire scene.

Wind lifted pamphlets from the ground and chased them around bare ankles and combat boots. An army jeep crept through the scene. Sunlight caught alternating corners of the vehicle's windshield as it rolled towards Franklin down

the walkway between Taylor and Prentice, Sandy's dorm. Sandy would be in her second class by now. Students converged on the jeep and hurled stones at the hood and windshield. Other students nearby cheered the rock throwers.

In the center of the patchy trampled grass of the Commons, the guardsmen were mixed in among the students until they stopped. And, as if in response to some signal, they separated themselves out into ranks in a perpendicular line across the bottom frame of Franklin's window, just below the verandah. The students standing there booed and heckled them. The soldiers marched the other students, scrambling and backpedaling, across the Commons and up Blanket Hill.

Franklin opened his window and heard the din from below—a low steady tide of voices punctuated by swelling shouts from the students crashing against curt orders from the guardsmen. A crackly bullhorn told the students to disperse. The demonstrations had been cancelled. The Victory Bell tolled vaguely from behind the dormitories. Franklin wanted to capture the richness of sound, the amazing simultaneity of all the noise. He wanted to play the tape for Sandy, in case the guardsmen dispersed the demonstrators before she left her second class. He didn't want her to miss it. Then with a horrible chorded emotion of shame, disgust and regret, he realized primarily he'd be happy for the excuse to bring her back to his room.

Rippling back across the grass, the students were chased away by surging clusters of soldiers. The students gained and lost the crest of Blanket Hill. It looked, from Franklin's distance, like the guardsmen pulled abreast of each other, responding to another inaudible signal. The first row of soldiers dropped, knees

to grass, waiting, frozen there at the top of the hill like statues. The soldiers pressed the students down and pinned them against the row of dormitory buildings, some slipped past and moved towards the string of pink blossoming trees along the back parking lot.

There, the crowd thinned out through the tree trunks and Franklin saw a young woman with auburn hair like Sandy's. She was wearing a bright blue sweater like one he saw her wear out to coffee once. This young woman was walking just like Sandy, too, her neck stretched towards the sky. And the guy beside her looked like Tom. But Sandy would be in class.

Franklin heard a shout, "You fuckers! You fucking pigs! No fucking pigs! No fucking pigs! No fucking pigs!" Other students joined in. Franklin heard some more tinny sounds from an officer's bullhorn. Then they stopped and the quad went quiet. Sunlight flickered down a row of bristling bayonets.

* * *

The light caught the specks of dust in the teacher's lounge. Contesta raised his scarred wrist and held his hand like a conductor. He seemed to be indicating that these were the moments that frequency modulation tidied up. And Franklin remembered the sickening poise of the afternoon four decades ago:

[Tape begins with carnival noise. Neil Young sings in the background. Outside, the open-air din of a crowd. Punctuated by louder outbursts from young men and women.]

Woman [*braying*]: Fuck you! You fucking pigs! No fucking pigs! No fucking pigs! No fucking pigs!

[*Other students around her take up and amplify her chant. Some rumbling follows, the thunderous syncopation of heavy footfalls. Then, an interminable moment of teeming silence replaces the white noise of the original recording—*]

[*Clear uninterrupted emptiness. No crackling, clouding white noise. The clean silence stretches into acres of blank sound speeding through Franklin's ears.*]

Guardsman Officer [*muffled by the megaphone, the distance, the dissonance from the crowd, but still undeniable*]: Right here! Get set! Point! Fire!!

[*The tape rolls right over the imminent moment, concludes with the shattering rifle fire. Sixty-seven rounds over a period of thirteen seconds, though it's impossible to distinguish each shot in real-time. Maybe Contesta can. Somewhere in the volley is the dogged bullet that sails three hundred ninety feet—sails for forty years, hissing as it enters Sandy's throat. She slumps over at the waist and then lies down on the ground like every bone inside her body has evaporated. Another bullet strikes Tom in the chest twenty yards away, he and Sandy are committed to the blackness of Franklin's tape.*]

Franklin remembered his panic right after the recording. He had run down the dorm's front stairs, his legs moving with the jangly detachment of a dream. It

couldn't be a dream, but it must. Pushing out through the front doors, the sunlight stunned him. He looked away and saw a crow flying fast and he thought, escape. When his eyes adjusted, so many other competing senses rushed at him at once—the wind, the bodies streaming past him in all directions, the microphones declaring a state of emergency, the Victory bell, the sunlight tinkling windows, belt buckles, cars, rifles.

Shouts and sobs punctured the pulsing quiet of the quad. He pushed through bodies, tripped over boots and bare feet. As he ran he caught only glimpses through the speed-blur—a man and a woman hugging, another woman resting her arm across their shoulders, a woman holding another at arm's length in a gesture of support or disbelief, men and women leaning into each other's arms or slumped down on the curbs and walkways. The crowd had been cut in half and the ones who remained were running or leaning over like they were sick at sea. Franklin covered the distance to the back parking lot in a beat and found a crowd behind the blossoming trees where he'd seen Sandy lay down. He pushed and dodged through torsos and hips and elbows into the clearing.

Sandy's body rested twisted at an unnatural angle. She'd lain down beneath the line of trees where they'd joined the picnic last night. A young woman with a blousy black dress was leaning over with a red-drenched shirt to Sandy's collar, two fingers of the woman's other hand pressed to Sandy's tan neck. The woman shook her head.

Sandy's arms were bent at awkward angles and her shins were crossed over one another like she'd fallen while running. Franklin couldn't make the image fit.

"What did you do to her?" he shouted.

The woman dropped her head and started crying.

"What did you do?"

"Easy," a voice said beside him and an arm wrapped around his shoulders. Franklin strained forward towards Sandy, but the grip tightened and pulled him to the grass edging the parking lot. Franklin looked up and there were gray wisps of smoke moving through the pink blossoms and black-booted men in green gasmasks and nothing seemed real to him anymore. Then the seconds sped up like the moment of before waking from a dream.

Contesta put his hand down on Franklin's and he could tell he'd just been asked a question he hadn't heard.

"What do you think," Contesta said. "Do you want me to play it again?"

"No, no," Franklin said.

"This one's your copy," he said. "I have my own that I'll play at the memorial tomorrow, the studio has another, and I'm going to drop one off downtown at the FBI building. You heard it, right? It's all there, clear as a bell."

"It's all there."

There was an embarrassing silence in the room. The fluorescent lights hummed and some invisible pipes clanged and clattered.

“It wasn’t an accident then,” Contesta said. “They marched out and shot at us, and Tom and Bill and Sandy were murdered.”

Franklin had forced his gut into a rage at the soldiers, the officers, the government, the other protestors. But they were all just agents of some larger force of fate or randomness. He didn’t believe the brink had been crossed on the quad. The moment had passed by in the riot outside of Ray’s, or when the fire was set to the ROTC, or some other imperceptible moment offstage, out of Franklin’s range.

“It’s not like they just marched out there and started firing,” Franklin said.

“Are you defending them?”

“Defending who?”

“Are you taking *their* side?”

“Whose side? There are no sides anymore. That was forty years ago. Those sides—if you could even draw sides—are gone. Half the guardsmen on that tape are probably dead or down in some damned nursing home.”

“But what about the victims?”

“Damn it Alan, they were more than victims.”

Contesta shook his head. “I know they were.”

The tape proved everything but not in the way Contesta meant, though it probably proved that too. Franklin had kept quiet all these years—because Sandy wasn’t supposed to be there, why was she there, what did she want from him?—but in his silence he had hung onto her. Speaking wouldn’t solve that, wouldn’t

erase what was recorded on the tape, wouldn't change the years after. Wouldn't bring her back. *Sandy*. Her name bloomed in him again.

“I'd like to say something, Alan.”

The teacher's lounge fell silent then the room went black across the furniture, their shoulders and the silent stereo, the light draining into the darkness rolling by on the tape.

CHAPTER 3

HURRI-KATE

In the early nineties, Seattle's dark billow of flannel and hair dye finally crashed over Cleveland. This was our moment, we thought, because nobody knew dinginess, sullenness and misdirected rage like us. And nobody assumed grimmer pride in conspicuous unrest than yours truly. I was one year out of college and lodged in a job that would have demoralized me even without a convenient ethos and record collection full of anthems of aggressive disappointment. I acted out my anxiety with the future in binge drinking, recklessness and sometimes shit-talking my guy friends into fights on my charming behalf. I fancied myself a hurricane—Hurricane Kate—which tore through the Flats, formed and re-formed over the summer of 1994 whenever the throbbing concrete heat met the dank breezes off Lake Erie met happy hour Natural Light met the receptive synapses in my brain. I didn't drink as often as I pretended, or have any real interest in drugs or recklessness but I also didn't know better than to tempt real grief and depression.

That summer could have been filed safely in my mind under “embarrassing / pathetic,” except that my guy friends beat a could-be boyfriend of mine, Jed, into a coma (he survived, but barely) after he almost assaulted me in a parking lot. Difficult days for me. All that and the hero of our favorite band committed spectacular suicide with a shotgun just after we scored a bootleg copy of the last live acoustic set his group performed. The order of events that summer fails to emerge through the swampscape of cheap beer and nitrous whippets and

worse. I forgot when Jed first popped up on my blurry radar but remember that he and I went on exactly one date, July Fifth. I could look up facts about Cobain's April 8th shotgun suicide and remember that Jed went to the hospital at the beginning of August. Besides these dates, my memories return to me with a pick-a-card-any-card sequence, my mind playing both the dealer and the mark.

Pick a card, and I'm sitting on the edge of my afghaned ash-stained couch in front of my speakers, listening to the live bootleg with the boys—Crab (the intellect) and the Molloy twins, Mike (the talker) and Tim (the brawler). No Jed yet. I was the only girl, but I was a hurricane, ready to pull friends and strangers into my dervish whirlwinds and deposit them on the other side of the Cuyahoga River hours, days later. I wore threadbare flannel draped over my malnourished shoulders, hips and thighs sausage into my flare jeans, my turquoise cowboy belt buckle ratcheted to the last eye I'd punched in the leather, ten-holed steel-toed boots, which I charmingly called my "shit stompers" all laced up—dressed to hit the Flats' boardwalk, dressed to walk the planks again.

But first we filled and refilled a balloon with nitrous from the aluminum whippet canisters they sold at gas stations and watched an hour's worth of notes cascade out my player. Cobain's gravelly plaintive pre-mortem voice dripping through it all, right to the eerie bonus track ghost song. We listened straight through, sitting like the RCA dog in quadruplet, our only movement dumbly passing the balloon and canisters down the row. This was how good the album

was (or the whippets were or both) because it really took something special to keep us quiet for even a minute.

By the end of the album I was on the verge of tears, ready to bawl my eyes out because of specific remorse for the deceased or because of the general spirit of those days, and by spirit I mean all the substances I'd jammed into my system. But I refused to let loose in front of Crab and the Molloy's, wary as the only girl. A breakdown in the appearance I'd crafted for them seemed like the worst possible outcome, though this anxiety seems quaint now laid beside other memories. When the disc stopped spinning and my mind stopped reeling from the last balloon, I made my stumbling way to the bathroom. In the mirror I watched a steady stream of saline mixed with mascara run down my cheeks like dirty river water from my dark eyes, which I was particularly proud of at the time. I had died red henna streaks into my stringy black hair, pulled the front strands back from my thin face and high cheekbones. My limbs and torso had narrowed and softened from inaction.

I heard somebody start the disc over and sat down on the toilet lid to listen for the first bars of the opening track, notes floating in from the space under the door.

"Fucking shame," Crab said, over the music.

Tim said, "They were just hitting their stride."

My friends could muster this sentiment for an unknowable rock star but showed next to nothing later after Mike put their onetime friend Jed in a coma. Before Mike even pulled his fists away from Jed's face that night, I felt guilt and

later felt more. Not that Jed was an untouchable figure. Pass the guilt around and everybody take a pull, like everything back then I took mine in excess. Oh I was a mess alright, after I'd already wasted so much practice pretending.

Pick another card, and I'm standing at the nurses' station at the Lutheran hospital, feeling as far from hurricane status as a garden sprinkler. Grief and guilt finally got the best of me and took me as far as Jed's ward and I still would have turned around except that one of the nurses, an olive-skinned Pakistani woman named Bahaar, recognized me. I made trips to the hospital for my job in the advertising department of a local drug company. Bahaar told me visiting hours had ended, but ushered me to Jed's room with a conspirator's wink and there I found my dumbstruck self sitting beside his bed. His face had healed from Mike's blows and become handsome again—in my mind Jed's dark hair, bright blue eyes, and his angular nose always stood out in remembered-Cleveland's sea of soft towheaded Poles and Anglo-Saxons.

"He likes it when you read to him," Bahaar said, though I knew he hadn't been much of a reader before. I guess she could discern this new interest from the number of blips on his monitors or from past experience with his condition.

I had nothing with me except a perfectly regrettable biography about the band who'd just lost their singer.

What people forget about Cobain was that he wasn't always so troubled. All the events of his life have been focused through the prism of his final act. People view every other moment as somehow leading up to his end, like cards

ever show up in order unless the deck is stacked. But still, when people remember Cobain's dark humor, in his journal for example, the darkness overshadows everything else. *Hi, I'm the moody bohemian of the band. I like: pasta, turtles, girls with weird eyes, writing, reading, keeping my mouth shut...gun cleaning.* Because of some short circuit in my wiring, which I later corrected, I linked Cobain's suicide with everything that had gone wrong for me that summer. I too was reading for the first indication of trouble, though I know now it must have been a convergence of elements, a perfect storm of personality, action and happenstance.

Pick a card, this one a morning memory, one of the few I can remember; it's the first time I met Jed formally, sober for the most part, though I'd fought through an eye-gouging headache as I'd dressed for work.

I walked out of my building in a wrinkled blouse and skirt, a hand visored over my eyes and barreled straight into Jed, who looked down and said, "Kate."

He'd spilled my water on my shirtfront and brushed some of it off with his hand in a gesture I would remember later as lacking any trickle of sexual charge. I brushed his hand away with my own, discreetly, and he looked down at me waiting for me to return his greeting.

I stalled momentarily, this was the closest I had been to him at this point, his features were even more arresting up close, eyes like bluebells, bright flecked with yellow and his hair and brow almost black.

He asked where I was headed and the soul-crush of my job came back to me. I worked in the advertising department of the drug company, Petracin, which sold medicine to terminal cancer patients. My job was to place little sponge footballs and golf kits with our drug's logo in doctors' offices and hospital waiting rooms.

"At Petracin Drug," I said. "Normal nine-to-five. What are you doing here?"

Although I had no reason to suspect that Jed was stalking me at the time, I found some pretty convincing evidence before his coma and then did a characteristically abysmal job addressing the circumstances. When I met his older brother later during visiting hours one day, he told me Jed had been troubled growing up, had difficulty making friends, got in more than his share of fights at the military academy where their father sent him, that he'd been sent there in the first place after an incident with a girl at public school. I knew almost nothing about Jed until it was too late. I told his brother I was only a friend, which in the end was probably generous.

Outside my building that remembered morning, I had no thought that Jed's behavior came from any inappropriate place. Downtown Cleveland was small enough for a normal chance encounter. I was young and a terrible judge of behavior and perceptions and I was a hurricane, wasn't I? Who stalked a hurricane?

"I'm just passing through," Jed said.

Passing through. At eight-thirty Thursday morning.

“Passing through to where?” I asked. “The lake?” I couldn’t suppress the jag of sarcasm I took out mostly at night.

He laughed and said sort of, he worked for his uncle at Jakubowski Tool, and he gestured at the port on the other side of the train tracks. The conversation stalled, which I would come to expect from us. He never said much. Among my friends, god bless us, who usually couldn’t shut up long enough to think, an ounce of restraint made Jed seem like James Dean.

I wanted to excuse myself so I could get out of the sunshine, deal with my headache in hermetic air-conditioned silence, regroup and wait to see Jed out at the bars, in my element. So when he said we should go out some time, I said sure, I’d be around, and I nodded *goodbye* or *that-settles-it*, depending on who saw the gesture.

Pick another card and it’s Bahaar, the nurse at Lutheran. “He’s *awake* today,” she said, her hazel eyes dilating to the size of nickels. She clicked and relicked a pen, white with the Petracin logo above the soft rubber grip. As she led me in she told me not to get my hopes up, that he had only opened his eyes, he hadn’t spoken yet or responded to her speech, “But he’s *awake*,” her thrill insuppressible.

They’d propped Jed’s bed up further. His face had healed but now the skin had gone slack and pooled above the covers, like his bones had been ground to mush. His eyes opened, reemerged for the first time in months. Still just a husk, if he had any new thoughts, he didn’t connect them to actions.

When I was a kid in Parma, my neighbor owned a rescued pit bull, Brutus, who had clear blue eyes set in his pink-and-white cherry blossom of a face; when you approached him, his eyes darted around like blue ping-pong balls on a rough current. Brutus was harmless and Jed reminded me of that animal, the first time he reopened his eyes, except for the dog's firm jaw.

I sat with Jed and he looked nervous, though I (almost) convinced myself it was just an illusion of his tormented appearance, like Brutus's. Harmless.

Out of habit, I read to him again from the biography.

Dear Diary,

Me. Me. Me. Finally I am writing down what I think may be wrong with me. My faults, my insecurities, my problems. Maybe if I make a list of my faults I could use this as a reference to be aware of everyday...If I write about my everyday interactions with people who I know, then I might be able to figure out their faults too...Maybe if I worry about my problems and my problems with others I might develop an even worse set of problems from my worrying so much.

It felt awkward reading to Jed now that his eyes bobbed and lolled, so I stopped and sat beside him but looked out the hospital window at sea gulls circling a trash barge sailing the Cuyahoga. I thought about my own problems, how I hadn't been able to recognize them, or interact with people beyond pretending and performing. All of which felt easier than exposing what I really wanted, let alone asking for it—a little tenderness and genuine connection.

"Thank Jesus," Tim said that night at my apartment, when I told him Jed hadn't said anything yet and didn't seem to recognize me.

I shot him dagger-eyes and said, “I don’t see anything to be thankful about here, Tim. A friend of ours is in the hospital because of us.”

“What friend? He was no friend of mine and I wouldn’t think I’d have to remind him how he treated you. How we found you?”

“You son-of-a—”

“Alright,” Crab said and Tim held his hands up in apology but shook his head. Crab smiled at me weakly, he hadn’t been there that night, after all, and didn’t really understand. Mike just looked mutely at my speakers. Crab and the Molloys had helped me through after the assault. While Jed lay puddling in the hospital, they had shut up when I needed them to, listened when I needed their silence, let me cry with patience and reassured me I wasn’t to blame. I had my doubts, even then, but passing nights with them beat the sprawling loneliness of my couch.

Pick a card, and I’m in the cabin of Mike’s pickup, still sobbing into Tim’s chest after watching his brother beat Jed into an unconsciousness that would last for months, at least. Jed was still lying on the dirt and after we stopped at a payphone off Route 2 so Tim could call 9-1-1 anonymously. Then he put the live bootleg disc in his player and at first I felt worse, but then couldn’t help but feel a little better. I had messed something up and Jed had messed everything up and Mike had messed it all up even more but nobody could touch these songs. So I reached over and set the stereo to Repeat All, and suspended time, no future, no past.

Pick a card, a mislaid joker, from weeks before Mike put Jed in a coma, the Fourth of July; I'm letting the good times positively tumble, me and all they boys—Crab, the Molloys, and now Jed. Crab scored a nitrous tank for the occasion, and Tim some light white powder that passed for coke from a dealer he knew named Flip. I was too scared to try anything more serious.

When we finally made it out to a bar called My Gal Friday's, we drank margaritas like we were on sweaty shore leave. We tore into a girl I heard say she liked her new purse because it was big enough to hold her hairspray.

“By hairspray, do you mean dildo?” I asked and the girl was understandably offended and whispered something to the boy standing beside her, who leaned forward until he saw Mike and Tim scowl.

“Where do you think he puts *his* hairspray, Kate?” Crab said nodding to Dildo's boyfriend, who wore his hair spiked.

“Ask him to grab his ankles and I'll show you,” I said. I was all charm back then and the couple decided to leave but Jed looked shocked and delighted—this was the first time he'd seen me together with the guys. I winked with a glint of reckless and regrettable pride. “Hurricane Kate.” Tim said, laughing and shaking his head.

At the Odeon we heckled our way through a terrible alt-rock set from Toledo band named Independence Weakened. In honor of the holiday, they played Americana mostly, distorted to a phlegmy gray shade of grunge.

“*Interest* Weakened,” Crab said.

“Interesting Weenies,” Tim said.

We were far too discerning to be fooled by the band’s false rage and sneers, we knew what this was all about. We booed them when they played an acoustic cover of our favorite band’s hit radio single. Crab said, “Not even Cobain could play that one acoustic.”

I remember the lyrics almost sounded tender without all the guitar noise behind them: *Load up on guns, bring your friends / It’s fun to lose and to pretend / She’s overboard and self-assured / Oh no, I know a dirty word.*

If I was still looking for the point when everything went wrong, this would seem like as good a contender as any. I was willfully ignorant of any sense of real trouble, didn’t even recognize the dangerous, ultimately impossible balance of Cobain’s music, instead shouted along as cheerfully as any teenie bopper. Bubbleglum, not thinking for a moment about what his lyrics might mean.

Independence Weakened began a rollicking version of “This Land Is Your Land,” and Jed grabbed my wrists and took a wild series of stutter-steps that made me wonder how many times he’d danced with a girl before and how many drinks he’d had that day. Even if Jed had been more graceful I was in no mood or condition to dance so I slipped my arms free as gently as I could.

“Come on, you’re Hurri-Kate.” Nobody had ever called me Hurri-Kate. Not even Tim had ever mashed the words together like that.

I shook my head, *no thanks*, and turned towards Tim and the relative safety of the bar. Jed’s arm flashed and his fingers sank into my wrist before I could take a step away. Tim saw the move, and surged towards him.

“What the fuck, chief?” Tim asked.

“Easy, Tim,” I said and when Mike made a silent move forward, Crab had the good sense to stand in front of him and tell him it wasn’t worth it or it was too early for a fight or whatever he needed to say to calm him down.

Jed lifted the backs of his hands to his shoulders in apology and turned to the stage but all the positive energy had been sapped from the group.

Pick another card, the dagger-eyed king of clubs, Jed has me pressed against my car, helplessly drunk, in a deserted parking lot blocks from the bar where I left the Molloyes. Jed had followed me there, breathed bourbon in my face and started groping and undressing me. “Stop—stop—stop,” I kept saying to him, my limp arms still trying to push on his chest. *Who can hurt a hurricane?* I wondered. In response, I imagined a chorus of crazed laughter. The laughter got louder and it seemed echo off the distant bridge, the Route 2 overpass, finally triggering my dimmed instincts enough for me to manage some loud-enough sounds of distress. Before Jed could pull away from me, I saw two shadows break off from the darkness beneath the bridge and bend around the deserted parking hut. The Molloyes.

“What in the *fuck* is going on here, Jed?”

“What in the hell are you *doing*, chief?”

“Whoa, easy. Mike, Tim. We’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

Jed hadn’t taken his hands off my wrists yet.

“You’re in the middle of something alright.”

I was too out of breath to say anything, but I remember my cowboy belt buckle jangled free and fell onto the asphalt, clattered there like a gavel rapping.

I pulled myself free and cried into Tim’s work coat while Mike stepped around us towards Jed.

“Easy, Mike, I don’t want any trouble,” Jed said. “This is just a simple mix-up.”

Mix-up or no, Jed tucked his elbows into his sides and put his fists up by his diamond eyes, probably like he’d been trained at the military academy. Mike never seemed to have a notion for technique but I never saw him lose a fistfight or even take a punch. He clapped his palms to Jed’s ears and then drew his fist back and punched him clean in the center of his face, leaving a rosette of blood between Jed’s nose and his upper lip. Jed reached up to dab at it and Mike pulled him to the ground. Planting his knees on Jed’s chest, Mike let loose a torrent of blows, his arms and fists pistoning into Jed’s face. I wished it wasn’t Jed but Mike’s fighting for me for once felt justified and I let it go on too long, everything in excess back then, except empathy. I still wonder what could have happened— if I had spoken up sooner, would Jed have woken up sooner, or never gone to sleep.

“Stop,” I sobbed through Tim’s coat and Mike looked up. Tim nodded. Mike bent to get my car keys and the Malloy’s linked their arms under my shoulders and buoyed me toward the front seat of Mike’s pickup.

Pick another card, this time I'm with Jed at a bar called the Magician, July 5th, our only date if you can call it that. There was some kind of vague vaudevillian theme—black and red and top hats stuffed with stuffed rabbits caught on the scruff by disembodied hands. A smoke machine in the back oozed gray misty puffs into stage lights that cycled through different shades of purple and red, and caught the edges of nooks, false doors, partitions and mirrors. Jed had let on that he'd made good with Crab and the Molloys and I wondered, at least momentarily, if the rest of the group may have been hidden somewhere in the confusion.

Jed smelled like breath mints and sport cologne and I liked sitting close to him. But I convinced myself that I always said too much so I waited for him to talk to me.

The bartender practiced some sleight of hand for us but the place had just opened and he'd really only had the time to learn a couple of tricks. He fumbled through his loaded deck and guessed my card incorrectly.

Jed and I sat alone in silence; the bartender moved to the far end of the bar to figure out where his cards had failed him.

“So where's Crab and everybody?” I asked, unable to keep quiet any longer.

“Oh, yeah. I think they must have bailed.”

“What do you mean *you think*?”

“Oh, just that I said we would be here at like nine and it's already ten. I'm sure they'll be fine on their own for a night.”

I liked that Jed said *we would be here* like we were a pair but I also sensed an edge of what I thought might be jealousy in his last comment about leaving Crab and the Molloy's alone. I decided to focus all my pitiful attention span on Jed. I asked him what type of music he was into and he said he didn't really like music. He seemed to still be sulking that I'd asked about our other friends. I asked him if he liked to go to the movies and he said he hadn't seen any recently. Books? Not since high school. Our conversation stalled there. The question—*what the hell do you do?*—sat there on the bar between us. I—who kept to a rigid schedule of happy hours and after hours that summer, on top of the miserable work I was actually paid for—still found time to listen to music, to go to the cinema a few times each month, to read a rock 'n' roll biography every now and again (if only to convince myself that I hadn't zapped every last brain cell). Jed didn't seem to have any interest beyond haunting local dives.

We stared at the smoke and mirrors for a few minutes, watched the bartender's magic-in-progress for a few more, waited for the red lights to change back to purple, and then the bartender came back and showed me another card, wrong again, and I was already irritated so I said, "Listen buddy, that's gotta be your last guess, it's not a trick anymore," even though I know it wasn't his fault. He slunk away, shoulders hunched.

If an air raid is pretty loud, then I remember the Magician as pretty loud when the DJ started his set. Jed actually grimaced towards blasts from the speakers a couple of times before I leaned in and said, "I think somebody's playing a late show at the Odeon tonight. You want to see if Crab can get us in?"

“Let’s have another drink here first.”

The bartender began practicing a new trick where he balled a number of spongy ducks the size of pencil erasers into his fist. The magic, it seemed, was in how many he could cram into his hand. Unbelievably loud music, unimpressive magic, and Jed and I didn’t have one word for each other—our date, if Jed wanted to call it that, seemed thoroughly ruined so I said, “I think I’ll wait until the show.”

I stood to leave and Jed reached for my arm but stopped quick. He looked surprised then embarrassed, so I said, “Rain check?” and he perked up momentarily and nodded, as much to himself as to me, through a cloud of smoke.

Pick another card, Jed’s eyes still closed in the hospital, I’m reading an entry from the biography again. After Cobain learned that two of his young fans misinterpreted one of his songs and repeated his lyrics which condemned an infamous rapist case while the boys assaulted a girl themselves, he spoke out against them at a show. *Last year, a girl was raped by two wastes of sperm and eggs while they sang the lyrics to our song. I have a hard time carrying on knowing there are plankton like that in our audience.* I guessed my life would have been easier if Jed had been a solely sinister shithead but I could only work up a general kind of hatred for those boys even after Jed assaulted me. Nothing was ever as simple as I thought before. More than anything I was depressed just to live in the world. I had learned too late I had no reason to pretend my rage came from sadness.

Pick another card, I'm making my limping way back to my car from the bars where I left Crab and the Molloys, determined to drive home if I could just make it the few overwhelming blocks to where I parked. I braved a deserted stretch of sidewalk, empty factories with smashed windows gaping, light guttering through like from jack-o-lanterns—under the blackened overpass, past the unoccupied attendant's booth, finally to the empty parking lot.

“Thar she blows. Hurri-Kate.”

I didn't see Jed until I was getting my keys out, until he was almost on top of me. He was leaning against an extinguished light pole. He had told me he couldn't make it out when I had called earlier for our rain check. Had he followed me to the lot? Known where I'd park for a night out?

“Jesus, Jed, you scared me.” He still was scaring me. “What the fuck are you doing lurking in the shadows like that?”

“Watch it, I'm not lurking. I'm waiting for you.”

“Well what do you want?”

“I just want to talk,” he said. “You have to admit there's something between us.”

At one time I may have wanted to admit this but I remembered the Magician and how little there actually seemed to be between us and before I could say another word, Jed said, “Enough talk,” and leaned in to kiss me. He smelled like shoe-polish, bourbon, Kools, and gyro meat; and if I ever smell that melee

again, I'm sure it will be in hell. When I told him to stop and pushed him away he looked surprised and offended.

He grabbed at me again and pushed me against the car. Jed would have been much stronger than me even if I hadn't already been exhausted. His forearms were like leather straps; his fingers were like handcuffs. He was intent on kissing my face, even as he pinned me against the door of my car. The handle dug into the small of my back. I turned away. Jed used his knees to hold me in place and grabbed at my breasts. His palms were cold and there was nothing sexual in the way his hands slid and pushed. I told him to stop. I was so tired. I told him not to do this here.

“Who's going to see?”

“Jed, stop. I don't care who sees, goddamn it.”

His hands were on top of my jeans, jabbing me between my legs. “I don't want to hurt you.”

Nobody can hurt a hurricane; though I was as wrong about that as anything.

Pick another card, one of my worst mornings before Jed ended up in the hospital, July Fifth, the morning after the epic Fourth. I knelt in front of a spread of hangover pharmacopeia on my coffee table—Vicodin, toast, a half-gallon of juiced orange juice—like a supplicant praying for mercy. Not even music could solve my problems. I'd been a hurricane last night, for sure, and in addition to my hell-bred hangover I remembered how tense everything had ended up between my

friends. All had been forgotten in our chemically induced amnesia, I tried to assure myself. I tried to stop myself at three painkillers. Coached myself hard, for several hours, out of taking the whole bottle. Prayed for Crab or the Malloys to call me back. Then, damned if Jed didn't call me. I wasn't sure how he got my number (never found out). Crab may have given it to him. Or I may have given it to him for all I can remember.

Jed asked me if I wanted to meet him at the Magician, a new bar downtown. When I asked him if Crab and the Molloyes were coming, if he'd patched everything up, he said everything was cool, though they told me later he'd never called anybody but me.

When I found out later Jed had only called me, it made me feel special in an odd way and I realized I wanted tenderness not rage, connection not preceded by sarcasm—like Cobain himself who summed up the last lines he ever wrote with empathy. I still haven't figured out how to address what I want but I have to promise myself there's still time. I told Jed all this the last day I went to see him. His eyes were open but he hadn't changed much.

Another card is stuck to this last one and even though I know I shouldn't, before I can talk myself out of it, I pry the card free and look at its face: dark buildings, an overpass, a darkened lot and then the memory laid bare. *Read it and weep*, I tell myself.

CHAPTER 4

UNCLE TEAGUE

Here's your Uncle Teague's last night—the real story. No cautionary tale, no factory-line morals. I promised I'd tell you everything when you were old enough and I'm not sure you're there yet but you were honest with me and now I need to be honest with you. I know how difficult it must have been for a young man to tell his father what you told me, especially growing up where you have, surrounded by all these traditional corn-fed boys. When you told your mom and me you'd known for a while but were waiting for the right moment to tell us, I was quiet but only because a headfull of memories came elbowing past each other and all fell in at once so I couldn't put them in order. I hope the truth in Teague's story will let me off the hook, a little.

First and foremost Teague was a model older brother. He took me with him through the brew-thru with his phony ID, baked us out of our skulls in his Charger before first bell and sent girls to talk to me every lunch period in the cafeteria. He was the warm glow at the center of wherever he went, but he seemed completely blind to consequences, drove his car like it was a weapon and became a don't-or-else case who spiked and crashed and left the rest of us to sweep through the rubble.

That much I've told you already and I won't pretend he wasn't all I've said he was. He *was* reckless. But he was also brave and troubled and had a gritty sense of humor. His last night, the first thing I remember are the police lights and the officers creeping up behind our car. I saw the lights strobe red and

blue against the back windshield, heard the officers shoes scrunching in the gravel at the edge of the road. Teague was sober by his standards. Until a couple weeks before Krankowski's graduation party, Teague spent the most weekend nights spectacularly drunk. The last few times we'd been out, Teague drank much less than usual, so little in fact that his friends Block and Krankowski ribbed him too hard and we had to leave. At the time I figured he was cranky about Nonnie and Poppie riding him to figure out his future. Boyhood and high school had been bliss for Teague, but the rest of his life seemed to be yawning out in front of him. He hadn't applied for college or thought about a career. Every morning in the month or so leading up to graduation Poppie left the Classifieds at Teague's spot at the breakfast table, the most promising entries circled in red pen. Teague stopped eating breakfast. After he passed, they wished they'd taken it easier on him (misremembering that they'd ever been hard). Even though that was never the problem, I couldn't give them any relief.

To say that Teague was not scrutably drunk doesn't mean he would have passed any sobriety test. So the cops inching towards the Charger felt like my stomach was slowly scraping against my spine. Teague smiled his easy smile. The cops unhooked their flashlights, snicked them on and pointed their dual beam at Teague's license plate. Teague didn't flinch. Then their figures came clear in our rearview, a couple paces behind our back wheels and Teague's smile dropped like a bridge collapse on his face. Faster than a heartbeat he had his foot on the gas. Right as the cops had breasted our bumper Teague said, "Fuck if Mom and Dad are getting *that* phone call," and tore a patch in the gravel. I should have

known then something was wrong, Teague never worried about the phone calls Nonnie and Poppie had to take. But the moment passed too fast for me to recognize the real danger. Stones from Teague's tires flew all over the officers pant legs and the two crew-cut men tensed in the swirl of patrol lights. They stood shocked for a moment before they scrambled back to their car, tripping over each other.

If he had been playing it for comedy, Teague couldn't have timed it better and when I went to grief counseling at school after his death, the comedy of the evening was something I couldn't talk about. Two other students had lost loved ones that year so they put us all in group therapy, although nobody seemed to take comfort in the company. We met for grief sessions with Mrs. Shrever, in the tutoring trailers on the back edge of the parking lot. There was a girl Lisa Trappani, who stonyfaced had watched her father die slow, and an enormous linebacker from our football team, named Michael Stills, who sniffled through every meeting over his younger sister who died half as old as your uncle of some unpronounceable disease. Not to say grief is ever easy, but the other mourners lost their family under less complicated circumstances. They had fewer questions beyond the straight up why-now's and why-me's. I'd been socked with all the facts I couldn't understand from my last few minutes with Teague and all the other questions that kept cropping up even after he had been buried. Questions I couldn't share with Nonnie and Poppie, really with anybody until your mother.

But at the start of the chase, the only question I had was whether Teague understood that he had just fled the scene of a crime. That the men stalking our

car had, in fact, been police officers. My voice squeaking like a saxophone, I asked him as much.

“No shit, Murder-She-Wrote. Of course they’re fucking cops,” he said.

“Why do you think I’m trying to lose them so hard?”

He laughed. I laughed. At eighteen, I’m sure you know yourself, you can deflect almost any seriousness with a joke, even better an insult. He laughed harder and was still laughing as he gassed it and put some more distance between us and the cruiser. Because I couldn’t talk about the humor of that night, I mistrusted the surface of all jokes for years and even now laughter sometimes comes coupled with sharper pangs. To hell with Officer What’s-his-face, Teague said. I only half-caught the name and thought, *Sure, to hell with Whoever.*

Teague was still chuckling to himself long after the joke had passed and he kept shaking his head. He must have been thinking what I know now—that sometimes there’s nothing to do but laugh and there’s an ounce of last resort comfort to be squeezed from feeling the sleet in your face and realizing you’ve been walking the wrong way all along.

Teague laughed in quick desperate bursts and pressed down on the accelerator. The Charger reached hood-rattling speed, jostled over the uneven road that bent around the swells and dips along the riverbed. I remember one curve vividly. Coming up on a hairpin, carrying all the speed we’d been gaining, Teague mashed on the brakes too late and just past the guardrail the Charger started to drift. The soft stony shoulder pulled his wheels down, his tires growled for traction along the crest of the drainage ditch. As we slid towards the edge,

some pebbles shot away and thumped turkey shot against the bark in the trees on the other side. We hovered along the dark gap in front of the darker tree line.

The front seat felt weightless, like exhaling.

Time slowed down, my mind extending the length before the ditch, delaying the crash. In my memory, a moment that could only have lasted a second or two, stretches into half a minute at least. Teague righted the Charger but had to slow down in the gravel before returning to the road and the cops gained some ground on us. My mind thrilled with a cocktail of fear, excitement and absurd humor, shaken by the curve and the bumpy road. When the blue and red lights painted the trees behind us, my mind keyed up, I realized that Teague hadn't said, Officer What's-His-Name, but a real name, Officer Weatherstone.

I asked your uncle who Officer Weatherstone was and his smile twitched a little, an unnoticeable shiver, except that I was sitting right beside him. Teague accelerated again and took a short cut down the cart path of a farmette that sold roadside vegetables during the day. Your uncle knew the backroads in Richfield as well as anybody else, the cut-throughs, service tracks, frontage roads, horseback paths and construction sites. He was, as I said, everything an older brother should be. He could shoot a jumpshot true as the sun rising and setting. Could blow smoke rings like halos. Knew how to curse and tell jokes and always kept an eye on his dogshit freshman brother. He lost the cops like he'd left them on the other side of a wall.

After one of our grief counseling sessions—*Home Wreckonomics*, I began calling them privately—Mrs. Shrever asked me into her office where there was a man seated in front of her desk, worrying the Rubik’s cube she kept to occupy student hands during meetings. She introduced the man as Detective Weatherstone.

“I was at your brother’s funeral,” he said. “We didn’t get a chance to meet.”

I remembered the name of course from the car chase and his presence at Teague’s funeral seemed like an intrusion. It took me months to warm up to him. Our first meeting, he asked me the same well-worn questions about how I was feeling and I gave my dopey robotic answers and it went pretty much like my sessions with Mrs. Shrever. He left me his card. My curiosity finally won out over anything like allegiance to my brother and I called the detective several times. Weatherstone hesitated to give me any real information, except that he’d met my brother before the night they chased us. It wasn’t until two years and a dozen periodic phone calls later, that Weatherstone decided I was ready to hear how he first knew my brother.

What I’m going to tell you is going to seem too convenient, given what you told me earlier, and given how many times I’ve told you this story before, leaving out the real details. You’ll just have to trust that I was just as shocked as you’ll be when I found out that Weatherstone *had reason to question your uncle’s sexuality*, was how he phrased it. I didn’t believe him at first, Teague had always

been incredibly popular with girls. I couldn't fit the fact into everything else I knew about him. I told Weatherstone he was out of his mind, he had the wrong guy. Then he told me he had found Teague in his Charger one night, parked out at Indigo Lake, in the lot across from the make-out lot, with another boy. Both boys naked. He saw the other boy's head spring up from Teague's lap when he rapped on the glass with his flashlight. The boys had been so mortified and meek and Weatherstone had just joined the force and was embarrassed to find two boys together in the car and so he let them go with a warning, taking only their names. All at once, the image of Teague with his pants down and another boy's head with long blond curls came into my mind and I was angry with Weatherstone and didn't know why he'd told me in the first place. I told him not to call anymore. The image came to me again and again, although I never found out who the other boy was or what he really looked like. For years, thinking about what Weatherstone told me alongside what I already knew about your uncle was like finding an extra puzzle piece that fit just as well as the one already in place, but changed the picture entirely. Then I decided neither piece really mattered to me.

After we took the short-cut past the farmette, I don't remember all the curves and dips we took, though bodily I remember the thrum of the trees whipping by our windows, throttling the silence inside the car. All the time that's passed and my failing mind pressed some of these turns down into oblivion so that they disappeared under the shadows of taller memories from that night.

Teague drove on, speechless and fidgety, setting and resetting his hands in different positions on the steering wheel.

“Who the hell is Weatherstone?” I asked. I was scared but I felt force in the name. Teague winced. I asked him again and he told me to drop it.

Teague had never told me to drop a single thing in his life. He took pride in never leaving anything well enough alone. Power over my older unflappable brother felt like nothing more than a thrill. Only later did the power sicken me—that in speaking Weatherstone’s name, I had thrown my lot in with his authority.

I asked Teague again and he said drop it, but sharper this time, in a tone familiar from that time just before his death. He had used the tone once at the breakfast table when I saw him hunched over a bowl of cereal. That morning he had apologized for telling me to shut my mouth before I’d even really said anything. He told me he’d been pinched the night before and not to tell Nonnie and Poppie. It was the morning, I found out later, after Weatherstone caught him in the parking lot. He used the tone again right before the chase when we left Krankowski’s graduation party. (Krankowski and Block never found out why Teague had been angry that evening. Everybody but me forgot that in those weeks before the funeral Teague hadn’t been his usual pig-in-shit happy self. Forgetting made for an easier story. He was reckless was all.)

After a few silent minutes, the road opened up like a black tablecloth right before we stopped, sirens in the distance, in some future cookie-cutter housing development off Route 77. Teague had pulled in behind the construction equipment. The land around us sat leveled and tilled and ready to go.

Idling in that empty plot, the hum of the Charger's engine punctuated every couple minutes by the Doppler and echoes of sirens down the rows of rising houses, Teague said, "I'm going to drop you off here."

I made some sort of pathetic protest and he said, "Because I don't want you to get pinched just for having been in the car. And because I say so that's why."

Teague told me the rest of his plan. There was only one exit to the development, same as the entrance the cops had covered, but Teague wasn't leaving through the exit. He was going to drive the other direction beneath the power lines until he met Medina Line Road, which he'd take to 77 and to the shopping plaza in Fairlawn, where the car dealerships are now. He'd park the car at a crazy angle in the empty lot. Then he'd walk away, leaving both doors open. At the movie theater across the street he'd call Bath P.D. to report the car stolen. He planned to fish a movie ticket out of the garbage for evidence. To me, a not-too-bright fifteen-year-old, this sounded like an amazing plan and I sat there hoping he'd rethink things and let me ride off beside him. Instead he reached across my chest and opened the door and told me to call Block to pick me up. I stood and my feet sank into some loose stones.

I looked back in through the passenger door one last time. Teague looked uncertain and for a moment I had another chance, which I promptly blew, to ask him to change his mind. I would have followed Teague's lead no matter the course—faced the entire police department, a corps of state troopers and the Summit county sheriff, or worse. Before I could think of anything to say, Teague

said, “Alright shitbird, get out of here and don’t get caught.” His last words, as far as we know. He reached over and closed the door, tore a final patch and disappeared. Some stones skittered across my shoes and I kicked them away in a childish spasm. I was angry with Teague for sending me away and in my darkest moments with Mrs. Shrever, and later, I remember wishing something bad would happen to him, but that memory can’t be true and anyways I was just a kid, right?

The sirens were closing in so I made my retreat to the woods skirting the development. Angry and confused I tripped off through the underbrush wondering about Weatherstone and why Teague had sent me away. Even later when I came up with stand-in answers to my questions, new questions slid in—Why did Teague think he couldn’t tell me about himself? Not Nonnie and Poppie probably, but why not me? Over the years—when I saw your grandfather make fun of a teacher’s lisp or saw him drop his hand like a hinge at the wrist, behind a waiter’s back—I wanted to hurt Poppie but not with Teague’s memory. And when Nonnie saw two men kissing behind the tents at the blossom festival just before you were born, and she had an offended heaving reaction, I felt nauseous too. I realized why Weatherstone told me about Teague. He didn’t want the burden of deciding whether to tell everybody else and this made me angry at first, but in the end it wasn’t his burden and shouldn’t have been.

I spent years and years angry with Teague too. Everybody but me forgot Teague’s last couple weeks of sullenness. When I continued to be angry with him, Nonnie thought this was my grief. It still prickled up years later and she couldn’t understand. I couldn’t explain and we suffered for it. Teague’s death

put a lot of pressure on our family and we didn't exactly make a diamond of it. Not a pretty thing to hear from about father, or that the grandparents you loved before they passed could be so mean-minded, I know, but I'm trying to be honest for Teague's sake and yours. And I know that a fifty-year-old man staying mad with the memory of his eighteen-year-old brother seems pathetic and immature. But I ultimately forgave him. And he would have forgiven himself too if he'd had the chance and then later realized there was nothing to forgive.

After he left me, I imagine your Uncle Teague shaking off any doubts he has and driving away smiling in his rearview as he watches me pick my way over stumps and roots. He soon forgets about me, forgets about Weatherstone, and cranks the local rock station. He's only eighteen, I have to remember. Skuzzy, throbbing full-throttle guitars come in as he cuts through one of the built-but-uninhabited lots, down a rough path made for backhoes, and finally down the lane cut in the woods under the whirring power lines. There are some tricky bushes and loose stones that sound like coins in a washing machine when they ping against the undercarriage of his car. On 77, he rolls down all the windows like he's setting off on a summer road trip. The miles tick by in the seams of asphalt. Before he loses control and drives off the overpass (in a moment of brief but excruciating doubt), he hums along with the radio, leans back and thinks about a blond boy from school.

CHAPTER 5

THE CASK

Christmas Eve morning, Abe arrived to stay for the weekend with his mother and stepfather (without his wife of five years) in his old room in Frank's railroad apartment. Abe's mother hugged him in through the front door. She told him she'd made his bed, and even though his old room had been turned into a storage space of sorts, he should have enough room. "Cozy, cozy," she sing-songed, her optimism impenetrable. Down the narrow row of rooms, Abe had to lower his duffle bag from his shoulder and turn sideways to pass his stepfather in the half-hallway between the kitchen and den. "They don't have barbers in Connecticut?" Frank asked as Abe shuffled by. For the four years Abe had lived in Frank's apartment during high school, Frank had always dealt with awkwardness of encounters in his narrow hallways by criticizing Abe.

Frank's insult, which would have rankled the hair on Abe's neck in high school, now seemed pathetic. Abe's mother had told him Frank's mind had declined rapidly since he sold the body shop he ran for decades. Gray hairs had started to curl in tufts from Frank's ears and his eyes looked buggy behind his thick lenses. What hair Frank had was pulled straight back with Brylcream and only a couple inches shorter than Abe's. Frank wore a flannel pajama shirt dusted with toast crumbs and tan sweatpants pulled on at a perfunctory angle. *He has good days and bad*, Abe's mom told him and Abe guessed this was a good once since he still remembered he disliked his stepson. "Merry Christmas, Frank," Abe said.

“Christmas Eve, dummy,” Frank corrected. “Christmas Eve day.”

“Okay.”

Boxes crowded Abe’s old bedroom but the walls were relatively unchanged: a desk, a bookcase lined with rows of Gothic lit and a framed print of the final scene from Abe’s favorite Poe story, “The Cask of Amontillado,” in which the hero tricks his nemesis down into the catacombs, shackles him and walls him up alive. Regrettably and unselfconsciously, Abe had celebrated the black-and-white image of a comically mustachioed man, spade in hand, setting the last row of bricks around his frantic quarry. Abe, of course, had identified with the mason because he had been so incapable of confrontation, and little had changed except Abe’s regret. Beneath the image of the final scene was the story’s opening line. “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge.” This past year, which Abe had spent tiptoeing through arguments and reconciliations with Connie, almost made him nostalgic for the simple hatred he’d felt towards his stepfather before college.

What Abe was sure would be the direst days of his life, played out in his stepfather Frank’s railroad apartment in Queen’s during the last three-and-a-half years of high school. That prediction turned out to be about as accurate as any other forecast he could have made about his life then. Rising from the steady froth of Frank’s insults, Abe remembered in all-too-clear detail, the worst day from those years.

At the beginning of his junior year, Abe had worked up the gall to ask Jenny Lee over one afternoon to study for the SATs and perplexingly she'd agreed. Jenny had short black hair and danced in the local youth ballet well enough to consider studying at college, assuming she could bring her test scores up. Abe considered himself frustratingly average, although he gained some attention as a good student.

Jenny sat down across from Abe at the card table where his family ate their meals. His mother had draped a lace tablecloth over the laminate and brought a plate of cheese and crackers. "You two are quiet as monks in here," she said. "You're going to ace that test, I'm sure."

"I knew a guy like you in high school," Frank said, home from work with his customary lowball in hand. "He used to tutor girls he was sweet on."

"I'm not tutoring," Abe said. "We're studying together."

Jenny blushed and chewed on her pencil, doggedly figuring a word problem about trains speeding from distant coasts towards the heartland.

"Asher Finestein," Frank said. "He had this great beak of a nose, looked like a stork so we called him Stork Finestein." Frank laughed, remembering his wit.

"What's he doing today?" Abe asked. Abe was keen then on morals about losers who studied hard and took their revenge years later as senators and doctors, while the point guards and outfielders walked security in their hometown malls. As if it were ever that simple, as if doctors never argued with their wives or mothers and woke up every morning erupting with certainty and goodwill.

“Stork?” Frank asked. “Who cares? Probably knocking over vases with that giant shnoz.”

Jenny let out a laugh like a little cough and dropped her eyes back to trains hurtling towards impact. When Frank passed through to the den, she said, “Your father’s a real character,” and Abe had said *stepfather* so forcefully that she broke the point off her pencil.

Abe struggled through the rest of the word problems and Jenny left their study date early, excusing herself to an earlier rehearsal time she just remembered. The ruined afternoon, Abe thought predictably enough, had been all Frank’s fault. Hitching his problems to Frank diverted Abe from his own in ways that allowed them to set, until they seemed impossible to break down.

At dinner that night, Frank asked how Abe had lured such a nice girl home from school and Abe explained that his generation didn’t lure girls.

“Well in *our* generation,” Frank said. “If you brought a nice girl home, you at least tried to sit beside her.”

Abe’s mom laughed a little cough almost identical to Jenny’s. She smiled down into her potatoes and Abe compiled the ruined dinner with the ruined study-date. He had an unfortunate skill, even then, for remembering and compiling perceived slights, for working himself into hidden rage. His introspection rarely took him anywhere interesting or even complicated. Instead he wore down a single track. Later he realized (too late) this attitude prevented him from confronting the people he cared about in ways that would have ultimately helped. His mind was a machine ineffectively connected to the safety valve of his mouth.

Instead the pressure would build until an explosion, or more likely a meltdown. *First this, then that, now this?* He looked down at his cooling dinner and vowed revenge.

Abe's mother had asked Frank to wait for Abe to arrive from Connecticut to buy their Christmas tree. It was the type of event she often tried to arrange for them when Abe was in high school and she still held out some hope that everybody could get along. She sent her men off that Christmas Eve afternoon assuring them she didn't want to go with them, she'd rather be surprised. Almost as soon as they closed the doors of Abe's car, Frank got it into his struggling mind that he was taking his real son Gary to pick out their tree.

"What have I always told you about picking a good tree, son?" Frank asked as they set off for the nursery in Forest Hills.

Abe knew almost nothing about Frank's former family but he didn't exactly want to explain to his stepfather that Gary had died in a jungle in Vietnam, his body unrecovered.

Abe told him he forgot, and braced for Frank's standard demeaning remarks, but instead his stepfather said, "Sometimes I think you'd forget your head if your neck wasn't so stubborn." There was a tinge of dark satisfaction in Frank treating Abe better than he would have wanted to, like a son.

"How do you pick a good tree, Pop?" Abe asked

For the rest of the afternoon as they strolled the rows of trees at the nursery, Frank talked about to Abe, outlining Gary's future.

“As soon as you finish whipping those commies back into the jungle, you’ll come home and there’ll be a job waiting for you at the body shop.”

How could have Abe’s own career turned out differently if he’d had this encouragement from Frank? Maybe business school after all, and a decent salary. Or if his real father hadn’t left when he was in middle school for California? Or had sent more than postcards with no return address. Still Abe couldn’t envy Gary, really, in life or death.

“Your sweetheart Rachel will be waiting here for you and I’ll help you put a down payment on that apartment on in the new building around the corner.”

Every sentence was a pep talk. Frank’s former view of the future was no more full or realistic than Abe’s view that the brainiacs who went on to med school or law school then led charmed lives. But Frank’s view was based in hope at least. So Abe played along in a detached way, wondering how all their lives might have been changed if Gary had survived. Abe still doubted he would have learned to communicate better, Connie’s therapist seemed to think he’d shut himself down as soon as his real father left.

The headiness of Frank’s optimism and the thick pine-scented afternoon only broke once when Frank mentioned Gary’s mother, his first wife, Janie. Abe’s mother had always been jealous of Frank’s first wife and pretending to be Janie’s son felt like betrayal.

Franks and Abe came back, still playing father and son, shimmying a stout white spruce through the doorway discussing a long bygone Mets’ bullpen. Abe’s mother smiled and must have thought Frank was softening towards her son. Abe

prayed he could keep up the gambit long enough to get the tree positioned and make a retreat out of Frank's skewed vision. But Frank called Abe Gary no less than four times while he was on his knees adjusting the tree skirt. Then he told Gary his mother wasn't going to put the roast on the table until they had her tree just right. Abe's mother had never made a roast in her life.

"Dammit Frank," she said finally. "That's not Gary that's Abe. You're not married to Janie anymore. She cheated on you with one of your mechanics and with the old building super and probably half a dozen other men before you got the good sense to divorce her. You married me twenty years ago and that's my son Abe. *We're* your family now. Janie hasn't called you in ten years." She left the room in a teary rage and Frank looked at Abe hurt and confused.

What should have been Abe's modest revenge came only a couple months after the failed study-date with Jenny. He hurried home following the seemingly interminable laps of track practice and found the scenario underway in the living room. His mom had stopped Frank before he could find his lowball, before he could even loosen his tie. Abe hurried past them almost unnoticed into the kitchen and stood listening just out of sight.

"Well why on earth did you send them then?" his mother asked Frank. Abe heard a strain of desperation in his mother's voice. He knew she was talking about the flowers Abe had sent to her office earlier, with a note from his stepfather.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Frank said. “I didn’t send anything to you. I get your flowers from my friend Tony Lancaster on 46th. My girl Rita must have sent them and I can promise you she’ll have hell to pay on Monday.”

Abe suspected Frank’s secretary Rita would buckle under Frank’s pressure and falsely admit to sending the flowers. He regretted the possible trouble she might suffer but there was nothing to be done for her. Striking some minimal blow against Frank had been the only thing on his single-track mind and he hadn’t considered the other people he would hurt, or how. His blindered grudge with Frank distracted him from all else.

“Did you forget when our anniversary is?” Abe’s mother asked.

“Not on your life. July 7th. Impossible to forget. Seven-seven. Lucky Sevens.”

Abe sensed his moment of revenge nearing. His favorite Poe story at that time ended after the anonymous mason walled his unsuspecting nemesis into an empty crypt. Even at sixteen, Abe wasn’t thoughtless enough to think that the mason’s revenge came without later regret, but the doubts must have been nothing compared to the darkly sweet moment of relief just as the hero-villain drank a solitary celebration and climbed back up to the Venice streets alone and free. Abe’s ears tingled in anticipation of his mother discovering why the flowers had come that day, of all days.

“Okay, well if they came on accident, then why today?” Abe’s mother asked. “Why two and a half months early? What’s significant about today?”

The moment of revenge had begun. The date, April 21st, was Frank's anniversary with his first wife, whom Abe knew his mother was suitably jealous of. Abe had discovered the date a couple weeks ago when he found Frank's planner in the den. The flowers would make his mother think Frank had mixed her up with his ex-wife. Her rage would be Abe's revenge and bring her closer to him and further from Frank—the perfect apex of Abe's impossibly elegant plan. What Abe learned later was that the darker the schemes, the more certainly they worked out as damningly as he could expect.

Abe's mother pressed her husband: "Tell me Frank. What's special about today?"

Abe couldn't help the huge grin curling on his lips.

"Now before I tell you, honey, don't be quick and jump to any conclusions."

"Tell me."

"It's only a coincidence. It has to be a coincidence. Rita. There's no other explanation."

"Tell me."

"Well, remember first that I didn't send them. Remember that this is only a coincidence, but today is—would have been—my anniversary with Janie."

"Some coincidence," Abe's mother said. Her voice clamped down as she rushed towards the bathroom.

In the kitchen she ran into Abe and sobbed, rushing past him, her distress audibly redoubled in finding Abe within earshot of the quarrel. Abe had hoped

for righteous anger. Instead she looked crushed. He had misjudged the complexity of his mother's relationship with Frank, an error he received plenty of penance for later in his straining marriage. Abe dropped the pranks and thirteen bleak months later he left for college, left the house, never, he vowed, to return again. Of course, the holidays he couldn't avoid.

Christmas morning, his mom began unwrapping her presents and smiled at a faded red sweatshirt that looked familiar to Abe. With a smile, she folded the sweater back into the box. Frank smiled back at her from where he was stacking logs in the fireplace. She opened another box, this time a pilly blue sweater, and her smile took a queer turn. Abe could see her mind working towards what he'd already suspected—that Frank, in some misguided moment, had wrapped his mother's old clothes as gifts. The next box in the stack had a butter soft t-shirt that said "Ocean City, New Jersey" from a chilly vacation by the sea, taken Abe's freshman year, when everybody had been on better behavior. There was no denying that this was an old shirt—the dayglo script dated it, even though his mom still wore it often around the house.

Abe tilted his head at the shirt and his mother choked down a laugh. Frank's back straightened and he turned to them from stoking the fire.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing," Abe's mom said. "Nothing. I took a sip of cocoa and it went down the wrong pipe."

“You should be more careful, dear,” Frank said. He turned back to the fire and rustled the dry logs with a poker. “Well, what do you think of your gifts?”

“I love them,” she said. “I’m sure they’ll be some of my favorites.”

Abe started laughing silently along with his mom and she raised a finger to her lips but couldn’t hold back her smile. Some well-timed crackles from the fire masked their gasps of shared joy. This was the closeness, at the expense of Frank, Abe had been hoping for all those years ago. He reveled in it, albeit edged with a certain menace. But he was happier for his mother’s reprieve in the face of everything that was disappearing.

In the life he’d built then dismantled with Connie he saw no humor. He had failed, as ever, in communication. He would either hold back entirely around her or let loose with an angry catalog of complaints—from petty and childish, to hurtful, to impossible-to-change—strung together all at once. After these outbursts he felt sick with his speech, he’d spare Connie as long as he could, melting down internally, passing whole days in bed with the lights off.

His mother looked up from laughing at her gifts and turned serious.

“Did you remember to open the flue, Frank?” she asked.

He snapped back: “Of course, I opened the flue. How many fires have I lit in my life?”

Abe and his mom both watched Frank subtly flick the lever to the open position and the fire blazed with fresh oxygen.

The day after Christmas, smoke poured out the living room window from the fire Frank had started in the bathroom with a cinnamon-scented candle. Ladder 117 arrived within minutes and the firemen managed the few flames braiding up the bathroom and kitchen window frames, thankfully before the blaze reached the tree.

Frank stood on the patch of grass in front of their apartment building, naked from the waist down, wearing only the jacket Abe's mother had grabbed for him, which had the effect of making him look even more out of sorts than he would have if he had been completely naked.

"Frank," Abe's mom said, in an urgent tone. Frank moved behind the bushes that lined their building's walkway. The fire captain brought a thick green blanket for Frank and he stepped from behind the bushes holding the blanket around his waist like a towel. He began giving orders to the firemen controlling the scene. Before Gary had been born Frank had spent his weekends as a volunteer firefighter. With one hand knotting the blanket at his hip, Frank conducted the passing firemen like a child would pretend to conduct a symphony. "Hey pal, make sure you check that the steam doesn't heat and catch again."

Abe turned and laughed quickly. He couldn't help himself, the laughter was a gut response to the nakedness and absurdity. He told himself it had nothing to do with how hard Frank had been on him growing up, with Abe's own shit life, with seeing a man so stalwart as Frank finally knocked down, if only by age. Abe had laughed, he assured himself, before he had time to consider any spite.

When he saw his mother's stricken face, met her eyes, his mood changed. Another firefighter had wrapped a blanket around her sunken shoulders and she looked like a child: helpless and small, her hair stretched like seaweed across her forehead, eyes as vacant as the gray sky above.

There was little lasting joy in recognizing what had become of Frank and what lay ahead, only fleeting humor. In the end, jokes like this always ended up on Abe, if he waited long enough for his mind to work them over. The mason in Poe's story may have set the last brick sure enough, may have drunk his celebration, may even have taken some physical reassurance from hiking out of the catacombs, but when he got back outside, a disturbed and solitary half century greeted him.

Abe's mother shuffled past him and nuzzled up beside Frank. He dropped his arm to embrace her shoulders. The firemen reflattened their hoses and hung up their masks and helmets. Frank looked with Abe's mother up at the row of their apartment's windows, smoked and smashed out, and she dropped her head onto Frank's chest. He rubbed her shoulders for a few minutes then they walked back inside and left Abe alone on the sidewalk watching the fading smoke.

CHAPTER 6

TIM TRAPP'S PORK CHOPS AND SPROUTS: A FOOLPROOF RECIPE FOR YOUR FOURTH DATE

Serves 2

2 pork chops
1 bottle barbeque sauce
1 pound fresh, organic Brussels sprouts
½ pound center cut bacon
Butter
Lemon
1 pound green beans (optional)
1 Apple cobbler (store bought)

Follow these instructions, baby bro, for this impossible-to-botch dinner and impress that maybe-special somebody; she'll be melting like caramel before you make it to dessert. If you're a lousy cook, if this is the first time you can remember reading a recipe that didn't mention a microwave, and you can't even remember why you offered to cook her dinner in the first place, relax. This is a simple, stunning meal and it's as easy to prepare as it is delicious. Although if the only time you've turned on your stove is to light a cigarette, then you may want to do a dry run.

First a note about the reason to cook this particular meal rather than another. The bill of fare has to strike just the right culinary chord, so to speak. You don't want to prepare something too elaborate, especially this early in dating. You don't want the evening to look too calculated, to make her cagey from the moment she realizes what you're up to. Say you've got a recipe for Beef Wellington or Osso Bucco that you're dying to try out on her, hold off until

Valentine's Day, or until the twelfth date, at least. And, keep the crème brûlée torch in the cabinet. It's important that this meal look effortless and that you look unflustered while you're arranging it—competence and composure.¹

Step 1: Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. (You know what the oven is, right? It's that outsized microwave that opens from the top. The maw where Mom used to make her three-day casseroles; where Uncle Dave hid his bottle on off-days.) This entire meal, under ideal and unmotivated circumstances, would take about thirty minutes to prepare. But of course, these are not those circumstances. Also, you want to have the meal only about two-thirds in order by the time your date arrives. Hopefully your first few evenings with her gave you some sense of her punctuality. Twenty minutes before you expect her, you should begin. Timing is essential. Watching you execute a step or two will lead her to believe that you didn't just remove the meal from plastic wrap and plop it on the stove the moment she rang your buzzer. So as not to appear too calculating, the meal should not be plated and steaming when she walks in either. You don't want to start the night with an *I've-been-expecting-you* finger-tapping tone. This is why Brussels sprouts are a savvy choice: you can simmer them to within an inch of their poor little skins without messing them up; they're actually better a little bit burned. ("Caramelized" you'll tell her when she arrives and you take her coat) [See Step 5].

¹ *Disclaimer: due to the profusion of pork in these dishes, this meal is only foolproof for Midwestern palettes—for taste buds in our big beautifully soft middle of the country; square states, Great Lakes states, and most states ending in vowels. If your date isn't from Chicago, follow these instructions at your own risk.

If your date says she doesn't eat Brussels sprouts, encourage her to try something new [say "adventurous" if the moment seems appropriate, but say it lightly]. Tell her, then, with mock-bombast, that she hasn't had Brussels sprouts until she's had your Dad's sprouts. Mentioning your family will make her feel more comfortable. (Never mind that Dad never touched a pan in your whole life and would have faced down tar and wood chippings with the same quiet resolve he faced tuna noodle casserole if Mom had given him a bottle of hot sauce. That Dad was a rock, even at meals, may have been alternately impressive and infuriating as kids, but we're not kids anymore and your date wouldn't know how to react to Dad's manners so it's best to amend your memory of our childhood meals, at least until a later date). If she still refuses to try Dad's sprouts, reconsider the relationship. But, for the sake of the evening, be blasé. Have a backup side dish, the frozen beans, for example, that you've thawed and placed in a grocery produce baggie. If she asks—but only if she asks—tell her everything you're cooking is organic, grass-fed, free-range and purchased from the Wicker Park farmers' market. Sautée the beans in butter; this should be inoffensive enough for even the starchiest of Midwestern sensibilities.

Based on hints she's picked up about you, this dish will seem healthier than what she would have expected. By now, she's probably seen you substitute cheese soup or fries for a dinner salad and line up beers for each course, it's in our family after all. She may comment on the healthiness of your meal. Be prepared to field questions, to tell her that, "I'll eat anything that's properly prepared," etc. She doesn't need to know that you have a handful of corn chips and a light

cigarette (“the breakfast blend,” Uncle Dave called it) before work every morning.

Step 2: Using something sharper than a butter knife, shave off the knobby ends of the vegetables, then slice them into halves, longways. If you’re going to have a cocktail to take the edge off before your date arrives, I recommend you wait until after you’ve done the chopping. Then fix the cocktail you’ll offer her once she joins you [See Step 5] so as not to switch spirits midstream. You’ve got too much experience to follow any beer-before-likker old wives’ tales but remember the queasy martini-and-champagne dissonance of last New Years’.

Step 3: Cut the bacon into small chunks (think almond-sized not bacon bits, a difficult distinction, I know, based on the essentiality of those prefab flakes on Mom’s salads) and cook these in a skillet over medium heat until they’re crisp. Scoop the pieces onto a paper towel to drain (most of) the grease off.

For this step, you may want to change into a different shirt, if you’re expecting her to be within an arm’s length of you, and if you’re not expecting this then you should consider saving my recipe. Don’t worry about the smell getting into your hair, the smoky outdoorsy scent will make for a brawny musk—a small dose of this, like the whiff in your hair, will remind her of canoe trips, her woodsy camp counselor, and fireside cooking. (If you doubt this advice, just remember all the stories Cousin Nick had from the summer he was camp counselor, before he and Aunt Kay moved to Tucson, while Uncle Dave went roughnecking down on the Gulf.) However, a large dose of this smell will remind your date of fast food steeped in a hot car. Moderation, is key.

But you should take some time to enjoy this smell, even a face full of it. Wallow in it; it will calm you and remind you of less stressful days—of summer weeks in West Virginia, waking up to Aunt Kay’s breakfast, of crisp BLTs on her back patio, of Uncle Dave throwing horseshoes before his wife and son moved west, of charming roadside diners we ate in on the way back, the smell still lingering, you and I trying to fill our stomachs with it to sustain us through nine more months of Shake ‘N’ Bake chicken and two-day old casseroles. The bacon grease snapping on the grill will be like listening to a burbling mountain creek. Enjoy this moment of relaxation before your date arrives and you have to perform as host. When you’ve had your fill, fan the remaining smoke out the window to the fire escape.

If your date says she doesn’t eat bacon (not even when it’s so obviously paired with—even dominated by—a vegetable), or if she doesn’t eat barbequed pork chops for that matter, you should not be dating this person after tonight. Knowing the Trapp family palette, there will probably be too many meal-time conflicts. Apologize politely for the menu, take her to the Chinese restaurant under your apartment, hail her a cab, then tell her as you close her door that you’re off to repair trailheads in Yosemite, joining a road crew the next state over, signing on with a lobster boat, or whatever other excuses Uncle Dave gave Dad for his comings-and-gones. Remember nobody really bought those, though.

Step 4: Pour the fat from the pan and drop in the sprouts, faces down. Bring the heat up to medium-high to sear the flat sides. Wait for a sizzle. Then place the pan in the preheated oven and cook the greens until they’re edged

bourbon brown. This should take no more than ten minutes. Use this time to tidy up your apartment. Roll your Cubs' posters away in your bedroom closet. Hide your bottle cap collection and beanbag chair under your bed. I shouldn't have to tell you that you've been out of school two years and have a decent job downtown and your apartment should reflect this, or at least not undermine it. Hide any paraphernalia and all your pill bottles. Check post-its, dry-erase-board messages and empty any wastebaskets. Straighten your hair; try an easy part to the right. Return to the kitchen.

With an oven-mitted hand, grab the pan and give the handle a couple wrist flicks to shuffle the veggies around. It's important to do this step before your date arrives because there's nothing attractive about a man wearing an oven mitt. [Same goes for an apron.] Do anything messy before she arrives, then just don't be a klutz. Take some pride in your dexterity, if not your cooking. Tuck your elbows in. Keep your hands away from the heat. Remember Uncle Dave's grace, even deep in those weeks Dad let him stay with us, relied on reduced and efficient movements. Slow down and relax. It's better to look cool dropping a glass than to look ridiculous fumbling for it as it falls to the floor. Why do you think they keep most world-class chefs in the back? Because good cooking is hard to do, and even harder to look good doing.

Step 5: As the sprouts cook to tender, clean your fridge. Throw all your Styrofoam containers and half of your condiments away. Move all premium beers and any fruit to the front. By now, the sprout skins should be alternately

brown and bright green, at once fresh looking and enticingly charred. Poke them first to check and then pop one in your mouth [after it's cooled] to test the texture.

This is when she'll arrive. Right on time.²

“Smells like a cookout in here,” she'll say. “I mean in a good way. I always miss barbeques for a few weeks after it gets too cold.”

“Is it cold out?” you'll ask. Take her coat and hang it up. Complete calm. “Well then I guess we'll have to play Frisbee in here.” Folksy. Not the best joke of your life but you'll both still be circling each other, making jabs at conversation in your front hallway. She'll seem pleased for an excuse to laugh. She'll run her fingers through her black curls and, for a moment, you'll be completely distracted.

Rouse yourself and say, “I hope you're hungry.” You're the host, the chef. Pretend like you grew up on manners. Ask her if she found the place all right, what train line she took to get there. Show her your apartment with a few brisk steps. Do not use broad arm gestures. Tell her to make herself at home; hope she doesn't. Go back to the kitchen and open the oven to show her you have the sprouts under control, everything under control. Offer her a beverage. Don't say cocktail outright and don't press. Dinner will go better if you each have a drink or two; dinner will go disastrously if you seem to force them. You have mineral water, pop, beer, wine, something else...

² This is when my date arrived, so far, so, so great. It's impossible to plan the exact moment when *your* date will arrive, but remember it's alright to let the sprouts caramelize a little deeper. (Mind your cocktails, though.) The rest of this recipe will have to be based on my date. Feel free to use it as a model, to a point. [See Step 9].

“What are you having?” she’ll say.

“A gin gimlet with a splash of club soda and a lime,” you’ll say. “My

Uncle Dave always used to drink this mix. My brother and I still call it ‘the Uncle Dave.’”

“Well, I’d love to meet your Uncle Dave,” she’ll say, nodding at your glass.

Nod back, even as you doubt she’d like to meet the real Uncle Dave, especially this late in the evening, though Dad managed to control him at the dinner table, even swaying slightly and forking around Mom’s hamburger-helped meals. Remember Uncle Dave’s red nose, how he looked like a sad clown the first time he stayed with us when we were kids, though nobody laughed.

Remember, later, how Uncle Dave amused us at first, when he stayed again and we were both in high school. How I told him I didn’t have a girlfriend and he said, *Smart one, playing the field*. Remember how Mom hid the best glassware last Christmas and all but a few cans of beers, not that our other aunts and uncles would consider taking a holiday easy themselves. How everybody humors him now at our reunions, jokes grimly when he’s out of earshot. Remember it’s in the family. Our own recipe, the genetic ingredients all in place, just waiting to be cooked. Moderation. You’ll have to figure that out yourself.

Recognize at this point that the sprouts may be cooking too much. Don’t panic. Open the oven and remove the pan. Explain “caramelized” to your date.

Step 6: Remove the pork chops from the refrigerator. Lead her to believe that they’ve been marinating for several hours; do this by telling her they’ve been marinating for several hours. Explain how the smokiness of the sprouts goes well

with the smokiness of the barbeque sauce. Ask if she's ever been to a restaurant called Morris's in Birmingham.

She'll shake her head no while she's browsing through your CD collection. Take a moment to thank God you thought to remove the soundtrack to *Grease* and all but your earliest Aerosmith albums.

"I had to bribe the cook at Morris's to get this recipe," you'll say.

"You like Soul?" she'll ask, holding up an Otis Redding album.

It's your favorite. Answer, "Sure." Wonder if this is a test or a trap.

Step 7: Place the sprouts pan back on the stove over medium heat. Add the crispy bacon and a couple pats of cooking butter. Ask her to do you a favor and stir the vegetables and the bacon until they're mixed while you take the chops out to grill them on the wok chained to your fire escape. You want to involve her in the meal. This will keep her from inspecting the apartment too closely. Also, giving her a task will make her feel like she's contributing, like you're working together, the same as all the ingredients in this recipe, and then if things crumble before dessert she'll have to acknowledge her hand in the failure. Watch her tuck her hair behind her ear from the blackness outside. Grill the chops. Return to the window and ask her if she likes the rib tips blackened. This will make you seem like you're thoughtful and like you've cooked this meal at least twice. Tell her you like your tips blackened, if she asks, just in case the chops cook too long while you're distracted watching her stand at your stove, stirring the sprouts like she's trying to read her future in them. You're still planning for any eventuality; you still have everything under control.

Step 8: Remove the pork chops from the grill. Plate the chops with the sprouts. Set the table with two simple mats and flatware.

Step 9: Eat. Slowly. Complete calm. This is the difficult part; don't relax yet. Make conversation. Ask questions; listen to responses. Ask more questions. Open a bottle of wine. Tell her it goes with the pork. Mention acidity, tannins. Don't say that it has 'notes' of anything.

Ask her about her day. She'll be chewing and when she swallows she'll only answer her day was fine—*just work, then here*. She's a paralegal and so bored with her job she doesn't want to say much more. She'll ask about your day but since you're between gigs and you cleaned and planned this meal all afternoon—which you can't tell her—you'll have nothing to say, so you'll say fine too. Remember Mom and Dad's monosyllables at the dinner table.

Listen to the fluorescent hum and the train rattle by your window. Remark to yourself that something feels amiss. She'll seem alright, but not thrilled, looking around your apartment, her eyes grazing your oversized clock and your framed real estate map of the Gold Coast during prohibition—like she's eating in your apartment on a whim, like stopping briefly at a yard sale with no intention to buy.

When you ask if she'd like more sauce, she'll just nod rather than saying thanks or even, *Yes*. Don't panic. Pass the sauce.

Notice the nervousness of a silent meal. Feel sympathy for Uncle Dave's sodden paranoia. Recognize you only feel anxious, really anxious, because you like her.

Try to think of something to spark the conversation in spite of the fact that you can't pull a single compelling thought from more than thirty years of experience. Remain calm. (Don't drink more than your date, especially on the sly.) Dates like talking about themselves.

“What do you have planned for the rest of the week?”

“Oh this and that,” she'll say.

By all means, do not respond with, “What's *that* supposed to mean?”

Because she'll respond with, “I guess it means I haven't thought about it much since it's only Tuesday,” or mutter under her breath, *I'm not sure it's any of your business.*

Please don't say, “Aw, don't sulk.”

Apologize. Even after you've done this, recognize the silence so aggressive it rings in your ears, the undercurrent like that time Uncle Dave brushed a glass from the table and just watched it shatter. And I was the ripe age of sixteen, just the right age to think that when he pushed my glass over the edge too, he was as cool as could be. Mom shouted for us not to step on anything before she swept the shards away and Dad said, *God bless it, Dave, please not in front of my kids* and you realize nobody ever drank at the table, but Uncle Dave didn't need to and he just sat there grinning like he'd posed an impossible riddle, Uncle Rumpelstiltskin. Wonder if your fourth-date meal has anything to do with that one from childhood, how it started so calm and manageable. How everybody spoke banalities about work and school because they didn't want to stray too far from the order.

Meals come off differently at different pressures. Pasta and dough taste different in Chicago and Cleveland because of the local water. Conditional differences and elemental differences. Nurture and nature. It's in the family.

Your meal is thoroughly ruined. The sprouts, though suitably caramelized, taste like sweat; the ribs, blackened tips and all, taste like diesel exhaust. Wonder if everybody in your life, even your brother and parents, have just been humoring you up to this point. Wonder if you have a single true friend left in the world. Let this thought crash over you and recede. Although it's no consolation, tell yourself you've probably had too much wine and too much of Uncle Dave's mix. Tanking a date because you've overserved yourself is no longer endearing at thirty-one, if it ever was.

Step 10: Warm up the dry cobbler you told your date you bought from a Swedish bakery in Andersonville and wonder why you're still bothering with the pretense. She leaves early, of course. Tell yourself the chops were too tough. Blame the pre-war equipment in your kitchenette, your insufficient appliances, your noticeably cheap place settings. Drink the rest of the gin without mixing it, even though you know that's not the answer. This has all happened before, sometimes before the fourth date, so at least you lasted this long. The next meal can be different, they always can. Eat half a bag of corn chips and the rest of her pork chop with the remaining ranch dressing you hid behind the produce in your refrigerator. Light a cigarette at the range and remark to yourself how failure and loneliness pluck at your ribs with odd hunger pangs. Cook the rest of the bacon. Don't open the window. Mom and Dad organized meals every night, and kept

Uncle Dave in order, or at least keep us from noticing him for the most part, our parents knowing all the while how easily all pretense could shatter. But at the center of this anxiety, there was always dinner. You only had to make it through one meal and you blew it. Refuse to clean the dishes. Consider signing up for an online dating service. Or cooking classes. You're between gigs but you could still be a chef, or a line cook, or a maitre d' as soon as you figure out how a simple meal could confound you so much at this point in your life. It's either in the ingredients or in how they're cooked or both.

CHAPTER 7

MAY THE ROAD RISE

I.

September 10th, the day before the grim two-year anniversary, and John and Krish were downtown for a ballgame, John determined to distract his oldest friend from the date. Wrigleyville was a cacophony of fans, bus exhaust and taxi horns. The corners around the stadium swarmed with blue and red shirts and hats like a pointillist painting set to motion, so crowded with strings of milling people that John could smell the sweat and Old Style hanging on the air despite the hard breeze. Fans laughed and clapped their friends on the back with rolled up baseball mitts and programs. John felt anxious to dodge into the melee with Krish but they were waiting for, Ricki, his older sister by two years, and a mutual friend of sorts from the neighborhood named Sully.

“There’s Sully,” Krish said. Sully had the same pale skin and carrot-red hair his sister had; they could have been siblings. John suspected Sully wanted to date his sister but she was only humoring him. Earlier that summer, Sully had landed Ricki a job in HR at Boeing where he worked, when she decided twenty-eight was too old to tend bar for spoiled college kids.

Krish didn’t let on, but John had seen Sully take a cold attitude to Krish since two Septembers ago, shown him no sympathy on the first anniversary when a fistful of skinheads had beaten his friend up and split his ear outside his family’s shop—like Krish should have prevented something or alerted someone. Like his

will could have steadied the buildings. Like he'd known they'd fall, and he'd just shrugged them to the ground.

“Nice slacks,” John said instead of hello. Ricki had worked a half-day that morning and was wearing tan dress pants and a bright blue shirt. Sully had on khakis and a white oxford but had no excuse. John leaned to kiss Ricki's cheek, her lips pursed into a tight smile, in response to his greeting, her mouth forming lines like parentheses around her lips. The old Ricki would have called John a prick, at least under her breath.

“Lame, I know,” Sully said as he shook Krish's and John's hands. “I forgot my jersey. I was hoping to buy a game day shirt on the way in.”

They walked towards a placard of unlicensed t-shirts divided into two rows: the bottom row mocked the afternoon opponent, the top row mocked the Cubs' Southside rival, primarily with racist slogans, like *Gonzales* [a White Sox outfielder] *mows my lawn*.

While Sully dug through a cardboard box of blue shirts Krish noticed the shirt and said, “Like selling t-shirts outside the stadium is a white-collar gig.”

They had all grown up with racism. John himself had a Black Irish complexion and tanned deeply in the summer so that the neighborhood punks called he and Krish and Ricki the Benetton Kids when they saw a fashion billboard featuring an image of deliberately diverse models. Mild, idiotic comments like that until the violence of 9-11 changed everything, which was distinctly difficult for Krish because nobody loved Chicago like he did.

Sully bought a shirt taunting the afternoon opponent—the caption “Gone Fishing” under a cartoon image of a bear cub with a marlin in his smiling maw. Then he bought a new ball cap for Ricki to wear because she’d forgotten her sunglasses. They bottlenecked through the turnstiles and took their seats in the bleachers in right field, with Krish and John sitting a row behind the other two.

Since they were kids, Krish and Ricki and he had always found luck together—their senior year of high school, there was a stretch of nearly two months when the Cubs won almost ninety percent of the afternoon games the three of them skipped class to attend, obscenely higher than their season average that year. In college, when John and his sister both worked the game-time shifts at Bertie’s, and Krish took the evening off from his dad’s shop, they always pulled in tips by the bucketful—their liveliness was bubonic. John never once considered that some of his memory of childhood may have been misremembered or exaggerated.

Over that time they had developed a near-religious set of superstitions about in-game protocol. So when the Cubs went down in the fifth inning, John turned his cap inside out to rally his team. Ricki had always argued that you had to do this as soon as the Cubs went down to give them a chance to respond.

“C’mon Rick,” John said. “Rally cap time.”

“That looks ridiculous,” she said. “I’m not doing that anymore.”

If pressed, John would concede, at twenty-six-years-old, that their luck only directly affected personal attitudes but he didn’t understand why anybody

would refuse the benefits, especially when the system was so simple and really had no drawbacks.

Sully took the hat from Ricki's head and placed it inside out on his own bulbous dome like a good-sport.

John nodded and turned back to the game.

He had told his sister not to leave the night at the beginning of the season when they'd been celebrating a rare win at Merritt's. The neighborhood turned industrial wasteland at night and it was dozens of blocks to the nearest bus stop. Not a cab in sight so Ricki decided to walk. She wanted to see Sully, who she'd just started spending more time with. On her way to meet him some hooded creep had attacked her, pushed her up against a chain link fence, tore the collar of her dress, cut the strap of her purse and pulled it away.

Ricki took her hat back from Sully and turned it rightside out. "Mark has a better system for predicting outcomes," she said over her shoulder to her brother. Ricki always did her best, by example, to show that Sully was to be included in conversations. John had chosen to follow this to the most meager degree.

"I'm not sure if my system's *better*," Sully said, scratching his cheek, not taking his eyes from the field.

"He's got these equations," Ricki said nearly breathless. "Complex algorithms to figure out when players will swing, when they're going to get hits, even where on the field the hits are most likely to fall."

Mark Sullivan, Sully, was their neighborhood-boy-makes-good. He went to U. of C. on scholarship, then to business school and now had charted a steady ascent with Boeing. He found Ricki a job there in HR, after she left her manager position at Bertie's, giving up on part-owning the place someday.

"I'd need to have my computer to plug the numbers in," Sully said.

"You didn't bring your computer to the stadium?" John said, just to be a shit. Sarcastic jokes were his habit and he couldn't have opened his mouth without them but with Sully they sounded impatient and cruel.

"No, no, I take my days off, very seriously," Sully said.

"Buy a girl lunch?" Ricki asked him and they stood and walked up the aisle towards concessions.

Krish was familiar with negotiating fraught exchanges between the siblings. Before Krish met his fiancé, Allyson, he had slept with Ricki a few times in college and they had argued about whether to tell John, arguments which led to them breaking it off. Krish, in some ways, could imagine what it would be like to be in Sully's place and took pity on him.

"Why do you give Mark such a hard time?" Krish asked. He spoke in a soft voice, which sounded like a whisper in the crowd din.

A beam of sunlight shuddered down the white baselines, like iridescence down a spider web, as the batter plucked his toe at the ground in the batter's box.

John deflected. "Is it obvious?"

"Only to anybody with ears and half a brain."

"Must be why Sully hasn't noticed yet."

“He has noticed. He feels awful about what happened to Ricki that night and he’s convinced you still blame him. He wants to talk to you about it but he’s worried how you’ll react.”

“How do you know?”

“He told your sister and she told me.”

“You guys have been having quite the little pow-wow without me, huh?”

“You know Sully’s trying to be good to your sister. He had nothing to do with what happened and he feels terrible about it anyways.”

Every time John looked at Sully, he re-felt the queasy feeling he’d felt when he tried to stop his sister from leaving Merritt’s by herself so late at night.

“He doesn’t deserve her.”

John had always considered Sully a freeloader on their good times. Never mind Sully’s generosity. John would have happily paid for his own tickets and anything else to be rid of him. John had cash anyways as the new manager at Bertie’s.

“*Really?*” Krish said. “Mr. top-of-his-class, Mr. V.P. of Boeing who got your sister a job? Who treats Ricki like the queen of the city? Who takes her sullen brother and scruffy hanger-on friends to free baseball games? I think the world of your sister too, but if Mark’s not good enough—”

A ball blast from a tinder bat interrupted them and they watched their second baseman gather the skipping ball against his chest and leapfrog a runner while throwing for the double play. When the crowd around them settled down, John said. “He’s a racist.”

“Who, Mark? Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“No, seriously. Last time we were at Merritt’s I saw him talking to Flynn. That dumb mick bouncer—”

An obese red-headed man two rows ahead of them looked back sharply.

“Who’s racist now?” Krish said.

“—the mick bouncer, you know my grandmother came from County Cork, so I can say that. But this guy Flynn is a real racist. Gets his kicks beating up Latinos. Remember what he did to that guy Ramirez? And Delgado?”

“Those guys were always bruisers. They used to start shit with cops for fun.”

“Anyways, I saw Sully glad-handing Flynn the all night last time I was at Merritt’s.”

“Sully is friends with everybody,” Krish said. “Even you.”

“Everybody except for you,” John said.

“I’m sure he’s got his reasons,” Krish said. One of the opposing outfielders angled under an arcing fly ball but lost it in the sunlight, giving the home team the tying run. The crowd jeered the lonely outfielder who had dropped his eyes to his shoes and punched his glove with his free hand. Krish guessed Ricki had told Sully about their fling in one of her bouts of truth-telling.

“Anyways,” Krish said. “Things seem to be moving along between Mark and your sister. I think you should start considering that they’ll start dating soon. If they haven’t already started.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Did she tell you something?”

“No, I’m just saying. Can’t you see it?”

John hadn’t allowed himself to recognize the possibility that his sister was being anything but civil to Sully since he’d found her a job.

Ricki came back with a tray of hotdogs and Sully with an armload of sweating beers for the group. John spent the rest of the afternoon watching his sister and Sully for clues, barely watching as Martinez loaded the bases and Miller won the game with a three-run homerun in the last inning.

Fans around him laughed and cursed and jumped and taunted the opposing outfielder, who had looked up to where the homerun had landed. The thrill John had felt before the game returned, although Krish’s prediction was still on his mind and he was anxious and excited all at once.

Ricki offered to drop John and Krish somewhere after she took Sully to his car and even promised to meet them at Merritt’s later. John wondered why she was in such a good mood and planned to figure it out during the car ride. They all piled into Ricki’s old beater, she and Sully in front again, John and Krish in the backseat.

II.

Lake Shore Drive jogged Ricki’s car out towards the lake, bent them through an S-curve around the famous Drake and the less-famous Knickerbocker hotels. An orange sign cautioned 25 MPH. John had seen Ricki rip through at fifty, but not today. The lake outside Ricki’s windshield passed by, dirty shale,

and John felt somewhat seasick from everything he'd heard and seen that afternoon but the Cubs had won, the outcome largely determined by luck.

The sky had darkened since they'd left the stadium—eerie sun-tinted yellow clouds emerged from clusters of gray clouds like batts of insulation from concrete rubble. Wind whistled louder through the car's weather strips. A wave crashed against the breakers outside Ricki's window, green spray rooster-tailing down the rocks. The patina seahorses in Buckingham Fountain cantered past John.

“So how would you use your programs to explain that win, Sully?” John asked.

Krish let out a sigh but Sully just laughed and said it probably would have shorted out his computers.

“Mark said the Cubs would win,” Ricki said. “And he was only off by a couple digits in the final score.”

“But you never could have known how important that dropped ball in the seventh would be,” John said. “The sun at just the right angle in the sky. It wasn't even supposed to be sunny today.”

Sully agreed that was true but Ricki said, “The equations account for variables like weather. The programs aren't foolproof but they do better than most human predictions—”

Human predictions? John thought. What sort of education had Sully been giving her?

“—In fact,” she went on, “The more variables the programs address, the more accurate they are. I can’t believe that’s true for human systems: lucky shoelaces, and one player growing a beard, and whatever other superstitions fans and players use to explain performance.”

A doo-wop ballad played through the stereo. John had punched the same song into the jukebox at Merritt’s the night of Ricki’s assault, but she’d left them before she heard it. *It may be on a Sunday; It may be on a Tuesday afternoon.* The car pressed on beneath the storm clouds shifting over the pocked green swells of the lake and the crowding row of tall buildings.

“The programs adjust,” Ricki said. “They adapt to contingencies like the weather. Update automatically. So when Skilling from Channel 9 said on the eleven o’clock news this morning to ‘take your ponchos to the game’ and predicted it would rain between 3 and 6 pm. The computer adjusts for a game that ends before the rain starts.”

Ricki’s proud defense of numbers and science irritated John but not as much as something more specific she’d said.

“I thought you said you were at your office all morning, Rick?” John asked, and she said she was. “Came straight to the stadium?” John asked, and she said yes.

“Well how did you get Skilling’s report then? I thought you said they didn’t have TV sets on your floor at Boeing.”

John always said the company name to sound like a cartoon sound effect, ridiculously, even though he knew they built massive airliners from scratch.

“I must have seen the report online,” Ricki said.

“But you told me they restricted you to company email and the stock ticker. No WGN.”

“Jesus John, how’d you remember all that,” Krish asked.

“Never mind how I remembered it. Where were you this morning Ricki?”

Sully’s neck turned beat red. Riki made a quick jerk of her head towards him and then the blood began creeping up her cheeks too.

“Where were you this morning, Rick? When you said you couldn’t meet us?”

“John can we talk about this later I’m trying to concentrate on the road.”

They were closing in on the exit for Sully and Ricki’s office where they were dropping Sully at his car. Ricki was picking up speed, despite the weather.

“What were you doing this morning, Ricki?” John asked. “Why is Sully’s car at the office if he had the whole day off?”

The rain gave way to hail and the hail crashed down in a manic drum roll on Ricki’s car. She drove on, conspicuously composed, hands at ten and two. The apocalypse itself wouldn’t have drawn Sully’s eyes from the road, all the buildings along Lakeshore could have crashed to the ground and he wouldn’t have flinched. Threads began to connect in John’s mind.

“Were you alone when I called you this morning?” he asked. “Just answer me that.”

Only stopped taillights cut through the whiteout of hail. Each pellet became distinct at the moment before it struck the windshield, notes in a

crescendo of noise on the hood and roof. Ricki's wipers pushed the shrapnel aside. She hunched forward over the steering wheel, trying to cut through the onslaught.

Ricki turned the wheel and straightened it, unknown instincts and perceptions guiding the flicks of her wrists. Her face set in a concentration John hadn't seen since the night she'd left them. Everything made sense now.

"Were you with Sully when I called?" John asked.

"Leave her alone, John," Krish said.

"You were with him last night—through this morning—weren't you?"

John went on. "That's why we're dropping Sully off at your office."

"His name is Mark, you prick," Ricki said. "Mark Sullivan."

She pressed the gas and the new speed rocked the car forward.

"Are you sleeping with Sully?" John asked.

"John!" Ricki said. "That's enough!" Krish said.

Not even the center divider was visible now; yet Ricki's wrists made another series of quick adjustments, turning and straightening the steering wheel. Then the green sign—"Wacker Drive"—passed their right headlight. Too tight, but Ricki wrenched the wheel all the same. The car banked up on the opposite median and came skidding down. Tires gripped at grease and road-slick and the backend fishtailed. The car shuddered once and John's side rose off its tires, Ricki's side tipped towards her rain-streaked window, but, by the end of a half-turn, gravity won out. All four tires safely back on slippery asphalt, the car slid to a halt and tapped the unseen concrete blockade.

This slightest collision jarred the tears loose from Ricki's eyes. She cried silently, water streaming down her impassive cheeks in a ribbon that pulsed with each new tear like the lines on her window, thin and bright as the gold braid she wore her cross on.

John said, "We're alright. We're going to be alright. I'm alright. Sully—Mark, you're alright. Ricki's alright. Krish is alright. We got lucky—"

"Goddamn it John," Krish said. "This isn't a baseball game. It's got nothing to do with luck. I told you to stop. But you wouldn't let it go. Who cares where she was this morning? Who cares who she's sleeping with?"

Krish made some further noise but it was lost in the hail, ping-ponging its now-gentle symphony on the hood. John looked in Ricki's rearview: everything came crashing down—the sky swallowed Chicago—right behind their bumper.

III.

Stiff upper lipped, Ricki and Sully had promised everything was alright and had agreed to meet up at Merritt's later, after they dropped her car at the body shop. But Krish and John hadn't heard from them for hours and they couldn't reach Ricki on her phone. They stood outside the heavy oak doors with the smokers under a black cloud of smoke trapped under the long awning.

"Maybe, they're inside already," Krish said.

John and Krish had been right on time and Ricki had never been early for anything in her life.

Every couple minutes, the bouncer named Flynn turned his pale, froglike neck to watch them without a trace of recognition that John and Krish had been drinking in this bar for half a decade or in fact any acknowledgment that they were anything more than a collective pile of dogshit congealing on his sidewalk.

“Forget this, I’m thirsty,” Krish said. “Let’s just wait for them inside.”

Krish walked to the doors and handed over his ID; Flynn said, “Bar’s overcrowded.”

John tried to play this off with a joke: “Cubs win and suddenly everybody’s a fan and a regular.”

Flynn didn’t even crack a smile.

“I think my sister may be in there,” John said, taking another tack, and this got a rise from Flynn.

“Your sister, huh?” Flynn said grinning. “Would I know her?”

“I’ve never seen this place overcrowded,” Krish said.

“You callin’ me a liar?” Flynn asked. “You can’t believe our shithole bar isn’t hurting for your business anymore?”

“No” “Yes” Krish didn’t know which to respond to.

“My sister,” John said, trying to get back on track. “She’s short. She’s got curly red hair.”

“Nobody cares about your sister. And you’re going to have to step to the side so these people can get by.”

A crowd of laughing girls, one in a veil, came out—confident, assured, happy. The bridal party hailed a cab at the corner of Hermitage and Krish said, “There go a half dozen people. Can we go in now?”

The two guys standing behind John said, *Yeah*, in chorus.

“Alright smart guy,” Flynn said to Krish. “I’ve had about enough of you.”

He grabbed Krish’s collar but Krish shrugged his shoulders and John took a step to stand between them and there was a flurry of black nylon from John’s periphery and the next thing he knew both he and Krish were on the ground pinned like sardines. The other bouncer, a shaved-head bulldog type hovered over John; Flynn stood over Krish. Both John and Krish had their arms chicken-winged behind their backs. They squirmed around, flailing away their last ounce of dignity.

“I told you not to test me,” Flynn said as he and the shorter bouncer brought Krish and John to their feet.

Krish turned and said, “You didn’t say anything like that.”

Flynn and the shorter bouncer pushed them away and Flynn pointed for them to head off down the sidewalk.

“Did Mark put you up to this?” John asked.

“Who?”

“John, let it go,” Krish said.

“Mark Sullivan,” John said. “‘Sully.’ Is he inside already? Did he tell you to hassle me and Krish?”

The other bouncer had reassumed his post at the door. Flynn stared at them for a long moment. "I have no idea who you're talking about, pal, but if you don't haul ass out of here and take the wise guy with you, I'll call you both in on disorderly conduct."

"Mark Sullivan," John said again.

"Tell Mike Sullivan that he can go to hell for all I care and take you two clowns with him." Flynn turned away and rejoined his partner by the door.

"He's lying," John said to Krish.

"Give it a rest, John. Why would he lie to us? About that? What's your real problem with Sully?"

"Why do you think he's always so squirrely around you, Krish?"

"Wait, why do *you* think he's so squirrely around me?" Krish asked.

"Because he's racist."

"Drop the theories okay. Mark's got nothing to do with this or anything else." Krish paused then said, "I slept with Ricki, okay. Before I met Allyson. Ricki wanted to tell you but I knew you'd react like this," he explained all this like an apology, like he knew he'd told John something that would bring his world down. "That's probably why Mark seems distant around me, okay? Ricki probably told him."

The shock of the statement forced John to the curb. The three of them had always been like siblings and he thought Krish felt the same. He couldn't make the image of them together fit, of Krish's bare torso above Ricki's red hair. He shuddered it away.

Krish saw and shook his head. "I'm not good enough for Ricki either?"

"That's not it," John said.

"We're not kids anymore," Krish said. "Especially not Ricki, no matter how long you want her to be."

Krish walked to the corner to hail a cab. Only one came by and it slowed then sped away. A black sedan like an unmarked cop car pulled up and the passenger window rolled down. Ricki emerged from behind it.

"I'm looking for two young suspects who match you boys' descriptions," she said, joking. "Wanted for public indecency and disturbing the peace. Sorry, we're late, couldn't find parking."

John stood up from the curb and walked to her window beside Krish.

"Why aren't you guys inside," she asked.

"Too crowded," Krish said and offered nothing more.

Ricki turned and whispered something to Sully at the wheel then she looked back and said, "Hop in, we'll go back to Bertie's."

Bertie's was past last call but they went inside and cadged drinks from a bartender John knew. The bar was strewn with streamers and bunting for tomorrow's memorial. It looked like a tornado had torn through and ripped up a Fourth of July party. Looking at the welter John didn't feel regret or forgiveness or thanksgiving, he felt strange and tired and he aimed his body for his usual stool, the cushion cracked into a vinyl bull's-eye.

CHAPTER 8

CODA

“Helicopter, helicopter!” Maggie, wide smile stretching her freckle-sprayed cheeks, reached her hands up to be spun like Lisa used to spin Andrew when they were kids. He remembered the starting position—hands locked to wrists. But he had never taught his daughter that game; she must have learned how to play at daycare or from her mother.

“Andrew?” Rica asked.

His wife stood beside him on the patio. His mother wore his outsized barn coat against the early chill and raked leaves beneath the oak tree as absently as she had pushed dirt around their garden after his father left. Maggie, Andrew, his mother and his wife had just celebrated his birthday with his mother’s spice cake. He had celebrated the day before with his father.

“Helicopt-uhrrr,” Maggie said, the last syllable drawn out in an impatient groan.

His daughter had the same white blond hair Lisa had grown out of; she had Lisa’s flightiness, her readiness to hurtle from one thing to the next. Maggie, at age four, loved nothing more than throwing herself from couch to armchair, tumbling down hillsides. Although there was no evidence to prove hypomania—the disorder that led to Lisa’s suicide—ran in families, Andrew couldn’t keep from worrying.

“I thought you were going to help Grandma rake leaves,” he said.

Rica elbowed him in the ribs. “*An*-drew,” she said. “Spin your daughter.”

He stepped from the porch onto the leaf-dotted lawn and reluctantly put Maggie in motion.

* * *

November 11, 1992. Andy's father had clattered through the front door late again last night, and now his parents yelled at each other while his mother dressed to greet customers at a weekend furniture sale. Andy was in the unfinished basement. The room, stark gray concrete, as long and wide as the house, was a wasteland of junk except for the little clearing Andy and Lisa had made for his guitar and her drum kit. There were dusty clothes racks, busted and overgrown bicycles, dormant and outdated appliances, abandoned athletic equipment, unmarked garbage bags slouched like casualties and plastic tubs in every corner filled with what their mother called piddly-shit. In the middle of this jumble, Andy was learning to play guitar on a third-hand instrument from West Hill Pawn with an amp the size of a detergent box. He played a few bars at a time of each song until his fingers slid to the wrong fret and a jarring note buzzed through his hands and ears. When he stopped to regroup he heard his parents' argument move into the kitchen, filter down through the floorboards. Some of the words petered out, muffled beyond recognition:

"Where ___ you last night?" his mother asked.

"Out," his father said.

"___ with who?"

"Frankly, Derry, ___ none of ___ damn business anymore."

"You're unbelievable ___ you know that?"

“Well, believe ___ or not, you won’t ___ me anymore.”

“And ___ moment ___ soon.”

Andy had decided to learn guitar with his friends from the block, Trip and Will. They had barely learned how power chords could hide their inexact fingering before the boys found out about Andy’s parents’ divorce and stopped coming over. So Andy started playing alone in the basement. That Saturday, while his parents fought, Andy, his brown curls falling down over his forehead, picked his way through some early Led Zeppelin. Then Lisa came down to play along with him. She said she could hear him through an air vent connecting her room to the basement.

The number of bulls-eye beats Lisa could hit between Andy’s feeble finger movements thrilled him. Chords shivered through his fingers, throbbed through his knuckles. The blasts from her bass drum were shockwaves against his sternum. He looked back at her and she smiled white-hot, her arms flailing around her like she was swatting bees in a swarm; but from Lisa’s seeming madness, perfect 4/4 time bled through.

“Not bad Little Man,” she said, once they’d played the song through from the beginning. Nobody had ever called him anything but Andy or Squirt before then, if they called him anything at all. “Maybe we could start a family cover band.”

“Redd Zeppelin,” he said, because of their last name, Redd.

“Absolutely,” she said. “And Mom could play bass.”

Then they both almost suffocated on their laughter. Their mom could barely operate a television remote. When their breath caught back up with them, Lisa asked Andy how he learned to play that song so soon.

“Dad printed me some tabs from the Internet at work,” he said nodding to the sheets spread across one of the plastic tubs. Lisa picked them up.

“Andy,” she said with mature sternness. “This is cheating.”

He adjusted the weight of his guitar strap, turned the tuning screws on the neck.

“Of course Dad would print you tabs and not real music!” she said. “Of course! What could be easier? Why would he care if you could read real music?”

Lisa resented any help from their father; the lousy Zeppelin tabs were just convenient because they were at hand.

“I know how to read music,” Andy said.

“Then don’t let me catch you cheating again. You’re better than that.”

He didn’t have time to consider whether he should defend himself, his father, or mutter some sort of thanks before she tore the sheets in half and thundered up the stairs.

A few minutes later he found her in the family room, listening to a classic rock tape. Across the room, his father had turned the TV set to the morning news, a reporter in the Persian Gulf. Andy heard the first few bars of Led Zeppelin’s “Communication Breakdown”—the overwhelming, hit-the-ground-strumming intro followed by Robert Plant’s bleated invocation. Lisa stood and started dancing her way across the room, jackknifing her knees to her chest and shaking

her arms above her head. Andy's father sighed, shifting and re-shifting his perspective so he could see the TV image of distant sand and rubble.

Lisa slowed her dance steps in front of Andy. Grabbing his arms she started helicoptering him, handcuffing her fingers around his wrists, high-stepping in a circle, all the energy in her legs and torso, spinning him at giddy speeds, her black painted toenails skimming across the green carpet. Andy became a helicopter blade whipping around the living room, his white-socked feet grazing the fake brass lamp, the fake potted plant, the empty ceramic vase, his dad's moving boxes. He could feel the momentum of speed and gravity lengthening his body, tugging joints, stretching ligaments, further fanning out the vertebrae in his back. Centrifugal force moved through him and out beyond the walls of their house—out—except for his sister holding his wrists. "Get to the chopper," she shouted.

"Andy's too old for that game," their father said.

"It's Saturday. You're not even supposed to be here," Lisa shouted, while whirling Andy around the room, her words flying down his spine.

"This is still my house," their father said.

To punctuate his claim, he kicked one of the boxes and it spit out a billow of packing peanuts. Packing peanuts: his father was being conspicuously thorough about his move, repacking old paperbacks and attic junk with care.

"And just because I'm getting my stuff set, don't think I'm leaving without a fight," their father said, "I'm going to be here until your mother and her lawyer pry my fingers from that banister."

Lisa let go of Andy's wrists and turned to their father. Andy flew into the couch, his limbs and joints snapping back to normal. Over the pile of his body, Lisa shouted, "And I'll be right there beside Mom with the friggin' Jaws of Life."

"You watch your language young lady."

"Eat my language, *Dick*."

Their father's name was Richard. Lisa had recently begun calling him Dick and telling him to "eat" everything he expected from his daughter: proper attire for young ladies, quiet music, her math homework, her language. He had actually lost weight in the last few weeks; his face looked gaunt and he frequently had to tighten and readjust his belt buckle.

"Go to your room," he said.

"With pleasure, *Dickie*."

Lisa paused at the landing in the washed out light from the kitchen, then she disappeared up the stairway, faster than running.

Andy's father gave him a wilting grimace. "Sorry Squirt, your sister's in one of her moods again." Leaning into a cardboard box he riffled through a half dozen obsolete trophies. When he emerged he had a packing peanut stuck to his hair. "Everything's going to be okay," his father said. "You know that, right?" Andy lay on the couch where he'd been hurled.

His father spoke with such earnestness Andy knew what he said wasn't true. The packing peanut came free from his father and floated to the carpet. His father reached for the foam bit but the phantom draft from his movement kept the piece just beyond his reach. When he pinned the piece against his armchair, he

was visibly pleased in a way that struck Andy as funny and pitiful. Andy nodded and left for his room.

From outside Lisa's room he heard muffled music, noise, the buzz of power chords. Andy tried the handle and barely had to lay his fingers on the knob before the door opened enough for the music to spill out louder.

By putting his eye up to the crack Andy could see most of Lisa's room. Washed-out denim hung in her closet; she'd strewn some baggy bright t-shirts across the floor, Day-Glo, coveralls. She listened to punk rock but she had kept most of her department store style. Floppy hats, black satin vests, black leggings.

Beyond Lisa's closet, there wasn't an inch of carpet visible; Andy couldn't even remember the color. Piles of clothes lay dented—like their mother dimpled the mounds of mashed potatoes at dinner to hold the gravy. The dents in the clothes-drifts, Andy imagined, were the ghost impressions of Lisa's body where she cocooned herself when she was in unseen moods.

She had painted black prison-spaced bars down the pink kitten wallpaper of her childhood. Over some of these bars hung posters: the image from the famous album cover of *London Calling* where Paul Simonon was center stage ready to smitheren his instrument.

Beneath the poster of Simonon's harpooning guitar, sat a chest of drawers Lisa painted HAZMAT orange and, alongside this, the matching vanity. Lisa stood there in front of the mirror. Andy hadn't noticed her at first because she had been so still. She peeled her long-sleeve over her head and her ponytail shifted a little—kinked at an oblique angle. Lisa held something up to her ear. A

droplet fell from her fist; she had an ice cube pressed to her lobe. She moved the cube away and he followed her hand down—skimming the naked width of her bare shoulders—to the white dish where she placed the ice. Her back and tank top both looked pale, not ghostly so, just soft. Her faded jeans and looked soft too. Lisa picked up a safety pin.

She turned her head to line up the point against an open inch of skin on her earlobe and jumped. The pin fell and she scrambled to pull her long-sleeve from the orange vanity back over her shoulders. A column of pink hatch mark scars throbbed on her shoulder, evenly spaced injuries.

“Andy,” she said. “Thank God it’s you. Mom and dad would freak if they saw this.”

She brushed drops of water from her ear and another stream from beneath her eyelids.

“Six becomes seven,” Lisa said, pointing to the side of her face. She had six earrings—one at the crest of each ear—but she wore Minnie Mouse studs beneath them.

“Lucky number seven,” she said. “Ha-ha.”

She looked sidelong at the prison bars on painted on her wall, her piles of clothes.

“What’s lucky about it?” he asked.

“Just an expression.”

“Does that hurt?”

“Yeah, but I kind of—Hey what are you doing up here?”

Andy shrugged.

“Okay, well, we’ll hang out in a little bit okay? I’ve got to get cleaned up.”

She moved towards Andy—the neck of her t-shirt drooping slightly, revealing the ridges of her clavicle and top two ribs. She took the door and closed it firm.

Andy stood on the other side for a moment. Nailed to the door was a yellow rubber dishwashing glove with four empty fingers folded down, one extended upward in a gesture their mother called obscene. She removed the glove periodically and Lisa replaced it, sometimes writing “Fuck Everyone” across the knuckles. Recently she had added a cardboard placard beneath the glove that said, *Abandon all hope ye who enter here.*

* * *

After Lisa’s suicide, her family guessed she probably had some type of undiagnosed bipolar disorder. In college and graduate school Andrew studied psychology; he helped his mentors in research to expand the diagnoses of manic-depressive patients to include the gradient system in the DSM IV. “Our previous understanding,” he wrote in an abstract for Dr. Jay Lind’s text, *More Than Bipolar*, “of the disorder will turn out to be similar to Medieval Humorism in that both methods of diagnosis are simplistic and ultimately wrongheaded even if they continue to crop up in contemporary treatment.” What should they do, for instance, with somebody like Lisa who could flash from sanguine to choleric to phlegmatic to melancholic before you could even record the changes? Andrew

told himself calling Lisa's condition "bipolar"—placing her in that broad box—probably wouldn't have helped her very much. She would have skipped any pills that slowed her down anyways.

Through his own research, Andrew decided whatever the other forces were, Lisa probably had a cognate of bipolar disorder: an aggressive manifestation of hypomania. The constellation of Lisa's disorder: her powder-keg energy, her PCP confidence, her blitzkrieg determination, hyper-creativity, winning zest, impatience, impulsivity, aggressiveness, ire, belligerence, family history of bipolar disorder (his mom's competing bouts of weeping and loopiness), and insomnia, "I barely sleep," Lisa said, "I just recharge."

* * *

Lisa closed and locked the door on Andy. A staticky silence settled over the house, so he went down to the basement to raze the quiet from the foundation up. He plugged his guitar into the measly amp and thought: *Little Man on guitar, Laser Lise on the 1's and 2's—This—Is—Redd Zeppelin!* Even at eleven, he knew he was a nerd.

Andy worked his way through *Led Zeppelin I*, finger-stumbling into a faltering gravé version of "Communication Breakdown"—reading from real sheet music spread across the plastic tubs. Midway through his shitty reprise of the song he'd heard on the radio earlier that morning, he started to get the hang of it. A thrill like a bodily epiphany occurred and his hands started cooperating. The notes came to his fingers straight from the marks on the page, his mind blissfully uninvolved.

He moved beneath the air vent and after playing a few more bars, he heard his sister's door open and slam shut, heard her feet on the stairs. Their father intercepted her, and Andy could make out most of the words of the argument; some syllables fought their way through the floorboards to his ears but many sounded too muffled:

“You don't slam doors in ___ house, young lady.”

“It's not ___ your ___ much longer.”

“I put ___ goddamned time ___ fixing ___ than anybody else, Derry.” A slip, her father had called Lisa by their mom's name.

“Too little too __, *Dick*.”

“You don't talk ___ like that.”

“ ___ ”

“ ___ ”

“Why don't you eat ___?”

Andy heard Lisa start to walk away.

“Get back here ___ lady.”

“You get your friggin' ___ off me or I'll ___ Mom ___.”

Lisa flung open the door to the basement, backlit by the filmy light from the kitchen, before she started running down the stairs towards Andy, her feet flying over the steps seemingly without touching them, like treading air. When she got to the bottom of the basement stairway, Andy could tell she was still keyed up from her fight with their father. Like a two-liter of adrenaline shaken at sonic speed.

“Hey Mick,” she called Andy, but he didn’t catch the reference. Probably, she meant Mick Jones. *What happened to Little Man?* “Try to keep up with me.”

She pulled at the neck and the sleeves of her shirt, beamed at Andy and then plucked her sticks away from where they rested across the snare. She stomped on the bass drum a couple times to settle in. Then she launched into a blistering version of the high-hat rattling overture of Led Zeppelin’s “Rock and Roll.”

Andy had seen Lisa beat the skins off her set before, but with some measure of showmanship or attention to the music. His sister’s skinny little seventeen-year old arms, thin as pipe cleaners, were beating the drums faster and more forcefully than ever. She wasn’t reined in by any tempo or time signature Andy could detect. She was just bashing the shit out of the drums; the drums were a stand-in for whatever else, and Andy would have had to be deaf and dim not to realize something was wrong. He made a few half-hearted strums across the strings then rested his fingers between the frets.

“Hey, Lise, I don’t think that’s quite right.”

“What!?!” Her eggbeater arms slowed down.

He repeated himself stupidly.

“Who the hell are you Sir George Friggin’ Martin?” Andy didn’t recognize the name of the Beatles’ producer then.

“Who?”

“Exactly.”

Andy strummed the strings again then shrugged out of his guitar strap.

“I just meant you were a little off,” he said. He meant off-harmony, off-tempo, offbeat.

But she took his words the wrong way and before Andy knew what was happening Lisa had pushed past her drum kit, the hi-hat clattering, and she was in his face, hers still flushed and crazed from her exhaustive playing and the earlier friction upstairs.

“If you can’t keep up, then maybe you should haul your ass out. I didn’t come down here to play smooth jazz.”

“I was down here first, and who invited you?” She was his star but the kid brother in him prickled.

“Who *invited* me? Who the hell are you? The lord of the friggin’ manor.”

“Maybe I am,” he said. “Or will be.” He regretted the last claim before he had even finished.

“Oh, you want to be *Dickie, Junior*? You think he’s in charge here, *Dickie Junior*? You want to take Dick’s spot once he’s gone, *Junior Dick*?”

Lisa grabbed his wrists. Before he had a chance to speak they both recognized they were in the takeoff posture for a helicopter. A menacing decisiveness spilled across her eyes.

“Lise. No.”

Andy’s foot clipped a cymbal on takeoff and grazed some more cardboard boxes during their ascent. Beyond Lisa he could only make out dark shapes, alternating colors of all the junk discarded in the basement. Those colored shapes and the gray of the concrete below. Andy had no idea where his sister intended to

release him. Terror, excitement, joy, guilt all collided; a moment of doubt blossomed and he wished Lisa wasn't always at the center of his life. Guilt, terror; Andy tried to turn the adrenaline into tenacity. Then he saw her manic eyes—green flecked with a copper so they glowed when she was animated. Behind Lisa's eyes, only the blind speed of their spin.

* * *

Redd Zeppelin never played again. Andy's guitar hiatus outlasted the mending of his wrist, broken on the bumpy touchdown of that last helicopter ride. Lisa became his center again, as ever, when she began calling home from college at any odd hour of the day, usually to talk to Andy only. By this point their father had moved out months ago, settling into his new apartment as deliberately as he had moved out of their house; their mother was on an endless stream of errands, most recently shopping for flower bulbs. So Andy and Lisa talked undistracted a few times each week. In her tone she sounded as calm as the morning he'd seen her pierce her ear. Even in this phone call, the last, there was no audibly discernable difference in her voice:

“Happy Birthday, Little Man,” she had said when he turned twelve that fall. “Is Mom there, before I forget?”

“Nope. Tree nursery.”

“Of course she is,” she said. “Haha, she's got her head buried in the ground these days, huh?”

Andy hadn't recognized the expression but he'd laughed anyways.

“Did she make your spice cake yet?” Lisa asked.

“Must have forgotten.”

“Right, well, feel free to take any CD from my room as my present, whatever you want, really.”

“Okey doke,” Andy said, because he’d thought he’d speak to her again sometime soon.

She was gone before their mother could call back. Their mother’s guilt in not calling her daughter immediately when she got home was only matched by their father’s teary rage when he heard. Andy sat silent in Lisa’s room for days at a time, cocooned in her abandoned clothes piles, listening to her CD’s.

* * *

Maggie’s little booted feet sailed above the grass; she laughed as she spun. Had Andrew ever laughed when Lisa had spun him? He felt his daughter’s hands wriggle and realized she was letting go of his wrists, midflight, about to slip away. As Maggie sailed from his empty hands she shouted, “Ope!”

Ope, was what they said whenever there was an accident. When Maggie had fallen down the kitchen step, knocking her head against tiles, and had looked up, waiting for Andrew to tell her whether she should be scared or hurt or just surprised, Andrew had said, “Ope! Wasn’t that fun?” and she had repeated, “Ope!” laughing like she’d just slid down a slide.

Now Maggie kachunked into the half-made pile of leaves her grandmother had raked. Andrew took several long strides and looked for movement in the pile. He looked back at Rica, then over at his mother; all three watched the stilled

leaves. An orange leaf skittered away from the pile, across the lawn, sailing off in an unseen breeze before Andrew heard her voice.

“Fun!” Maggie shouted, invisible beneath the mound. Andrew’s wife shook her head and smiled; his mother held onto the rake like a staff, her other hand rested across her neck just beneath the collar of Andrew’s coat in a gesture of joy or suspense. No one had mentioned Lisa, the anniversary of her death, their last helicopter ride, or any other date. Who could predict what event would next be inscribed in them?

As his daughter popped her head from the pile, mangled oak leaves dangling from her white kinked curls, Andrew convinced himself this was no one person’s handiwork, no one’s fault. Next time, though, he would tighten his hold.

