That Would Only Be the Beginning of Eternity

by

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ABSTRACT

That Would Only Be the Beginning of Eternity is a short novel spanning four days in the life of Dominic Adler: a sarcastic, cocaine-addled young man who lives in New York and sells advertising space. It explores the tension between past and present and the inevitability of miscommunication.

DEDICATION

"When Homer died, I used up all the fear I had in me, and all the grief, too. If there's somebody loose around here that wants to cut my throat, I wish him luck. What difference does it make? It's all the same in eternity. Just remember: If one bird carried every grain of sand, grain by grain, across the ocean, by the time he got them all on the other side, that would only be the beginning of eternity. So blow your nose."

—Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

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CHAPTER 1

ONE

You don't know me. So one thing I'll say is that some years back, during a California summer, I spent time at this facility. Every day for a month I heard I had four choices: love, fear, courage, or shame. Those were the different ways we could approach life, they said. They said it to everybody—they were trying to change the way we thought about life—since addicts like us, they said, are full of fear and shame, and what we needed was a whole lot more courage and love and all that. We had to do bogus homework assignments that were supposed to help us differentiate between when we were approaching life with fear and shame, and when we were approaching it with courage and love, etc. etc. Maybe I should have paid more attention, to be perfectly honest. But I was only about twenty-one when I was in this rehabilitation center with the grandly inspirational name—Placid Waters. So I wasn't really listening.

One afternoon around the circle, this guy Randall told us how he came to arrive at Placid Waters. Randall always pulled on his facial hair in a way that reminded me of my Uncle Bruno in Michigan, who has a mustache like Randall's. All you need to know about my Uncle Bruno is that he thinks Detroit is the greatest city on earth, and his favorite food is a hamburger patty in between two slices of pepperoni and mushroom pizza. But Randall looked more like a gaunt, sweating, deflated balloon version of my Uncle Bruno than my actual Uncle Bruno. Randall looked like if you touched him, your finger would get stuck to his skin.

Randall told us he was a heroin addict when he was a teenager. "It was the

seventies," he said. He said it was amazing and terrible. He didn't get into a lot of detail about that—but he didn't have to. Then when Randall was in his twenties, he got arrested for possession, and he did three months and some community service, and met a guy named Bobo who worked at a church, etc., etc. Point is, Randall decided to take the opportunity of his arrest to get clean. That's what he called it, even then, thirty years later, "the opportunity."

Marcus, the group leader, interrupted him. "It was an opportunity, Randall, and you took it! Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you react to it!" All cheerful.

"Sure," said Randall, because what else can you say to that? Even if it is true. After Randall got out of jail, he stopped doing the heroin. He quit drinking too, because he realized that wanting the heroin and wanting to drink were all up and mixed together in some hazy desperation for distraction that Randall would just have to get used to and learn to live with, like everyone else did. So Randall started going to church with Bobo, because everyone knows that the third step is to "give your will and your life over to the care of God," and that the fifth step is to "admit to God, to yourself, and to another human being the exact nature of your wrongs," and that the sixth step is to be "entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character," and that the seventh step is to "humbly ask Him [meaning God, obviously] to remove your shortcomings," etc., etc.,

blah blah blah. The twelve steps go on and on about "God," always with a capital G. Anyway, Randall became full of the Holy Spirit, and sang the loudest in church, and "all

that shit," he said. There was even a period of a few months when he spoke in tongues. "Woogah Boogah Shoogah!"—and then he'd just knock himself down with the Holy Spirit. "All I was doing really," said Randall, "was shouting. I can see that now."

When he was twenty-five, Randall got a job selling refrigerators at Ramón's Refrigerator Room down in Alhambra. He met Karen, a mezzo-soprano in the church choir. After about six months of courting her around, Randall and Karen got hitched. He said she supported his decision to lead a life of temperance. The way Randall talked about it, I got the impression that Karen was a bit of a teetotaler—one of those crusading types. Anyway, after he got married, Randall's life was swell, he said. A real exciting trip. The sun shined. The flowers bloomed. He drank orange juice at dinnertime. He pretended to like tea. He sold refrigerators during the day and then sometimes at happy hour he went down to the 7-11 by himself for a Big Gulp or a slushie. Keeping time. Trying not to fuck up the days so that when night came, he could breathe thank you into the sheets. Get up in the morning and do it again.

Enough days of not fucking it up and in three years time, Randall and Karen became parents. First it was a boy. A year after that, a girl arrived. Those two kids were the apples of his eyeballs. All four of them drank Coke together on Sundays, watching football on television, rooting for the Niners. Over time—which, by the way, Randall

pointed out, can go by pretty slow when you're always sober and selling refrigerators—the boy and the girl grew up. The boy moved out. He got a place of his own and a job in the construction business. Then the boy started drinking because he was of age, so why

shouldn't he? He was a grown ass man who could make his own decisions. "We can't stop him," said Karen. Even though they wanted to.

That was the part Randall couldn't handle—his son growing up and making his own income and drinking with his friends like the good old boy Randall wished in his heart he too could have been. The good old boy instead of the retired heroin addict. Randall said he began to feel as though he had missed out on life, because he had spent all of his energy trying to preserve it instead of just living it, like, it seemed, everyone else was doing. But Randall wasn't a good old boy—he was an addict. He always thought of himself as that dreaded A-word. So he made a decision about his son. Randall asked his son not to come over anymore if his son had had anything to drink. It seemed like a pretty simple request, Randall figured. But in practice all it meant was that his son didn't come over at all. It got to where the kid wouldn't even talk to his father on the phone. That's not what Randall had wanted, and he felt pretty bad about it. Randall started to realize, he said, the full extent of how the quest for sobriety could diminish a person. In other words, that an addiction to sobriety was still an addiction. Especially if sobriety was all mixed up with some God. But he never felt comfortable saying any of this to Karen. "She didn't like to think about my past," is how he put it. Because in thirty-two

years, Randall had never wavered. Not at his daughter's wedding, where the booze was free because her new husband's family said that was the only decent way to have a wedding. Not at church, because of course they attended a church that served grape juice

in place of communion wine. Randall never had a drink. "Neither did Karen," said Randall, "but that's because she said she never even thought about wanting it. She would always say why would you want your mind to be altered and I would agree with her but inside I always knew the answer to that question was as obvious as why do we drink water? But I never let myself think about it for too long. I just pushed it right to the back of my mind and tried to focus on the television or selling another refrigerator or whether the Niners were ever going to get back to the Super Bowl."

Eventually, Randall's daughter had a daughter of her own. Randall was a grandfather. A jolly sober grandfather. After she was born, Randall stopped going to church. He told Karen that grandfathers didn't need to go church because they were already saved. Karen didn't like it, but what could she do? Randall stopped going to church and instead—after football season ended—spent his Sundays trying to read every item in the *Los Angeles Times*. He even did the crossword. He also started secretly smoking cigarettes, and depositing the butts into a coffee tin he kept in the garage, and then driving down to the dump once a month to dispose of the butts in private. And if Karen knew, well then she didn't show it.

One Sunday came along when Randall's mind got a bit preoccupied. He kept thinking about his situation with his son and why the kid didn't come over anymore. He tried to think about other things, but then his mind would go right back to it. Karen was at church. She still sang in the choir. Randall hemmed and hawed around the house for a

while. He couldn't bring himself to concentrate long enough to read the paper. So Randall decided he would get in the car and drive around. Maybe that would clear his mind. He smoked cigarettes out the window and threw the butts on the side of the road. After a while he realized the tank was nearing empty, and so he pulled into a gas station.

"Next thing I knew," said Randall, "I was standing in the mini-mart buying a six-pack of light beer. I mean, it had been so long that I figured, well, maybe I can handle it? What's one light beer? Light beer is barely even beer and beer is barely even a drink. Anyway, there was only one way to find out." So Randall purchased the light beer, came home, popped open one of the bottles, sat down on the couch and began to drink it.

"And you know," said Randall. He had placed his cup of coffee on the floor between his feet when he began his story, and he picked it up then and took a sip. Some of the coffee stuck to his mustache. "You know, I felt pretty good," he said. "I turned on the boob tube. There was a car chase on the news. Everybody likes a car chase. I watched it. Then before you know it, the bottle was empty. I had finished one beer. And I didn't feel wild or nothing. I started to wonder what all the fuss was about. So I drank another beer. I kept watching the car chase. Then I thought my wife was going to be home soon from church. Well, I don't know if you ever had a wife—but if you have maybe you can understand what I'm saying when I say that I didn't really feel like seeing Karen all that much. Right then. Not forever—just at that moment. So I got back in the car and I started driving around. I left the beer in the fridge and everything. I didn't even think about it. Swear to God."

"How were you feeling at this point?" said Marcus. Marcus had been tapping his

pen on his clipboard throughout Randall's whole story, scribbling notes to himself. Marcus was a skinny guy with small pink head like an eraser at the end of a pencil. He wore these stud earrings and he had tattoos of flowers up and down his arms and he probably thought all of it made him look like a chilled out laidback dude who drug addicts could say things to. But it came off as very practiced, at least to me.

"Like I said, I felt pretty good," said Randall. "I drove by one of those motels that advertise monthly rates and all that. Kind of on this dirty street. I don't know how I knew where to go, but I just did. I mean, I had had the two beers, so I just figured, well—fuck it. I bought some heroin."

I laughed a little after he said that, even though I was trying not to. A few of us did.

"Just 'fuck it'?" said Marcus, all serious.

"Fuck it," said Randall. "Fuck it. I started again with the heroin."

"Just 'fuck it," said Marcus again, this time a little softer, for emphasis, like he had some insight into the words that we addicts did not. I mean they had counselors there who were in recovery themselves, and had been for years, but Marcus wasn't one of them. Marcus was more of a rehab academic. "And how do you feel now?" he said.

"Now?" said Randall. "Well right at this moment I feel pretty antsy. I'm pretty twitchy right now—I'll be honest. But I'd also be lying if I said that in the last year I haven't had some fun. I know that's probably not what you want to hear Marcus, but you

want us to be honest."

"Yes I want you to be honest."

"Mostly when I get the heroin and I'm about to do it. Right before I do it. That part has been really great. How come we never talk about how much fun drugs can be? That's *why* people do them. Also, I'm getting divorced."

"Well," said Marcus. "We can talk about anything you want, Randall. But that doesn't often come up because by the time people get here, drugs aren't fun anymore." Marcus cleared his throat. "It's my understanding that you and your wife are separated now, Randall?" Marcus cleared his throat again, in a way that was supposed to be all, listen to me.

"Yep," said Randall. "Separated. Soon-to-be-divorced. That's the truth. That's what I just said. I love her still, but—she's made up her mind."

"So then," said Marcus, suddenly getting a little excited, as though he had caught Randall in some sort of logical contradiction. "If heroin is so great, Randall, then why are you here? Why have you been separated from your family?"

Randall wiped his mustache. He sipped his coffee. He had the jitters. He wouldn't stop bouncing his leg. The sound of his pockets jingling drove me up the wall. That's one thing I hated about Placid Waters. Everyone twitching around all the time. "Why am I in here?" said Randall. "I'm in here because they told me I had to be."

"Who's they?" said Marcus. Marcus had his clipboard and that clipboard and

everyone else's twitching must have really made him feel like the guy with all the answers. Because that's how he acted most of the time. Like the guy who knew things you didn't.

"They," said Randall, "all of them."

"Your family?" said Marcus, "the law?"

"Sure," said Randall. "Yes."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone," said Randall.

"It sounds like you're blaming other people," said Marcus.

Randall started laughing. It was a bit jarring, the sudden laughter. Then he began to pull on his bushy eyebrows, and looking at the hairs that came out between his fingers. His eyebrows got less bushy everyday.

"So what do you think you're going to write about this afternoon," said Marcus, "love, fear, courage, or shame?"

Randall touched his hand to his breast pocket. "The Forty-Niners."

"Love, fear, courage, or shame?"

"I'm out of cigarettes."

Cera leaned toward Randall with her pack of Menthols. Cera had been a stripper until she got in a car accident that popped one of her implants and ruined her boobs. That's how she put it, at least. Her Mom named her C-E-R-A instead of S-A-R-A. I don't know what she used for a stripper name.

"Here," she said.

Randall took a couple.

"Love, fear, courage, or shame," said Marcus again. I figured Marcus had been a camp counselor in a past life. "What are you going to choose?"

About a year after I left Placid Waters I bumped into Randall at a corner store in South Pasadena buying a handle of Tequila. We had a good laugh then about Marcus and his clipboard. That was the last time I saw Randall.

I catch myself thinking about him, wondering if he ever made up with his son, wondering where he might be right at this moment. What he might be doing, or saying, or drinking, and how bushy his eyebrows are, or if he pulled them all out. I don't feel sad for him. Not even a little. Because one thing he said to me at the liquor store that

afternoon those years ago was that not since that day when he couldn't concentrate on the crossword puzzle and went out in the car and bought a six pack of light beer and drank two of them and watched the car chase on the news and then went back out in his car and decided fuck it, fuck all of you, I'm buying some heroin, because that's what I want, not since that day, said Randall, have I sold another fucking refrigerator.

And you can't begrudge a man for wanting a little more from life than just waking up in the morning and putting on a cheap polyester suit and then driving on the freeway down to Ramón's Refrigerator Room in Alhambra and spending eight straight hours talking to strangers about ice makers and freezer burn and about how you don't want to over pack the fridge because too many items will disturb the "cool flow" and what not. Although at least in that version, he does wake up in the morning. I guess I don't know

what he might have had to sell in the absence of refrigerators. Now that I'm thinking about it, maybe refrigerators aren't so bad. People do need refrigerators. But I don't feel sad for him. Not even a little.

I was just about falling down the stairs trying to get out the door to go to work. I felt like shit. I had a headache like you wouldn't believe. I felt the way a hammerhead shark looks.

Sunlight came through the windows on the stairwell, and the brightness made me feel like a drying piece of jerky. I couldn't remember anything I ate yesterday. I hadn't slept. Every time I took a step my chest got really tight.

I might as well say now that the reason I was in Placid Waters those years back is because I couldn't for the life of me stop sucking coke up my nose like a goddamn vacuum. I know it's a stupid problem to have, and I did it to myself. I can't deny that. That's shame for you, Marcus. I'm ashamed.

I was clean for a while, after Placid Waters. Then I got bored. They don't use that word *clean* on accident—you do feel a lot cleaner when you don't snort powder you bought on the sidewalk or in a rental car or in a hotel room that smells of urine and peach schnapps up your face. You probably already know that. My mother thinks I've stayed clean all this time—she thinks that's how I managed to graduate from a good college and get a job at a prestigious magazine and all that—and I don't like disappointing her. Just because I do street drugs doesn't mean I'm the kind of person who wants my mother to worry.

At the bottom of the stairs was my landlord.

"Hello," I said.

He stood by the mailboxes fidgeting with a toolbox, unfolding a stepladder. I startled him and he grabbed onto the ladder to stabilize himself. My landlord Moshe Epstein is a Hasidic Jew. I live in the Hasidic part of Brooklyn. He owns most of the buildings on our street.

"I'm Dominic Adler," I said, and secretly I hoped that he would recognize my last name as Jewish and that somehow, it might make him more inclined to like me.

But all he said was "What?"

"I'm in 5C and I've been meaning to talk to you because our mailbox is broken and we haven't been getting any mail."

"No more smoking," he said then. He kept fidgeting with his tools. "I see smoke coming from the windows." He talked to the ceiling.

"What about the mailbox?"

"Okay, okay," he said. "We'll fix it. But no more smoking."

"That's my roommate. Jocelyn."

"Tell him no more smoking."

"She doesn't listen to me."

"You're the man," said Moshe. "You tell her no more smoking." He climbed up the stepladder and his hat pushed against the ceiling. "Hand me that," he said, pointing to the toolbox. Laid out in the box were piles of shimmering wrenches and screwdrivers and a bunch of other tools I didn't know the language for, and then I realized, neither did he.

"This?" I said.

"No, the one next to it."

We had signed the lease inside of Moshe's shabby gray van, driving around the building in circles because he couldn't find a parking spot. When we handed him the papers he stopped in the middle of the road so Jocelyn and I could get out. He put the car in park. Pretty soon a line of cars honked and stalled behind us, trying to maneuver around the van. He and I shook hands. "Congratulations," he said. I almost said "For what?" but instead I just sort of mumbled. Then Jocelyn leaned in with her hand out. He took a giant step backward. "No, no," he said, "I don't touch."

"Does he mean he doesn't touch lesbians or he doesn't touch women?" she asked me when we walked away, even though she already knew the answer. "Fuck titties in Christ, why didn't you tell me?" she said. "You're the Jew. I'm just standing there with my dumb gentile hand flapping around in the wind."

"I forgot," I said, which was true. My father was raised Jewish, but that's the wrong side. We did Hanukah a few times growing up, because my mother thought we should "have a connection to the culture," etc. etc., except I can't remember much about it, other than the dreidel song. None of us ever got Bar Mitzvahed or anything, even though PJ always sort of wanted to, for the presents I think. When we were kids, on

Sundays, my mom took me and PJ and Stacy to mass, where we listened to some priests the Catholic church had basically captured from the Congo or Vietnam go on and on about the Holy Spirit. Dad stayed home, and on further prodding Dad admitted he was

actually an atheist. “God gives me a headache,” he said.

And then my sister Stacy would tell him that there’s no such thing as true atheism, because everybody worships something, and it never seemed as though he knew how to answer that.

“Moshe,” I said. “Mr. Epstein. Maybe Jocelyn will listen to you if you tell her.”

“Tell her no more smoking,” said Moshe. Then his cell phone started to ring and he climbed off the stepladder, whipped back his payot, and answered it.

Down the block, on my way to the train, I passed Moshe’s office and inside the window I could see his two sons. They looked a lot like him—same outfit and everything. Same payots. Same hats. The main difference was that one was little less fat than Moshe and the other one was a lot less fat. The thinner son sat at his desk and his brother seemed to be telling a joke, because I could hear him yelling a bit, and then he acted something out, extending his arms like wings and taking big steps around the room. The skinny one laughed his head off. Maybe I watched them through the window longer than was polite, because the one who was telling the joke saw me and stopped. I probably stood there longer than I should have. Did I already say they were brothers?

Well I got on the subway and stumbled over police tape and a homeless woman with scabs on her forehead and a guy dressed as a clown who was trying to get people to buy balloons that were shaped like dicks and someone else sitting on a sheet surrounded by bootlegged DVDs and nameless clean-shaven smug guys with shiny shoes and briefcases, and children who couldn't stop staring and almost all of them wore headphones, except for the clown. I went to work.

I work at this magazine and if I'm not there by a certain time then people will have to wait an hour or two before they can reserve their personal ad in the classified section. Very big deal.

When I got to my cubicle, I felt a squeeze on my arm. I spun around and just about punched my boss in the face. I'm very easily startled.

Victoria wanted to go to lunch. She's my boss. The two of us were getting a bit of a reputation around the office since we were always going out for lunches where Victoria would spend hundreds of bucks she didn't have on wine. We'd come back to our desks around four or five, me helping Victoria carry her shopping bags, slugging our feet, trying to answer the questions of people who were more sober than we were, and someone would make a joke and say You carrying your soul around in that shopping bag or what? Then I'd shrug and whatever it was in the bag (delicate shoes that would

probably only last her an afternoon, antique plates, a charcuterie serving platter), I'd drop

it on Victoria's desk. Keeping it up was probably the hardest part of my job, aside from the boredom.

We sat at a table in the window of a café on Downing Street.

"Is that blood?" Victoria said over her wine glass, looking at her hand, bemused and horrified. I saw a fat dark globule on the tip of her finger and she touched her tongue to it very daintily. She pulled and twisted the flesh of her arm until she could see her elbow. There was an inch-long gash.

"I'm bleeding," she said. Watching her was like watching a cat groom itself. She called for the waiter. Then she wetted a napkin and held it to her elbow. "How did that happen?" she said. "I didn't even notice it happening."

"It happens," I said.

"But it didn't even hurt," said Victoria. "I didn't *feel* anything." When Victoria's drunk she speaks in a British accent. She grew up in Philadelphia.

"How should I know?" I said.

"What can I do for you?" said the waiter. His name was Justin. He'd been our waiter before. He had a nice ass.

"I need another napkin," said Victoria.

"Me too," I said. Because I was sweating. A lot of toxins were trying to leave my body, but I was pretty good at putting the toxins in faster than they could leave. I

was also very jittery, on account of all the uppers. Because in addition to the coke, I also take these little stimulants every morning that Dr. Herman Klaus gave me. Dr. Klaus is

the psychiatrist on Madison Avenue that I see once in a while. The pills are supposed to make me not want to do coke anymore, because they're supposed to act just like coke does, but be safer than coke, and make it so I don't crave coke anymore, because they said my brain doesn't produce the normal amount of dopamine, or whatever. I don't really know all the reasons—but Dr. Klaus says those reasons are good—and anyway I'd been taking the pills for so many years that I never really bothered to ask Dr. Klaus *why* anymore.

"Sorry I was late today," I said.

But Victoria just said "What?" because she was still inspecting her elbow. My wine glass: empty. Justin brought more napkins.

"Another bottle, please, Justin." She really accentuated the t's, on account of the fake British accent. Victoria is one of these high-class culture groupies who wishes she was a composer or a poet or something, but she isn't—she's in advertising. So instead she'll tell you about what kind of a kisser last year's Pulitzer winner was or about that time in high school when she and a now dead Kennedy were in a play together and so then Jackie came out to see the play and took Victoria and the now dead guy to lunch. There's a whole class of these people running around New York—I probably would have been one myself if they'd have let me. But—as Victoria put it—I'm too scrappy. So I'm not in the club.

My phone started vibrating in my pocket. It made me want to throw up. Every time my phone rings, I'm sure it's Manny calling. And every time it isn't Manny, I can't help but make the sign of the cross, even though I stopped being Catholic a long time

ago.

"My mother is calling."

"Answer it," said Victoria. She was still holding the napkin to her elbow. I tried to make it look like I wasn't making the sign of the cross, even though I was.

"Mom!" I accidentally yelled a little. I was so happy. Usually I hate the phone and I'm always lying so I can get off the phone. I don't really have to do it with my mother, because she does the same thing. One time she said, "Dominic, I need to hang up now because I have to open the garage door." I'm not kidding about that. All you need to do to open the garage door is press a button. I don't blame her, though. I do the same thing. I hate the phone.

"Thank God it's you, Mom."

"Gay boys are so much sweeter to their mothers than other boys," said Victoria. She wasn't quite talking to me, but more staring out the window and pouting her lips as though she hoped someone walking by on the street would see her and want to take a picture. "Maybe Andrew will turn out to be gay." Victoria said, "I hope so." She sighed a big loud sigh. She reminded me of a second-rate actress in a low-budget play. Andrew was her ten-year old son and maybe I should've mentioned I was gay when I started telling this story. Love, fear, courage, shame. Maybe I should spend a lot of time here

talking about when I was a kid, and how I used to put highlighters up my butt and sit in my room until dinnertime, liking the way it felt. Love, fear, courage, shame. Maybe I should say that when I was seventeen and came out to my parents, my father shook my

hand and my mother said, “Oh Dominic, we knew that” and that the whole thing felt pretty underwhelming. I could tell you about the first time I got fucked by a man I knew, and then about the first time I got fucked by a man I didn’t know, and how maybe it didn’t happen in that order. Love, fear, courage, shame. Except I don’t feel like getting into all that right now.

“What a greeting,” said my mother. My mother has been getting quieter every year. Her voice is basically a whisper now. “It’s nice to talk to you, Dominic. I can’t remember the last time I heard your voice.”

“You too, Mom. It’s great to hear you too,” I said, and I meant it.

“I wanted to tell you,” she said, “Grandpa wants to have a tree-planting ceremony for PJ this weekend.”

“A what?” It was a pretty noisy restaurant.

“A tree-planting ceremony,” she said. “Like a memorial.”

“Oh God,” I said.

“I just wanted to tell you.”

“Oh brother.” Victoria raised her eyebrows at me. I was supposed to fly to Detroit that night for my Grandpa’s eighty-fifth birthday. I had a red-eye out of JFK.

My grandparents live in the suburbs of Detroit, along with my mom’s brother Bruno and her sisters and my cousins. And Mom was flying out from California to be there, and my sister Stacy was coming in from Chicago with her finance guy fiancé Roger, and my dad wasn’t coming because my dad had to work. PJ’s my brother. PJ’s not coming because

PJ's taking a dirt nap for the rest of eternity. I guess that's a pretty awful way of saying it. I probably say a lot of awful things.

"PJ would've hated that," I said.

"Why do you say that?" said my mother. She didn't ask it like a question that wanted an answer. It was more a question of why was I *the kind of person* who would say that? She asked it just so I would think it over. Then my mother became completely silent and I could tell her feelings were hurt and that bummed me out a little. To have such an already quiet-spoken mother and then to make it so she didn't want to speak at all. That wasn't right. Even though all I had done was tell her the truth.

"Look, if that's what you want, then that's what you want," I said. "You should do it."

"How's work?" she said.

"Super."

"Well I'll see you really soon. I've got to go—I'm driving. I've got to make a left turn. I'll talk to you—."

We hung up. I can't tell you how my mother's changed since PJ died. I can't tell you because I don't know.

Victoria stared out the window and made a face like "look how deep in thought I am." Justin filled our glasses with more wine. Victoria reached into her purse.

"I have this here," she said. She held up a copy of the latest issue of the magazine. Aside from compiling the classified ads that run in the back, I'm also supposed to sell ads to people. But salespeople annoy all hell out of me, and I also annoy

myself when I am one. Victoria opened the issue to my pages.

"Can I read you something?" she said. She had stopped holding her elbow and I could see a little drop of blood bubbling on the skin.

"Please don't."

"Decent-looking old wench, age 52, seeks 18–20 year old fellow for trampoline jumping," said Victoria, "and then there's an email address."

"I thought you would appreciate that one."

Victoria didn't smile. "I'm still 51," she said. "Can I read you another?"

"Please don't."

"Manic-Depressive Catholic-Jewish twink, age 27, works at magazine, likes white mountains for skiing *winkwink,* seeks handsome gray-haired gentleman to help him find out if he has any latent daddy issues." Victoria looked up from the magazine. "That one is definitely you."

"I wonder if people will answer it."

"Dominic," said Victoria. "You wrote these."

"Okay, okay."

"I've counted and I think there are about eight here that you wrote yourself."

"Maybe I did."

"I talked to Ellis about it," said Victoria. Ellis is the publisher. He's six and a half feet tall and from Virginia. Apparently he grew up in this very wealthy family that owned a bunch of television and radio networks in the South and apparently there are books written about how screwed up his family is and apparently the wrongest thing you

can do around the office is to bring up one of those books. So that's what everyone does.

"What did he say?" I said. Justin placed a chicken sandwich in front of me. I had forgotten that I'd ordered it. I tried to eat but I might as well have been chewing and swallowing a dirty old t-shirt. "You think he'll fire me?"

"Nevermind what he said."

"You don't think I'll get fired?"

"Probably not," said Victoria. She picked up her fork.

"You're getting blood everywhere," I said.

Victoria looked at her elbow again. "Do I have *stigmata*?" She dipped the napkin in her glass of water. She had her non-bleeding arm wrapped around herself to cover the bleeding one. "How am I supposed to eat like this?" She asked Justin for some band-aids.

"What am I going to do about Manny?" I said.

"Who?"

"Oh nothing," I said. "Nevermind. I feel like shit," I said. "My head is killing me." Justin brought the band-aids. "I'm so itchy."

"Why aren't you eating?"

"Why do you think?"

"So it's not a cold after all," said Victoria, with this holier-than-thou smirk on her face. She sipped her drink. "Look, Dominic," she said, "maybe all this, your life, the cocaine," she said, holding up her glass, because she knew about a lot of things, I told her

plenty of embarrassing things when I didn't know who else to tell—plus lucky for me cocaine was high-class rich person drug and not, for example, a dirty hippy drug like weed and so she was more inclined to pretend to understand why I did it—"maybe all this is because you haven't mourned your brother."

"That's rich," I said, trying to chew, but it tasted like bark. "Real rich." I picked up one of her napkins and blew my nose. When I looked down at it I saw bunch of wet snot and blood—mine and Victoria's. "I can't blame PJ for myself."

"No you can't," she said.

"Look, I'm lousy at this," I said. "I'd fire me if I could. You should tell Ellis that. That if I were him, I'd fire me." Except I knew she probably wouldn't say that to Ellis. "Let's talk about something else," I said. "I don't want to talk about PJ." And that part was true, because Victoria wasn't one of those people who had a lot of patience for

talking about that kind of thing. She was too busy staring out the window and wondering how she looked to people walking by on the street.

So Victoria began to tell me how she had spent last night having sex in the single-stall bathroom of a wine bar with a married accountant from Jersey named Harry.

"I invited him out because I owed him some money," she said. "I invited him to give him a check." Victoria owes everybody money because she can't stop buying six-hundred dollar shoes and all that—Ellis, the IRS, her mother—about everyone you could think of except me. And Manny. Victoria didn't come from money. She said she was a scholarship kid when she went to school with the Kennedys because she was a prodigy

on the violin but then she had to sell her violin to pay for her father's funeral because her father in Philadelphia fell down the stairs drunk and died and then she never played the violin again.

Victoria said she and Harry had slept together once thirty years ago when they were both in their twenties, before either of them were married to the people they were married to now. And how it wasn't all that great last night, their second time in thirty years, because she was on her period but luckily they were already in a bathroom so that was convenient for removing the tampon but also difficult to do without making it obvious to Harry. It had just been so long since she had had sex, more than a year, so she just did it even though the circumstances "weren't ideal," and she felt kind of numb "down there" from all the wine. Then when she got back to her apartment on Broome

Street her husband was awake and working on his computer and he asked Victoria if she had had anything to drink and Victoria lied and said no. Then she said her son Andrew complained that he hadn't had any dinner and it was already eleven at night and that made her feel like she had been a bad mother and a sad old drunk. So then she asked me again if I thought Andrew might be gay and I told her to call me in eight years when he's legal and I'd find out for her. And even though by then we were in pretty good spirits, she told me it wasn't funny. Except she didn't say *funny* she said *humourous* because she probably figured that's how a duchess would describe it. Sometimes she claimed to be a French duchess.

Victoria gave Justin the credit card. "One more for Dominic," she said. She

motioned for him to lean toward her. She whispered in his ear. Justin listened, and then disappeared into the kitchen. When he returned he held in his hands a decanter of port. "This doesn't usually see daylight," he said. "This is usually more of a night time drink." He picked up the tiny port glasses and set them down in front of us.

"We're celebrating today," said Victoria.

"No need for a reason," said Justin. The liquid glugged into Victoria's glass, then into mine. "What are you celebrating?" he said, to cover the silence.

"Well for starters," said Victoria, "his brother's dead."

"Pardon?" said Justin, looking at me. I didn't know what to say so I just sort of made my face into the face of a person who was smiling.

"That came out wrong," said Victoria.

"What she means," I said, "is that we need a bit of a pick me up."

"No need to explain," said Justin, "I understand completely."

"Oh good," said Victoria, laughing. "I hoped you would."

We drank the port.

I decided not to return to the office with Victoria. I crossed the street and then the avenue and a stone church and a policeman on a horse and the stairs underground smelled of hot piss and feet and I felt someone bump me from behind but when I turned to see who it was, all I found were too many faces and I was one of them and we moved, a herd of antelope, onto the F train. I was still sweating. The train began to move. I watched jowls bounce and sway under the florescent light.

I didn't notice right at first this dirty blonde kid standing in the middle of the train. He came out of the corner. Maybe from a different car. He was someone you smelled before you saw, and looking around by process of elimination you realized where it was coming from. He looked like Huck Finn, if Huck Finn were alive today and living on public transportation instead of a raft. His sweatshirt had a dark brownish-green stain wiped across the front. Grime coated his hands, crud harvesting in his fingernails and around dry bitten cuticles, like he'd been playing in the dirt. Everyone else on the train gave him about a two-foot radius of space because of the odor—that perfume of feces and garbage you encounter a lot in New York.

But he was holding a bottle of soda and that got me thinking about my brother PJ. My mind wanders a lot. People say I have a problem with living in the past. But you can't really help what you think about. Can you? Recently I've had Marcus in my head

saying, “Dominic, life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you react to it!” with a lot of enthusiasm. He’s probably right.

PJ was always funny about soda, like this kid seemed to be. This kid on the train, well he just kind of cradled a bottle of soda in his elbow like it was his baby. Then he’d go and inspect the label real close to his face—not that there was much to read. The bottle had one of those flimsy white drug-store labels that just said *Cola*. Maybe this kid was a little fuzzy in the head, if you want to know the truth. Or maybe he was as high as I was. I don’t know—if Huck Finn lived today he’d probably have done a bunch of meth and then ended up in a Missouri prison for accidentally blowing up the old widow’s house. And instead of Huck Finn he would’ve been called Hick Fun.

What I started thinking about then was how when my brother PJ and I were kids, and PJ would get irrationally and unnaturally attached to whatever soda he happened to be drinking. He insisted on holding his own can of soda, but he always dropped it when it was still full, and you could tell this pattern bugged the hell out of him. He was only a little kid. I guess adults aren’t that different—the way everyone tightens up when someone accidentally breaks a glass at dinner. At least that’s how it is at my mother’s table.

Once PJ dropped a soda, he never failed to scream his head off. This happened quite often—it got to the point where I started to wonder if he was doing it on purpose just so he could have a good cry. After he dropped it, he’d get stiff as a plank and clench his fists and stare up at the sky with his head back, wailing. He looked like a toy soldier at attention. The whole time he screamed the soda just whizzed all over his feet like

explosive piss. Getting everywhere. Spilling more and more.

"Just pick up the soda, PJ." I always told him that. But he wouldn't. He only froze. It killed me.

The kid with the soda got off the train in Chinatown, but by then I had started thinking about PJ, and when I start thinking about PJ, it's hard to get off the carousel, if you know what I mean.

So I got to thinking about this other funny stuff PJ used to do. Like outside with the neighborhood kids he and I used to play this game called "war." It was an adventure search-and-capture game with invisible nuclear bombs and Presidents and stuff. One summer day, PJ was a POW up in the oak tree in our backyard. Then I staged a raid on the tree, so PJ had to jump out of it. He fell ten feet, at least. He just sort of landed splat on the grass like a belly flop. It was awful and wonderful to watch. I can still hear the thud he made on the dirt. Then he got right up, wiped off his shirt, and we played for the rest of the afternoon. I dropped an atom bomb before dinner, and the game ended because the entire planet blew up. We walked into the house. Our mother came home. After a while she said, "Peter James," because that's PJ's full name, "why are you holding your arm at that unholy angle?"

"I think it's broken," he said. "It's kind of numb." He just shrugged. I was glad she had said something. It was starting to creep me out, the way his arm was bent.

My mother is very practical about things. She buckled PJ into the car and drove him to Urgent Care to see a doctor she knew. Turned out PJ's arm was broken in two

spots. But the whole time between breaking it and having it cast it was like it didn't even matter to him. Everything was fine.

Or there was this one time, when PJ was about seven. We had this creaky old lake house up in the mountains where we would go on weekends in the summer. It was built in the twenties or something, and let me tell you: it was one weird house. It had three different staircases and each of them only lead to one room, like they were hamster tunnels or something. It kind of made you feel like the old woman who lived in her shoe. A bunch of the windows were made of stained glass, with pictures of birds and flowers and lumberjacks, for no reason at all. In the back of the house was this old wooden hot tub all covered up, mossy and molding. In seven years of having that lake house, we never opened that tub. Dad used to joke that if we ever did open it, we'd probably find a dead body in there, left by the previous owner. I guess the house used to belong Charlie Chaplin back in the day, when he needed a place to hide out with one of his pregnant child brides. I don't know; it was a weird place. This was in California, where people walk around with giant balloons of bubble wrap where their heads should be, so anything is possible. Just ask Randall.

In order to get to the lake from the house you had to walk down all these creaky stairs. They went on forever. PJ and I counted once and it came out to about 180 steps, and PJ probably dropped a soda on every one of them. Every time you took a step, your shoe stuck to the step behind you.

All the way at the bottom of the steps was our dock. Dad bought this boat he was super jazzed about and we parked it there. But the boat didn't really work. It was a

speedboat that always died on you when you were out in the middle of the lake. Then the lake patrol showed up wearing life vests and they'd ask you what was wrong and you'd have to say "Sorry sir, my boat is a piece of a shit," or whatever. There was this one day, when we were hanging out on the dock: me, PJ, Dad, Mom, and my sister Stacy. Dad had this big metal shovel and he was shoveling rocks out of the water right by the dock. It was a fresh-water lake. Man-made lake, to be honest. Like I said: California. They're crazy about man-made lakes out there. Anyway, Dad was shoveling rocks in the water and then dumping them three feet away on the shore. Which doesn't make much sense because what's the point of shoveling rocks? They're just going to slide back into the water in about five minutes. Dad wasn't really outdoorsy, if you want to know the truth. He liked to say that he used to be. In fact, he was always saying that, with a giant glass of scotch in his hand, sitting around the fireplace in the drafty house in Pasadena where I grew up: "Dominic," he'd say, "I used to be something of an outdoorsman."

Then my mother would cut in and say, "Oh come on Joe all you had was a beard."

I've seen pictures of him on a mountain with a backpack on. Does that count? I don't know. Dad's a corporate lawyer and that's basically what this lake house was about in the first place. A place where Dad could grab a shovel and feel real handy and "get out there," even though he never wore anything but khakis and polo shirts and little golf hats, even on the dock. Maybe that's not something worth being sad over, but it made me kind of sad. Dad shoveling rocks in his khakis and feeling really good about it. He didn't want to get his shorts wet so he was sort of balancing himself on a boulder and digging into the water. There was sunscreen running all down his face. Mom's crazy

about sunscreen.

So PJ and I were swimming around in the lake and doing jumps off the front of the dock. Far away from Dad. Then for some reason, when I said go, PJ decided it was a bright idea to run backwards toward the shore and jump in the water right where Dad was shoveling, with all the rocks. I watched him do it, and it was over before I even knew what happened. Because PJ landed straight on the shovel. It sliced through his foot. In between the pinky toe and the other toe. Sounds improbable, I know. What a landing. Believe me, we were all astounded. You could hear the little crunch when the shovel cut his foot. It was sort of how it sounds when you bite into a piece of shrimp. Maybe I'm making that part up, about being able to hear it. But it felt like you could hear it.

Dad fell into the lake after him, splashing around in his golf hat. He pushed PJ back onto the dock. Dad looked like he might have been crying but to be honest that was

probably all the sunscreen and sweat running into his eyes. The cut on PJ's foot was about an inch deep, but you couldn't really see it then because there was blood spurting all over. Dad starting yelling "Muriel, Muriel," because that's my Mom's name, and Mom ran over from where she had been rubbing sunscreen all over my sister and Stacy made these gagging sounds when she saw the geyser of blood and Dad threw PJ in the boat and the five of us raced across the lake to the hospital so PJ could get stitches. I'm not kidding—we went to the hospital in the boat. The whole ride over Mom was trying to hold PJ's hand. She kept quizzing him on his times tables. Like she'd say, "7 x 7," and he'd say "forty-nine." She said later that she was doing it to "distract him from the pain."

Anyway, the point is, PJ wasn't crying at all. He didn't seem to be in pain whatsoever. Everyone else was in hysterics, but he just lay in the back in the boat, letting the air and water fizz around him, while the boat sped up and down on the waves. Mom had his foot wrapped up in a ratty beach towel. He had sort of a serene look on his face. Like it was just another lazy afternoon. Every so often he made a face like he had just eaten a piece of sour candy, but that was mostly when my mom yelled out another equation he was supposed to solve. Then he'd reluctantly say, "thirty-six," or whatever it was. The boat started to die when we reached the hospital. I jumped into the water and swam to the dock, pulling the boat along with a rope. Dad carried PJ into the ER like a bride in his arms.

"Incredible pain tolerance, that boy," was what the doctor said when they stitched PJ up. "You're very brave," he told PJ. I guess you could say that. That the fact that PJ didn't cry was all a feat of courage. But just wait until old braveheart dropped a can of Mountain Dew. I'd like to see the doc try to comfort him then. That's all I'm saying.

You'd think because I had such a gross habit myself, I'd be more accepting of other people's gross habits. But I'm not. Our apartment is on the corner of the building and has this long useless hallway. I could smell Jocelyn's cigarettes all the way at the end of the hallway. As soon I opened the door, Lenin the Chihuahua bounded toward me. He made Chihuahua sounds. Jocelyn is home all the time. She says she lives off her trust fund and she tells people she designs jewelry. I've never seen any of it—the trust fund or the jewelry.

Since our apartment is shaped like a flower stem with a few misshapen leaves attached to it, I had to walk past Jocelyn to get to my room. She was on the couch, the ash accumulating in her fingers, watching a commercial for this spray paint you put on your head if you're losing your hair and the spray paint is supposed to make it look like you still have hair but mostly it looks like you have shoe polish on your head.

"Hello."

"Hello."

I could hear the shower, and I figured Brittany was in there. Brittany had her own apartment a block away, but she had about five roommates. Brittany came from this Baptist family in Indiana, and they didn't appreciate her taking up with Jocelyn. I guess

Brittany had never been with another woman before. Jocelyn complained that Brittany

made love like a “dead fish.” Through the wall once I heard Jocelyn ask Brittany if she had been this dead with the fifty guys she slept with before the two of them got together. Brittany started to cry. After that, Brittany was at our place night and day, and Jocelyn was a bitch to her whenever she felt like it. Brittany had only gone to fashion school, and Jocelyn would sometimes mention a writer or something that Brittany had never read, and then burst into laughter because Brittany had never heard of the person. She did it on purpose. Then she’d drag me into it. “Ask her another one,” she’d say, like Brittany was some country bumpkin sideshow brought to the big city for our amusement. I can’t remember why I ever liked Jocelyn, to tell the truth. Except for a while there she was probably my closest friend in New York, other than Victoria. And Manny.

I got into my room and fell on my bed. I sort of fell through it, because I had gotten the bed pretty cheap, and I didn’t have all the right parts for holding up the mattress. So under my bed I kept these cardboard boxes and suitcases and about a hundred books and they kept the mattress up pretty well.

Next to my bed is this silver pipe attached to something that goes through the wall. All day long it goes *clack clack clack.* On the white walls of my room are two smashed bugs. They were there when we moved in. I tried to clean them up but they’re stuck. Christopher is a spider. I’m not quite sure what Eleanor is—all I know is that she has at least one wing.

I decided to check my email;

My dear nephew,

I am so thrilled you will be here in michigan so soon! I have something very

special planned for grandpa's birthday! It is a surprise for him, so please do not ruin it. On Saturday there will be a limo coming to pick all of us up! A limo! That can fit all of us! I'm sure you ride in limos all the time in new york but this will be new for the rest of us. So get excited. Then were going to take youre granpa to the horse races downtown, and well eat there!

I just wanted to let you know, since I am the organizer, so you will know what to expect. I know this is the first time you will have seen most of us since PJs funeral. Im sure you heard a lot of stories about what has been going on in michigan from your mom or from your nonna, so I wanted to tell you not to worry. Youve probably heard things about your aunt jeanine. I can't deny what you heard. All I can say is that I think jail has done her good because I haven't seen her drink since she got out. And she's going to the meetings. Yes, things are looking up around here, that's for sure!

Everyone here is anxous to see you! Cant wait to here about your fancy life. See you soon!

In jesus name,
aunt Lisa

Then I noticed I had a voicemail from Manny. Well, that about made me want to keel over. I didn't want to listen to it. So I decided I wouldn't. I decided I would just get my things together and head to the airport.

The first thing I did when I was getting ready was I decided to cut myself up a few lines. I used to have a pretty big stash but all I had at that moment was what I hadn't done of an eightball. I'm not going to get into why I used to have a pretty big stash. Maybe you understand why I had it and why I'm not going to get into it right now, especially not in writing. Love, fear, courage, shame. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I get the willies every time I see a police officer.

This particular eightball wasn't from Manny—it was from a kid who called himself Baby J. He delivered it straight to my door. Faster than ordering a pizza.

Baby J looked like he was about fifteen years old. In fact, I never once saw Baby J drive a car. Other people drove for him and Baby J sat in the passenger's seat. When I first met him I asked him if he was virgin, as a joke, and he got all bashful about it and started mumbling something and then I figured he probably was. I admit that it made me feel pretty lousy to be buying blow from a teenage virgin. What do you want me to say about it? That's shame for you, Marcus. I'm ashamed.

I was feeling tired and I figured I'd be fine if I could just stay awake until I was on the plane. I didn't have any coffee or anything—otherwise maybe I just would have fixed myself a pot. What I had was cocaine, so that's what I did. I rubbed out a little bump on a history book—the same one I had used as a tray all morning, before the sun had come up, when I got all amped and danced around my room even though there was no music and packed my bag for Michigan. The book just said HITLER on the cover in giant letters, which made me laugh—because Victoria always said that if you want to sell a book just put a swastika on the cover and people'll go nuts over it. Then I wrapped what was left of the blow into a few pieces of tin foil, and I put it in my wallet. My dresser was broken—probably because I had found it at the dumpster in front of our building and

then heaved it up five flights of stairs to my apartment—so I stepped over some pieces of one of the drawers and looked over into my suitcase.

All day long *clack clack clack.*

What's up, Christopher?

Then I noticed that on top of my folded blue argyle sweater was a hard brown little turd. God damnit. I almost just zipped up the suitcase anyway, but then I thought about what kind of dirty person that would make me, and I remembered Victoria saying *you're scrappy* and this kind of thing might have been what she meant and so I drew a tissue and picked it up. I walked into the room where the television was. Jocelyn was still on the couch, spread out in her slip.

"Your dog took a dump in my suitcase," I said.

"Lenin is not my dog," said Jocelyn. She sucked on a cigarette. The cigarette was basically a permanent extension of her mouth.

"Maybe I should call animal control then," I said. "Maybe Moshe would like to know there's a dog in this apartment."

Jocelyn ashed in one of five dishes. Lenin began dancing and singing around my legs. "Look," said Jocelyn, "he likes you."

"Oh come on. You're patronizing me."

"Who?" said Jocelyn, "Me?" She smiled in a way that made her lips disappear. Pretty soon she went back to staring at the television. She was watching a reality show

called *My Surprise Boob Job*, about people who thought they were going in to get their wisdom teeth removed or something and instead woke up with fake tits.

"You ever think about calling him Stalin instead?" I said.

"Look," she said, "I'll tell Brittany to clean it up."

"I'm holding it."

"She's in the shower," said Jocelyn.

"I already cleaned it up," I said. "It's right here in my hand. It was in my suitcase. I need to use my suitcase."

"She'll pay for your dry cleaning. When are you leaving?"

"I'm going to the airport right now," I said. "Right now."

"Beautiful Detroit," said Jocelyn. She laughed suddenly, and loudly, and then she began to cough. A hacking, phlegmy cough. As she coughed, her hand shook and ash floated onto the couch cushion.

"Beautiful Detroit." I kept holding the turd. I didn't know what else to do with it. The water in the shower stopped.

"Someone came by here looking for you," said Jocelyn, clearing her throat, taking another drag of the cigarette.

Well that about made my skin fall off. "What?"

"A big guy," she said.

"Did he say his name?"

"He just asked if you were here. I was just so surprised to hear somebody knock on the door. No one ever knocks on our door. I told him you were going to Detroit with your family or something and I thought maybe you had already left. I wasn't sure. I'm not a secretary. I was busy."

"You're not busy."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Well what did he look like? How big was he? Was he black or white?"

"Neither," said Jocelyn. "Or both, I guess. Mixed, maybe. I don't remember."

"You told him I was going to Detroit."

"All he said was that he wanted to talk to you," said Jocelyn. "That is where you're going, isn't it?"

"Jesus Christ," I said.

"He didn't really seem like your type. He had a neck tattoo. Maybe he looked a bit like that security guard you used to bone. Or used to bone you. What was his name? Retard?"

"Terard," I said.

"Oh right," she said, hacking cough laugh. "Terard: an anagram for retard."

I sat down then. I felt like I was going to faint. "Well what was the tattoo? Was it a tattoo of Mickey Mouse holding a machete?"

"What?" said Jocelyn. "No. I think I would have remembered that. It was something else. Maybe a flower."

I tried to remember all the guys I knew who worked for Manny. I couldn't think of anyone with a flower on his neck. "You're not making this up?" I said.

"Why would I make this up?"

"I don't know," I said. "You tell me."

"You're impossible," said Jocelyn.

What happened was, about a year ago it got so that I was calling Manny so often, the two of us sort of became buddies. He'd invite me to come pick up from him at

different people's apartments. The first time he proposed I help him out with his business, it was at this old woman's apartment on the Upper East Side. We did a few lines together on the coffee table, while the old woman stood in the kitchen making a pot roast, and while we did the lines I stared at all these crowded photos of her grandchildren on her fake wood-paneled walls. They were the kind of photos with star-spangled rainbow backgrounds that looked like they were taken in a mall somewhere. I couldn't stop wondering who all those grandchildren were. The old woman never said a word to me, just let me in. It occurred to me maybe she was a ghost. But I saw Rosalina grab the old woman's arm in the kitchen, saying thank you, and how are you, and the woman's flesh wobbled the way I was sure a ghost's wouldn't. Rosalina went almost everywhere with Manny—hyped up and chattering. Fifteen years ago she had been a dancer in the New York City Ballet. All legs. She would have been beautiful if she hadn't looked so frozen into her smile. I could go on and on about the apartments where I met up with

Manny or Rosalina, and I never asked any questions. I guess that's why Manny started to trust me. I even spent five dollars on this rap CD he made—he said it was ten dollars normally but he'd give to me for five since I was such a loyal client. His rap name was BoogerMan. I listened to the CD once when I had nothing else to do, but I had to turn it off after about two tracks. And I like rap music.

"You got anything I can take for a headache?" I said.

"Maybe," said Jocelyn. She got up from the couch. She yelled at the Chihuahua to shut up. I saw this strange look pass over her face. "Oh my God," she said.

"What? What is it?"

"Your nose is bleeding," she said.

I touched my face with the hand that wasn't holding the turd. "I guess it is," I said. I tried to hide my nose. "It's so dry out today," I said.

"It's not that dry," said Jocelyn. She ashed in the tray that had Jesus' face on the bottom. She was the kind of person who thought ashing on Jesus' face was about as hilarious as you could get. "In fact, it's supposed to rain tonight. A lot."

"Okay," I said. "What are you, the cops?"

Jocelyn lit another cigarette. "All I'm saying," she said. "Is that it's not that dry. It's not even a little dry."

"Brittany," I said. Brittany stepped out of the bathroom in her little towel, with her long thin legs peaking out. I got up from where I sat and walked over to her. I could

feel the turd inside the tissue. The other hand I was using to catch the blood coming out of my face. "I saved this for you," I said.

"What is it?" She sounded genuinely excited. For a second I felt bad. It was kind

of a dirty trick. "Oh my God," she said, when she saw the turd. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she said, and she looked like she was really wondering.

I went back to my room. *Clack clack clack.*

I looked around my floor at all the books and clothes and pieces of the dresser. I tossed a paperback into the suitcase. I said goodbye to the bugs.

I got pushed onto the subway. So I pushed back. It started to rain.

Wet and standing in Airport Security.

"Sir, is this your bag?"

"It is."

"I'm going to need you to step over here please, sir," she said. Her uniform bunched in uncomfortable-seeming places. She wore plastic gloves.

"Please unzip your bag, sir." Her eyelashes were spiders stuck to her face. Hello, Christopher.

"Yes, ma'am."

I remember once when we were kids, PJ brought a hammer and nails and a bunch of wood in his carry-on. We were going from California to Michigan for a party that Nonna threw when she finally passed her American citizenship test. When they asked PJ at security what he was doing with a hammer and a bunch of long nails, he said he just wanted to make something nice for Mom while he was on the plane. Something nice like two squares of wood nailed together. Of course they took away the hammer and the nails. PJ started to cry. They let him keep the wood.

"Please unpack your bag for me, sir."

"I don't have anything," I said.

"Please unpack your bag."

So I did. I removed the paperback and the sweater. The woman inspected my

neck pillow. She held it up with her long rhinestoned nails like it was a dead thing. She walked over to her kiosk and came back rubbing powder all over the fabric.

"You've been randomly selected to test for residue of explosive materials," she said.

"But I just bought that pillow in the airport," I said. "It still has the tags."

"You've been randomly selected."

So I waited to see if my pillow would explode, or whatever. The woman looked around the airport. You could tell everything she was made to say just about bored the hell out of her. Next to me, an elderly, brittle, raisin-skinned woman was pushed forward in her wheelchair. A few of the security agents were trying to pick her up and take her through the metal detector.

"Be careful," said a redhead standing behind the wheelchair.

"Are we in Florida?" said the woman, as the uniform wrapped himself around her body and tried to help her stand.

"We're in the airport in New York, Mom."

I couldn't stop staring. All these strangers in uniform pulling at this woman's gummy limbs.

"You may repack your bag, sir."

"What?"

"Repack your bag, please."

"Oh," I said. Even though I knew that the coke was in my wallet, which had been in my pocket, which had gone through the x-ray in one of those little gray bowls

unnoticed, I felt the rush of getting away with something that other people couldn't. But once I acknowledged this feeling, it evaporated and was replaced by the feeling of being a lowlife. And I imagined then waking up in jail, like my mom's sister Jeanine had been doing all summer, and I imagined what must go through your head when you are in jail, knowing that you are the person society has decided they want to be protected from.

I thought for a second about taking out the blow and handing it over to the woman with the spider eyes, like this was elementary school and she was my teacher and I knew I had cheated on my test and would get away with it unless I spoke up. And maybe a braver person than me would have at least gone and flushed the coke down the toilet. But all I did was walk through to the other side of the security barricade and put on my shoes.

Then I listened to the message Manny had left. But all that turned out to be was the sound of someone hanging up.

On the plane, they said buckle your seatbelts. They said these are your gas masks. They said help yourself before you help others. In case of an emergency landing, your seat cushions can be used floatation devices.

I was no longer tired.

On my right was a Hasidic man. Very skinny. His payots were straight. When we took off I heard him praying.

On my left sat a thick-necked man wearing a gold band and reading a golf magazine. While we were waiting there he stared out the dark window and got on the phone with his wife and said, “it’s been so long since I’ve flown coach, I kind of forgot what it was like, ha ha, yuck yuck yuck.” Then he pressed the flight attendant button and asked the woman when the drinks would come around.

The Hasidic man wrung his hands together. “I am very afraid of flying,” he said, underneath his breath. I didn’t know at first if he was talking to me, but since I was the only one who could hear him, I nodded.

“My wife says that is silly. To be afraid. To be afraid when we have no control.”

“I’m with you,” I said, “Can’t stand flying.” It wasn’t true. But this guy had such an old man face that I felt I would say anything just to get him to like me.

I asked him where he was from, and he said Williamsburg, and I said No Shit, me

too. I asked him if he knew Moshe Epstein, and he said, I don't think so. I asked him if he saw that article in the *Post* about how Moshe Epstein was in a lawsuit over the building where I lived and it said he was forty million dollars in debt on the building, and was that true, and he said he didn't know. Then I started telling him how Moshe was always forgetting to give us our rent invoices and how he didn't seem to have it all together as a landlord. Then the guy said, I don't know anything about that. Then I asked him his name, and he said, my name is Amos.

And I said, I'm sorry Amos, but I need to squish by you. I need to go to the bathroom. So Amos squished his legs into the aisle.

When I came back I said, you know Amos, my father was raised Jewish.

Oh?

Yes, but he is an atheist now.

His life must be very empty.

You know Amos, it probably is. You're probably right.

Then I said, Amos, when I was kid I used to go to Mass every Sunday with my mother and my brother and my sister.

You are Catholic?

Not any more, Amos, not any more.

I think this happens a lot.

You're probably right, Amos, it probably happens every day.

Your faith has low retention rates.

You're absolutely right, Amos, that's absolutely true.

Then I said, excuse me Amos, but I need to squish by you, I need to go to bathroom again. The man reading the golf magazine said, while you're up, I might as well go myself. So the two of us bumped past everyone as we tried to get to the back of the plane. And while I was in the bathroom, I thought of all the things I wanted to say to Amos. Like what if you were part of a Hasidic family and one morning you woke up and just thought *I don't believe in God today, no can do.* Do you still have to wear the outfit that day? Or can you just wear like a hoodie or something? Or is it a disgrace to wear the outfit, a travesty, if you don't believe? But I guess that was probably the wrong way to think about it, since it assumed that the reason a Hasidic person wore their Hasidic outfit is to let other people, people like me, know that they believed in God. But my question was more Are you allowed to wear the outfit if you don't have faith? What if you couldn't help but be a doubter? Are you kicked out? When I came out of the bathroom, the golf magazine stood there looking annoyed, like how dare you for taking so long in *my* bathroom. He had the face of a guy who didn't usually have to wait for things.

So I returned to my seat. Amos was reading something and I could see it was in Hebrew. I didn't want to disturb him and I no longer remembered what it was I wanted to ask him. I figured he was someone who had much more noble thoughts than I had and

so he deserved his privacy more than other people did. I pretty much thought that about anyone who wore a special outfit to satisfy their religion. I know it's silly. But if I couldn't believe in God then the least I could do was try to believe in people who

believed in God.

Plus the golf magazine came back and cleared his throat like he wanted my attention. I got up to let him pass. We took our seats.

I think maybe you left this in the bathroom, he said. He held out a rolled up twenty-dollar bill. Research shows that ninety percent of U.S. bills in circulation contain traces of cocaine.

Thank you sir, I said. Don't know how that got there. Must have fallen out of my pocket.

Sure, he said.

I snatched it from him. I offered him my other hand. My name's Dominic, I said.

Randall, he said.

No shit, I said. I used to know a Randall.

There are a lot of Randalls out there.

But I never knew this Randall's last name.

So I guess you didn't really know him.

I don't know, I said. I knew him probably better than I know most people. It's just that it was the kind of place where you're not supposed to tell each other your last names.

Randall raised his eyebrows. I see, he said. One of *those* places.

He opened his golf magazine.

Excuse me, Amos, I'm going to need to squish by you again. I need to stretch.

CHAPTER 2

TWO

"Sick" is the word we settled on.

PJ is "sick."

PJ had schizophrenia, it turned out. At first it was like I had just been told he wasn't my brother at all. But once you know how it ends it's easy to go back in your head and replay every minor event with your new explanation in mind. Like I guess a function of the disease is possessing an obscenely high pain tolerance, so that's why PJ didn't mind at all when his arm got broken or his foot was sliced by Dad's shovel.

Last time we were in Michigan, PJ kept saying I'm a black man from the planet Blarg and Aunt Lisa and Uncle Bruno are my real parents. I'm a product of their incest. You're not my brother, you're my cousin. My brain popped from all the magic mushrooms, isn't that great news? For a while there instead of a brain all I had was colony of magic fungus. And finally when I took a shit my brain came out into the toilet and thank god he's feeling better now. This is the greatest day of my life, Dominic. Can't you see that? Don't you know that? I've defeated the voices in my head they're gone I took a huge shit now they're gone. I'm pretty sure someone molested me in the night, was it you? It might have been one of the nurses who live in the bathroom. The President of Blarg's given me a World Peace Award.

I asked him if the World Peace Award was for Earth or for Blarg and he said he

wasn't sure but I could watch the announcement on the evening news and find out.

Then I'd tell him he wasn't black, that we were half-Italian and half-Jewish, but he wouldn't listen to me. The doctors said there's no point in arguing with a delusion. And I guess PJ understood better than most people that all of your identity, including the race or religion you supposedly were, was all just a construction, a story you told yourself, so if he wanted to change the story he told himself then who was I to say no? And is mental illness just when the story a person tells himself about himself is at complete odds with the story everyone else wants him to tell about himself?

Nonna and I sat in her car, waiting by the curb in the empty Detroit airport. The orange and blue light of the sunrise hit the concrete. We call my grandma Nonna because she grew up in Italy. But none of her grandchildren can actually speak Italian.

"Yep," she said. "Your Uncle Bruno quit at Chrysler. Or they quit him. I don't really know—they're letting everyone go."

I flipped down the passenger's seat mirror so I could take a good look at myself. I pulled a flake of dead skin from my cheek.

"How is everyone?" I said. "How's Aunt Jeanine? How's Aunt Lisa? How's Detroit?"

Even though I was still looking in the mirror, I could feel Nonna watching me. The engine below us hummed. "You don't look so great," she said.

"It's the red-eye."

"Detroit's not so good," said Nonna, "or haven't you heard? Neither is Jeanine.

But Lisa, you know, Lisa has gotten all into Jesus. Forget Catholicism—she takes Carter to the Mega-church now. It's evangelical or something—I don't know. She likes it. You know Carter's only twelve," said Nonna, "and he's getting all this mumbo jumbo about Jesus from his mother, so I decided to tell him a little bit about Buddha, and about my beliefs as a Daoist, and, you know, just some things." Nonna became a Daoist the way other people stumble into knitting or arts and crafts. "So he had a few other opinions in his head," she said. "Then last week, I'm driving him to soccer practice, and he says to me, 'Nonna, did you know that God created everything? God created the sun and the moon. God even created my butt.' And I said, 'I know Carter, but then, who created God?' And he thought about that for a second. Then he finally said, 'probably Buddha." Nonna started laughing. "Isn't that something? "Grandpa liked that one a lot."

"That's something," I said.

"There she is," said Nonna. In the distance I saw my sister Stacy, walking alone on the empty curb. The wheels of her suitcase appeared to be broken, because the bag wobbled until it flipped over onto the fabric side and scraped the cement. "Where's Roger?" said Nonna, "Go help her."

I got out of the car. I didn't really think Stacy needed any help, but it was easier to comply than to argue. When I got close, I saw Stacy's face looked puffier than I remembered. I could see this tuft of silver spurting out of the top of her head, like a weed in her dark brown hair.

"You look like you're drunk," said Stacy. "You got that drunk film on your face."

"It's nice to see you too," I said. I tried to pick up the suitcase. I didn't know how

else to carry it so I pulled it onto my shoulders.

"Why are you doing that?" said Stacy.

"Nonna said I should help you."

"Put it down," she said.

So I did. Stacy went back to dragging it behind her like a carcass.

"Where's your fiancé?" said Nonna, pulling herself out of the car. We were still about twenty feet away so she basically yelled it. "He in the bathroom?" One or two strangers turned around to look at Nonna.

When we got closer Stacy said, "He's in Chicago. He has to work."

"You really thought he might be in the bathroom?" I said.

"I don't know," said Nonna. "Your dad's not coming either," she said. "He's working. Everybody's working." She looked around at both of us like we were the ones who had made it so. "We don't have that problem in Detroit. Nobody's working over here anymore. We don't have that problem."

"Well we're here," I said. Stacy put her bag in the trunk. We got into the car.

"So are we going to see Aunt Jeanine this weekend or not?" said Stacy. "Is she out of jail or what?"

"She's been out almost a month," said Nonna. When Nonna drives she can't help but swivel around on the road, jerking the wheel every few seconds to get back into the center of the lane. Correcting. Nonna thinks it's rude not to make eye contact when you talk to someone.

"Maybe just watch the road," I said.

"How does she look?" said Stacy.

"How do you think?" said Nonna, correcting. "She just spent three months in jail. Although it's the one place she stays sober."

"So what are we just going to set up all the drinks in the basement and then sneak downstairs whenever anyone wants one so it's not all in her face?" I said.

"That worked okay last time," said Nonna. "Unless you have a better idea."

"What do you mean it worked okay?"

"Well she didn't drink."

"Not right then."

"Well what do you want us to do? It's not our fault she can't hold her liquor. All you kids want to abstain for the weekend? I sure don't. Your grandpa sure doesn't. You got a better idea, kiddo?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

"Well don't ask so many questions."

"Where's Mom?" said Stacy.

"Grandpa is picking her up this afternoon. Then, you know, we're going to have a bit of a memorial in the backyard," said Nonna. "That's what Grandpa wants."

"A what?"

"They want to plant a tree," I said.

"There are already about a million trees in Michigan," said Stacy.

"It's supposed to be for PJ," said Nonna.

"Oh."

"I don't like it," I said.

"You don't like what?" said Nonna.

"The tree thing."

"It's not really about you," said Nonna. "It's what Grandpa wants."

"He's my brother," I said. I know I was being difficult, pushing this point. I just didn't want it to turn into one of those things where we reclaim PJ's death in some kind of falsely beautiful ceremony, and release a dove into the sky, and pretend like it's all part of the healing process, when all we've actually done is made a performance of our own grief for other people.

"It's not really about you, dear," said Nonna.

I imagined everyone in my family gathered around a flimsy-looking tree in my grandpa's backyard. I imagined my Uncle Bruno, with his pizza burgers, and my Aunt Lisa who was like a puppy, if a puppy had fake tits and loved Jesus and bossed everyone around all the time, and my alcoholic Aunt Jeanine who would watch as everyone else drank, and Nonna, the Italian sass, and Grandpa, who was getting to that age where he repeats everything he says at least three times before moving on, and my sister Stacy and her notably not-there Roger, and my cousin Carter, and my cousin Dave, and my cousin Elizabeth and Aunt Jeanine's daughter Rianne, who had been doing all her own laundry since the age of nine, on account of her mother being an alcoholic and all that, and of course my own mother, with her whispering voice, and all of them looking awkwardly at each other and at me and at some thin potted tree that sat in between us. Everyone

pretending to believe that the sickness they felt was temporary. As though if you gave your family all the pieces of yourself, they'd hand it all back to you in the right order.

"Maybe just watch the road," I said.

"You know, Dominic," said Nonna. "I lost a brother too once. In the war. And your grandfather lost a brother in the thirties because he got hit in the head with a baseball bat. So Dominic you are not the sole inheritor of tragedy."

"You know," said Stacy. "The funny thing about flying from Chicago to Detroit is that your arriving time is earlier than your departing time."

"That's hilarious," I said.

"Alright fine," said Stacy, "It's not that funny. I'm just trying to cheer things up."

"Watch out!" I yelled. Nonna slammed her foot on the break. The car lurched. A teenage girl, driving a faded Cadillac in the shape of a lifeboat, had cut in front of us. "Just watch the road," I said.

"It was her fault," said Nonna.

The sleep you get when you're still coked up isn't quite sleep, but more like an exhaustion headache your eyes succumb to, because they're too dry and itchy to stay open. When I could no longer pretend to be resting, I got up and looked around the room. My mother's childhood bedroom.

One of the reasons I like to stay in this room when I visit is because I'm fascinated by the dollhouse. It's been sitting there since the 1960s. It's got handmade curtains in the windows and a little sink in the kitchen, with a miniature faucet. It's got miniature porcelain toilets and a frosted glass door for the shower. A pot of fake flowers smaller than a thimble sits on the kitchen table, next to a place setting: a woven blue placemat, a three-pronged fork, a knife like a splinter, a white plate with blue flowers painted delicately over the center, a matching blue bowl that sits on the plate, a tiny soda bottle made of sea-green glass, and a frayed leafy newspapers with unreadable print. Around the room in wood cabinets with glass doors are plates the size of nickels and teacups for ladybugs. Scattered around the main room is a bird cage that might fit a cricket; a high chair made of toothpicks; a fireplace grate; a wall tapestry; an embroidered bench; a grandfather clock. A loom. Downstairs is something like a dungeon. Could be a blacksmith's table, or maybe some kind of furnace. Anyway, it's the entire civilization of a family in miniature.

On the top floor, next to the chimney, sits a canopy bed. A bed that had to be

glued back together about ten years ago because PJ dropped a basketball on it. Nestled on the bed are four pillows inside lace pillowcases. One pillowcase says M for Muriel, one says J for Jeanine, and one says L for Lisa, sewn in blue thread. I guess Bruno didn't get one. The pillows are yellow, but they look like they used to be white. Nonna made them all by hand. Back when she was a little girl in Arezzo she apprenticed to be a seamstress. "But I didn't want to be seamstress. I wanted to be a stewardess and go all over the world and be glamorous." But you had to know English to be a stewardess. So she came to America to learn English. She did learn English, but then she met Grandpa so she never became a stewardess. She became a housewife. "I don't regret a thing," she says, "Buddha says beware the barrenness of a too busy life."

Never in my life have I seen the dolls that are supposed to go inside. It makes you wonder how the house got so intricate, if there were never any dolls to occupy the rooms.

I heard voices, echoing from downstairs. I smelled onion and garlic. I took slow steps down into the family room, the kitchen.

Whoa, sleepyhead, they said. Here he is, ladies and gentlemen. Here's Dominic. How was your nap? How are you feeling? I gave my mother a hug.

Fine.

My cousin Dave busted through the front door. Dave is Bruno's son. Dave finally gave up on his education after he spent six years at Oakland Community College

and still had no degree to show for it. So now he and a few of his buddies from high school travel around the Midwest painting the interior walls of Home Depots.

"My Dad's in the car. He's coming," said Dave. Bruno came in and the first thing he did was he ripped a loaf of bread in half and then shoved one of the halves into his mouth.

"Hello," he said, but you couldn't really tell. All you could tell was that his mouth was full of bread.

"Where's Elizabeth?" I said.

"Where's the bar?" Uncle Bruno swallowed.

"My sister's not allowed in this house anymore," said Dave.

"The bar is in the basement," said Nonna. She had a bowl of dough in front of her. She picked up a ball and squeezed it through her fingers. "Needs more olive oil."

"That's not going to stop Jeanine," said Dave.

"Muriel," said Nonna. My mother sat on a bar stool with a glass of white wine in front of her. Her face looked like the face of a person who has been frightened into permanent surprise. Facelift face.

"Come here, Muriel," said Nonna. My mother floated over. She seemed to have been shrinking. She looked as though she might disintegrate in a big gust of wind.

"You start on seven," said Nonna, screwing the pasta machine onto the counter. "Once it comes through you change it to six. Get it down to a two. When you get it down to a two, bring it over here and I'll cut the noodles. If it gets too sticky, sprinkle more flour."

"Why isn't Elizabeth allowed in the house anymore?" I said. Elizabeth is Dave's little sister. Elizabeth is PJ's age. Elizabeth has failed out of beauty school because she can't wake up on time.

"I'm too busy to explain, Dominic," said Nonna. "Or can't you see?"

So I asked again.

"Do you have a cold or something?" said Nonna. "You sure are sniffling a lot."

"Maybe," I said. "What about Elizabeth?"

"Mamma mia, Dominic." Nonna always said *Mamma Mia.* I think she picked it up watching American television, imitating how it seemed Italians were supposed to speak English. "All I'm going to say is that thanks to your cousin Elizabeth, your grandpa and I are now the proud owners of a pair of padded women's underwear. In case you don't know what that is," she said, slapping her wooden spoon on the counter, "it's underwear that has padding that's in the shape of a butt built into the fabric. I don't know why anyone would want a bigger butt. Especially not in this family. Especially not Elizabeth."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Nonna. "It's deceit, that's what it is, plain and simple. Deceit."

I could hear the stairs in the basement creaking. Dave and Bruno thudded back from the underground, holding beers. Dave stashed a few in the refrigerator.

"Jeanine's not here yet," he said.

"So what's all this about Elizabeth and the padded underwear?"

Dave rolled his eyes.

"Nonna and Grandpa don't like us to talk about it," said Bruno. He ripped off another piece of bread.

"Elizabeth had some parties here while Nonna and Grandpa were in Italy," said Dave. "She left some souvenirs."

"She got blood all over our sheets," said Nonna. "Someone broke all my perfumes. Someone stole my necklace. Someone stole my Roman coins. Someone left their weird underwear."

My mother kept grinding the lever in circles, clumsily holding sheets of dough. The machine wobbled on the counter. "I can't remember if I did this one on a four," said my mother, in a breathless, sighing whisper. "I think I did. I don't know. I'm on a three and it's all bunched up."

"Mamma Mia, Muriel," said Nonna. "If it's getting bunched just roll it again."

My mother picked up a squashed piece of the dough. It looked like a large severed tongue. "It's not working," she said.

"It's deceit is what it is, that Elizabeth," said Nonna. "She never had all the working parts up in her brain like you and I have. It's just deceit, plain and simple. Muriel, if it's too sticky, sprinkle more flour."

"I don't remember how to do it." My mother flopped down in a chair.

"At first I thought it was some kind of hat," said Grandpa.

"What?"

"He means the underwear," said Nonna.

Grandpa hobbled up the garden porch. He held a pot, and in the pot a fatigued plant drooped. It took him a long time to open the sliding glass doors, and I didn't help him because when I try to help him he gets mad that I thought he needed help in the first place. Outside, Stacy curled up on a lounge chair, drinking something with lime. Bruno and Dave dug shovels into the dirt, making a hole.

"I got the tree," said Grandpa, jerking his knees into the kitchen. "The tree is here."

It didn't look like a tree to me.

"It's a maple tree, PJ—I mean, Dominic." His eyebrows went up. "A maple tree."

"It's a twig with three leaves."

"Maple leaves."

Grandpa placed the pot on the glass table. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He blew his nose. "Do you need this?" he said. "You sound like you have a cold."

"No." But when he offered me the handkerchief, he accidentally dropped it. It landed on the tile floor. He's gotten to be one of those really ancient guys who take

forever to pick up a magazine or something off the coffee table. "I'll get it," I said, even

though I didn't want to. I didn't want to touch it. I'm sure he'd been carrying it around in his pocket for days. Crusty.

"No, no," he said. "I can do it." He had one hand on a chair to stabilize himself and he was trying to reach down to the floor with the other hand. Finally Nonna walked over to him and picked it up. "Here," she said.

"Thank you darling."

"Show Dominic the sign," said Nonna.

"I got a sign," said Grandpa.

"What kind of sign?"

Grandpa walked his arthritic walk over to where I sat. He pulled from his pocket a rectangle of plastic that's supposed to look like wood. "It says *PJ's Maple*," said Grandpa. "*PJ's Maple.*"

In his garden, underneath his rose bushes, Grandpa has signs like this for all his daughters and granddaughters. *The Muriel. Jeanine's Esperanza. Lisa Rose* is dying. *Rianne* hasn't had a bloom in three years. *Stacy* is actually a hydrangea. The sign for *Elizabeth* has been turned around so you can't see what it says.

When I told him I was gay he asked me if I wanted one too. I think he was trying to be nice.

"Dominic," said Grandpa, "war is hell."

"What?"

"Is that what you were asking?"

"No."

"I'm here!" Aunt Lisa's got the enthusiasm of a cheerleader.

Behind her through the front door came Carter, her son. Then Rianne, Jeanine's daughter. Rianne said nothing. Rianne's seventeen and she has bad scoliosis, and when she walks, she has to swing her hips and drag one foot. She was supposed to have surgery last summer, but then Jeanine went to jail so she didn't. Jeanine got her third DUI on the way to an AA meeting. Jeanine got her fourth DUI in the parking lot of the courthouse where she was for a hearing on her third DUI.

"Where's your mother," said Nonna. "I thought you were bringing her."

"She said she'd come," said Rianne. "She said she'd get a ride after her meeting."

"I don't know where my sister is," said Aunt Lisa, holding her hands up as if to say, It's not my fault. Not mine. Not mine. Aunt Lisa's shirt looked like part of a sexy clown costume. It was the kind of sheer material that made it easy to see that her nipples don't point in the same direction.

"How are you, Dominic?" she said. She hugged me. "Muriel." She walked over to her non-alcoholic sister. My mother sort of limply lifted her arms for a hug.

"I need a drink," yelled Lisa. "Carter, go get me a drink. In the basement."

"How's Jesus?" I said. "I heard you got reacquainted with Jesus."

"Jesus is good," said Lisa, "thank you for asking." She looked around at the

spread of flour and drying dough. “Making noodles?”

“It’s exhausting,” said my mother. “I forgot how long it takes. I forgot how messy it is. Look, even Dominic has some flour on his nose. And you’ve been all the way over there all this time.”

My mother reached for my nose. “Come here.”

I put my hand around my face. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get it.”

“You got a cold or something? You keep sniffling.”

“I just need a tissue.”

“How’d you get flour on your nose from way over there?”

“I just need a tissue. It’s fine.”

I could see through the sliding glass doors of the kitchen Stacy coming up the steps from the garden patio. “Hello everyone,” she said, as she pushed her way inside. “Looks like Dave and Bruno are digging a grave out there.”

We could see them, standing over the hole, sweating.

“Are they wearing sunscreen?” said my mother.

Nonna put a box of tissues in front of me. I blew my nose. Hard clumps of blood. I folded the tissue into my hand.

“It’s time for a cocktail,” said Nonna.

“War is hell,” said Grandpa.

Flour: finding explanations that won’t scare you.

The September days in Michigan are long. It started to get dark. Jeanine still hadn't shown up.

"She said she'd come," said Rianne. "I tried to call her."

"We have to get started honey, or there won't be enough light." Nonna put one arm around Rianne. "Here," she said, "Try the cannoli."

"Okay."

"You like it?"

"Okay."

"You want a glass of wine?"

"Okay."

"Just a little one," said Nonna. "Let's go outside." We shoved our way from the kitchen to the garden. Rianne had to swing her leg down the steps, one at a time, moving like a scarecrow.

We gathered around the hole. Grandpa had attached a wire stake to the fake wood rectangle and he held it in his brown hands like a miniature flag.

"Who's going to start?" said Nonna. "How should we do this? Maybe we should have some music. Maybe we should play PJ's favorite song."

"PJ only listened to rap music," said Stacy.

"That's it?" said Nonna. "I don't have any rap music."

"I can rap for us," said Dave. "What did he like?" So I told Dave a couple songs, and he knew one of them, and he started rapping.

"Enough with the rapping," said Bruno.

"Maybe we should just recite the lyrics all solemn like and not try to rap them," I said.

"Forget I said anything about music," said Nonna. "Somebody say a prayer."

So Aunt Lisa put her arms up in the sky and closed her eyes and told everyone else to close their eyes, but I didn't. The whole time Lisa talked, me and Stacy and Dave just looked around at each other, smirking. Aunt Lisa said a bunch of crap about Jesus being our savior and saving us all from ourselves. Aunt Lisa said PJ was safe now. Aunt Lisa said PJ was free from the hell of his own mind. In the middle of the prayer Dave gave a thumbs up and Carter started to laugh and then Nonna let Carter have the razor eyes. With her arms in the air, Aunt Lisa's shirt hiked up so you could this glittery bejeweled star dangling from her navel. Aunt Lisa said no death is an accident. Aunt Lisa said you're never dead so long as people on earth still love you. A breeze jostled the leaves. One or two began to fall. Aunt Lisa said death is the beginning. Aunt Lisa said none of us can understand the meaning of eternity.

Grandpa looked pleased. "This is really something," he said. "That was quite a prayer, Lisa, quite a prayer."

"I made it up myself."

"We can tell," I said.

"Who else would like to speak?" Nonna looked around at all of us. Grandpa stared solemnly into the dirt.

"PJ always had the coolest sneakers," said Carter. Carter hasn't had braces yet. His teeth are all spread out and he's short and always smiling and he looks younger than he is. "Also, he was really good at football."

"You can have them," said my mother.

"Really?" Carter enthused. "What size?"

"Nevermind what size," said Nonna. "Dominic why don't you say something?" Everyone looked at me, so I had to look back at all of them.

"Didn't you say in the car that you wanted to say something?" said Nonna.

"Is that what he said?" said Stacy.

"Say something," said Bruno.

"Well, okay." I cleared my throat. "PJ had schizophrenia," I said. "We found out he had schizophrenia when he was eighteen years old. PJ heard a lot of voices. PJ was drunk when he died. Maybe he made a rash decision."

"He was drunk?" said Carter.

"It's a long story," said Stacy.

"No it's not," said Dave.

"How come I don't get the full story?" said Carter.

"We'll tell you when you're a grown up," said Nonna.

"It was the middle of the night. He went for a walk. He walked off a bridge," said

Dave.

"Dominic, say something else," said Nonna.

"Like what?"

"I want to hear the story," said Carter.

"You just heard it," said Dave.

"When PJ got out of the hospital the first time, me and Dad and Stacy slept on the floor in front of the doors in our house. To block the exits—so PJ wouldn't leave in the middle of the night to go cure the neighborhood girl of her sex addiction."

"I don't know where he got that idea," said Mom. "Lindsay White is a very nice girl. Good family."

"Yeah Good Family," laughed Dave. "What's that?"

"He said he was going to cure Lindsay of her sex addiction by showing her love," said Stacy. "It was kind of sweet."

"So wait," said Carter. "What?"

"Okay, okay, enough," said Nonna.

"How about tell us something funny," said Rianne. "I want to hear something funny.

"Okay," I said, "okay," because when does Rianne ever ask for anything? "One time, when I was in high school, I snuck out in the middle of the night to go to party, and when I came back around two or three in the morning, I saw that PJ's bedroom door was open. So I looked in at him. And I saw that he was walking all over his room in the dark

and removing the framed football and movie posters from his walls and piling them on the carpet in the center of his room."

"That's creepy," said Carter.

"PJ was only about as old as you are, Carter. So then I started saying 'PJ, PJ, *what* are you doing? I just stood in the doorway watching him. But he didn't hear me. I didn't know what to do. He just kept at it, and the pile got bigger and bigger. I realized he was asleep. So I just went to bed. Left him to continue doing what he was doing. In the morning around breakfast I asked him if he noticed all his posters were taken off the walls and he said, 'How'd you know that? What happened there?' And I said, 'PJ, you took them all off the walls in your sleep.' And he just kind of laughed and shrugged. So then I started to wonder if this was maybe something that happened to PJ all the time, and he just never told any of us. Like he'd wake up and all the furniture in his room would be rearranged and he wouldn't really think twice about it because that was just life for him."

"A human being can get used to just about anything," said Dave.

"I caught him moving the dining room chairs around once," said Stacy. "He was sleepwalking. Sleep-decorating."

"Or remember," I said, "that morning when we found the sliding glass door to the pool had been left wide open in the middle of the night, and the refrigerator was open too, and it had been ransacked. And there was food thrown all over the kitchen and ketchup all over the walls and on one of the paintings on the wall and even on the ceiling. And we were all like, well that's weird. Maybe it was a bear, or something. But now I think it was probably PJ."

“Maybe it was a bear,” said Stacy.

“How would a bear get into a gated community?” said Dave.

“I feel like I know him better now that he’s dead,” I said.

Mom sat down on the grass.

“Remember when he got that job selling knives?” said Stacy. “That was a little scary.”

“So is it funny?” I said. “Are you going to laugh?”

Everyone looked at me.

“It’s not really funny,” said Carter.

“Not at all?”

“The ketchup part is kind of funny,” said Dave.

“I thought so,” I said.

“I’m hungry,” said Uncle Bruno.

“War is hell,” said Grandpa.

After dinner, Dave took Stacy and me into the woods behind the house with a packed pipe.

“Who’s ready for that limo tomorrow?” I said.

“Aunt Lisa won’t shut up about it,” said Stacy. “Every time Grandpa’s out of earshot.”

We heard a holler.

“There she is again,” said Stacy, burping smoke. “She wants help picking a date outfit for next week. She’s going bowling with some dude. I don’t know.” Stacy handed me the pipe and the lighter. “Something sad like that.”

“Why is bowling sad?” said Dave.

“I don’t know,” said Stacy, not looking at either of us. “I guess it’s not sad if it doesn’t make you sad,” she said. “But it makes me sad.” Lisa hollered again.

“Why doesn’t she just ask Jesus for help,” said Dave.

“Tell her Jesus likes halter tops,” I said.

“Fuck,” said Stacy. She stomped back out of the forest, through the yard, and into the house.

“We can see them,” I said to Dave, looking through the tress, “but they can’t see us.”

“We’re basically at the zoo,” said Dave.

We smoked, the two of us alone in the woods.

"Hey Dave, you got a key?"

"What kind of key? A piano key? An answer key? The key to life?"

"A car key."

I pulled out what was left of the coke.

"Holy shit," said Dave. "Where'd you get that?"

"I brought it."

"On the plane?"

I shrugged.

"You're fucking crazy."

"Does that mean you don't want any?"

"No, no," said Dave. "Give it here." He pulled his car key from his pocket and dipped it into the bag. After one bump I could tell he got pretty wired. "You do this shit all the time?" he said.

"Pretty often."

"Like every weekend?"

"Pretty much."

"Every day?"

"Basically," I said.

"Hot damn," said Dave, laughing. "Fucking New York. Guess that's what happens."

"Guess so."

"I still never been there."

"It's quite a place."

"That's what I've heard," he said, looking around at all the trees like he had just noticed them. He sat down on a log. "I like this time of year," he said, repacking the pipe. "The week between summer and fall." Dave handled the weed delicately, like a new mother with an infant. Even in the indigo light of the near-dark, he picked out the dried leaves individually, inspected the hairy orange crystallized flowers that meant it had been money well spent. We smoked. We watched the end of daylight pass through the tree-cluttered sky. We smoked again.

"So what would you say is the best thing about living in New York?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess it's pretty easy to get stuff. For example, this blow was delivered straight to my door fifteen minutes after I asked for it. By a teenage virgin."

"Well that's something," said Dave. "So you can just get everything you want."

I thought about it.

"Well no," I said. "You can't get that."

We laughed.

"What's up with this limo?" he said.

"Who knows," I said, because that was tomorrow, and any time I let myself wonder about tomorrow, it made me feel as though I had already lost today. We went through the forest and back into the house.

We sat around the fireless fireplace.

"I just saw Aunt Lisa's tits," said Stacy.

"Oh God," said Dave.

"The doctor did a really bad job. You can see all these ripples in her skin. One of her nipples is straight on and the other one looks like it's trying to make a right turn."

"Please stop," said Dave.

"It looks like she's got two sandwich baggies filled with water taped to her chest."

In the next room, around the television, Nonna tried to get everyone to watch *La Strada*, her favorite movie. *La Strada* is about Gelsomina, who gets sold by her mother to Zampanó, who performs a traveling strongman show. Gelsomina's sister used to work for Zampanó, but the sister died, so Zampanó returns to the family to get a new model. He gets Gelsomina. Gelsomina doesn't talk much, but she's great on the trumpet. Zampanó kicks Gelsomina around, even though he kind of likes her. Then Gelsomina sees Zampanó kill a hire-wire artist while the guy is changing a flat tire. Gelsomina never gets over it. She never talks again. Zampanó leaves her in the cold countryside in the middle of these Roman ruins, even though you can tell he kind of feels bad about it, because he leaves the trumpet with her. Many years later he's on a small Italian beach town performing his strongman show, breaking chains across his chest, and he hears a local countrywoman humming one of Gelsomina's tunes. Zampanó asks the woman

about it, and the woman says oh it was just this song this crazy woman who roamed around here used to play on the trumpet. But she's dead now.

Zampanó can't handle it. He runs into the ocean and starts to cry. That's the end of the movie. But when Nonna put it on, all through the opening credits Aunt Lisa kept saying we've got to watch *Transformers*—she can't believe her brother and sister have never seen *Transformers*. So Nonna pressed stop on *La Strada*. Dave and Stacy and I went outside to sit by Grandpa's pond in the dark. We could see the mound of dirt where *PJ's Maple* was taking root.

"Got any more blow?" said Dave.

Stacy looked at me. "I knew it," she said. "I knew you were being weird."

"This kid brought that shit on the plane," said Dave. "Pretty crazy."

"Is crazy the word?" said Stacy, getting up from the lawn chair and reaching her hand into the pond. "I can't stand the way people use the word crazy. Are you hearing voices? Your thoughts narrated to you outside of your head, bouncing off the walls of whatever room you're in? That's what crazy is. And if you are, don't tell me. I don't think I can take any more surprises. Not for another ten years."

"You ever think maybe we're all like PJ?" said Dave.

"What do you mean?" said Stacy, "Dead?"

"No like, we all have schizophrenia."

"No." Stacy guffawed. "I don't think that."

"We might," said Dave.

“You ever been committed to a psychiatric ward?” said Stacy. “You ever hear voices?”

“He used to always talk to himself,” I said. “Turned out he was talking to other people.”

“You ever been convinced that one of your aunts was your mom and your mom was a frog? Did it ever take six orderlies to restrain you and then tie you up to a gurney and then shoot you up with sedatives? And then the next day all you could do was accuse them all of trying to murder you?”

“I mean maybe if he was born like a thousand years ago, somewhere else, his hearing voices would be a sign that he’s communicating with the gods,” said Dave. “Or maybe a thousand years ago he wouldn’t even had heard voices at all. Maybe the only reason he heard voices is because we’re here now. Maybe the culture created schizophrenia.”

“You’re drunk,” said Stacy. “And who knows what else,” she said, gesturing at me.

“I am a little,” said Dave, “but what I’m saying is that maybe schizophrenia is a rational response.”

“A rational response to what?” said Stacy.

“Everything,” said Dave. “This family. This country. The pressure to succeed. The fact that 9/11 was an inside job.”

“Who *are* you, Dave?” said Stacy.

"You ever think about World Trade Center towers six and seven?"

"Maybe you are hearing voices."

"I mean you ever seen a video of World Trade Center buildings six and seven next to a video of a controlled demolition?" Dave was excited. He started pacing around the yard. "You ever seen it?"

"No," said Stacy.

"I thought you'd never been to New York," I said.

"Doesn't matter," said Dave. "That's not important. What I'm telling you is. Those towers fall just like a building falls when a building is supposed to fall. No resistance, nothing. Can you explain that? Can somebody tell me why those buildings fell so easily when no plane hit either of them? Can you explain that other than to say the U.S. government set the whole thing up?"

"One time," I said. "I was on a date and we were trying to get to a midnight movie at this movie theater we had never been to, and we got lost and ended up crawling all over this rubble in this construction site. Because we could see the movie theater lights on the other side of the rubble. So we just kept trying to push through it even though it got harder and rougher. Then this security guard came up with his flashlight. Turns out we were trampling all over what was left of the World Trade Center. We didn't even know it."

"Okay," said Stacy, looking at me. "You. I don't even have time to start on you. But you Dave," she said, turning to him. "You need help. This needs addressing. You're losing it, Dave." Stacy stood up.

"What are you so afraid of, Stacy?" said Dave. "Maybe you're afraid that I'm right."

"Okay, first of all," said Stacy "No, I don't think schizophrenia is an invented condition. No, I don't think that everyone has collectively invented mental illness as a way of quantifying and *othering* precisely the very parts of their own mind which they fear the most."

"Sounds like you've thought about it," I said.

"And Dave I can't even begin to address this 9/11 nonsense."

"The government's done it before. False Fag operation." Dave started to laugh. He looked at me. "Sorry," he said, "I meant False Flag. To get everybody riled up and shit so we could go to war."

"He's right," I said. "What about the Spanish-American war?"

"That's not the same."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night," said Dave. "Let me ask you something, Stacy—What's the difference between sane and insane?"

"I'm not going to answer that."

"The insane person believes they're sane. Now let me ask you, Stacy, are you sane or insane?"

"The voices were never very nice to PJ," said Stacy. She kneeled over Grandpa's pond and waved a stick at a big goldfish. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. "They were always telling him to kill himself."

"But maybe that comes from shame," said Dave, getting louder still. Frogs in the

pond croaked. “Maybe because everyone tells him that hearing voices is so dysfunctional and a sign of serious mental illness that the mean shit the voices say are just manifestations of all the outside negativity.” He gestured as he spoke and his beer splashed on the patio. “What if we had a culture that praised hearing voices? Then maybe the voices would be nice to him and tell him he was valuable and all that? What if we had a culture that praised anything at all that wasn’t all about just making money and shit?”

“So what. So what. Are you a communist now?” said Stacy. I could tell she was crying. “Ladies and gentleman, here we have David Bruno Capelli, conspiracy theorist and communist.” She started to clap. “Clap for him, Dom,” she said. But I didn’t. “In case you haven’t realized it, Dave, money is useful.”

“How’d all your dad’s money make out for PJ?” said Dave.

“Hey Dave,” I said, trying to redirect the conversation. “You take a philosophy class in school or something?”

“Hell no,” he said. He finished his beer. “The only thing you learn in school is the national anthem and the lord’s fucking prayer.” He dropped the bottle on the patio. He yelled into the trees. “Forgive me father, I have sinned. And I’m gonna keep on doing it.” He belched. It echoed. He laughed.

Nonna opened the sliding glass door. “What’s all this racket out here? It’s time for dessert.”

“I need another drink,” said Stacy, pushing herself up, shaking her head like she

could shake us off with it.

From inside the house we heard Lisa yell: "*Transformers* is a great film! It's got everything you could ever want in a film. Name one thing you want in a film that *Transformers* doesn't have."

"Just do what you want," said my mother.

Strange to drop in on all these lives. In New York I spent so much time alone. What is a family?

Thirty year-old clothes hung in the basement from a pipe. The fabric was thick and I remembered from trying it all on as a kid that it made you itchy. Nineteen seventies mustard and teal and paisley. Nonna had sewn them. It all looked like ghosts on hangers. Packed in boxes sat dusty toys. A kid's drum set—formerly the property of an eight-year-old Uncle Bruno. Cheerleading uniforms—Jeanine's and Lisa's—my mother never wore one. In one corner half covered by a tarp sat an aging foosball table with monkey and lion figurines to do the kicking. I sat on a piano bench. Dave sat on the dog's grooming table. The dog's been dead five years. But the brushes and nail clippers are still sitting there in an old cup.

Dave told me how when he found out, he was in the middle of painting a Home Depot in Indianapolis, so what he did was, in the corner of the ceiling at that Home Depot he painted PJAdler in really tiny letters.

"It'll always be there," said Dave.

"How majestic."

"I mean, until they paint over it."

"PJ always loved Home Depot," I said.

"Really?"

"No. Who loves Home Depot?"

"I don't know," said Dave. Maybe he sounded a little offended. "Some people like to do home projects," he said. He took a sip of his beer. "Well what were you doing then?" he said, defensive. "When you found out."

"I'll give you a guess."

Dave laughed. He has sort of a barking, bemused laugh. He got up off the table and started inspecting his dad's old football helmet. "Blow?"

"Bingo." I looked through a box of books. They were all in Italian. "I'm in a little bit of a bind, Dave," I said. "To be perfectly honest."

"Yeah you and me both."

"No," I said. "I mean, I'm in a real bind. I—well. I was selling it. I'm selling it. But I'm not very good. I owe someone some money."

"You sold what?" said Dave.

"What do you think I sold?" I said. I could tell Dave was trying not to be too curious. Dave spent a month or two in jail himself a while back. That's part of why he had to take the same classes over and over again at Oakland Community College. He was never in jail for much—just violating probation here and there. Possession. That kind of thing. I could go on and on about the legal trouble of people I love but I won't bore you

with the details. Because despite the risks of selling cocaine I had never been arrested or

anything. Even PJ had been arrested. But I guess it's pretty easy to get arrested when you've got a bunch of voices in your head giving you a lot of conflicting information. It's pretty easy to get confused enough to make yourself noticed. Like even before we knew PJ was "sick" he got a DUI on a night when my mother thought he was home asleep in his bed, and suddenly my mother's mind conceived of all the things her children might be doing as she slept. What PJ said was that he got lost on a hill when he was leaving a party, so he decided to pull over and figure out where he was and how he had gotten lost. Except when he pulled himself over he realized he had crashed into the fence of a gated community. So then the security guards at the gated community came over to him, and it was those guards who decided to call the cops, and then the cops came and gave PJ a breathalyzer test and PJ blew more than twice the legal limit even if you were a person old enough to drink, which he was not, and so they arrested him and put him in the back of their car and took him off to jail. And by noon the next day my mother was calling people PJ knew, asking where he was and what had become of him, and by evening PJ had called her and said he was sorry to say this, but he was in jail. And then Dad hired one of his lawyer friends and that lawyer friend pointed out that by the time the cops found PJ, he wasn't actually driving, but sitting handcuffed on a curb, and so because the cops didn't actually see PJ driving, the charge could be reduced to a wet and reckless, which was supposed to be better than a DUI. But then we looked at the police report

and it turned out what PJ had crashed into wasn't quite a gated community but rather the

California Institution for Men in Chino, and that the security guard was really more of a Correctional Officer, and so the lawyer friend dropped the plan about the wet and reckless. But I could see how PJ's mind made the leap, considering that prison is the ultimate gated community and all that.

"You think I can move to Michigan and paint Home Depots with you?"

"I don't know man," said Dave. "Hey look at this," he said. "This box is filled with the wedding pictures of divorced couples. Here are my parents. There's Lisa and Joe. Jeanine and Tom. Jeanine and Bill." He picked up one of the albums. Dust motes floated around him. He pulled a string that dangled from the ceiling. The naked light bulb illuminated.

Dave rubbed his eyes. "So what were you doing then?" he said. "What was your day like that day?"

"What was my day like that day?"

"That's what I said."

I got up and looked around a little. In the corner of the basement sat a rusting exercise bike and some kind of vintage waistband equipment for weight loss. I tried to put it on.

"I mean for a while we thought he was going to be okay," I said. "He was taking his meds. He was getting better. He signed up for his DUI classes. Even though when he

was filling out the form he checked the box marked 'African American.' For his

emergency contact information he put the name of a rapper. Then he started lifting weights a lot. Once he went back to thinking he was white and accepting that we were his real family and that no one was molesting him at night, he was just—well—embarrassed. All he wanted was to be as normal as possible. So he imitated what he thought normal people were like. Maybe he was afraid any time he had a thought that might be construed as too unusual. So he preferred the mundane. He watched television all day. He laughed at commercials. He sat on the couch drinking beer. He gained sixty-five pounds. He could talk about dumbbells and squats and the importance of getting someone to spot for you for hours and hours. He almost never slept. It got so I never wanted to go home to California because listening to his inane chatter infuriated me. Then one of his high school buddies got him this job selling knives. It's a company where they recruit kids to sell knives to people they know. The salesperson makes an appointment at the customer's house. Gives them a demonstration. Gets incentivized to recruit more people to sell knives. It's kind of a pyramid scheme."

"Knives?"

"I'm not saying it was perfect," I said. "But he was all excited. Like, proud to be part of a company. It was sad." I remembered what Stacy had said. Maybe it doesn't make you sad but it made me sad. I finally had the waistband hooked around myself. "You think this'll work?"

"No."

"It's hard to say exactly what I was doing that day. I couldn't get a flight to California until the day after. Plus I mean, he was dead, so what was the rush?"

"I guess."

"So I just walked around New York, calling people I knew. Most of them never picked up. And if they did pick up I didn't know what to say to them other than 'my brother's dead.' Which, what can anyone say to that? People are busy going to work."

Every time Dave turned a page of the photo album, more dust whirled into his eyes. He kept rubbing them.

"I mean I hardly ever pick up the phone," I said. "So I guess I can't expect people to pick up the phone for me. That's part of why I'm so bad at selling what I was selling, you know?"

"I can imagine that would be a problem," said Dave, blinking frantically. "My contact's fucked up."

"That night I went out with Jocelyn—she's my roommate—to this bar. I just figured I'd find a dude to fuck and that would be that. I just wanted to feel something other than what I was feeling."

"What were you feeling?" Dave kept poking his eye with his finger, jabbing it in and out.

"I don't know man. Nothing. I felt nothing. To be honest I felt like he had already died. So then when he was actually dead, I don't know. What is there to say? I guess part of me was relieved. That's where it had been leading all along, and we all knew it. PJ knew it. Maybe I'm only saying that now to make myself feel better. But the point is, I was already mourning him. How do you mourn the death of someone if

you're already mourning him while he's alive? I don't know. That night I just figured sex was the best way to feel *something*. So I met this guy. At this pool table. He was okay. Collegiate looking. His name was Brian. Just one of those Ivy League Crew Team types. So I thought, okay, you'll do, Brian. He didn't say much. Maybe that's why I picked him. We walked back to his apartment. We started making out. We were talking a bit. I turned the lights off when we got into his room. But all of a sudden I didn't feel like doing it anymore. I wasn't attracted to him, really. I felt lousy. I think maybe I just wanted someone to talk to. Except once it was dark in there, Brian stopped answering my questions. He didn't seem to even know I was asking them."

"Drunk?"

"That's what I figured. So we hooked up a little, but I couldn't really get hard, so then I just jerked him off so I could go to sleep."

I could see the rolled-up lens fall into Dave's hand. He pulled down his eyelid and jammed the specimen right back in there, blinking and pressing his fingers down on his lids and wobbling his irises in circles so the lens would attach to the right part of his eye.

"In the morning I woke up before he did. I wasn't really sure what to do. I started looking around the room at all these decorations he had on his walls. He had a

bunch of posters of jazz musicians. I tried to get out of bed without waking him, but I couldn't. He woke up. When I was putting on my pants I noticed on his wall he had a certificate that said he knew sign language.

"And so I said to him, 'oh you know sign language?' you know, trying to be friendly. Trying not to be too awkward."

"Sure." Dave turned the stiff laminated page of the album.

"But then Brian was like, 'Yes I'm actually very active in the hearing loss community.' Then I noticed he had some framed covers on his walls of *Hearing Loss* magazine. I didn't even know that was a magazine. Now that I was up and walking around the room I could see it better. So I was like, 'oh *Hearing Loss* magazine? I haven't heard of that one. I don't think they play in our slow-pitch magazine softball league in the park,' you know, trying to be real casual and not awkward."

"Right," said Dave. "We've all been there."

"But I don't think Brian heard me because then he said, 'Well I'm actually deaf.' And I said, 'What?' And then he said it again: 'I'm deaf. I can read lips."

"What?"

"That's what I said. Then I noticed that one of the framed covers of *Hearing Loss* magazine had his face on it. The headline read: *The Road to Acceptance*."

Dave shook his head. "You're kidding me." He was back to wobbling his eyes in circles.

"So then when I left I made sure to say goodbye to him while I stared him straight in the face. He said he was completely deaf in one ear, and had twenty percent hearing in the other ear. And all night I had been talking to him. There I am just in his random apartment where he's covered the walls with pictures of jazz musicians. Jazz music he

can't even hear, except with twenty percent of one ear."

"You didn't notice he was deaf until the morning."

"I didn't notice he was deaf," I said. I couldn't help it, I was laughing. Dave laughed too. "I guess that explains why he didn't answer my questions."

"Guess so," said Dave. Slowly, the laughter left us. He flipped the page of the album. "What was that planet PJ said he was from?"

"Blarg."

"Oh right,' said Dave. "Is Blarg a real planet?"

"No. I looked it up. I wanted it to be."

"Look how young they are is in this picture," said Dave, holding up the album.

"Look at my mother," I said. "She's so smiley." We stared at it for a while. "When he first got sick all my mother could say was that it's actually a tremendous relief when your worst fears are realized."

Dave put down the photos. He pressed his fingertips on his eyes again. "Do you believe that?" he said.

"Not really. Hey Dave?"

"Yes?"

"You ever find that you're talking to yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like you're talking to some imaginary friend, trying to explain yourself to them, but mostly you're talking to yourself."

"Maybe," said Dave. "I don't know, man. I'm not really sure what you're talking

about."

"Oh."

I looked at the spread of photos in the album, at faces which were the prototypes for the fattened, freckled, wrinkled, frozen, fake-titted faces I knew now. Familiar but unrecognizable. In their faces I saw suddenly a long foreboding highway of time, a whole stretch of mountain road, which curved and tunneled through rocks and cliffs, and on the asphalt to make the lanes were lines—little white lines. They disappeared up my nose as I went along.

The next day we waited for Jeanine and we waited for the limo. Finally we had to tell Grandpa what we were waiting for.

"A limousine," said Grandpa. "A limousine, classy. That's classy." Grandpa wore his favorite vest. Nonna made it for him forty-nine years ago.

"Surprise!" said Aunt Lisa.

Jeanine didn't show up, and when the limo came it wasn't a limo. It was a bus that had *Motown Parties!* written on the side of it, accented with a bunch of cartoon clip-art pictures of musical instruments and car parts.

The driver got out and counted us. "I thought you said fourteen," he said. He read a slip of paper he had pulled from his pocket. "Fourteen."

"We're down to ten," said Lisa.

"Where'd the rest of them go?"

"They're gone," said Lisa, trying to rush it along. "Everybody get in the limo!"

Inside the bus there were three squashed beer cans and a sullied bra on the floor. There was a mirror on the ceiling of the bus. It was cracked. It had little scratches on it.

"How did someone scratch a mirror that's on a ceiling?" said Stacy. "I don't even want to know."

"Okay, here are the rules," said the driver, "My name's Mack. Don't nobody open the windows. None of them. Because they might fall off. Also, I wouldn't use that

bathroom if I was you. Everything else is okay."

"Isn't this fun?" said Lisa to Grandpa, squeezing his knee. "A limousine."

Grandpa nodded. "Very nice." He straightened his vest.

"Aunt Jeanine texted me pictures of dogs all night," said Stacy. "Look."

She showed me her phone.

"There are so many."

"She also sent me these sappy videos of dogs that are available for adoption with that sad lilting music in the background, and with these little captions like *Blu was rescued from a whore house in downtown Los Angeles. We can tell she's been abused because she's scared of men's voices.*

"She does that from time to time," said Rianne.

"Look, Rianne, midnight, one am, three am, six am, eleven am. You think she ever sleeps or what?"

"Do you really think I can have PJ's sneakers?" said Carter.

"Sure," I said.

"Hey," said Carter. "In New York, you guys have Slenderman?"

"What's a Slenderman?"

"He's this guy, Slenderman. He's the scariest thing I ever heard about. He lives in the woods around here. He's real tall and skinny and he always wears a really nice suit. He kind of looks like he's made of a tree. If he sees you then bad things will start to happen to you."

"You ever seen him?"

“I don’t know,” said Carter. “If bad things start happening to me then I figure I probably have.”

“That’s a good rule.”

“Do you have any scary stories?” said Carter.

“I’ve got scary stories,” said Dave. “But they’re not like that.”

“I think you mean spooky stories,” said Stacy. “Not scary stories. You don’t want to hear Dave’s scary stories. Or he’ll tell you about 9/11.”

“What’s the difference between spooky and scary?” said Carter.

“What’s the difference between waking and dreaming?” said Dave.

“I don’t get it,” said Carter. “Hey, Dominic.”

“Yes, Carter?”

“How come you’ve been carrying that book around in your pocket?”

“He needs a flat surface,” said Dave.

“What?” said Carter.

“Oh look,” I said, pointing out the window. “Free houses.”

“Guess that means we’re almost to Detroit,” said Carter.

“Michigan used to be such a nice place to live,” said Nonna.

The bus rattled on.

The horse races in a city where every third stoplight no longer functions is not a place you want to take your Grandpa for his birthday. To get to our table we passed rows of empty eyes at slot machines. The lever goes down, the lever goes up, the machine goes ding and the lever goes down again and all the while the eyes don't change but stare back into the hard neon gaze of the cherries and the sevens and the happy beeping music that means you lost, try again. We ate gray chicken. We were too dressed up. We smiled for Aunt Lisa's camera.

"The VIP section!" said Aunt Lisa. "Isn't this nice?"

"If it's a VIP section how come everyone is wearing old gym clothes?" said my mother.

"Some of the gym clothes look new," said Nonna.

"It's the Detroit VIP section," said Lisa.

"This wine tastes like punch."

"I like punch," said Lisa.

"If you'll excuse me," I said, "I'm going to need to squish by you."

In the doorway of the bathroom was a man asleep on the tile. He had a wiry, silver beard. I stepped over him to get to a stall. I wobbled on the toilet seat. Fully clothed.

The book in my lap I had read once before—in the third grade. It was one of PJ's

favorite books, and now that I was reading it again I could see why PJ had liked it so much. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. It's about this girl who accidentally gets left on an island off the coast of California, near Ventura, because the Catholic missionaries evacuate the rest of her tribe in the middle of a big storm. They don't really want to go, but the girl's dad, who was the chief, just got murdered by some otter hunters, so the tribe figures they don't have much of a choice. She's on the boat with the rest of them, but then she noticed that her little brother was still out there on the island. He got separated from the group when he ran back to get his spear. Her tribe tries to restrain her but she can't stand the idea of her little brother left alone on the island for who knows how long and so she jumps off the ship in the middle of the wind, rain, and crashing waves and she swims back to him. She gets to shore and she and the brother eat some abalone once the sky clears up a bit. Pretty soon her brother has a fight with some wild dogs and he dies. The rest of the tribe gets killed at sea when their ship sinks outside the San Francisco Bay. Except she doesn't find that out for about twenty years. She just keeps waiting for them to come back, and she starts tallying all the moons that have passed since she last saw them. And she survives out there on the land, by herself, and she makes herself a house, and a fence out of whale ribs to keep out the foxes, and she makes weapons, even though in her head is the voice of her dead dad, the chief, saying any weapon made by a woman would always break in a time of need, but she does it anyway, because she says she has no

choice. Because she needs some weapons. She tries to kill the wild dogs that killed her

brother. She injures the dog leader with one of her weapons but immediately regrets it. She decides to bring the dog back to her house and she nurses him to health. She names him Rontu. Rontu is a good dog. After about ten years Rontu dies, and it's pretty much the saddest thing you ever read. And this girl is supposedly based on The Lost Woman of San Nicolas, who really lived alone on this island for eighteen years right before the Civil War, until the Catholic Priests rescued her, and after she got rescued by the church it only took about seven weeks before she was dead of dysentery. But that part's not in the book.

This copy I had was I think a first or second edition paperback, and was all taped together with hard old yellow tape, and had a stamp on the inside with the address of the elementary school where PJ and I went, and in little handwriting on the inside of the cover was "PJ Adler, Third Grade" in thick pencil. PJ had terrible handwriting. It slanted in every direction. Because he wasn't right-handed or left-handed. They say it's a function of the disease. And throughout the book in his rhomboidal handwriting he had underlined funny little things and written WOW! in the margins and stuff like that when something exciting happened. Or he wrote a sad face on the page when the girl's little brother Ramo died, even though that whole ordeal with the wild dogs when Ramo was killed only lasted about a paragraph.

I could hear a little kid in a different bathroom stall, and his father telling him don't

forget to wipe. The man with a ratty beard on the floor began to cough. It was one of those coughs that made you wonder how a body can sound so close to the end but keep

going in spite of itself.

I opened my wallet, and removed the coke, and arranged the powder on the cover of the book. The cover had this picture of the girl standing on the island with her dog, and the island was shaped like a dolphin. I put a little bump where the dolphin's eye would be, and where his spout would be, and at the tips of his fins. And then I found my rolled up twenty-dollar bill.

"Germs," said the father. "Everything you see in here is covered in germs. Germs can kill you, you know. So that's why we wash our hands. To protect ourselves. Otherwise we get sick."

"Don't we get sick anyway?"

"Wash your hands."

Her secret name was Karana. It's dangerous to use your secret name except with someone you're sure you can trust. She figures that's probably why her father got murdered. He told the wrong person his secret name. Chief Chowig.

"Time for cake!" said Lisa.

"My mother still won't answer the phone," said Rianne.

So me and Dave and Stacy and Rianne decided we'd take a cab back to Nonna and Grandpa's house. I wasn't hungry anyway.

In the cab, Dave said, "I had about enough of that masquerade."

"What's your problem?" said Stacy. Grandpa liked it, she said, and what was the big deal if it made Grandpa happy? Then Dave said it was easy for her to say that because she didn't live here in Michigan and she never had lived in Michigan and it was no trouble staying in Nonna's and Grandpa's good graces when you were never around.

Stacy paid the cabdriver. We stepped out onto Grandpa's driveway. The sky was on the edge of night. We piled into Dave's car.

"Why do you think she won't answer the phone?" said Stacy. That's one thing that kills me about my sister. The way she asks leading questions when the answers are already apparent, just to make someone else to say an uncomfortable fact she doesn't want to say herself. But Rianne just closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the gray sun-worn fabric of the seat. She pressed her palms flat into the cushion.

"My mother's her own person," said Rianne.

Dave took a one-way dirt road through woods, and the car bounced over rocks

and sometimes when the back seat bumped upwards and landed hard I watched Rianne wince. I realized she kept her hands flattened into the seat so she could protect her spine. Dave turned up the radio until the bass in the rap music made the flimsy car vibrate. Air through the windows felt cool and in the trees I saw for a moment a ghastly face—a haunted, perverse moon face, and the face grinned and then hopped back through the trees on its towering, spindly limbs.

"I just saw Slenderman," I said.

But Dave and Stacy stared out the front windows, Stacy asking Dave to please turn down the music and Dave saying What? What did you say? And even though the music ate up the sound of her voice I could read the meaning from Rianne's lips and from the half-words I heard: "Now that you're looking you'll see him everywhere," she said, and smiled.

Jeanine and Rianne live in a brick house. Three stories including the basement. Big and empty. The previous owner had been Rianne's ex-step-dad. An ex-step-dad is someone your mom divorced after she divorced your dad. It was Bill's second marriage too. When Bill and Jeanine got divorced, Bill let Jeanine have the house so long as she took all her debt along with it. Because if she wasn't drinking, she just spent money. Or that's what everyone likes to say about Jeanine. If it's not the drinking, then it's something else, so oh well just let her drink. Sometimes it's both—drinking and something else like drinking. For example—before the divorce, but after Bill had already gleaned a pretty clear idea of what the alcohol was doing to his wife and where the marriage was heading—Bill got home from his job selling computer supplies to company offices and his kids didn't know where Jeanine was and Rianne didn't know where Jeanine was, and so they all sat around, waiting. They waited all night. Bill got in bed but didn't sleep. He got out of bed at sunrise. Bill didn't call the police and report her missing because Jeanine already had her three DUIs and she was on probation and wasn't supposed to be drinking, and so Bill figured that calling the police would probably do her more harm than good, at least at that moment. Or maybe it you could explain it by saying that involving the police just because your wife was missing was too much trouble for a

marriage that was already over. Bill decided to wait it out. But at dinner time, Jeanine

still hadn't come home. So Bill took all his kids and Rianne out to eat burgers and play bocce ball, hoping that when they returned home, Jeanine would be asleep in bed. But she wasn't. On the morning of the second day, a little orange car driven by a strange young man pulled up the driveway at their house. Bill said he watched through the window as Jeanine hugged this man he had never seen before. She got out of the car and opened the backseat and picked up a bunch of department store shopping bags. The man sped off in the bright orange car. Jeanine waltzed through the garage into the house with her hands full of shopping bags and she smiled and her smile was brighter and horsier than before.

Nonna said that Bill said that Jeanine wouldn't tell him who the man was. She was missing for a day and a half. In that time, Jeanine had gotten twenty thousand dollars worth of brand new porcelain teeth she didn't even need installed in her mouth. Veneers. Giant masticating chompers. The bill came in the mail a month later.

Bill filed for divorce. Jeanine promised to get sober. Jeanine cried and asked Rianne to forgive her. Jeanine admitted she was *powerless over alcohol* and Jeanine *admitted to God, to herself, and to another human being the exact nature of her wrongs* and Jeanine was *entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character* and Jeanine *humbly asked Him* [meaning God, obviously] *to remove all her shortcomings*, etc. etc., blah blah blah. Jeanine got a sponsor. Jeanine got sober. Jeanine got a job waiting

tables at Johnny P's Pizza Joint. Except Jeanine had a lot of back pain, I guess, she had a

little bit of scoliosis herself—not as bad as Rianne but that's who Rianne got it from. So being on her feet hurt a lot. She asked people what kind of pizza they wanted and then she brought it to them, smiling with her giant teeth. She asked them what they wanted to drink, and then she brought them their wine or their margaritas and said What Else Can I Get Ya? in that friendly waitress speak and then she would go back into the kitchen and pop the pills the doctor had given her because he said they would take care of the pain in her back and at least he was right about that—the pills were the best part of her day. So it was hard to say exactly why she couldn't stay sober—Aunt Lisa said it came down to "having the gene or not." "Jeanine has the gene," said Aunt Lisa, "and I don't." I don't know what exactly Lisa thought that gene was or how it worked or where it came from, but I wondered if Jeanine got so used to being thought of as a drunk, a fuck-up, a person of sick moral character succumbing always to the evils of liquor, that she just gave up and let herself be the drunk. I always liked Jeanine. I mean in addition to her being someone I loved because she was my mother's sister, I also liked her. Or I did when I knew her. I guess I didn't know her anymore. But she was the kind of person who wouldn't judge you if you let her see something that you didn't usually allow other people to see. One time when I was about thirteen years old she caught me in the bathroom at her house trying on her eye shadow. I tried to hide it but it was green and shimmery. I figured she'd tell everyone. That's what Lisa would've done. Stacy too. Nobody keeps a

secret. So I kept expecting Nonna or Grandpa or someone to confront me and tell me to

just admit it already that I was gay and save everyone else the anticipation. But that never happened. All that did happen was the next time I saw Jeanine she pulled from her expensive purse this eye shadow palette all wrapped up in fancy department store paper. She gave it to me without saying anything. I was only thirteen, and embarrassed, and she made me feel better about wanting to put eye shadow on at all. Maybe my mother would have done the same for me if she had caught me at it. But my mother never caught me at it. Jeanine did.

Rianne unlocked the front door. A swarm of dogs ran toward us.

"Oh God," said Stacy. "I thought all those pictures were of random dogs. How can anyone adopt this many dogs?"

"They make her happy," said Rianne. "They're all from the pound. Mom, Mom," she called. She circled the kitchen, the front room, the television room. She moved upstairs.

"There's dog shit on the carpet," said Dave.

"She's not in her bed," called Rianne. "Usually I find her in bed."

"She's not on the back porch," said Stacy.

"The bathroom isn't locked," said Dave.

"These dogs," said Stacy.

"She's not in my room either." Rianne looked more exasperated than scared. She held on to the banister as she came back downstairs.

We checked the basement. We found her. In the laundry room. In a laundry

basket. In the dark. She looked like an old sweatshirt. I put my fingers on her neck to find her pulse.

"She's so skinny," said Stacy. "When did she get so skinny?"

Rianne stood farthest away from her mother's body, one foot still in the hall. Dogs followed her everywhere. They barked at her from the other side of the doorway.

"She's still breathing," I said.

"Maybe we should call an ambulance," said Stacy.

"No," said Rianne.

"No?"

"The insurance," said Rianne. "It's fine. It will be fine."

"It will be fine?" said Dave.

"She's just drunk," I said. "And sleepy."

"Just don't tell Nonna and Grandpa," said Rianne. "Please. And don't tell your parents. Or Aunt Lisa. I'll get her to go to the meetings. She'll wake up tomorrow and she'll want to go to the meetings."

"Somebody needs to take these dogs outside," said Stacy.

"Let's just take her upstairs and get her spread out on the couch," said Dave.

We sat there for hours, watching *an investigative two-hour special on the real-life true-crime story of a group of well-to-do Florida cheerleaders who stabbed one of their own for fun and dumped her body in the ocean*. Watching that same commercial where they show you how much the spray paint looks like real hair and a "real customer" with a shiny cotton-white head of fresh hair paint leans into the camera exclaiming "I never thought I'd look like this!"

And Dave said, "Yeah, I bet you didn't."

Jeanine woke up, spread out on the love seat, one of her boney legs draped onto the carpet.

"Mom, you're drunk," said Rianne.

"I'm not drunk," she said, "You're drunk." She lassoed her paper doll body into a sitting position.

'That may be true," said Dave. "But we're allowed to be drunk." His held a bottle of whiskey in front of him like a conductor's baton, the amber liquid sloshing around every time he said something. "We found this in the basement bathroom, Jeanine." I watched Jeanine follow with her eyes the bottle in his hand. "Along with all these empty ones," said Dave. Jeanine spread herself back out on the couch. In his boredom Dave had

arranged the empty ones—we had found eight—in a circle on the floor like a sundial, *real-life true-crime* light from the television catching on the glass.

"Who says?" said Aunt Jeanine. "Who says you're allowed to be?" She tried to push herself upright. Her flimsy arms slipped off the couch.

"The law says we're allowed to be," said Stacy. "The law says you are on probation."

"Well good for you," said Jeanine. "Are you always this smug, Stacy? Come here, Bubba." She rubbed a Black Lab's ears. "How are my babies?"

"They're dogs," said Stacy. "They're fine." Stacy got up quickly from her seat and paced around the room with her arms crossed, every so often hovering over Jeanine and tapping her foot like she was about to say something to our aunt, then backing off and going into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water, then sitting back down in a chair, playing with her hair, then sitting on her hands, then looking like she was about to say something, then not saying anything at all.

Jeanine nuzzled a wet nose. "Good dog."

Finally Stacy spoke up: "Having eight dogs in a home residence must violate at least one city ordinance," she said, throwing her hands into the air, like *Ha, how do you like that one? Try answering that one.*

"Good dog," said Jeanine.

"It's been a while, Aunt Jeanine," I said. "It's nice to see you." Jeanine had been watching the bottle of whiskey and the dogs and her eyes moved slowly over to where I sat.

"PJ," she said. She looked surprised.

"I'm Dominic."

"It's too dark in here," said Rianne. She flipped on more lights, and the shadows changed on Jeanine's face.

"I know you're Dominic," she said. "Where's PJ?"

"PJ's dead, Mom," said Rianne. "You obviously know that already, Mom." Rianne began to march around the house flipping on lights, getting louder as she got farther away. "You obviously know that."

Jeanine slapped her palm on Bubba's belly, a thud. The dog's tongue hung out of its happy, clueless mouth. "I know that," said Jeanine. She lay back down on the couch. "My back hurts," she said. "Somebody hand me that orange bottle."

"I don't think you should have any more," said Stacy. She said it stone-faced, and behind her cheek I could see that she was grinding her teeth.

"Since when are you an authority over me Stacy?" said Jeanine. "I changed your diapers."

"She's actually pretty coherent," said Dave. He took a sip out of the whiskey bottle. "I'm surprised."

"Me or Jeanine?" said Stacy, her voice getting higher, her expression falling open.

"Jeanine."

"I can still *hear* you," said Jeanine.

Rianne walked over to the orange prescription bottle on the coffee table. She unfastened the lid.

“I love all my babies,” said Jeanine.

“Who are you talking to?” said Dave.

“Good doggies,” said Jeanine.

“Here you go, Mom,” said Rianne. She held out a pill. Her mother hooked her long bony fingers into Rianne’s hand.

“Thank you sweetie,” she said.

At Nonna and Grandpa's house, most of the windows were dark, but the porch light had been left on for us and inside, the television played *La Strada* to an empty couch. Stacy turned it off. I went upstairs. I could see light in my mother's room. I knocked.

"Come in." Engulfed in the squeaky metal-framed bed, my mother sniffled, swallowed up in blankets. Her wire-rimmed glasses made her appear as though she had already aged into frailty. On the walls in dusty frames hung faded portraits of Aunt Lisa in high school, smiling as she held up her swim team ribbons. Above my mother's head hung a photo of Uncle Bruno and Angela, Dave's mom, who I hadn't seen in about ten years. They looked like they were nineteen years old.

"Can't believe no one's taken that down," I said. "After the way it ended." Angela had left Bruno for the Best Man at their wedding, Carl. Now it was Carl and Angela. They lived a mile and a half down the road from Bruno.

"I think this is the room where they put things once they've taken them down." As she looked up at me, I realized all the lines in her forehead were missing. Erased.

"So how are you?" I said.

"I'm okay," she said, but her face was immobilized. A face caught in between expressions. "I'm fine. Are you fine?"

"I'm fine."

“Poor Gelsomina,” said my mother. “I’m going to have dreams about it. I know I am.” She buried herself into a pillow.

“It’s a sad movie.”

“I don’t like the horse races,” said my mother, like a child making a pronouncement. “Everyone there made me sad.”

“It was a pretty desperate place.”

“Sit down,” she said.

So I sat in the place on the edge of the mattress where she had patted her hand.

“Is it my fault?” she said.

“Is what your fault?”

She pulled a tissue from the blankets and blew her nose.

“Of course it’s not your fault,” I said.

“I should have paid more attention,” she said.

“Sometimes it feels like he was never alive at all, and I’ve just imagined him,” I said.

“No,” she said. “That’s not true.”

I looked at all the pictures of Aunt Lisa’s swim team ribbons. Then I told my mother how the last time I saw him was when he drove me to the airport in Los Angeles. And how he was driving me nuts with all the dumb shit he kept saying. And all I kept doing was asking him just for a little peace and quiet. Just telling him please, shut the hell up, please. Because after he stopped being delusional all he did was try to imitate

what he thought a normal person would say or do. All this inane jibber jabber all the time, like a doll with a broken string who asks *What's your name? My name is Sparkle*… or whatever for twenty-three out of twenty-four hours. It can make you crazy listening to someone who's crazy. He'd take his meds in the morning, and in the afternoon, and at night, and then he'd sit on the couch all day watching videos of cats on the Internet and sometimes making appointments at the houses of people who knew him when he was a kid, when he wasn't "sick," who felt bad for him, and going to their houses and trying to sell them knives. And maybe they bought the knives because they pitied him.

"I bought his knives," said my mother.

"Congratulations," I said.

"I'm tired, Dominic," she said. "I need to sleep." I could tell I had worn her out. I could tell she didn't want to talk anymore. "Will you turn off the lights on your way out?"

"Sure," I said, and I got up and on my way out the door I turned off the lights but before I left I thought of something that had been bothering me and so I asked her, "Mom?"

"What, Dominic?"

"You know that dollhouse in my room?" I said, "I was wondering who made it?"

But she sighed a big loud sigh—a sigh perhaps meant more for me than for herself. "I'm tired, Dominic, I need to go to sleep."

"Somebody put a lot of effort into it," I said. "But there aren't any dolls."

"Goodnight, Dominic." I heard the springs of the mattress creak. My mother resembled an invalid. I hated her. I wanted to shake her and tell her to buck up. I wanted to punch her. I wanted, I wanted, I wanted. But all I did was close the door.

Once the door between was closed, I unfolded the tin foil I had been keeping in my wallet. My hand shook. I watched a little clump of white fall into the carpet. So I got down on my knees.

I figured that wherever it had fallen, I couldn't see it anymore, but it was still there. I put one nostril to the carpet and tried to snort, grazing over the parts of the floor where I thought it might be. I inhaled a morsel of pillow fluff. After that, I sat on the floor, leaning against the wall near my mother's door. I thought maybe I heard her crying in there. I didn't want to listen to it. So I crawled across the hall on my hands and knees into the room where I kept my suitcase. It probably looked dramatic—me crawling down the hall. Mostly I was just too tired to stand up.

In my room, my mother's childhood bedroom, I licked the tinfoil. I waited to feel numbness in my mouth. I waited with the same grinning desperation a desert dog feels as he runs, tongue in the air, toward that shimmering silver mirage that for a second looked like liquid.

Your brother thinks your car smells like a homeless person. He needs to go to the airport but there is no room for his bags. Dominic is trying to be nice but he gagged at the odor when he opened the door. Jesus Christ! Where can I sit? There's so much trash. Basketballs, dirty socks, water bottles, cigarette butts, the wrappers that go around burgers, halves of French fries, apple cores from when you were trying to lose weight, sweatshirts that Mom thinks we threw away because the sleeves are ripped or the zippers are broken but we just like them we can't say why, spray paint cans, football pads, pennies, and knives, knives, knives. Plus that bag of rope and leather so we can show the customer what the knives can do.

We push what's on the passenger seat out onto the curb. Your brother tells you the neighbors will complain. The neighbors don't like where you park the car. The neighbors don't like the cigarettes you smoke from the balcony that looks out onto their front yard. The neighbors say they hear a tapping sound at night. I can't sleep, the blonde lady said this morning. Was that an animal, or was that you? You tell her you're not sure which sound was tapping, but would she like to buy some knives? You pick up the trash and the shoes and the lighters off the curb and throw them into the backseat, where they disappear into the piles.

In the car, you tell your brother how much you like the radio station. All vinyl, all

the time. It's a good one, Dominic says. The commercials are on, and he reaches to change it. You let him but you wish he'd just stay on 100.3 The Sound. What will you do when you get back to New York? But your brother doesn't answer you. You tell him how much you like driving on the freeway. The 110 is the most fun of all the freeways. It's the oldest one, he says. He tells you how to get to the airport.

Where are you going after this? Dominic wants to know.

You tell him you're going to the doctor. Your brother lives far away. You are staying home with Mom and Dad. Would you like to buy some knives?

“Be safe, my children and grandchildren,” said Nonna, sighing dramatically. “Mamma Mia, I’ll miss you.”

Stacy and I and our mother walk in different directions. The airport is full of strangers.

“Goodbye, Dominic.”

“Goodbye.”

Dr. Peterson wants to know how you are doing. How's our head? He wants to know.

We tell him it's shrinking.

In a good way?

I think my brain has re-hardened. I thought I was a goner but now it's hard again. All my shit came out in the toilet and now my brain is hard again. Thanks, Doc. Can't tell you how much I appreciate it. Did I tell you I'm a working man now? I'm selling knives. They have a forever guarantee. Forever is even better than lifetime. Would you like me to get them from the car? I need to practice my pitch.

Sure, PJ. I'll wait right here. Go get them from your car. I do like those knives. I could use a few knives myself.

It's a real beautiful day outside, says X. We already know! Tell us something we don't know, X. Even the sounds are beautiful, swimming past our ears. Does anyone else feel like we're underwater?

Back in the office, Dr. Peterson wants to know how our pitch works. We show him the list we made at the salesman meeting.

1.) *make the customer comfortable*

2.) *emphasize quality: dishwasher safe!*

3.) let customer practice with knives

4.) tell customer about yourself.

What do you say about yourself? Dr. Peterson wants to know.

They don't mean real stuff, they just mean put a picture of your family in the front of your binder so they know you are a real person.

We flip the page to show him ours.

My brother left me today, Doc. He went back to New York. Can't say I blame him. He's got a life to live. Can't say I blame him.

Doc Peterson nods and coughs.

5.) do not mention price until thirty minutes have passed

6.) emphasize quality again: Forever guarantee! Free sharpening!

You can tell Dr. Peterson is impressed that you can cut a penny in two with the scissors. Scissors are only a hundred dollars but they come free with the kitchen set! Dr. Peterson wants the paring knife with the white handle, the ice cream scoop, the scissors. Thanks, Doc. Our first sale this week. Got our first commission check in the mail last week. $33.13. It would have been more but we gave Mom scissors for free and they cut it out of our share. Still, it's great to be a working man.

When you leave the office, Dr. Peterson says Maybe you should consider using a different picture, PJ.

What?

In your binder. A different family photo.

Why Doc? This is the only picture I found around the house. I found it in a box.

But you're the kid, in this picture, PJ, you're the kid.

And suddenly you see what he means: that's you. That's you as you were. You're the little boy in the blue corduroy overalls. You're the one with the bowl cut. You're holding a choo-choo train.

Maybe a different picture, huh PJ?

Whatever it takes, you say.

Whatever it takes what?

Whatever it takes to keep the customer satisfied.

Have a nice day, PJ, says the Doc.

And when you get back into the car you decide to call your brother to tell him how it went. What a great sale you made and how much Doc P bought and how it's great to be a working man but Dominic won't pick up the phone and maybe he's on the plane so you leave a message but then you remember the way Dominic says he hates the phone and so then you wonder if maybe you did a wrong thing so then you call back and leave another message apologizing for the first message and then you go home and fix yourself a drink and tomorrow you'll wake up and think I can't believe it: another day of this shit.

Now boarding all passengers flight 304 to New York, JFK.

Aunt Lisa says no death is an accident. Aunt Lisa says you're never dead so long as people on earth still love you. Aunt Lisa says none of us will ever know the meaning of eternity. Aunt Lisa says isn't my belly button ring cute?

Maybe death is a lesson in vocabulary. Words with meanings you've taken for granted. Words like *brother* or *please shut up* or *schizophrenia* or *blunt force trauma,* which is the thing that happens when your brother jumps off the old Pasadena bridge into the arroyo. The bridge that was already called Suicide Bridge. Words that won't ever mean again what they had meant before. The word *forever,* which slips away like a wet silver fish every time you get close enough to almost catch its meaning. A word bigger than the human minds responsible for its invention. Forever, forever, vanished into the hard white core of the earth.

Because, PJ, if you hadn't died, how would you have lived?

CHAPTER 3

THREE

First thing I did, leaving the plane: called Manny.

"I'm sorry I've been missing," I said. He told me to meet him at 96 Orchard Street. That was all he ever said on the phone—the address of a place where he wanted you to wait.

So I went to 96 Orchard, which was down in Chinatown, and I stood on a stoop and I wasn't sure if I should go inside the building so I called him again and Rosalina the ballerina answered and said "stay where you are, don't move at all, we'll be right there."

I sat on the steps. I thought about what I would say and how I would say it. I thought about how much I would ask for. I think I was trying to be brave. Love, fear, courage, shame. I decided I would tell Manny that I would get him his money—that I would pay him back in work and get clean and sober while doing it. How I would sell for him without snorting it and then I would get out of all of this mess and he would never hear from me again and I'd never snort anything ever again as long as I lived.

When they finally arrived, it was in a big black truck, and Rosalina emerged from the passenger's side and she looked at me like she didn't know who the hell I was. Manny got of out the driver's seat. Except something about him was wrong. He had shrunk, it seemed. His features were off by two or three degrees. As though he had walked through a carnival and had come out slightly changed by the image in the fun house mirror.

"Hello."

"Hey."

"Manny?"

"I'm Manny."

He must have been able to tell from my face that I didn't believe him, because he said it again. "I'm Manny." Rosalina leaned over into driver's seat of the parked car, one of her tip-toes still on the curb and the other knee jammed into the seat. Her ass stuck into the air.

"I'm looking," she said.

"It'll be one second."

"You're not Manny," I said.

"I can get you what you need."

"But you're not Manny."

"Why do you have that suitcase?" he said. He looked at me with new eyes. Suspicious. "What's in there?"

"Just clothes," I said. "I just got off a plane."

"It's gone," said Rosalina, emerging from the cavern of the car.

"What's gone?"

"Unfortunately we dropped it," said Rosalina. "We had about twenty bags in a little case and we dropped it. I don't know. Maybe it fell out between the seats. Maybe it fell out of the window on the freeway." Rosalina's eyes sunk into her face. "It's gone," she said. "I can't find it."

"God damnit," said Manny. "I'm sorry about this," he said.

“You’re not Manny,” I said.

“I’m Manny,” he said.

“He’s the uncanny Manny,” said Rosalina. He made a quick whistling sound like don’t say anything, but she talked over it. “He’s Manny’s brother.”

“You look a lot like him,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Manny,” he said.

“Your parents named both of you Manny? Why do you have Manny’s phone?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Manny’s been detained,” said Rosalina. “He will be unavailable for the foreseeable future.”

“Well what’s this guy’s name?”

Rosalina shrugged. “Just call him Manny.”

“I’m sorry about this,” said the man. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to find it.”

Hello, Christopher.

Hello, Eleanor.

I fell through my bed. *Clack* *Clack* *Clack.*

Somebody shut this pipe up.

The sleep you get after weeks of half-sleep is more than sleep. It is ghosts leaving your mind that is what PJ said once when he got an MRI and the doctors said PJ, we found nothing wrong with your brain, and PJ said I wish it would just be a tumor and laying in that tube everyone screaming like ghosts leaving your mind but for a second there afterward everything got calm and that's finally when the sleep came. The real sleep.

So on Monday, Lenin whined and Jocelyn told Lenin she's going to have him executed if he doesn't stop yapping for like, five seconds, please. Here's a treat, maybe that will calm him down. And Brittany with her long thin legs peeking out like a flamingo or an ostrich used all the hot water in the shower. When I got in the bathroom, I found her dark hair clumped in the drain and the mold growing in colonies on the porcelain but none of that matters because Sunday was clean and today, Monday, my nose does not hurt and I cannot remember the last time my nose did not hurt.

I passed police tape all over Moshe's office, Welcome Back to New York, if you

can make it here, you'll make it anywhere, and what the hell does *making it* have to do with today? On the F train, everyone's loose necks swayed with the car—crowded trains and any exposed flesh bouncing in the underground light and maybe the way the drug shortened and lengthened my brain made all of it appear digestible when it was not. So I went to work.

On my desk blinked the red light that meant strangers had left me phone messages with questions about their classified ads. I sat underneath the fluorescent overhead and I stared at my calendar with the little shiny squares that meant days and I thought How many squares had passed since PJ died and since I first tried cocaine and since my Dad bought that boat that never worked at that lake house where Charlie Chaplin hid his child bride, and I thought how many squares since I came from the womb into the screaming white hospital and how many squares are there left?

My desk phone rang.

"Classified Advertising."

"Dominic."

"Hello, Dad."

"I heard I missed a party this weekend."

"You did."

"Dominic, I talked to Stacy. She called me."

"That's nice of her."

"I just have one question for you."

"Did she tell you there's no such thing as atheism?"

"Are you injecting it?"

"No."

"Are you smoking it?"

"No."

"So just snorting? Same as before?"

"Yes."

"Well that's good, Dominic, that's a start."

"I'm getting another call, Dad. Someone probably wants to place a personal ad."

"Now this is serious, Dominic."

"I'm not arguing with you there."

"You have an excellent brain, and I don't want you to waste it."

I wanted to ask him what I was saving it for? And what is the meaning of wasting it?

"You only get one brain, Dominic."

"They call being drunk being wasted but what do they mean by that?"

"Dominic, grief is something you walk into, with your head up."

"Got any more dad advice?"

"When you get to the fork in the road, take it." Ellis the publisher walked past my desk. He nodded. I gave him a little two-fingered salute.

"What kind of ad interests you?" I said. "I can give you the frequent advertiser

rate of $5.25/word. It's a fifteen-word minimum."

"Dominic."

"I might also interest you in a display ad. Again I can give you the frequent advertiser discount of two-hundred dollars per inch. Now that's only across one-column. Our columns are two-point-two-five inches wide. And if you want that to be in color then it's an additional seventy-five dollars."

"Dominic."

"Can you spell your name for me please?"

"No."

"Now did you say B as in Blarg or D as in Dominic or Dead or Dad?"

"Dominic."

"Well relax Dad I haven't done any today."

"That's good, Dominic. That's a start."

Dad said go back to doing your job, jobs are good. And I said All jobs? And he said, Do your job, Be a productive member of society. And I said All jobs? But he had already hung up.

So I popped up from my desk and bounded across the silent carpet past everyone's typing hands and into the break room because there's coffee in there—and I'm out of cocaine so I might as well do some coffee and become *a productive member of society*.

On a table in between the vending machine and the coffee contraption that delivers periodic jolts of increased productivity sat the daily newspapers and staring out from the thick black ink is Moshe Epstein's face.

SLUMLORD FOUND BURNED IN DUMPSTER: Who didn't want him dead?

In the photo, he's smiling and it doesn't even look like a fake smile. On his head is a fuzzy brown hat in the shape of a small tire, cocked to one side.

Beneath his face is a photo of the gray van but its innards are burned and I saw the seat where I once sat, signing the lease, getting out and shaking his hand, except the seat just looks like the skeleton of an old bird cage and not like a seat at all.

Epstein was abducted outside his office at 135 Borinquen Place in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on Saturday. His lifeless body was found smoldering in a dumpster outside a Getty Station on Cutler Mill Road in Great Neck, New York on Sunday morning.

Although the coroner has not released an official report, investigators believe that Epstein died of suffocation, and was also badly burned on his torso and hands. A surveillance camera positioned near the office captured images of Epstein struggling with two attackers for nearly 5 minutes before being forced into his own silver Toyota Previa. Broken handcuffs and plastic restraining tape were found on the sidewalk. New York Police Department detectives suggested that Epstein may have died from compression suffocation, perhaps after an assailant sat on him inside the minivan.

"This is my landlord," I said. But the only other person in the break room was this editor, Saul, and he chewed a donut and looked over at the paper and said, "No kidding?"

"This is my landlord," I said again. As though that might give me some ownership over the death. I wondered for an instant why I would want ownership over this death and not over PJ's and how in the hell had Moshe gotten mixed up in someone who would kill him and is death that which gives life meaning and all that crap. I began to cry.

"We've just decided to do a piece on how his death is being covered," said Saul. "All the anti-Semitic language here. Look at this." He read aloud: "The slanted *shtreimel* on his head gives his crookedness away, said one tenant.' Now that's really bad. People are calling to boycott the paper."

"Who gets sat on to death?" I said. I could tell Saul was trying not to look at my face. Hot water kept falling out of my eyes.

"I read somewhere that the police believe the assailants were just trying to scare

him into paying them back," said Saul. He finished his donut. "So were there rats in your building? Did they shut off the water for days at a time without telling anyone? That's what tenants are claiming in this article," said Saul. "Even the use of the term slumlord is offensive," he said.

"It's easy to resent the religious man," I said. "PJ heard the voice of God once. He told me about it. He said it was louder than all the other voices. God told him to prepare himself for death."

Saul waited for the machine to fill his cup of coffee. "Anyway, sorry it was your landlord," he said. "But he was probably a lot of people's landlord." Saul left the break room. I bit my tongue to stop crying.

You ever see something in front of you, clear as day, even though you can't explain it? That's what happened to me then. Right in the office, there was PJ. Grown PJ standing on New York City corporate carpet where he had never in his life stood. Grown PJ, carrying his extra sixty-five pounds, holding his salesman binder in one hand and his bag of rope and knives and leather in the other. Holding up a picture of himself as he used to be: with his bowl cut and his choo-choo train, when he couldn't tell left from right, but what is oddity in a child other than natural?

So I left the break room, and returned to my desk, and behind my desk is Victoria's office, and PJ followed me through the doorway that had no door into her office. Victoria sat at her desk, typing. Sometimes, when she got too drunk, I could hear her snoring in her seat.

“I quit,” I said.

“What?” said Victoria.

“I’m quitting,” I said, and as I did PJ held up his shining diamond knives and said, “Dominic, the scissors are a hundred dollars but they come free with the kitchen set.”

“You’re not quitting,” said Victoria. “Don’t be ridiculous. What would you do instead?”

My phone rang. I jumped around PJ to get to my cube. I picked up the phone.

“They have a forever guarantee,” said PJ.

“Classified advertising,” I said. “How can I help you?”

In my room the pipe went *clack* *clack* *clack.*

“Dominic.”

“Hi Dad.”

And when I said it, PJ’s smile caught mine, and in his eyes I saw him say, don’t tell Dad I’m here. I saw him say, I learned more in death than I ever knew in life, and the scissors are a hundred dollars but they come free with the kitchen set, free sharpening, forever guarantee, forever is even better than lifetime.

“Dominic,” said Dad. “Grief is something you walk into,” he said, “with your head up.”

“You won’t quit,” said Victoria. She pushed herself out of her chair and marched over to me. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Who says I’m ridiculous?”

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