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EVIDENCE OF LIVES

by

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B.A. George Mason University, 1989

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2012

Major Professor: Jocelyn Bartkevicius

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ABSTRACT

Evidence of Lives is a novel that deals with themes of childhood abuse, mental illness, and alienated families. The book opens with the main character, forty-two-year-old Mark Barr, who has returned home from New York to West Virginia after eleven years for his older brother Steve's funeral. Steve, having died of a heart attack at forty-six, was mentally ill most of his adult life, though Mark has always questioned what was "mentally ill" and what was the result of their father's verbal and physical abuse during their childhood.

When Mark discovers that there is to be no funeral, but a cremation without service, he calls his girlfriend, an attorney back in New York, who tells him he has a "legal responsibility" to voice his brother's oral will. Just nights before his death, Steve called Mark and conveyed his last wishes to be buried, not cremated.

The book unfolds into an odyssey for Mark to discover love for his brother posthumously in a loveless family. *Evidence of Lives* is a portrait of an oldest brother's supposed mental illness and unfulfilled life, as well as a redeeming tale of a youngest brother's alienation from his family and his guilt for abandoning them.

To the memory of my brother Joe

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Pat Rushin, and Dr. Darlin' Neal for their invaluable editorial help.

Special thanks goes to Susan Smollens for her guidance and support.

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INTRODUCTION: THE WRITING LIFE

In 1989, I was a twenty-six-year-old art student who hadn't read his first novel. Secretly, though, I loved words, just not those written down, but sung. Bruce Springsteen's songs, in particular, had as much meaning as my ears could hear. No artist put as much "heart and soul into ordinary words" as he did, wrote Dave Marsh. But how could so much human meaning be captured on the page without music?

During an elective poetry course at George Mason University, I tried to find out. As an experiment, I typed out lyrics to a few of his songs, put in line breaks to make them look like poems, printed them out, and read them quietly. Here's a verse from "Drive All Night."

When I lost you honey sometimes I think I lost my guts too
And I wish God would send me a word
send me something I'm afraid to lose
Lying in the heat of the night like prisoners all our lives
I get shivers down my spine and all I wanna do is hold you tight

I was shocked. Nothing. Flat. Where was all the heartfelt feeling so richly steeped in the music? Not only that but the Boss had bad grammar. Reading him on paper, I thought he sounded, well, dumb. I was let down. Whatever I would write in my poetry class, it would not sound like Bruce.

Around this time, by chance I opened a book by John Updike—and out poured sentences bejeweled with commas and printed in Technicolor, as in this passage from his story “Separating.”

“Yet, a summer ago, as canary-yellow bulldozers gaily churned a grassy, daisy-dotted knoll into a muddy plateau, and a crew of pigtailed young men raked and tamped clay into a plane. This transformation did not strike them as ominous, but festive in its impudence; their marriage could rend the earth for fun.”

Now this was writing! The visual artist in me was enchanted. His sentences didn’t read as if scratched out in the dirt with a stick. His sentences were endless and ornate, like fancy, curly, golden lines on sensationally green Victorian wallpaper. Every word was “written.”

Even as I went on to finish my degree in art, I found myself writing. For years afterward, I referred to Updike’s *Trust Me* collection to study for technique and range in narratives. As my stories written in imitation of his rococo style and epiphany-capturing structure began to be published in prestigious journals such as *North American Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *The Iowa Review*, I grew bigheaded and overly confident. I scowled at the idea of master’s program in writing. And why not? My undergraduate degree wasn’t in English or writing, but still I was getting published. In fact, not six months after graduating with my art degree, I even got a job as a newspaper reporter for *The Fairfax Journal* by putting together a few mock news stories and pulling off a certain moxie in my interview. I was all the more smug. Writers aren’t made in classrooms, I told myself. They’re forged out in the real world or in their hovels, alone. Could

Miguel de Cervantes have been taught to write? Could Charles Dickens? Rudyard Kipling? If anything, writers were reclusive and miserable, like Faulkner, to name one, and this misery was all the knowledge they needed for their blood-encrusted words.

But I soon became frustrated with so-called journalistic objectivity because it made no room for my own personal perceptions. The more I reported, the more I wanted to write in first person, to include my own observations, views, and opinions, all of which ran contrary to a reporter's code of factual impartiality. Looking back, there may have been a Tom Wolfe-inspired hybrid of New Journalism I could have adopted, but at this particular publication, I saw only a future of plodding, fact-driven, same-sounding, overly structured, scant write-ups. As far as going into a master's program in writing, I remained skeptical of the value of it. Besides, it had just taken me seven years to get through the B.A. art program at GMU as a part-time student and full-time worker, so I was in no hurry for another college commitment.

Over the next decade, leaving both formal education and journalism behind, I moved around, working odd jobs, writing creatively as much as I could: photocopy clerk at night in D.C., office temp in Minneapolis, and innkeeper in Newport, Rhode Island. I had few friends and romanticized my isolation. I was a writer after all, on the trail of John Updike. What he could write, I could write better. I remained highly ambitious, too. After I published ten stories, I had to publish another twenty. Then thirty. I was cracking off publication credits like a kid with BB gun and pile of dead crows: *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Confrontation*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*, to name a few. What little money I earned went, in large part, to stamps for submissions.

Then I undertook a novel—and fell flat on my face. Manuscript after manuscript, revision after revision, each was rejected. I was dumbfounded by the comments. What was meant by narrative arc? Didn't plot exist necessarily? Rotating point of view—huh?

My lack of reading was clearly exposed. The fancy descriptive writing I had modeled after John Updike's *New Yorker* stories, when spread out over a hundred pages, left a void where plot and action should have been. My novel didn't develop. Worse, it repeated itself. Add to that a negative armchair review by my father, a former mailman, and I was humiliated, to say nothing of insulted. While reading one of my published stories, he creased the magazine in half, rapped it against his knee, and said, "Boy, your sentences—there're just too many words in them." He went on to scrunch up his face and shake his head as if having just bit into a lemon. "...too many damn commas, too." He craned forward in his chair and called out, "Jane, get in here!" as if my overdone writing were an emergency only my mother could handle.

My father had only a high school diploma, but language mattered to him in a down-to-earth way. To him, how a man spoke revealed his character as "the choice of an adjective is all but a moral decision," poet Mark Craver put it. To my father, a man's words should be few, have true aim, make perfect sense, and be humble all at the same time, and he should get them right on the first mouthful. No rewrites. Editors call these words spot-on. My father called it having a little gumption whenever you opened your mouth.

Not only didn't he recognize his own son in my writing, but it upset him that he didn't. Not to be cheeky about it, but what he would have recognized and saw fitting would have been a one-time, plainly written confession to our local priest, Father Hiltz, about how I had been a difficult son to raise, causing my poor mother and father grief. As far as my hoity-toity stories,

what spell was cast over me? He had not raised me to sound so important.

His reaction gave me pause. Was my writing false? Was its purpose unhealthy? Harmful? I had to be honest with myself. I wasn't John Updike. I didn't attend Harvard and Oxford on scholarships. I went to community college in rural Virginia. The truth was, I hadn't even read the classics by Austen, Conrad, Hemingway, Keats, and Milton. Shouldn't I read a good novel before I could expect to write one? Something was wrong with my lofty aspiration, seriously wrong.

I was left with questions that took me back to the starting point. What makes a writer? What's in his heart? Does he embody the truth? More important, what's his mission and what are his limits? Then there were more specific questions. What was my unique style? Should I agonize over every word? Or should I be frank and plainspoken like my father and others where I grew up?

Thinking hard about it, I discovered a correlation between my writing and my art. As a graphic artist, I had essentially been a copyist, working from clipart and photographs. Nothing really original was ever generated under my Rapidograph pen. Was this same unoriginality happening in my writing?

In my correspondence with publishers, I was referred to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, in the last chapter of which I found the commandment: "Write in a way that comes naturally...." While I understood the general idea, it gave rise to more questions. What if nothing comes naturally? Or what if what "comes naturally" is bad writing?

I decided I would take my questions to the source. I drove up to Ipswich, Massachusetts, where, nosing around the antique stores, I came across a local lady all too willing to gab about

the town's most famous resident, American author John Updike, including where he lived. Following her directions, I turned at the bridge outside town and took the snaky road through the trees. I was brave and excited until I passed through a high gate and looked up to see a majestic white mansion on the hill overlooking the cold blue Atlantic. My car lost its rev, and the courage in my chest turned to lead. Meanwhile, the driveway was delivering me right up to the gleaming white Doric columns that stood on either side of Mr. Updike's front door like well-uniformed sentries. It was evening, and I was slipping in during the rose-tinted hour between day and night. In an inglorious moment, I scampered out of my running car and up to his grand door, where I leaned my latest manuscript against the jamb so that the big envelope would plop down on the toes of his oxblood slippers when he emerged. In a no less inglorious moment, I scurried back to my car and zoomed away, my head swirling in disbelief. I had done it. Not very magnificently, but I done it.

Why didn't I just write him through his agent or publisher? After all he was well known to be public-friendly. For the same reason I had copied his writing style in the first place: insecurity with a dash of conceit.

Nonetheless, what he wrote back would change my life. But I would have to wait more than a year to hear from him.

~

Today, I can't think of a writing philosophy without first thinking of the reader, and before moving to Orlando a year ago, I spent eight years in New York City, learning all about the reader. Was it in the writerly tea lounges of Park Slope, Brooklyn? Was it in an internship at

Harper's Magazine? No, it was on the gloomy subway where I first heard language that, although spoken aloud, chiseled into my soul the basis of my writing conviction, the blood of my writing life.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentleman!” barked a gruff voice from somewhere amid the bundled up bodies and brooding, guarded stares on the 6 train rocking and lurching through lower Manhattan. There were groans all around me, and I knew why. Here was another of the city’s crazy homeless about to make a speech about life’s hardships to earn a bit of change.

“I apologize for interrupting you fine folks this afternoon...” the voice went on.

From my place of safety against the window, I sat peering through the standing bodies for this bigmouth no doubt wearing a bearskin of the city’s filth.

“I will take only a minute of your precious time, so that you all can get home to your families....”

In the filmy light of the subway car, I spotted him in a collage of straphangers. He was black, weather-beaten, and dirty, his clothes looking dragged through a dumpster.

“...my name is Jeff Peterson Wilt, and I live in a shelter on 2nd Avenue. I have two children.” He paused. “They don’t live with me.”

Many, I saw, went on reading. I couldn’t help but take notice of their statue-still gazes at the pages of their books. As absorbed as they had been before the interruption, they still were now. What focus! What concentration! Their attention would not be disrupted. This was reading under pressure. What in heaven’s name were they reading so indisturbably?

As the homeless man went on spouting about how he had lost his job, I scanned the subway car, taking in all the book titles I could make out--*The Honor of Spies, 5 Steps to*

Romantic Love, and *Music and the Mind*. I never forgot these three titles. Add to these all the eye-catching book jackets I could not make out, and there had to be at least a dozen readers in the subway car that day. What happened next would be a moment of epiphany, an “ah hah” the likes of which I would not experience again. Whatever I wrote in this life, I would believe in and write well enough to give me the confidence and courage to stand up on the public bus--right in the middle of the aisle!--and read powerfully aloud so that all the good folks would not read their books, but would instead listen raptly to what I was reading to them from mine. Where Mr. Jeff Peterson Wilt had failed, I would succeed. Call it a dare to myself. Call it another conceit. But it was a conviction my father and men like him would see as the damnedest headstrong attitude that might just work, surely give me more of a chance in the business than imitating a fancy-pants style of Updike writing I didn't know anything about.

I found my readers to write for: ordinary folks with no patience for self-absorbed writing, working stiffs who wanted crisp stories that moved along, like the bus or train. No delays, service disruptions, or route changes. Beginning-middle-end. Destination reached.

~

John Updike wrote to me, in response to my novel I had dropped at his doorstep fourteen months earlier, “There are many nice touches in these pages. Try to generate more suspense the reader is curious about. Keep writing. But don't keep bringing your work to me. I'm a dead-end. You need an editor.”

As I held his typewritten note in my hands, I could not believe what I was seeing. His typewriter had flying caps. He had left an “s” off “touches” and added the letter in blue pen. He missed a comma too--though who was I to make this assumption? He might be breaking a rule

at his discretion.

I was seeing something else. He was polite. He was brief. He wrote in short, normal sentences. Strange, of all the lengthy, elaborate sentences of his I had read over the years, these few short, plain ones were ones I understood best. He was, for the first time, real.

Then again he didn't make any sense. John Updike a dead-end? He could move publishing empires around with a phone call. Try to create more suspense? I wasn't writing a mystery. Was I?

Still, what a gentleman. The day I drove onto his property, he didn't send his Rottweilers after me, as a friend of mine imagined him doing. In the days afterward, he didn't have a detective visit my doorstep to warn me to stay away. He wasn't frightened by my intrusion at all. He was calm and courteous, and he took his sweet time answering.

I kept his note like a precious letter to save for centuries.

At the time, I was working at a literary agency in New York, learning all about how big publishing is an unforgiving, money-driven business. I had already been urged by agents to forget Updike's exquisitely vivid adjectives and in my novel "build a structure to hang my art on," said literary agent Jeff Herman. Make me care, all the agents were crying. Don't write tortuous, snakelike sentences, they said. Get in on the Toni Morrison style.

Amid all this New York palaver of writing, I was realizing that my voice came from my West Virginia roots, not from Brooklyn's parade of writers, not from pugs like Norman Mailer or upstarts like Rick Moody. Keep it true, in other words. All the artfully bundled phrases in the world, all the dense and sweetly rhythmic words, can't say the sky is blue the way "the sky is blue" can.

CHAPTER ONE

I was off for West Virginia in a purple Mercury Grand Marquis, apparently the only rental car left in south Park Slope late on a Saturday in spring. As I pulled down Sixth Avenue, the sun was falling between the black rooftops, casting an omen on my journey home. Was I really going back to West Virginia after all these years? I had no choice. My oldest brother, Steve, was dead. There would be a funeral.

It had been eleven years since I had been home, a record. Before that, six years. Before that, I visited home every few months in good faith. But every time, seeing my mentally ill oldest brother and the backward state I had come from left me feeling so miserable and sorry for myself that I was useless in my life elsewhere for some time afterward.

At some point over the years, I decided enough was enough. I could keep in touch by phone, but that was it. For me there could be no visiting West Virginia, period. Visiting was something I did with my dentist. In West Virginia, there were only reckonings.

Then, just last night, I called Steve at my mother's urging. His aortic valve, she said, was shrunken up from years of smoking and drinking, but apparently there was an operation that could save him, which he had been refusing to have done for some time. When I talked to him, he sounded out of his mind—going on about dying, making me promise to bury him beside Granddad. I had little chance of convincing him to have any operation. When I found out this morning that he had died at the hospital later last night, my first thought was—he knew was going to die, and he wanted to die.

It was hard to take Steve's health crisis and death as anything other than an act of deserved finality. For the last two decades, he had been holed up in a state-subsidized apartment behind the Wal-Mart in Alma, West Virginia, a hundred pounds overweight, doped up on every kind of "mental illness" medication the VA hospital could fill him up with. Steve was that guy on "COPS"—no teeth, no shoes, no shirt, hairy white beer belly hanging down over his dirty jeans, screaming and hollering in the street for Momma or Loretta Lou, only to whimper as the cops walked him like a child to the backdoor of the squad car. On that last visit home eleven years ago, I had thought—he's dead already.

By the time I got on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, it was dark. I found myself hemmed in by big, shiny-sided trucks, too scared to leave the safety of the middle lane, aiming that boat of a car between rows of glow-in-the-dark dashes and holding on for dear life. It had been a year or more since I had driven a car. I was a New York pedestrian; we didn't drive. The glare of shamrock-green signs all but blinded me while illuminated arrows were pointing in a thousand directions. Ten minutes of this—blinking pylons, bumper-scuffed concrete barriers crowding in close, looming overhanging bridges, all made worse by a herky-jerky ride over hard ridges in the cut-up roadway—and I had had enough.

On 95 South, I entered even heavier traffic. Off to the right was the Manhattan skyline accented by the silver rocket of the Chrysler Building. I couldn't help but think of my girlfriend, Lisa. New York City was our backyard, but did we ever see it? Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Guggenheim, and Museum of Natural History—did we ever go? Had we once taken an afternoon and gone out to the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island? How could we live in New York City like that?

My cell phone was switched off. This afternoon we had another big fight. She was relentless with her questions. Why was I insisting on driving all night? Why not fly? Why indeed. As much as I tried to explain it to her, she didn't understand. Alma, West Virginia, was no place to go to swiftly. No place to enter in the daylight either. Bad memories, heavy feelings, dread and worry—it was best to tiptoe there from state to state, under the cover of darkness.

An hour out of New York, the large, glowing-green signs were blurring by—East Brunswick, Trenton, Levittown. With my hands glued to the wheel, I became one with the car, my back and buttocks formed into the upholstery, which was formed into the metal frame, which was formed into the roadway. As soon as I settled back for the long haul, I hit the outskirts of Newark—or at least I thought it was Newark, which made me wonder if I was lost, because how could Newark be so close to 95? Or was it? So many signs streaking contrails of confusion.

Down in the dark Atlantic seaboard I drove, the nighttime world a gigantic flashy mobile over my head. Traffic thickened without warning, rushing in close on both sides, a strange comfort in the closeness. Then, as rapidly it thickened, all the cars were gone, and I was by myself in the night.

I switched on the radio only to be startled by the harsh noise in the quiet car, and quickly switched it back off. At times I was so lost in thought I could have plunged into the black waters of an unmapped bay or barreled out onto the tarmac of some small airport. Other times, headlight glare on signs became so blinding I wouldn't have known if I had made a wrong turn a hundred miles back and was now on the outskirts of Cincinnati.

But I was nowhere near Cincinnati. Looming closer and closer was a gleaming-blue sign

over the highway: "Welcome to Pennsylvania." I felt myself passing a kind of checkpoint. West Virginia, which bordered Pennsylvania, was just ahead and around the corner.

I pulled over into the Senator John McCain Rest Area. The dash clock read 2:13. I found myself doing math in my head. Exactly thirty minutes until exactly twenty-four hours since Steve died. He was pronounced dead at 2:43 a.m.

I could still hear my mother's distraught voice from this morning.

"I just have to believe Steve's in a better place. He has to be. He was never happy in this life. We all know that. Never."

As I listened to her, I could also hear my brother's voice from last night. It was like a transistor in my head. "Don forget me, bro."

Sitting in my car at the rest area, I discovered a GPS, suction cup and all, wrapped up in the glove box by its charger cord. I plugged it in and began tapping lighted icons. If I read it correctly, West Virginia, or at least where I was going, was not just ahead or around the corner. I still had 242 miles, or three hours and twenty-one minutes, to go.

After a quick trip to the restroom, I hit the highway again. The road south was smooth and focused, firing a ray gun of glow-in-the-dark dashes into the smoldering night ahead. Shiny blue signs for McDonald's and Wendy's, one after another, passed by. Coffee would be nice, but I liked my low-key, sleepy mind and the ever-changing mental stream of stupors, trances, and dreams...Steve's lean figure from long ago, in the blue and white Alma High track jersey, running up ahead along the shoulder, wavy and breaking apart in the far reaches of my headlights, leading me home.

I glanced at the dash clock—2:43—then at the GPS—203 miles, or three hours and

twenty-six minutes remaining.

~

In the amber glow of daybreak, the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains loomed through the fading night like a giant brontosaurus on the horizon. I cracked the window, and cold early morning air rushed in. I was here. I had survived to return to this loamy, wonderful place.

What if I turned around and went home right now before it all got too murky and complicated? I took my foot off the gas and let the big vehicle drift, the highway roaring under my tires.

At Mechanicsburg, I exited 95 and onto a new highway. President George Bush Highway, the sign read. I thought of Lisa, my liberal New York Jewish girlfriend. She'd definitely smirk. Off to the left was a funky modern church with an illuminated, needle-shaped, aluminum-looking spire. To the right, a Galaxy Cybercafé and Hummer dealership. Then a Wal-Mart appeared, followed by a Best Buy and Dr. Tiche's Stand-up MRI.

Stand-up MRI?

I came to stop at one of those mega stoplights—two red lights and two greens controlling four lanes of traffic. Bob's Big Boy, Chesapeake Bay Lobster House, Denny's—I could see two McDonald's arches without moving my eyes. In the same eyeful was a Tom Williams Lexus. I could remember when there was nothing here but cornfields in every direction.

I rode on. College Hill Cleaners, Security Savings Bank, Jefferson RE/MAX, Lucas Veterinary Care, AIG Advisor Group, Jo-Ann Fabrics, Shakey's Pizza—what in the hell had happened to West Virginia?

Taking Rt. 14 south, I spiraled around through a blurry tunnel of trees before shooting under a green-graffiti-scrawled stone underpass and into open daylight. My foot came off the gas. The houses along the Old Tug River—they hadn't changed in thirty years. Rooftops, driveways, and clusters of trees—I knew their shapes and outlines like my own living room furniture. Scenes were preserved like paintings. The split-rail fence at the 617 turnoff, after all this time, had the very same three broken timbers in a row, each falling to the ground like a hatch mark across the two above it. How could the wood not have rotted away? The sign for Ronny's Gas was still red and flaking. How could it not have fallen or at least be dangling? The ranch house on the hill had the same worn circle of ground around its flagpole—I could remember riding along this road as a boy in my father's '71 Dodge Dart, hitting this bump I was now bouncing over, looking up at that worn circle of ground, and thinking, "I bet their dad was pissed at them for wearing down that good grass."

An old, familiar melancholy returned. It was the same feeling from my youth, back where it had left off. The farther I drove, the more unsettling it became. Did sorrow live in these hills, in the black rocks and brittle brown brush? Did it somehow kill Steve? All around me, mountains were streaked brown like stained commodes, and skeleton-shell barns flashed by, as if retreating. In that moment, I felt that this land had never stopped waiting for me to return, that like an enemy, it had me for life.

Coming to stop at Four Corners crossroads in southern Mendon County, I looked warily to my left. My father lived in that direction, about ten miles down. He and my mother, though still married, had been living separately for the last twenty years, she in town, he way out here. When I pulled straight ahead, no longer did turning around at any time and retreating to New

York seem an option.

At the crest over the Bluestone River, I let the big car drift. In the valley below was St. Mary's Cemetery, hundreds and hundreds of white stones softly dotting the slope. All my relatives were buried down there, and soon Steve would be too, under the scraggly black tree on the far side, their headstones grouped together. Steve would fit in so well. There was our cousin Ritchie who OD'ed on painkillers at thirty-one. A year later, his older brother, Darrell, buried beside him, was beheaded in a car accident. Then there was Uncle Bobby who died of carbon monoxide poisoning two days before Christmas.

The outskirts of Alma were spoiled by a knot of convenience stores—a Walgreens, with its curly neon-red signage, sat back under a shelf of Blue Ridge sugar maples like an abomination. Gilmore Street, the main street in town, still had the charming small town look I remembered. Houses were dandy and storybook, with peach-colored trellises, whitewashed basement blocks, and spinning duck-wing mailboxes. A new barbershop pole decorated the corner like a giant candy cane. Alma Junior High—now Alma Middle School—had a new look, too. The plain hulk of brown blocks was cheered up with blue-trimmed windows, brilliant yellow flowers in front, and an eye-catching electronic marquee in the center of the grounds that read, in running red letters, “Tigers Defeat Bulldogs...20-7...Go Tigers!” I had to smile. Alma had gone modern.

My mother's backstreet was a different story. I drove over deep potholes and broken glass and under power lines twisted and gobbed on leaning telephone poles. At a sharp bend in the dirt road, my mother's house came into view—I stopped the car. A sharp line cut down the center of my chest. I was home.

First thing I noticed was the big refrigerator on the front porch, tucked away behind the overgrown bushes and porch columns. The chimney had collapsed on one side, leaving a hole in the center you could see blue sky through. On the slope of the rust-blotched, silver tin roof lay a smattering of bricks, sprawled out and sliding down. Gutters, window sills, and the brick sides of her house—all were overrun by spidery vines that, burnt to a crisp by summers past, sparkled like copper wire. Rusted paint cans were tossed about in the grass, and an old-time chrome car bumper was propped up against the house.

What kind of son lets his mother live this way?

I pulled over in front of my mother's house, behind what had to be her car—a sprawling old American make with dull-green paint and faded, fat whitewall tires. Seagull-white bird crap, as clumpy as flour, was splattered across the trunk, and for an antenna, there was a bent clothes hanger, rusted at that. Straight ahead in the distance, beyond the rutted road, a smoky mist was settled over the worn-out little houses, and a lush blue covered the mountains beyond. This was the heart of West Virginia, the holler culture of Appalachia, even though there hadn't a hillbilly here in fifty years.

I turned off my car and listened to the quiet settling in around me. The dash clock read 7:41. I looked up at myself in the mirror. Oily, pale, unshaven from driving all night, my eyes smoldering dark, and my hair dragged down over my head—I was no gift for my mother to see.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a movement on my mother's porch—a fat figure in a dirty denim jacket and blue jeans was staring down at me in my car.

My brother!

My god, it was him! Curly copper-red hair, scraggly beard, slit-like eyes, expressionless

mouth, small chin, pale complexion—Steve was alive!

CHAPTER TWO

Steve and I were staring eyeball to eyeball. How could this be happening? Was it all a sick practical joke? No way my mother would lie about something like Steve dying.

I fumbled with the armrest buttons in an attempt to power down my window, but ended up unlocking and re-locking my door instead. Having stepped off the front porch in the meantime, he was walking up the sidewalk toward me. When I finally got my window down and looked out, I saw not Steve, but my middle brother, Greg.

“Hey, captain,” he said, with a fleshy smile.

“Hey,” I said back, catching my breath inside.

“Been a few.”

“A few.”

I had trouble looking at him—I had trouble looking away too. He was eerie. He resembled not just Steve but our father as well. He was a crossbreed of the two of them, Steve in beefy body and unprepossessing features, Dad in angry red ears and bullet-shaped head. Strange, when we were young, he hadn’t looked like Steve. Nor did he much when I was home last. My first thought was: this was what he got for staying in jerkwater Alma all his life.

I opened my big door, which was heavy and looked enormous as it swung open.

“That your car?” he asked as I stepped out.

“It’s a rental.”

Were his construction boots elevated? I didn’t remember him being so tall.

“Rental?” he said, his lips yanked up on one side as if by a fish hook, a quirky snarl I didn’t remember him having.

Awkward seconds passed as I waited for him to get past the fact I was driving a rented car. It had been eleven years since we had seen each other. Shouldn’t we be saying the normal things? *It’s good to see you. Wow, it’s been a long time. You look like shit.*

Slowly he walked the length of the car, his eyes going high and low.

“Mercury Grand Marquis, huh?” he said, reading the emblem on the front fender. “You see this?”

As I stepped toward him over a bed of crunchy gravel, I remembered why he and I didn’t talk much. We never liked each other. I was the baby in the family, and he was the forgotten middle child. But there was more. Much more.

For the moment, though, he was being friendly. He had a big clownish face as he stood pointing at my front grill. What, was a dead possum stuck to my bumper? Or radiator fluid leaking from my dirty New York car?

I peered around the front of the car. Shiny bumper, dusty hood—everything looked normal and car-like to me. I glanced back at him, my heartbeat racing as I stood within inches of him after all these years.

“Look again,” he said, pointing down, his meaty hand dangerously close to my face.

I looked again—I looked harder. Still, nothing.

“P-E-E-U-6-3,” he said, reading off the license plate. Then he grinned straight at me. “Get it? Pee-yew 63.”

Yes, I got it. Something stinks, so it must be my birth year, 1963. Ha-ha, very funny.

I stepped back from him. God, he was strange. He had always been, too. Back in junior high, he once ate a whole lemon—bit right into the bright-yellow rind, then proceeded to chew it up and swallow it down in half a dozen face-wrenching bites, just to impress some girl who, as it turned out, wasn't even watching. Instead, he impressed half the guys in school. They looked at him, at first amazed, then a little weirded out.

“Mom'll want to see you, he said, becoming serious.

I nodded, the moment turning to duty.

“I can't believe it,” I said, shaking my head. “Steve gone.”

His eyes narrowed on me.

“I can. You weren't around to see how bad he had got...pissing everywhere in public, fightin'.”

We were both quiet for a moment, as seemed appropriate. Then he turned and started away.

“Later,” he muttered.

“Whoa, just like that?”

When he turned back around, I remembered there was another reason he and I didn't like the sight of each other. It was in his cold eyes, our terrible secret.

~

In the months after Steve was first institutionalized when we all were just out of high school, Greg and I went to see him. As Dracula's castle is located deep in Transylvania, so Weston State Hospital was located deep in the mountains of West Virginia. The ride was long, the conversation strained. Maybe Greg thought he was supposed to be me—to have gotten

Mom's love, to have gone to college, to have moved out of the state. All his effort went into showing me I was not good enough, not smart enough. Anything I could do, he could do better. All my effort went into making my comments easy on his pride, in keeping his disdain for me on the far side of his face.

Weston was a castle-like fortress of rock on a hill, with grim, dark halls, deadbolts on doors, buzzers sounding everywhere, and bare bulbs overhead, raking harsh light across walls that looked scratched by the fingernails of patients. Milling about in the main area when we arrived were other visitors waiting on the day's visiting hours to begin. Some had homemade cookies in tuperware. One had a store-bought cake. Fudge with vanilla stars. Greg and I were empty-handed.

On the far side of a blue line painted across the floor were patients in red-striped pajamas, filed into place. Most were smoking and staring glassy-eyed at us. It was as if the hospital had just had a big sleepover for fat, strange-faced adults, and we were the parents picking them up.

Our brother, along with a few more patients, shuffled out of a deep doorway and joined the others. Steve was dressed in the same striped pajamas, wearing a white wristband, his head down and hair tussled up. He looked fifty years old—pale, unshaven, with baggy, lidded eyes.

As soon as the guards allowed it, patients began crossing the line to visit with loved ones. Most hugged. All around us they were hugging. Except us. Greg and I, barely drifting closer to our brother, were just standing there with our arms by our sides, too shy and childlike to step up and hug our brother.

The hugging went on and on. So much hugging, it almost seemed a kind of custom. The longer we stood just there, the more conspicuous we became.

Here we were two hours into the mountains, having ridden past miles of scraggly countryside dotted with rundown houses and rivers filled with slow muddy water—into the poorest part of the state—and we didn't know the first thing these so-called backward West Virginians knew to do once inside these horrible walls: to hug their loved one.

Soon the guards were eyeing us. Even Steve, with his weak penlight eyes, managed a clear squint and a sorrowful smile as if realizing that his younger brothers were still scared boys. Eventually we inched up to him and said hello. Words were heavy, painful, and few. What in the hell do you say to your brother in a mental hospital? How are the accommodations, bro?

Then something worse happened. I glanced at Greg. He glanced at me. Steve, as drugged up as he was, picked up on the message passed between us.

“Shit, you guys ain't leaving already?” he said.

We couldn't look at him. We looked at each other instead. It was a relief to see Greg, with his clean-shaven face and clear eyes.

“Take me home with you all. Get me out of here,” he whined.

“We have to get back,” Greg said, backing up.

“Shit, already? You all ain't leaving me here, are ya?”

The guards kept watching us. Greg, wiggled out, looked ready to cry. I wanted to cry, too.

“Ssh,” I whispered.

“Fuck ssh!” Steve blurted out.

The fat guard at the main desk stood up.

“This ain't my fault. Tell Mom. Don't leave me here!”

All I wanted was to get away from him—run like hell out of the place. He was ugly. Disgusting.

So what if we had just ridden the humpback mountains for two hours. Besides, why stay? What else was there to say? Keep your chin up? Get well soon? Steve was history. Mentally fucked up, belligerent with everyone—everybody was fed up with him.

We left—ran right out of there. The car couldn't get us out the mountains fast enough, and the ride home was eerily quiet, sealed in disgrace.

That day it was clear. There was no love in my family.

~

I watched Greg vanish long and far across our mother's backyard. That was my brother, the X factor in my family, the unexplainable blip on humanity's big screen—no girlfriend, no friends anyone knew of, according to my mother. If Steve was dead because there was no love in my family, then Greg would live forever because he didn't need any.

Facing the house I had grown up in, seeing its brick sides wind-pitted and vine-covered, its windows blistered and its roof scorched, I realized I had forgotten what old looked like. All around me in this world was new—new roads, new cars, new houses. Nothing was allowed to get old anymore.

I knocked on my mother's old metal storm door, and the white front door soon trembled and cracked open—and there, through the glass, was my mother. She had white hair, not red. It was the strangest sight. Her hairstyle was the same as always, a Mary Tyler Moore look, only now it looked spray-painted white.

All the worries that had built up in me while in New York were firing up and down my

body—that too much time was passing and I would never see my mother again. My mother was just the opposite. The surprise had come and gone from her face by the time she got the storm door open, which scraped and dragged over the concrete jamb.

“Good lord, you drove all the way down without calling once?” she said, jabbing the sticky door open. “...through the night, too, from the looks of it—Mark, I thought you had better judgment.”

I stood smiling, despite being doused by cantankerous comments. She was smaller than ever, stoop-shouldered, and just as jowly as she had warned. She hadn't aged into my rosy-cheeked grandmother. Instead, she looked puffy from medication, which left her skin stretched and tinged red, especially over her cheekbones.

“Goodness, you look thin,” she said.

When she stepped up and we gave each other an embrace, I felt an awful hump in her back under her flannel shirt, like a cantaloupe. She had warned me. She had Grandma's osteoporosis. There was a filmy glaze on her eyes as well, and she seemed to focus just inches from her face, almost in cross-eyed fashion. Her cataracts. They had been getting worse for years. To make me out, she peered at me as if through a single line drawn by her fingertip down a fogged-up window.

“And you're pale too. Have you been unwell?”

“Unwell? No.”

“Lisa with you?” she asked, peering around me.

“No, uh, she couldn't come.”

“Oh?” She raised her cloudy eyes to me. “You two didn't have words over this, did

you?”

My intuitive mother fought some more with the storm door before putting her leg against it like a chock. The sharp edge of the door answered back with a deep crease in her brown corduroy pant leg.

“Mark, good lord, can you please, *please* fix this one H of a door for me while you’re here? I can’t get your SOB of a brother to raise a hand for me.” When she poked her head past me and glanced up and down the porch, her white hair brushed my ear. It felt like a wire-brush. “I see he’s run off as usual.” She pulled her head back in. “Well, I must warn you—expect a run-down house here.” Leaving the storm door in my hands, she stepped back inside. “The upstairs bathroom doesn’t work, hasn’t for years. You’ll have to use the small one out in the addition...”

As I followed her in, I was peering beyond her snowy white head into the murky interior.

“Watch your step on this floor. There’s boards loose—oh, my poor boards, maybe you can fix them?”

“Of course.”

She stopped and turned to me.

“Of course?” She smiled, but her teeth, uneven and yellowed, were not in her favor. “You sure didn’t stick around here very long growing up, did you? Your father was commenting on that just the other day.”

It was the moment of truth. Never would she be so honest again. First moments were like this.

Meanwhile, I found myself in an awkward place, halfway inside the house, the angry

storm door jabbing at my back. I knew to glance away, and first thing I noticed in the living room was Steve's high school graduation picture on the cherry coffee table. There he was, as he had looked so long ago. If the gods had blessed John Travolta by touching their thumbs to his chin and granting him his famous cleft, then they had favored Steve even more by running their fingernails around his lips and creating a sleek, famous-looking Errol Flynn mouth. It took me a long second to pull my eyes off him. My mother, without moving her head, knew just what I was looking at.

"I know, Mark," she said, her voice cradled down in sympathy for both of us. "He had his whole life ahead of him back then, poor soul."

We passed sorrowful looks, and my return home seemed to begin at this moment.

I stepped on inside. Against the wall facing the street was the antique leaded-glass bookcase Grandma had always cherished, and inside still were my father's precious issues of *American Rifleman*, years and years of them pressed together, except for a short section of top shelf, which held books. I zeroed in on the white spines, taking a big step toward them.

"Hey, our old Time-Life books."

"Yes, lordy, Steve sure loved those, didn't he?"

I leaned over and read the spines. *Age of God-Kings*, *Library of Nations*, *The World We Live In*.

"Hey, where's that big three-book set about the pyramids?" I glanced back at her.

"Remember?"

She said yes.

Steve bragged that one day he'd discover a room of priceless pottery under the Giza

pyramids and decorate his millionaire's mansion with ancient vases, bowls, and cups glazed in bright colors. His big talk used to make Mom laugh. All Dad said was, "We'll see, buster."

On the other side of the bookcase was the lemon-yellow sofa Granddad had passed away on. The story was, he fell asleep on it one winter afternoon and never woke up. When he didn't answer his phone the next day, Aunt Marion, driving down from Mount Mission, found him curled up on it like a baby. Today, it sat out from the wall a foot or more like his casket on display.

I went on glancing around the room like a visitor seeing it for the first time. Eleven years ago, I had been this same glancing visitor, as I had been six years before that, too. When it came to returning to this house, my life, it seemed, kept resetting itself.

"Now watch your step everywhere," my mother went on warning. "Steve, bless his heart, fell on those stairs just last month." She turned to me, looking bewildered. "I wonder if that caused him injury somehow."

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Oh, and if you go up into the attic for any reason," she said, with a screwy grin. "Your poor mother has bats in her attic."

Bats in her attic, bats in her belfry. I heard the pun in her words.

"Bet you think your mother's crazy," she said, laying it bare.

She could have been, yes. Meanwhile, pictures, vases, and tattered old books were causing my eyes to ping-pong around the room from memory to memory—a painted wooden figurine of the Virgin Mary, a shimmering-pink carnival glass vase with an elephant's trunk neck, a Charlie Brown snowflake paperweight. The floor was yet another memory. The oak

boards, black from years of tracked-in grime, came from scrapped barges that once ran the same hard lumber up and down the Bluestone River. I was standing on old native wood, the skin of the region's bygone timber industry.

"Now about your brother," she said.

She was steadied against the antique pie safe, the tin panels of which, decorated with perforated circles, squares, and diamonds, brought back the feeling of Christmas.

"He's not down at Eackle's Funeral Home where you might think."

I stared at her, not sure what I was hearing.

"Mark"—her voice came to me on a straight line—"we think it's best that your brother be cremated."

At first, the word didn't sound like itself, but instead like something to do with food: cremated chicken soup, cremated apple pie. Then the true meaning came in sharply—fire, industrial-sized oven, Steve vaporized to ash, gone, no casket, no body in the ground, nothing.

Poof!

I stood there at a loss. Cremate Steve? Why? No one in our family had been cremated.

"But Mom—"

"Mark, he didn't have any money or insurance, and we sure don't." She leaned against the pie safe. "Lord, he hadn't worked since that Wal-Mart job, and they sure didn't give him any insurance. Certainly no retirement."

Retirement? I wanted to laugh. Steve never started to live.

"Anyway, there's more," she said, taking a moment to straighten out the lace cloth covering the top of the pie safe. "Now I don't want you to think by any means that this has been

a wasted trip for you, but you might as well know now, there's not going to be a service either."

All of a sudden I felt exhausted. I wanted to sit down, lie down. No funeral? No service at all?

"Your father has decided it's best. Steve didn't have any friends. He was just so sick for years. The only 'friends' he had were those blankety-blank drunks at that bar."

While she fussed with the small picture frames, candles, and ceramic hand bells that decorated the lace cloth and pie safe, I glanced back at Steve's picture, and the sight of him, youthful and clean, sent a cold line through my heart.

"But he said he wanted to be buried."

She was silent for a second.

"What's that? Say again."

I stepped closer.

"The other night when I spoke to him. *Buried*. Buried near Granddad. On the hill. He said so."

"Oh, good lord! *My Dad?* That boy knew better than to say that." She started toward the kitchen door, stopping and saying over her shoulder, "Mark, I'm so sorry, he shouldn't have bothered you with that nonsense. Now, please, about your old room. I'm sorry, but I had to some move boxes in there. So it's cluttered, and it gets cold up there at night, even this time of the year..."

I drifted over to the Charlie Brown paperweight on the bookshelf and peered in through the cloudy water. There was poor little stupid baldheaded Charlie Brown, still trapped inside, still puzzled about existence after all these years. He was bundled up in the same water-logged

winter jacket and Christmas tree-green scarf, Snoopy beside him, a faded red empty food dish clamped deep in his mouth, looking up at his master with still-angry, inverted-apostrophe eyes. I picked up the paperweight and shook it, and my mind obliterated in the sparkling blizzard.

“Mom, where’s he now?” I asked.

I turned to see her face flush with a shade of fear.

“Where is who now?”

“Steve, Mom.”

“Well, we can only hope the good Lord’s”—she broke off and looked at me with sharp eyes—“oh, you mean...his body?”

When I nodded, her head drifted down.

“St. William’s Crematorium, over in Randolph County.”

The moment felt dreamlike.

“Now I can fix you some breakfast.” She stood in the kitchen doorway. “There’s not much. You always liked Corn Total.” Her voice came down a notch. “I have that.”

Holding Charlie Brown in my hand, I nodded. Corn Total would be fine.

CHAPTER THREE

I was home—home in my mother’s house after more than a decade away, smack-dab in my old bedroom, in Aunt Helen’s fancy poster bed that had been moved in here after she died. Dour old oak dressers, three of them, filled one side of the room, crowded together. A stack of cardboard boxes rose up on the other side of the bed, all but walling me up. On the floor around the bed were piles of yellowed newspapers, scores of parrot-green Dollar Plus shopping bags, and a handful of black wooden picture frames leaning against the footboard.

The sunlight beyond the window was intensely bright. What time was it? How long had I slept?

I dropped my legs over the side of the bed and walked trancelike out into the hall, stopping at the first door I came to. Steve’s old room. The brown marble doorknob rattled when turned, and the door floated open on chilly-black wrought-iron hinges. Curtains on the lone window inside were yellower than ever, the drawn shade browner, and the sill all the more heavily painted.

The trouble with Steve started when he went crazy with the gun at this window. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* The gunshots hammered the chalk-white walls, making the frame of the old house tremble. Blackbirds burst out of the trees below, flapping up past the window, squawking—shrieking. More flapped out of the dilapidated church tower over on St. Barnaby Street. The shuddering bangs continued so steadily that, waking in my bed on that muggy June morning so long ago, I had timed my cringes to them, squeezing my eyes shut tight, fingers in my ears.

Dad's wild shouts filled the hall. By the time I got to Steve's door, Dad had slapped and kicked Steve to the floor and stripped the hunting rifle from his hands. My brother's face was beaten red. My father's was savage, with lines of fear and rage drawn down around his mouth.

Within minutes it seemed, the town police were charging through our backyard, stomping down Mom's prized, bell-shaped orange tulips. One cop put his foot through our bathroom window, his big black boot ripping down her daisy-embroidered white window sheers, which he then dragged by his toe out into the living room, like a gooey cobweb.

In no time police were stepping all over our house in their uniforms, radios crackling. One stood over Steve's bed, cocking and re-cocking the lever on the hunting rifle, kicking out rocket-shaped bullets. Bullet and bullet landed harmlessly down on the blue unicorn quilt that had taken my mother months to make. Mom stood back, gnawing on her fingernails, horrified at the sight of long copper-plated bullets falling on Steve's bed. Greg and I, barely in junior high, were crowded together in a corner in our pajamas and bare feet.

Half the morning cops scoured the street. Four shots had hit the side of Mr. Waller's place. Three went through the front door of Pete Lancaster's house. The headlights of Dennis Faraday's VW had been drilled straight through like bull's eyes, one bullet per light. In all, fourteen shell casings were found on the floor of Steve's bedroom.

"Just what were you shooting at, son?" Sherriff Davidson, sweaty from the sticky morning, eventually asked Steve.

Handcuffed in the backseat of a squad car, his face brutally red and sullen, Steve never answered, never said a word. But Greg and I knew. *Everything.*

I closed the door to Steve's old bedroom as easily as it had opened and took the narrow,

wooden steps downstairs, holding on to the rattly handrail. Step after creaky step, I was reminded why my mother was so ill-tempered. It started with these stairs. Crooked and steep, they descended as if into a dungeon. Grandma had nicknamed the house “WK” for “woman killer” because of what these steps did to a young homemaker’s knees as she carried laundry baskets up and down over the years.

Halfway down, the walls, untouched by daylight, were a deep, cold blue. As I child, I had often hidden here, and the step I had crouched on still showed wear, the dark oak varnish gone, leaving a scuffed, lighter shade of brown. It had always felt like a safe place to huddle, the yelling above and below being faint and far away.

Crossing the living room, I called for my mother. I passed candles, ceramic jars, spindle-shaped table legs, portly vases, and picture frames. In the low kitchen doorway, a fresh coat of cream-white paint flashed down the wall, except for a three-inch-wide strip of yellowed old white paint left running up the doorjamb. In this span of old paint were little penciled horizontal lines, along with scribbled names and dates, at different heights, densest about shoulder-high.

_ Steve 2/14/73

_ Greg 5/5/76

_ Mark 12/13/75

Our heights growing up, all recorded on this wall. Steve’s handwriting was always so fancy, like an artist’s. I brought my finger close the pencil lead he had pressed in so long ago, but didn’t dare touch my oily fingertip to the precious remains of it.

The kitchen looked unchanged—paisley embroidered seat cushions on cane chairs, chocolate-dark antique kitchen cupboard, and old sandy-yellow walls covered with tin wall

plates of roosters and ducks, in murky, grease-layered watercolors.

I stopped in front of the round kitchen table. There, at mealtimes, our father complained about everything from my mother's dried salmon cakes to his boss at the vending machine plant. How many times he had brought his fist down against that table, causing dishes and flatware to jump. Steve sat in harm's way, to my father's right, within easy reach of his swift backhands.

Today, in the center of the table, stood a Jesus figurine, its plastic robed arms outstretched. Tilted back against it was the I ♥ New York postcard I had sent to my mother nearly eleven years ago. The silhouette of lower Manhattan showed the Twin Towers still standing.

To check the backyard for my mother, I headed through the cool, dim smokehouse, where I came to a plastic trashcan filled with brown empty beer bottles. In the sunlight streaming down through the door window ahead, each brown bottle looked filled with candlelight, a church shrine to Steve's drinking. On the floor beside this trashcan of glowing beer bottles was a metal bucket brimful with yellow sand stabbed from every angle by cigarette butts. Mom said Steve spent his Friday nights here drinking and smoking.

He used to overfill the little ashtray in my VW Bug, crushing out cigarette after cigarette until building an acrid, smoldering pile. This was during my early twenties, when I'd drive from D.C., where I was living at the time, to Alma on weekends to see him. The state had him in a one-bedroom apartment behind the old Hecht Plaza in Jeffersonville, a step up from the group home where he had been for years previously. Weston State Hospital, by this time, had become a bad memory for everyone.

On those weekends, we ate at the new McDonald's or went to Sally's Flea Market and

walked around. The whole time, sadness hung from him like a scruffy coat. He muttered about the injustice of our childhood, how Dad had hit him and yelled at him the most. I found myself in nurturing mode, telling him not to feel depressed, to try to make goals for himself, to find a small job he'd enjoy, maybe take a class at Alleghany College. Baby steps, I said.

If we ran into someone we knew from school, he made no effort to cheer up—no phony smile, no cheery personality, just a flabby, drooped face and lidded eyes. Part of the problem was the medications dulling his brain, fogging his thoughts. But he was also missing something inside. Fight. Like when you're on your bike on a hill and have to stand on the pedals and pull with all your worth on the handlebars—drive your legs, twist your body, grunt, fight to get over the rise. Steve laid his bike over and sat down.

What he lacked, I always thought, was a good healthy dose of vanity. Didn't it anger him to be sad? Didn't it piss him off to have his good mind fogged up with shitty feelings? To have yellow teeth? To have people repulsed by you? It would me. It would anyone I knew too.

If only he cleaned up his appearance, lost weight, and quit smoking, if only he dressed the part of success and threw a cheerful tone in his voice, not sound down or negative, the world would smile with him. He could fake it until he made it, as it were. Why couldn't he? I was.

I was miserable and frantic from one moment to the next. Mood swings. Fear of being alone. Whirlpools of hateful thinking. "I don't know how you keep from committing suicide," a friend said in utter consternation of me.

Everything dark inside Steve was also inside me. We were brothers after all. When it came to nightmares and painful memories, we had matching sets. Only I had a slight edge in keeping myself together, thanks to being the youngest and coming along a few years after him,

when my father's backhands were losing a degree of strength and range. But if I hung around Steve too long, self-loathing would capture me from the inside out too.

Call it survival. Call it abandonment. Steve was history, and it was every son for himself. I would keep a distance from my brother for more than a decade. Once again there was no heroic love in me.

When I saw him eleven years ago, he was far worse. Mom said he was shoplifting from Wal-Mart, junk food and shoes of all things. Check his apartment, she said. So I did. In his closet were boxes and boxes of Little Debbie's Zebra Cakes, twenty, thirty boxes, along with a pile of brand-new shoes, none with a box—sneakers, loafers, sandals, dress shoes, hiking shoes, flip-flops, rainboots, workboots, cowboy boots. The damnable thing was, they were all too small for him, two or three sizes too small, for a boy. Little Debbie I could see. But the shoes were bizarre. Mom said it was a clear sign of schizophrenia, based on what she had read. I hated considering it. But it couldn't be easily explained away otherwise. Even Steve would say only a nut would do such a thing.

From the smokehouse, I stepped out into the hot sunlight of the backyard, where I flipped open my cell and called Lisa.

"There you are," she said.

I gave her a second of silence before grimly saying, "It's a mistake, Lisa."

She gave me the same second of silence back.

"So that means you're there?"

"And I'm leaving."

"Okay, well, that's your choice. You have no trouble making those."

I stepped across the yard, my sneakers whipping through high thistle grass, until coming to a stop beside a trash barrel rusted bright-orange and stuffed with flattened cardboard boxes.

“There’s not gonna be a funeral, okay?”

I could picture Lisa’s narrow-set, gem-black eyes hardening, her carefully tweezed brows creasing down, and her pale forehead breaking into wavy lines.

“So, what, they’re just gonna leave him in the morgue, or whatever you use down there? Shack? Tent?”

“They’re gonna cremate him.”

She was quiet for a second.

“So that’s their choice.”

She knew full well what Steve had said to me last night on the phone about wanting to be buried. She was just being a bitch.

“Maybe it’s something Catholic,” she said. “Did you think to ask?”

Catholic? Just the opposite. In this town, being buried was Catholic. At last count, Alma had one grocery store but three funeral homes, four if you counted the historic McConnell Funeral Parlor. A glass-sided, horse-drawn hearse still sat in front of it, complete with gas lanterns.

Just outside town was the Walgamuth Burial Vault Company, and over in Peabury, twelve miles down Rt. 21, was the Peabury Casket Company. Being buried was big business around here, to say nothing of a way of life.

Clicking sounds filled the phone, and I knew what they were from. Lisa just hooked a wave of her long hair behind her ear, rattling one of her blue topaz Star of David earrings that I

had given her for her last birthday. At the same time, birds were making a racket in the trees around me—buzzy sounds, trilled sounds, songbird sounds, all going faster, slower, louder, softer.

“You there? Hello...? Mark?”

“Yes, I’m here!”

“Don’t shout at me!”

I wasn’t shouting. I could barely hear her. I moved farther out across the grass, finding a half-buried railroad crosstie to stand on.

“You could have called me this morning. Or last night. I know you think turning your phone off is somehow defying me, but it’s actually cowardice. There may be no love between us, but you can still be considerate,” she said.

How many deep breaths must I take when breathing itself felt like suffocating? How could I hate my girlfriend?

“Anyway,” she went on, “cremate seems so....”

I sat down on the crosstie, feeling the hard wood against my rump. “Mean? Heartless?” I slouched over, stretching out my back and legs, pushing my sneakers through the splintery, bluish grass. “Wrong? Cruel? Take your pick.”

“No, more like...unceremonial.”

I raised an eye. She picked her words well. They were, after all, her ammunition as an attorney.

They were also her ammunition against me. She was right. There was no love between us. At one time we were close, or so we thought.

When we met six years ago in a book reading circle, she spoke of *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes* with such passion that in her I saw the same hurt and anger I had for my father on the face of a woman talking about her mother. It was an emotional crisscross I never expected to find.

But as one month together became three, things quickly wrong. She insisted on a spare, generic apartment. If we had an extra of anything, we had a fight. Two coffee cups, two placemats, two chairs. Two shampoo bottles, two bathroom towels, two only of everything. Our bed and nightstand looked like a colorless version of the Holiday Inn. The whole apartment was an uptight, underweight little bitch.

Over time, the weaker and unhappier I became with her. She took on a superior, abrasive tone with me as her mother had done with her and her father. What she talked about, I talked about. What she didn't talk about, neither did I. Every comment between us, every look and glance, every posture, was for me like a move in a game of pick-up-sticks. I dare not disturb her precious comfort zone lest I hear her mother's shrill, anxious voice.

Nothing good grew between us. Weekends we went nowhere. Same tired TV—Law & Order, Mets game. No beach in the summer because she wasn't happy with her body. I didn't go to her office parties because I was tired of being asked about my career going nowhere.

All around Brooklyn was brimming with social opportunities—neighborhood block parties, community groups, churches galore. There was even a billboard to coax us out of our shells: "Don't just live in Brooklyn," it read. "Belong."

We were not a good-looking couple. With Lisa's persistent wisps of gray and my pasty baby face, we were an odd-looking in the baby stroller circles of Park Slope. We doubled

everything negative in each other, reinforced every social barrier—which people were too pretty for us to talk to, which too rich, which too young and happy.

On a trip to Italy, we came to the one building in the world perfectly named for us, The Leaning Tower of Pisa. As we stood before the famous leaning tower, arguing, our tour guide came and asked, “Is there a problem, guys?” Was there ever? Call it inevitable. Like Monday laundry day, Tuesday shopping day, and Wednesday co-dependency crisis day.

To push The Leaning Tower of Pisa up straight—it had become an old joke between us, a bittersweet joke.

Today, she went on with her wonderful career while I put up with mine. As a corporate securities attorney, she had no trouble filling sixty, seventy billable hours a week. As a writer, I had my online editing service that, though hellish and barely profitable, gave me some freedom to work at home on my great and, lately, uninspired equivalent to *Up in the Old Hotel*.

Which of us would leave the other first? She had the money and the determination. I had neither.

Her earring was clicking against the phone again. “Did your mother say *why* she wants a cremation,” she asked. “Did your brother ever request it? In a will?”

I dropped an astonished look down at my phone.

“A will? *My brother?* You gotta be kiddin’.”

“Then cremation was not something he....”

“Please. Just the opposite. He said bury me near Granddad. I told you that, Lisa.”

When I craned around and peered across the yard at the back of my mother’s checkered brick house, I caught sight of someone waving to me from the porch of the old Upton place

across the field. I squinted through the afternoon glare. Someone sitting in a shiny-legged chair. The hair was unmistakable. *Whitey*. I thought he had moved away years ago.

“Once again, Mark, you there?”

I pressed the cell phone snug against my ear.

“Yeah, I’m here...”

How the house had aged. The clapboards, once glossy with a robust blue, were now flat and faded. The windows, once spruce with red and white trim, were now haggard and battered at their corners. *Whitey* waved again.

“But I better go, okay?” I said. “Call you later.”

“Wait, we have some things to talk a—”

Slipping the cell into my jean pocket, I headed through the clumpy weeds toward the big house. My heart was pounding, and I was feeling the old danger, the exhilarating danger.

Whitey was as queer as a three dollar bill, as they say. When I was growing up here, the town whispered and snickered about him. He had a big blue van with pink curtains over the windows, and the space behind them was the most wildly imagined space in town. Greg used to throw rocks as far as he could in this direction. But I was the one who sneaked over and talked to *Whitey*. I was also the one to stick my hand into an air conditioner fan.

The air conditioner was in our kitchen, and the plastic cover was missing, so the fan spun out in the open. Dad told us all to stay the hell away from it. One day, when he had been smacking me around, I stared at the shiny metal fan blades blurring around. I moved closer, raised my hand, and put my fingers ever nearer. I knew they’d get cut off. Still I wanted to feel it. Not that I liked pain, but I might.

Whitey was like than fan. Not that I was queer, but I might be.

A few times when I sneaked over to his house, he put his hand on my back, smiled creepy close to me, and talked about peckers. He said experimenting with them was a good thing and skin was just skin. The longer he talked, the more I felt myself staring at that spinning fan inside me.

For hours afterward, my face in the mirror was all weird and backward because I had been talking a long time with Whitey about something I shouldn't. Mom always thought I was coming down with something. Greg said I had stolen something of his.

No matter, thirty years had passed. 2009, 2008, 2007—by the time I reached the broken-down fence around Whitey's house, I was stepping back through the 80's, my head filled with a kaleidoscopic spin of memories: Whitey leaving his van door wide open all night because he forgot to shut it after he unloaded groceries, Squirt his beagle rooting out bugs in the front yard, and a lemon-colored blanket left drying out for half a year on the porch railing.

Soon I was close enough to see that what I had thought was a metal chair on his front porch was in fact the rims of a wheelchair, rising up in shiny arches. I stopped.

"You gonna say hello to me or not?" he bellowed from the porch.

I went closer and this time stopped below the porch railing. His body had that soft, settled look, like the old house around him. What was it—cancer?

"Dang, boy," he called down, "never thought I'd see you again."

I stood giving him the only smile I had—leery, a little sad, and ashamed for old reasons hanging just out of memory's reach.

"Christ, what's it, eight, nine years now?" he asked.

“Eleven.”

“Eleven!” He threw his bucket head from side to side, then pointed behind me toward my mother’s place. “Seen you pull in this morning. Now is that car of yours purple? Like a beet? Can’t see in this sun—shit, you gonna say hello to your Whitey or not?”

I took one more step.

“Hello.”

He burst out loud in a raspy smoker’s laugh. Strange how memory worked. I always worried my mother could hear his loud laugh through her kitchen window, and she’d look out to see me on the front porch with Alma’s infamous resident—the man who got busted for buying child pornography through the mail. That I had forgotten until now. Soon after, Whitey was arrested again, this time for soliciting prostitution over in Jeffersonville. Mom said he was the filthiest man she knew. Growing up, I liked secretly visiting the filthiest man she knew.

A long second of silence passed while I pretended to find the dusty beams of his porch interesting.

“Let me spare you the stress, son,” he said. “I’m old. Hell, I can’t even get out of this chair.”

At least I wouldn’t have to hug him, as he had always insisted on doing.

“Home because of Steve?”

I nodded and waited for him to offer his condolences.

“And you ain’t been back in all this time?” he asked. He backed his wheelchair away from the edge of the porch. “You wanna sit?” He nodded over at the porch swing that hung dead-still in the shade. “You used to, remember?”

Stepping up onto the porch, I came face to face with him. He looked seventy, even though I knew he was only fourteen years older than me. He was still perfectly named, though. His hair had been a snow-white shock for as long as anyone could remember, parted on one side and combed back in a high wave. Mom said it went white at an early age because of all his sins. You wanted to touch it because it was so feathery and pure-looking, like the crest of an eagle.

When I sat down on the gritty, dirty-white porch swing, the old chains holding it stretched tight and popped overhead. *Boing!*

“Relax,” he said. “They’ll hold. They ain’t dropped you yet.”

He was grinning at me, and that was still an unpleasant sight. Whitey had dollar-store dentures, as we used to tease him, and in all these years, he hadn’t upgraded them. Rumor was he made them himself out of an ice hockey mouth guard. Looked like a slim bar of dirty soap melting in his mouth. I could never imagine another man or boy standing the sight of him, much less kissing him or whatever.

I sat still, my eyes fixed beyond the shaded porch railing at his gravel driveway that glared in the sunlight like ice. Beyond, the Blue Ridge Mountains and sky came together like different blankets, the bottom one a true-blue made of cotton and the top one a powder-blue made of wispy polyester.

“Boy, you lost weight,” he said. “You used to be, well, chubby. But, hey, now Steve’s the one who got big on us, didn’t he?” He backed his wheelchair up beside the porch swing so that we both were looking in the same direction. “Your brother didn’t come ’round to see me much in the last, oh, six, seven years.”

I spun my head over to him. “Steve came over here?”

He grinned. “That so surprising? You did.”

I looked away. Yeah, well, I did a lot of regrettable things.

When we were growing up, Steve mouthed off to everyone that Whitey Upton was a big old queer and he picked up hitchhikers on Rt. 340 and propositioned them. He said he’d kill Whitey the first time he came close to him.

Back then Whitey had been an old-fashioned shutterbug. We never saw him around town without a camera around his big neck. A couple of his bird pictures were in The Alma Times.

“...stayed over in J-Town mostly, in that big subsidized housing place.” Whitey pulled a lever on his wheelchair. “Became a minister over there. I’ll give him that.”

“Minister?”

“Yep. Addiction Ministry. Something like that. At that First Christ Church, or whatever they call it. You know—well, hell, you wouldn’t know, you ain’t been back—but that snake worshipping place near the Route 17 turnoff.”

That was hard to picture—Steve in a shack-like church with garish red carpeting and aquariums in the corner filled with snakes. Instead of pews, metal folding chairs. Instead of bibles, NRA propaganda. Instead of an organ, a guitar.

Whitey leaned forward and cranked his big head over at me.

“You mean your mom didn’t tell you?”

Looking worse for the years, he had a chafed, red-spotted complexion, as if these coal-farmed mountains in Mendon County were bad for the skin. When I shook my head, the swing’s chains tinkled and dinged like wind chimes.

“Matter of fact, I gave him a twenty dollar donation once,” he added.

That I doubted.

He asked me about New York, but I said as little as possible. Something I'd never forget about him—he had a way of getting inside your head, taking liberties with the conversation, then making suggestions you felt guilty about turning down. Mom always said he was an operator, which was how he avoided jail.

In the silence, he told me he had a cousin in Albany, who might be in jail in Jersey by now. As he spoke, his Appalachian twang ground around in my ears. He kept glancing over at me, his red stovepipe neck creasing and uncreasing.

He pressed his hands down on the armrests. “Now your mom did tell you that your brother was volunteering at that dig site for St. Thomas?” he asked.

I stared face to face with him, and he looked taken aback by my stern expression.

“The college?” I asked.

“Well, why not? They have that archi—archiologic—hell, I can't even say the word—ever since they found Grant's cannon, or some such shit. Steve was one their big fellows that wheelbarrowed away all that red clay out at Priestfield.”

Steve a minister? Steve a volunteer at the college? Whitey was doped up on painkillers, sure as hell, and these West Virginia hills had petrified ludicrous notions in his head.

“Your mom didn't tell you that neither, huh?” He squirmed around, sweaty-faced, probably excited to sit next to me again. “Dang, boy, you need your old Whitey around more. I'll be your ears for ya.”

He was at it again, working the conversation to his advantage, making me feel small and funny so that he could then make me feel better.

I pressed my back firmly up against the slats of the porch swing, careful not to lift my shoes off the porch, to trust the chains, which still jingled whenever I moved.

“What’d you all talk about?” I asked.

“Come again?” he said, his mouth dropping open.

“You and Steve?”

As he stared over at me, his splintery white eyebrows were bundled up over blue eyes my mother always said would be attractive if they weren’t Whitey’s. Then he looked off, smiling.

“What’s that new song... ‘God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy’.”

He laughed hard and loud, and I found myself laughing a little with him. Then the moment kinked up, turned outlandish, both of us laughing hard. When we both settled down, the blood receding from our faces, I wondered what in the heck just happened.

“Like my chair?” he asked, slapping an armrest, his face holding a rosy shine.

It looked like a homemade wheelchair concocted out of an aluminum patio chair, bike tires, and rusted clamps, with clumsy chrome levers stuck in. I nodded to be nice.

“Surgery on my back,” he said.

“Oh.”

“Hey, remember how you all used to carry on out there?” he said, nodding out at the field.

We all had known he was watching us, but we played anyway. Jimmy Smoot could throw a perfect spiral on a half-deflated football across fifty yards of rock-hard, frozen field. One time Dink DeWitt’s mean ugly face loomed over me as he held me down, saying he was going to pull a ten-pound bugger out of my head and watch it cave in. Steve, coming out of

nowhere, pushed Dink to the ground as easily as a scarecrow, then stood over him. I scrambled to my feet and looked down into Dink's scared eyes, as he had just done to me. For a second, I couldn't be sure if I was seeing myself or him. He wasn't sure either, it seemed. After that day, he never spit Peter Pan peanut butter on me in school again.

I stared down at the slate-gray, worn-out porch boards. I had forgotten that my brother had stood up for me when we were younger. How many times Steve had saved me from mountain hoogers like Dink.

Whitey's twangy voice came into my ear again.

"Hey, bud, Steve told me once—I'll never forget it neither—that your all's dad used to hook up an electric charger to his bed and shock him. To make him stop wettin' the bed. That true?"

True. Steve would be half naked on a metal cot, his arms and shoulders shivering, his pale skin lined by a grid of bedsprings. Under him was a small itchy-wool mule blanket so that when he peed in the night, he wouldn't ruin anything good. Under the cot, which was made of coiled galvanized steel, sat a black generator box with a big red knob and a shiny dial filled with lines and numbers. From the box ran brown and yellow insulated wires with clamps on the ends, stretched wide open like snakes, their spikey gold teeth biting the silver-painted bed frame as if trying to eat their way up to Steve.

Steve was whimpering to Dad that he didn't want to sleep on the bare cot, he promised he wouldn't pee, and please let him have a real blanket. Greg and I were standing back. Mom was over by the dresser, complaining that our brother had yellowed all his underwear, so there were no decent ones left. All the while, from the generator came a low buzz, sending electricity

dancing all over the room—around the rim of the lampshade, in and out of dresser handles, and up and down hairs on my arms.

Whitey's hand touched my back. I held perfectly still. His old tricks again. Anything to touch me. If I stayed bent over, he'd take his hand away eventually. SOB was clever. Even now he'd dare me to make a stand.

"Your father fucked you all up," he said.

His hand left on its own, and I sat up. That quickly he was over in the center of his creaky wheelchair again. Whatever he had been saying, he went on: "Your poor mom's still afraid of him—I swear he hits her." Then the same hand he had been touching me with, he banged down against the armrest, making the wheelchair rattle. "Now there's an evil man, your father."

He peered off his side of the porch as if somebody might be spying on him, only to turn back to me.

"Hey, remember Jimmy Sullivan?" he whispered. "You know he's a hit man now?" He grinned. "You didn't? See, you do need your old Whitey around again."

Jimmy Sullivan and I had been best friends growing up. We were going to be cops when we grew up, like on "Adam-12." He'd drive, and because I was good in art class, I'd draw the criminals as we rode up beside them, like a police sketch artist. But after high school, Jimmy stayed in this miserable county and fell apart here. Drugs, jail.

"Swear," said Whitey. "He's always drivin' up to Pennsylvania or Connecticut to kill somebody. Hell, he'd kill anybody around for two hundred bucks." Whitey held his hand out like a pistol, his big thumb striking down like a gun hammer. "Pop, pop, pop." Then he tapped

me on the arm and leaned as close as he could, his voice a rough whisper. “Hey, go see old Jim. Tell him about your father hittin’ your poor mom all the time. I’ll give you his address. Then, when you’re driving back up north”—he gave me a wink of his silver-blue eye—“you’ll know.”

I was riveted by him—how he was talking to me, how he was looking at me.

“Hey, come inside,” he said, releasing the lever on the wheelchair. “Come on now. Hell, I told ya I can’t stand. Something I wanna show ya.”

I stood and followed him, under his tow, just like I used to.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whitey's hallway was furniture-choked and musty with stacked-up cardboard boxes and overfilled plain brown shopping bags. The living room beyond seemed to have exploded its contents and landed them everywhere. Clothes covered a chair and black bureau of drawers yanked wide open. An old-time spindle coat rack lay knocked over. Half a dozen brown shoeboxes were overturned on the floor, white tissue paper spilling out, lids strewn nearby. Curled-up magazines and yellowed newspapers were littered here and there. A red coffee cup lay on the parquet floor, a belt snaked around it.

"What the hell happened in here, Whitey?"

He pivoted his wheelchair to see me gawking around.

"Changed some, hasn't it?"

"Well, not if—"

"Liar."

I laughed, and it felt good to laugh. Lisa and I never laughed.

"Seriously."

"Time. Time happened, son. Now don't look over there," he said, wheeling ahead of me, nodding off to the left. "That's my junk room now."

The door, partly open, was draped with blue and black pants and a dirty rainbow of shirts that looked mummified into the dingy wood. Beyond was a windowless, shadowy little space I remembered, more like a gap between the walls.

Whitey never invited me into that room, so one time I peeked in without him seeing. I expected to find whatever was impossible to imagine, maybe whips and chains and a bunch of gay magazines and little boy nudie movies. But I found books. Nothing but his mother's romance paperbacks with fancy English ladies on the covers. I doublechecked too, pushing on spines for a hidden torture room behind the wall.

I peeked into the back of his blue van one time, too. Nothing but stacks of asphalt shingles and dead flies stuck to the inside of the pink curtains over the windows. Whatever queer stuff he did, he covered his tracks.

As I moved on down the hall, my footsteps on the floorboards were jiggling the contents of a huge, dark-brown, many-windowed curio cabinet, which I didn't remember. Inside were rows of porcelain plates with blue and white landscapes on them, a cluster of white-marble owls and clear-glass swans on one shelf, and, on the top shelf, three dusty pink-glass pigs. The pigs I remembered.

"Just you here now, Whitey?" I called out, catching up.

The high ceiling made my voice vibrant and echoey.

"Just me and disability," he said. He stopped. "Hey, bring your tool belt? I could sure use the help. Ma died four years ago. You don't remember her, do you?"

"Whatta you mean, don't remember her? Of course I remember her. She gave me a shitload of candy on Halloween."

"She did at that, didn't she?" he said, throwing a filmy smile back at me. "Ma enjoyed that as I recall."

I was close enough to see a bald spot starting in his thick mass of snow-white hair.

“Hey, you ever let anyone push you in that thing?” I asked.

He cast a sour look over the shoulder.

“What, off a cliff?”

Again I laughed, and again it felt good.

The dining room, while still clad in panels of rich old oak, was brimful with clutter. Everything heaped, hanging down, leaning out, tilted over, looming, and falling, including the hulk of a misplaced black wardrobe rising up in front of us, ready to swing open its doors and swallow us away.

“Warm in here, Whitey,” I said, my face breaking out in a sweat.

“Hot, you mean. Radiator’s stuck.”

In the corner of the room sat a little mustard-yellow radiator, hissing like a witch.

“It can’t be turned off?”

“You wanna give it a try? I’d sure be grateful.”

I stepped over to the radiator, my sneakers ripping through trails of tissue paper, snagging a pile of wrinkled shirts, and plunging squarely into a shoebox.

“Ignore that,” he called out. “Mom sure loved her shoes. Guess I need to clean up some.”

I reached down and grabbed hold of the small black knob just inches above the floor. The knob was hot and sharp-edged, so the harder I gripped as I turned, the more it burned. My arm was straining, my face grimacing. I tried a few times, too, squeezing and twisting as hard as I could, wondering, ultimately, if I had been turning in the wrong direction. All the while, steam roiled up in my face.

“Can’t get it, huh?”

“No, I think I can. I felt it give.”

Using my left hand this time, I found my grip stronger and, with one mighty “uuuooooohhgg,” the knob unfroze, squeaked, then spun easily before squeezing off the hissing from above.

“Hey, you got it, bud!”

I turned to him, sweaty and smiling, then strode back over, trying to miss the clutter I had already walked down.

“Hell, that’s just what old Steve would have done, the brute,” he said, grinning at me.

“Now we can cool off.”

He spun his chair around and shot off through the house, tires rolling over whatever was in his way, including a pizza box that didn’t flatten out, but instead threw a bump, twist, and skid into his roll.

We ended up in the dingy kitchen. More creased-up shopping bags and marked-up cardboard boxes crowded the walls. Not cans of peas and corn, but cans of Red Devil Rust Remover overloaded pantry shelves. Dog-eared, baloney-pink rugs spread across bulges in the floorboards. On the counter lay what looked like a dismantled brake cylinder, oily screws and springs, half-moons of rusted metal, and grooved thingamajigs from one end to the other, with a pair of blue-handled sewing shears left in the middle. Clearly his mother had not been around in a while.

Whitey’s wheelchair was stopped in front of a rubbish-entangled table on which lay a gutted toaster, its blue and red wires fraying in every direction.

“Whitey, you seriously need a soldering gun here.”

“Have one. I seriously need a new set of eyes.” His voice was dry and croaky. “Heating element’s shot.”

“You need one of those big magnifying glasses. The kind mounted to a—” I illustrated with my hands, showing him how the neck of the magnifying glass curved down and around.

“You fix things now?” he asked, lifting his head.

“No, but my fath—”

I bit off the word.

“Well, speak of the devil.”

I stared down at the charred bread crumbs stuck to the metal guts of the toaster. Whitey, meanwhile, grabbed a pair of needle-nose pliers off the table and started working.

“Sure could use your father now,” he said, probing the point of the pliers at a dangling wire. “We’ll just have to kill him later, right?”

He beamed up at me a troublemaking grin. I stuck my finger into the toaster’s guts, holding the blue wire still for him.

“He was an airplane mechanic, right? Bombers?” he asked. “Fighters?”

I pretended to think.

“Transport?” he went on.

“Fighters I think.”

“Infantry for my dad.”

“I remember.”

Whitey, fumbling with the pliers, soon gave up on attaching the blue wire.

“Good lord,” he said, sighing. “These damn bread burners are only ten bucks at Wal-Mart.” He dropped the tool back on the table and cocked his head up at me. “Know what I learned?”

“No, what?”

“Some men are just assholes.” He readied his hands on the skinny, tread-worn wheels of the chair. “Well, let me show you those pictures before I forget.”

~

I caught up with Whitey in what I thought was his mother’s old room. He was parked just inside, waiting for me.

“You’ll wanna see this,” he said.

I already was. Spread across the top of a lined-draped bureau, then across a plain wooden bed with only a white sheet on it, and continuing on the floor were photographs, dozens and dozens of postcard-sized color photographs.

I stepped past Whitey and peered close. They were *all* of Steve.

Steve in a dusty, grubby payphone booth, in a gray hooded sweatshirt, looking like a police suspect unknowingly being photographed.

Steve wearing a cone-shaped, silver party hat and a goofy, white-cake-smudged smile.

Steve waving from a bridge—I recognized the Jennings C. Randolph Memorial Bridge, made of redwood crossties.

Steve in front of the McBurnie Drugs store window down in town, unshaven, black cowboy hat on, and a pale, moon-faced look.

In larger photo, he was sprawled out in a wicker chair, wearing rumpled tan slacks, a

large book cracked open on his white-shirted belly, his eyes closed as if sleeping.

The moment was dreamlike. Hairs were standing up on my arms. What the hell was all this? Gag pictures? Masquerade photo album? Steve tripping on acid?

I turned to Whitey. “What the fuck?”

He sat sober-faced, his hairy sunburned arms folded up. “Two hundred and forty-seven pictures of your brother, that’s what.”

In the commotion of my body, a shadow of my arm flew down across the wall like a lance. “Two hundred and...?”

“Taken, well, ’round the last time he came around.”

“Jesus!” My loud mouth filled the room. “Why?”

He fidgeted his chair forward, then back. “Well, he wanted them, that’s why. I had the camera. He had nothing better to do. Neither did I.”

Nothing better to do? There were a lot of other things a person could do that were nothing better to do.

“Hell, he was drunk in half of them.”

“This is a lot of drunk, Whitey.”

The pictures were endless. Endless and bizarre.

My brother, puffy-faced and unhealthy-looking, stuffed into a denim jacket and mounted on a red, chrome-flashing Harley.

My brother in a short-sleeved, alligator-green shirt, looking less than collegiate as he stood centered before the wide trunk of a fanned-out tree.

My brother leaning over a cart in a grocery store, in front of foggy freezer doors,

something colorful and box-shaped in his hand.

“You might say we got carried away. We hung out a lot together that fall.”

My eyes pinched him flat. “Hung out?”

He sat back in his chair and let his head fall to one side. “Now don’t get the wrong idea here.”

I laughed out loud. Just exactly what was the right idea here? That a known pedophile gallivants around with a mentally disabled man for a month-long photo shoot?

“We was just havin’ fun.”

“Fun?” I threw my arms wide. “This is a lot of fun!”

“Don’t get riled neither.”

As I whirled around, hundreds of images of my dead brother blurred by.

“Yeah, well, this is just bizarre.”

Steve was never photographed like this before. Mom’s crappy Kodak never made a bold impression of anyone. It never photographed ratty hair or grubby hands, never zoomed in on bad teeth, never caught the shine of oily skin or picked up lint on a shirt collar—never captured the hardened side of life in a man’s crisp mouth or a plea for mercy in his doughy eyes. Mom’s camera was G-rated.

Nothing better to do? I wasn’t buying it. It would have taken more than beer and boredom to put Steve in these pictures. This was Steve fingerpainting his life in disgrace.

He’d never wear a paisley shirt with a Confederate belt buckle, or a Mickey Mouse cap with a cowboy boots. He’d never have cake hanging off his face either.

Whitey nodded down at my feet. “There’s more.”

On the floor was one of the many brown-type shoeboxes from his cluttered hallway, bulging with more photos. Nearby was a bloated, glossy-red shopping bag. Whitey drifted closer.

“Now let me explain something right now.”

“Oh, please do.”

His face, though pie-shaped and scratched up by time, was strained tight, his chin squared off. “Your brother never came and got these from me. All I asked was he pay the cost of having them developed, then prints made. That’s fair, right? That’s what he asked me to do for him. I mean, they weren’t cheap, even back then. Something like a hundred bucks. But, hell”—his voice dropped—“your brother and I had some words over it.” He fell quiet. Under a grimy-yellow ceiling light, he looked like a dejected Humpty Dumpty. “And that’s how it was left, God forgive us.”

Forgive them for what? I wouldn’t take 247 photos of anyone unless I had a serious thing for them. I might have taken Lisa’s picture once. The painter Andrew Wyeth, in love with his housecleaner Helga, secretly painted her dozens of times in the nude while filling sketchpads with her. Two-hundred-and-forty-seven photos spelled obsession.

“But why?” I asked him again.

Whitey let out a heavy pent-up laugh that seemed to come from the bowels of his wheelchair, as if both he and the chair were frustrated with me.

“Jesus boy, whatta you mean why?”

“Why they all so...different?”

Again he toyed his chair forward, then back.

“Well, I told ya. We was foolin’ around. Experimentin’ I guess. And remember now, I’m a photographer. This was some sorely needed creative work for me.”

Who was he kidding? Lewd. Loud. Lazy. He was those, not creative.

“Okay, so is that your idea?” I pointed to the Mickey Mouse cap and cowboy boots one.

“Hmm...probably Schlitz Malt Liquor thinkin’ on that one.”

“Okay, how ’bout this one? Why the fedora and gold chain? Was it symbolic?”

“Symbolic? Hell, it was—”

“What’s he thinking in this one?” I pointed to Steve sitting on a fire hydrant.

“Thinkin’? Good lord, boy.”

I stooped and picked up the shoebox off the floor. It was weighty, its sides billowing. I plucked out a photo and raised it up squarely before my eyes. It was of a rocky black field spreading out to a mountainous horizon, with Steve’s bulky figure in the foreground, in ghostly light-colored clothes, his veil-like face gazing into the window of the photograph.

“Strange.”

“Now why strange?”

“Cause I don’t recognize him.”

He kicked out a grating laugh. “You don’t recognize him? That’s a six-thousand pixel photo you’re holding there, from my good Nikon.”

“No, I mean it’s like I’m looking at a complete stranger.”

Whitey handed me a sideways look. I began holding up the photos one by one, all but gazing cross-eyed at each, before returning it to the shoebox. In a few, Steve was standing on the same barren field, his silhouette, as rotund as it was, like that of the last man on earth. In

others, he was jolly and hamming it up beside cars and trucks on a dealership lot—a snazzy red job, a mammoth black truck.

I picked out another photo, looked at it for a long moment—“See, I don’t recognize his expression”—then shuffled it back into the shoebox like a card I didn’t want—“Or his style of clothes, or where half these pictures were taken.”

“Well, I’m not sure what to tell you there.”

I eyed Whitey hard. “What was he gonna do with them? Just keep them?”

“That was my impression.”

“And you didn’t want any for yourself?”

He shook his head.

“None? Really? And he didn’t say anything else to you? You two just went joyriding everywhere, taking pictures? Where’d the outfits come from? You buy them?”

“Son.” He waited until I looked him in the eyes. “Relax. Your brother liked tuna fish, okay? I’m the frankfurter man here.”

I looked away. “I know,” I muttered.

“You sure?”

“I said I know.”

But, no, I didn’t know. There was more than one way to be an old queer in West Virginia, and Steve’s quirky, lard-soft face was vulnerable to all of them. Half the queers in West Virginia weren’t queer. They were just gross and bored. In some form or another, that’s essentially all they were. Ordinarily I wasn’t so ugly with my opinions. Women here weren’t doing their job. They were like dirty old work boots. Men weren’t doing their job either. The

libidos in West Virginia were dead from the fat Wal-Mart bellies hanging down on them.

Whitey eased his wheelchair closer. “Let me ask you something that’s needed asking for twenty years. You’re his brother.”

I could already guess his question from his tone—and I dreaded it.

“Okay, ask.”

“What in the hell happened to Steve?” His stovepipe neck was glowing. “Would you please tell me that?”

What happened to Steve? Didn’t he know? He’s the one who photographed him to death. Didn’t he ask Steve during all their gadabout adventures?

I found a long spider crack in the sand-yellow wall to follow. I had only my standard reply. Dad was brutal with my brothers and me, and in our three-boy war against him, defying him, backtalking him, Steve was on point. He got hit the hardest, took the brunt—and went nuts.

There was the old lie about schizophrenia, but I had done my research years ago and put suspicion all over it—read all about the symptoms, stressors, and triggers, understood what was delusional and what was only depressive. The disease was a contradiction. It could label anyone who felt negative and persecuted, anyone who wore a dark face and muttered a few strange, ugly phrases.

When I saw my brother eleven years ago, he swore to me, in the clearest voice I ever heard, that he had been misdiagnosed all along. This wasn’t the first time I had heard it from him. He said that years back, during a two-bit psych assessment in that medieval hospital Alma General, he honestly mistook his conscience for “voices.” Said he was so freaked out by the doctors that he nodded at the wrong question. After that things went to hell. They gave him

drugs and stuck him in a room with a bunch of weirdoes. He tried changing his answer, but nobody would listen.

I believed him, and everything made sense—except for all the small-sized shoes he stole.

But it didn't matter anyway. Years of heavy medications had damaged him in another way. He was drinking and fighting in pool halls around Alma. His dream of engineering school at WVU was over. He was a hundred pound overweight. He was crude, his charm and innocence gone. He was just another of the state's rednecks.

When did he give up? What was his breaking point? How could a teenager who seemed blessed, who was born with such promise—smart, athletic, good-looking—surrender to a tragic life? I sat on Whitey's dusty floor, still wondering. So was he.

“I mean there was moments,” Whitey said, “Steve and I'd be yammerin' about life, and he'd be going on like a philosopher, talkin' history and commerce, all kinds of shit I didn't understand, and I'd think to myself, what the hell's wrong with this picture?”

He didn't want to see my last picture of Steve. It was Picassoesque—his face bluish and ill-looking from one angle, his eyes oily greenish black and penlight-tiny from another, his whiskers rained down upon his cheeks like an army of tiny angry arrows, his boots dragging everywhere like a ball and chain.

“I mean the man's got a medicine cabinet full of drugs—Zoloft, Haldol, all kinds of shit. Tells me”—Whitey's face crabbed up—“he's a ward of the state. *A god-forsaken ward of the state?* Your brother?” He shot a finger down at me. “Who's that philosopher fellow he was always fascinated with? Neats, Neatsy somebody.”

“Friedrich Nietzsche.”

“Yeah. Your brother who talks Neatsy, a ward of the state? That’s a goddamn good one.”

In that moment, the light on Whitey’s face made him fuller, rounder, as if he had always been a cardboard cutout to my brothers and me. Maybe he and Steve had been only drinking buddies with too much time and film on their hands. Shouldn’t I be happy they both had their fun together?

With the shoebox tucked under my arm, I slid my back down the smooth side of the big bureau behind me until I touched down neatly on the floor—never breaking my gaze on the picture in my other hand. With my knees tucked up to my chest, I let my legs fall open, my jeans drawing long, tight creases as I sat cross-legged.

“Now this one I know,” I said. “This is out at Wizard’s Clip, that ghost place—whoa! Now where’s this one taken?” I flipped the photo over, and on the back, in sloppy blue cursive was, “Bluestone Boat Ramp.” I looked up at Whitey. “You labeled them?”

“Just the first few. As a courtesy.”

“You all stop anywhere?” I asked.

My question stilled him, and in the light I saw fuzzy white hairs crawling down over his ears like caterpillars.

“Come again?”

“You know, sit down, like, at McDonald’s?”

“Yeah, but Hojos. Steve had his favorite booth.” Whitey’s face glowed like an old parchment paper lampshade. “Favorite waitress, too. Charlene Winters.”

I wanted to know everything Whitey knew—what Steve ordered at HoJos, what color his

plate was, what he said to Charlene Winters, what she said back, how their faces looked together. Whitey's big hoary head was like a container of precious information, his brain and mouth the book and print of my brother just a few years ago.

What good was it being his brother when I didn't know him? What good was my childhood with Steve? Childhood memories were out of date.

I gave a long look around the room at all the pictures on the bed and bureau. I picked up one near me—Steve as a gardener, wearing a straw hat, its black chin cord hanging loose, a brown-plaid flannel shirt, and puffy, spotless-white canvas work gloves. His face was tranquil and distant as he snipped at a rose bush.

Whitey wheeled in close again.

"These are all yours now," he said.

I pivoted to him.

"What?"

"Give some to your poor mom." He nodded around the room. "They belong with his family now."

What? No, they didn't. They belonged in Area 51 for now. I took a step back from him.

"Whitey, I don't know."

I came here for a quick funeral, which my mother and father were making an even quicker cremation. I didn't come here to make things harder for them—and for myself. How Steve was dressed in these photos, his bizarre expressions—this was not something my parents were prepared to see. Steve smiling, having fun, enjoying himself? Steve getting out of his shoebox apartment and living a little?

Who cared if Steve went a little weird in these photos? Who wouldn't with his life?
Why should anyone take him seriously?

Ignoring me, Whitey fished a brown shopping bag off the floor for me and began gathering up the photos, building them into stacks, all these strange images of Steve, one after another—my brother in a baggy black suit, my brother in jeans with rolled-up cuffs, his white legs stabbed down into yellow river sand, the Bluestone flowing behind him.

Maybe I wouldn't take them. Maybe I'd let them fall on the floor when he tried to hand them to me.

I imagined my father screaming at the sight of these pictures. In my childhood, he had screamed a black tornado, my brothers' and my disembodied heads would spin forever inside a vortex that piped down into our father's big mouth, his face marbled with bulging blood vessels.

Reluctantly, I helped Whitey gather up the photos he couldn't reach. Maybe I'd just stuff them all into the trunk of my car and never mention them to anybody? Then, once back in New York, bury them in the back of my Brooklyn closet?

At last, the room was picked clean of photos, and I held the filled-up shopping bag up against my chest with both arms, not trusting its white yarn handles. I was not ready to leave. A minister, a volunteer, and two hundred and forty-seven other ways I didn't know my brother.

Where was I to go now? Oz?

CHAPTER FIVE

Crossing the field back to my mother's house, I walked myself deeper into dread of having these photos. To my mother there was one person in the world more pathetic than herself, and she needed Steve, alive or dead, to be that person.

He was her dead baby in her arms. She should have protected him from the man she married, but she didn't, so Steve got his spirit battered to death. She didn't protect Greg either, but he was surviving apparently. Though she did protect me, it was a last-minute effort. Mom did not have any sort of clear conscience.

To see Steve in these photos having fun and being free with himself would surely disturb the nails and knots of her self-persecution, and I did not come here to snap anyone's twisted thinking. No to showing these photos to my family.

After stashing them in the backseat of my rental, I stepped inside my mother's house to find another surprise: my father sitting in the center of the lemon-yellow sofa—Granddad's deathbed. It was, I immediately thought, the most remarkable location for him. When this sofa was moved into our house from Grandma's, Mom immediately made it off-limits to us kids, including Dad. For most of my childhood, the sofa was invisibly roped off. It was also pulled out from the wall like some kind of a hideously colored, cotton upholstered sarcophagus on display. Now, after all these years, here was my father, who hadn't lived in this house since I was in high school, when he and Mom separated, happily sitting on the sofa—triumphantly parked on it, as if one-upping his long-dead father-in-law once and for all, smack-dab after

Steve's death.

I closed the front door behind me and came on in. My eleven-year record of avoiding him was now over, and I felt tricked. There was no battered car or truck outside, nothing to warn me he was here while. He raised his head as if expecting me.

“Well, the prodigal son returns,” he said.

He was in front of my eyes before I had a chance to be startled, and he was not a slobbering colossus or a pointy-ear fiend as I had feared. His voice was no different, still piping out the same sarcasm. In the primrose-yellow light of afternoon coming through the wavy old window panes, his complexion was a strange off-shade of coffee. His short hair was this same muddy-ash, as if he had been cleaning the chimney flue.

“Hello,” I said.

There were only two syllables to deal with, but with my father, every uttered sound had always been a tripwire.

“You wanna see something?” he asked.

He lifted from his lap and held out what looked like a vase, an exceptional vase—teal, metallic-looking, and finely grooved, as if cut by a lathe. The neck tapered down and curved out flawlessly into an elegant container.

I stepped forward, past so much in this living room that was still his—a brass powder horn lamp and, on an end table, a miniature Viking ship with a coiled up dragon's head for a bow and a lashing tail for a stern, with a dozen little oars on either side, all of which my father had put together from a kit.

At the last minute, when I extended my arm to take this curious-looking vase from him,

he pulled it back.

“Know what it’s for?” he asked.

Flowers? That would be my guess.

“You telling me you don’t?” he asked, his voice rounding down in disappointment.

As soon as he turned a veiny temple toward me, I knew.

Steve’s urn.

A glint of control came into his eyes as he again handed the urn out for me to take.

Warily, I reached out for it, eyeing his big-knuckled hand. At the last minute, he tomahawk-chopped the base of the urn down snugly into my palm—not hard, but hard enough.

He held tight to it. But so did I. Then he gave it a sharp pull, sending a snap through my arm and shoulder, and a tug-of-war over the urn was underway. Not full out—I had no decent hold on the wide end of the urn, and he had every advantage in grasping the narrow neck. He grinned slightly, the faintest indication of affection. Then, as strangely as it had all started, our arms became relaxed, and the urn felt like a prosthetic handshake between us. He let go of it, and I stepped back with it.

Just like him to make a little game out of handing it to me. Everything on his terms, to his liking. Same old countrified megalomaniac.

The urn was unnaturally hard—not metal, ceramic, or painted glass—and lightweight. If dropped, it would bounce like a plastic water pitcher. My redneck brother inside this thing? He’d drink beer out of it.

“Now I understand from your mother you gave her some words. Some nonsense about being buried?”

He knew I wouldn't answer him. He was counting on it. He pointed across the living room at the big framed picture of my grandfather.

"Near old Roy the family man?"

Roy the family man, as my father liked to put it, had a halo around him for being everything my father was not—soft-spoken, devoted to his children, a good neighbor.

"It wasn't nonsense," I muttered. "Steve told me he did."

My father leaned forward on the deathbed.

"He told you? Well, wootido! That damn boy told me a lot of things too. Never once carried through with one of them. Told me he was going into the Air Force—but did he?"

Again I didn't answer, and again he was counting on it.

"But since he told you, well hell, I guess I should just run out and do whatever he says—is that what you drove all the way down here to say?"

There was but one move here. The nowhere move. Like in chess, when you just stare down at the board, pretending to think, knowing it's hopeless.

"Laziness. That was Steve's problem his whole life...quit that good job at Jacobs Concrete. Not a word to anyone, just walked off the site. Damn his foolish little heart."

I actually understood my father's ugliness. His sons hated him. That would twist up any man. But as I had wondered over the years—didn't he realize why we did? It was a question I could never get past.

Even as a child I had known that his slapping me and kicking me made him a bad man. How could he have been five times my age of five and not have known or cared? Why had he been blind all his life to common decency? Even today, as an old man, he was still a bully.

Maybe the Devil deserves to be slapped and kicked. Funny, only the Devil would treat a child that way. Then he'd cremate it. What did that say about my father?

I rolled Steve's urn around in my hands.

"Now when you're finished looking, you can set it down"—he pecked his finger down on the coffee table—"right here beside his picture, just where the little devil can think about what he did to himself."

I was finished. I put the urn down on the table beside Steve's high school graduation picture, which I couldn't bear to look at, and turned toward the kitchen doorway, wondering where my mother was. Seeing the unlit room beyond, I got the feeling she wasn't in the house.

"And for your information, buster, before you run off, the church doesn't want him buried."

Caught in a pivot, I glared over my shoulder at him.

"You heard me. Not in St. Mary's Cemetery anyway. Your brother—and careful how you look at me—had a reputation."

"Yeah, well, he was still Catholic."

"The hell he was—and don't smart mouth me!" He leaned down with one forearm against his knee and sighted me as if I were a billiard ball at the end of a pool cue. "Another thing, old family sweetheart Roy over there wouldn't want your damn brother buried near him."

Clearly the old bastard didn't want me here. I got that. But what could I do? Erase myself from his sight for another decade until someone else died?

I looked anywhere but at him. On an end table across the room was a cluster of old pictures in small silver frames—Grandma Jennings, Mom's mom, standing thick-legged and

moon-faced beside her '52 Nash; Aunt Ruth holding up one of us as a baby; and Granddad Roy himself in a larger brass frame, gazing straight at my father. God only knew what he was wondering.

I could well guess. *Cremate Steve?* We Barrs were a funeral family. Irish Catholics were a casket-in-the-ground people. Wakes, hearses, pallbearers—it was tradition.

Half the town went to Granddad's funeral. A career tax preparer for H&R Block, he was known and trusted by many. Under warm lights in his casket, he almost looked like he was lying on a beach, all dressed up. His hair wasn't blown off to one side, making him look nearly bald. Makeup covered his age spots, and he had on a gaudy gold Lion's Club ring with a big red stone.

Same with Grandma. Not that she was ever pretty, but lying in her casket, she almost was. She had on rouge, a fancy dress that came from another era, and was framed head to toe in lace and fine cherry. White lilies were all around, filling the air with a sweet yard smell that she would have liked.

Steve—bloated, grungy, and depressed in life—would look his best, too.

“Besides, that boy never got his last rites,” my father went on.

I could appreciate that my father was a stickler for a proper Christian burial. As a boy, he had dug graves for wages in St. Mary's Cemetery. As an adult, he had been a volunteer pallbearer for Eackles Funeral Home. I could remember him at our cousin Eddie's funeral. As he held onto the long shiny arm of the casket, moving in a slow step-march with the other men, all dressed up in suits, his face bore a great solemn expression, like a captain before a burial at sea, the meaning of life and loss etched into his weather-beaten face.

But with Steve, my father could find no meaning. He still believed that Steve had woken

up one morning years ago mentally ill, having caught the disease in the night like a demon's cold. He'd never consider that screaming at us and beating us may have contributed.

Oddly, my father himself always seemed to be the damaged one. Damaged for being the last of the penny-pinchers from the Great Depression. Damaged for coming back to jerkwater Alma after the Korean War and marrying our simple, unexciting mother and missing his life's dream, whatever it was. Damaged for working at Johnson Vending over in Clermont for twenty-two years as an assembler before forced into early retirement for continually arguing with his supervisors.

"...that boy's shit out of luck. He should have made allowances in life and planned for a burial if that's what he wanted so damn much."

"So let me pay for it. We—"

"The hell you will."

Hell, damn. Hell, damn. All he ever did was cuss. Who was he to feign piety?

I wasn't saying my brother was a pharaoh to build a pyramid over, or Jesus to be resurrected. But he was more than a corpse on record to reduce to ashes for a horrid little container. Where would Steve go? To the spirit world, like a skinny old Indian burnt up on a stick scaffold in the cold night?

Out of the question was any mention of the snake-worshipping church Steve had gone to, according to Whitey. As a perversion of faith, that would be further cause to send my brother straight to hell in a blast of ashes. Nor did I yet trust what Whitey had said about Steve being a volunteer at the college, and the strange photos of my brother were unmentionable.

No funeral home filled with red and rust chrysanthemums for Steve. No frosted hunk of

gray granite with my brother's name on it.

"Not even a headstone?" I asked.

He pretended not to hear me.

Everybody got a headstone, didn't they? Ordinary people, great people, evil people. Benedict Arnold, Richard Nixon, Stalin—even Billy the Kid got one. The nameless got the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The worst of the worst got a pauper's grave.

When I took a step away from him, the smell of cat pee, rising up from the large oval rug that had covered this area of floor for so long, jackknifed in my nostrils. What smell would Steve, once cremated, leave behind? For that matter, what could any of us leave behind as potent as the smell of cat pee?

I turned to my father. "Dad, don't you see? Steve—"

"Don't you 'dad' me!" he shouted. He thrust his knotty head out at me, screwing it to one side. "You're just like your mother. You cozy up when it's damn convenient for you!"

He slapped his palm down on his armrest, sending a puff of dust into the air, and stood up in one easy motion, breaking away from the sofa. He was shorter than I remembered, but not stooped like Mom, or arthritic in the knees like Granddad. His green-checkered shirt was tucked inside dark slacks, and he wore a snake-like black belt around his trim waist. I took a step back as he wrung his hands together as if they hurt.

"Mark"—his voice climbed as if to make an announcement, "now listen. It's too damn late. It's been decided."

Been decided? He decided, he meant.

"Then how 'bout the Catholic cemetery over in Jeffersonville? They wouldn't know

about any ‘reputation.’”

“No.”

I took another step back.

“More abuse for Steve, Dad?”

How could anyone stand this man? This had nothing to do with church or any cemetery. This was his shame and regret he was hiding.

I could spell it out for him too. He was too ashamed to have Steve on display in a funeral home, the casket open for anyone to walk in and see in his bloated, blotchy, drunkard’s face—evidence of his wretched, short life, all pointing back to our father.

Or he was afraid of no one showing up at all. Total indifference. No one showing up at the cemetery for the graveside service either, the grass at St. Mary’s sparkling blank with a son forgotten.

In my family, we had made a lifetime out of neglecting one another, and here was another instance of it. Where was the love? The backbone to take control of a situation and do the right thing? We were all unfinished little people.

“Cremating him’s wrong, Dad. And you know it.”

Wrong for the simple reason Steve loved fire. When we were young, he would stare every night into our potbelly stove, into the fire’s light. He left his dreams imprinted on those low, coiling flames. He wanted a Fender guitar, a jade chess set. He wanted to become rich and famous and discover something great. He wanted a girlfriend. He sure didn’t want to end up a handful of white ash.

“You coming down here and telling us all what the hell to do,” he said.

The lines in his face deepened as he grew all the more gloomy and threatening. When I was young, I had thought that God, angry with him, had tried to gouge out his eyes but missed and left deep thumb marks that were the heavy bags under his eyes. I still thought that, more than ever, as he went on chewing at the air.

“You never offered to help before, never cared while Steve was alive. You just ran away from here.” His finger came at me like the point of a sword. “Where have you been the last ten, twenty years?”

“Staying away from you,” I muttered.

“What did you say?”

“Why do you think I ‘ran away,’” I said, my head wobbling in anger.

“Oh, your old man was too damn hard on you, was he?”

“He was. He abused us.”

There was no thunder or lightening. The words just came out. It had taken me all these years to say them.

His face was hacked up with anger, and when he took a threatening step toward me, I thought the old bastard was going to take a swing at me.

He wasn’t the only one with a temper. Didn’t he remember I had been arrested years ago for fighting and charged with battery? Didn’t he wonder how I had gotten the long scar down my chin since then? Or how about the fact I was divorced and never in a lasting relationship?

Shouting at coworkers, putting my fist into bathroom mirrors, buckling plasterboard walls in efficiency apartments from West Virginia to Minneapolis—by the time I was twenty-five, the number of good women I had scared off with my temper left me feeling I had killed a

car full of friends in a traffic accident.

I had his anger in my veins, imprinted on my psyche. I was him. My whole life had been decided not by my freewill, but by a much smaller, exact force—quite literally by the slaps to my face by my father’s hand. In those impacts, who I was to be was knocked into position, shaped, and put on course. Every thought and action from those years had been fired forth in fear, shame, or desperation. Every limit I put upon myself had been based on a self-image weakened and reduced by him.

Of course he cared nothing about my depression. How many times had I walked to the East River in New York and stared down into the shimmering, inky-black flow, wondering: how would it be drowning. Or the guesswork with Prozac and Ativan, the desperate talks with crisis hotline counselors in the middle of the night, and the panic attacks that had me swerving across lanes of traffic, yelling and screaming, hammering my fist against the horn, spit flying, the highway behind me under a caution flag as if following a hostage situation. He knew nothing of these episodes of self-hatred that went on and on, like being on a tall, swaying ladder with no way down.

Wouldn’t he be amused to know that his son had been a patient in the legendary wacko ward of Bellevue Hospital in New York? Most came to The Big Apple to see the Statue of Liberty and to ride in an open-air double-decker tour bus through the majestic, building-filled streets of Manhattan, all while fantasizing Wall Street tickertape falling on them. I came to the city with everything I owned in a bag slung over my shoulder, only to find myself soon out of money, no job, nobody but strangers around me, Manhattan going underwater, me drifting in the cold depths.

But when I handed over my shoelaces to the guards in Bellevue, I came in from the cold. I felt the warmth of the lights in the ward, and the bright white walls around me opened my eyes. I had to admit a certain thrill at being a failed, sickly frustrated writer in the famous halls of madness. I had reached the apex of something.

My father knew none of this. He was so unaware. It was right under his nose. He had not one crazy son, but two.

Standing before him, I felt savage, bewildered, and out of kilter. For his good and mine, I headed across the stinky oval rug for the front door. I would stop this cremation somehow, if only to spite the bastard.

CHAPTER SIX

I crossed the weedy backyard at a brisk clip. My father hated me. Counselors, girlfriends—all were quick to say over the years, no, he hated himself. But I didn't buy it. If it hadn't been for me, the third son, my mother would have never put her foot down and said—your hard-fisted ways, Bill, not with my youngest, you don't.

A counselor had once asked me if I had an Oedipus complex. Not strictly Oedipus, I replied, because he had unwittingly killed his father—I would well know it.

I didn't expect fatherly love from him. I knew my fate. All my life, whenever I talked to men twice my age, a great yearning for a father figure bled from me. Most men my age wanted a younger woman. I wanted an older man.

When I was in my twenties, it was easy to win fond smiles from middle-aged men. I spoke of my own father with a pride that actually agreed with me. Dad had been an airplane mechanic, and his side of the family, five generations back, was at the root of the Mendon lumber industry. These older men gave me glimpses of love and admiration I craved. I was a good son, they said, and I grabbed this corroboration out of thin air.

In my thirties, fatherly smiles from men a generation ahead of me were harder to come by. My answers to their questions drew puzzled, cloudy looks. I wasn't married? I didn't have kids? As they listened to me talk of my father, they became confused when learning he was not deceased. I clearly spoke of him in past tense, one or two pointed out.

Did I? It was a curious slip-up that amused me, made me think.

When I was divorced from a short, ugly marriage in Minneapolis, I was taken to dinner by an older man in my church, in my supposed grief. When he propositioned me over his rare steak, I thought—what rock have I turned over?

I had been turning over these rocks all my life, starting with Whitey next door. Men wanted me in a way women never did. I was smallish and soft-spoken. Maybe they thought they could boss me around in their kitchen.

On one hand, I was mortified. On the other, I was fascinated. What did it mean that I felt sexual desire only for women yet made emotional connections only with men?

As I say, I knew my fate.

Halfway across my mother's backyard, I caught a flash of banana-yellow in a clump of undergrowth. I stopped and followed the line of color until making out the curve of handlebars. I stepped closer and crushed down the briars with my sneakers. There, in the clutch of weeds, held all this time, lay Steve's old mini-bike.

How my brother had loved that noisy, smoke-kicking contraption. Most of it was rusted away, but at one time, it had a Campbell's soup can muffler that scalded your leg raw.

Shouldn't I put it under glass like an artifact? Shouldn't I be careful not to smudge away any possible trace of his young fingerprints? Or what about the handlebars, scratched, nicked, and worn down the precise extent to record his joy with the bike like the rubbed beads of Mother Teresa's rosary or the thrust tip of Geronimo's knife?

Or was I just absurd with sentimentality?

Once beyond my mother's yard, I headed up the dusty lane toward town, the gravel crunching under me like a fine layer of well walked down bones. Whitey's clapboard house

stood sunbeaten in the distance. I thought again of all he and I had said about Steve. More than ever my brother was a scattered soul.

What of Steve the minister? Steve the archaeology volunteer? Why didn't I take that bag of photographs Whitey had given me, dump them on the floor of my mother's house at my father's feet, and dare him to help me put them together like a jigsaw puzzle?

From the lane, I headed toward the middle school, following a chain-link fence whose shiny, woven wall of diamond-pattern wires blurred by. On the cinder running track, I remembered that famous spring day in Alma track and field—Steve crossing the finish line in his sheening blue and gold Panthers jersey, nearly a full lap ahead of the runner from Green Valley, to the blare of trombones and rata-tat-tat of snare drums.

From here, I took a pig path into a patch of woods—and stopped. What happened in here? Litter was everywhere. Milk jugs, fishing lines entangled in limbs, and a rusted tricycle flung high into the crotch of a tree. When I emerged on the other side, two words, spray-painted in black on the pale-green, golf-ball-shaped water tower in the distance, greeted me.

Eat me!

I was in The Little Brown Jug area of Alma, named after a bar that had once stood here. Houses were nothing but cinderblock shells. Frosty purple graffiti snaked around telephone poles and across dilapidated porches. Tops of parking meters were missing. There were no sidewalks, only a weedy shoulder strewn with old tires, flattened beer cans, and sparkling bits of green glass.

Out in the middle of the potholed road was a hook-shaped skid mark that caught my eye. I stepped out into the road, my shadow bobbing ahead of me, until I stood gazing straight down

at this faded streak of seared-on rubber. Overhead was the sizzle of sagging power lines, black snakes frying on the sky. I knelt and touched the skid mark, feeling the warmth of the asphalt.

Could it, by chance, have come from that tomato-red '77 Camaro with gold shag carpeting Uncle Tommy had sold to Steve for four hundred bucks? Steve liked to race it through here.

I strode across the chipped-up concrete bridge over Old Furnace Creek, the water below eerily rust-colored. Years ago, from this bridge, Steve had dropped a large flat rock on a water moccasin winding through this reddish brown brew. *Whoosh!* Up came a geyser, the snake flip-flopping in the air before plunging under with the pancake-shaped rock, never to resurface. I stopped to peer down at the gruesome water. Why, after all these years, did I feel sorry for the snake?

Behind the High's store rose the bushy frontier of Milton's Salvage Yard. When we were in junior high, my brothers and I'd sneak out there and hide in those tattered old ragtops sunken in mountains of wild plants. We broke off signal arms, yanked knobs out of dashes, busted glove box doors off their hinges, and sliced up the vinyl seats with penknives. Steve was the angriest at our father, and Dad had tormented him all the more for being like Mom—thin-skinned.

Steve and Mom were alike in many ways. Both had reddish hair. Both were born in March. Both had weak teeth. Mom had Janie's Beauty Salon to escape to when our father became too much, and Steve had these rusted-up cars to vent in.

I'll kill the fucker! He'd jam gearshifts up and back, punch pedals to the floor over and over, and hammer his fist against dashboards. But nothing ever happened. There were no engines, no tires. As mad as he got, he was still sitting in those same sagged down clunkers, in

the high ugly weeds.

On charming Washington Street, I slowed up. The white steeple of St. Mary's rose up like a pylon warning me to stop. As I recalled my father's words, "The church doesn't want him buried...not in St. Mary's Cemetery anyway," anger burned in me.

Was he telling the truth? Or was there no money to bury Steve? Or that he didn't receive last rites? Which?

Or was he just abusing Steve unto death?

Then, I thought in another direction. How could a handful of ashes get to heaven? How could Steve walk through the pearly gates if his legs had been turned to flakes? Or talk to God without a head, eyes, and mouth?

Heaven, in my mind, was a kind of place—a kingdom beyond the blue and gold sunset: bleach-white castles adorned with crosses, emerald-green grass, gilded wrought-iron gates, levitating blond-haired angels, and God himself with a white beard as long as his scroll of promised land admittees. I had grown up with richly illustrated children's Bibles within easy reach—in my doctor's and dentist's waiting rooms, in the waiting area of Sears Tire Center, Al's Barber Shop, and Farmers and Merchants Bank, wherever there was a *Popular Mechanics* or *Family Circle*.

Then, when I left West Virginia, I often heard of cremation. Whenever someone said they were going to be cremated, I thought—oh, you're just saying that to sound big. Or you're just saying that because cremation's in a trendy choice, like voting independent. Many people gave it a metaphysical wanderlust. They spoke of it as taking flight, ascending to another world, a Zen afterlife.

The idea made no sense. To burn up your body and expect your soul to make it to kingdom come was sort of like taking the rocket away from the astronaut. To say nothing of a screwball gamble. What if you got to Heaven and needed your body? It was a child's way of looking at it, but the best I could do then—and now.

I walked on past St. Mary's to a long block of prettied-up row houses. Sitting high on porches on both sides of the street were today's town residents. There was a flashy brunette in a red tank top, her front yard filled with showy, cone-shaped, cream-colored flowers. On the stoop next to hers was a small girl in a jean jacket covered in pink rhinestones that sparkled in the sun. Two houses down was a big-bellied man washing his black SUV in the street.

I eased on through, disguised by time. Who was this bony man? New York life had brought me to bones. In the town I had grown up in, I was a rakish stranger.

Farther down, the town's broken-up sidewalks had gotten worse over the years. The claw-like feet of century-old oaks were ripping from the ground, breaking their time-frozen stances. In places, concrete slabs were cleaved up so badly they left gaping holes and had spewed dry brown dirt out onto nearby lawns. Sections of walk were taped off in orange.

I stopped and stared down at the open wounds in the earth.

"You can't fight Mother Nature," my mother had remarked to my father more than two decades ago.

"Sure you can," Steve had chimed in from the other side of the dinner table. He helped himself to another fish cake, or burger, taking the biggest, which usually went to Dad. "The problem's a pathogen in the soil. Simple. It can be confirmed by an acid and alkaline test."

Mom smiled in a way only I could see.

Steve wasn't kidding, though. He took soil samples around town, and what a sight, too. He marched right down mainstreet, an oversized green hardhat plunked over his little red head—the hardhat had been left on the street a few years back by a Potomac Edison worker. Under his arm was Mom's good office clipboard. Greg was right behind him, entrusted to carry the most essential item on our microbiological field work, a shiny metal case with a briefcase handle. Packed inside was a complete hydrocarbon detection kit, including amber glass vials and stainless steel measuring cups. Mr. Lucas, our chemistry teacher, had let Steve borrow the kit. As the lowly assistant's assistant, I brought up the rear, lugging a gunny sack of clanging metal tubes, with a king-sized flashlight stuffed under my belt.

Old ladies peered over railings. Cars slowed. Other kids wanted to join us but were turned away. Steve was in full Mr. Scientist mode, saying we needed to avoid carbon-poor, yellowish, clay-based soil and look for nitrogen-rich black earth. The idea was to find a pattern in vegetation-rich environments that would correspond to higher pH readings. Basically, that would lead us to diseased soils, he said, where we'd likely find the source of the pathogens. He sounded smart and was, but in this case, all he was doing was reading Mr. Lucas' instructions.

We collected some thirty bottles of dirt and labeled them all by location and ground depth. The problem later would be the pH strips kept at the school. If they weren't ten years old, then they had been touched a hundred times, ruined by oil and salt from fingertips. In our samples, Mr. Lucas couldn't tell phosphorous from dog pee.

So the pathogens went unchecked for years. The town's soil lost integrity, and tree roots sprung free, breaking sidewalks like graham crackers. Today they were crumbs.

As I cleared the last of the upheaved slabs, Eackles Funeral Home came into view. A

plain white building with black shutters, heavy-eyed windows, and tired siding, it looked sleepy in the afternoon sun. There were no cars around it. My brothers and I had walked by here every day on the way to school, and every time one of us joked, "People are dying to get in there." If there was a hearse in front, we stopped to admire it. It looked like a chocolate-covered ambulance.

Steve was always brave about opening the front door of Eackles and peeking in. Behind a heavy red velvet curtain was a large dimly lit room filled with rows of simple metal folding chairs on a floor of bright green AstroTurf.

When Granddaddy Roy was laid out inside, my brothers and I and some cousin I couldn't remember all gathered around the edge of his casket, all the way around, and peered in as if leaning over a bridge and gazing down at eddies in the water. Though waxy faced, with eyelids and lips looking glued shut, Granddad, we believed, was only sleeping. We were old enough to know what dead was, but this wasn't it. Dead was a skunk along the road. Dead was a taxidermied fox. Dead was something or somebody we didn't love.

Steve reached in and touched his spotted old hand. He didn't say it was cold or stiff. He just held it for a moment. He was always a little older than us in that way.

At home, we talked about embalming fluid, right at the dinner table. Dad seemed to know a lot. Said it went through the veins like antifreeze going to parts of an engine. We asked why it was green. That he didn't know. We all sat in quiet wonder. No one made the crack that it turned Granddad into a martian or monster.

I thought the luminous green was pretty, like electricity. Prettier than blood. It made Granddad better than human. He wasn't going away to bones like some dead dog in dirt in our

backyard. He was bedded down for a long sleep, in satin, in a box of beautiful wood, with a big concrete vault—made right here in Alma by his neighbors—ready to be put around him, to seal out for centuries dirt and rain and cold until some force from God would raise him up like Jesus.

That was not death.

Today, all these years later, as I stood in front of the funeral home, I knew why Steve now wanted to be buried next to Granddad. So that he could reach his hand out and find him in the earth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Just then, my cell phone vibrated in my front pocket.

Incoming call from New York. Lisa.

“Mark? Hey, I have news for you. Good and bad, depending on how you want to proceed.”

I came to a stop and shifted my weight to one side.

“Proceed?”

“What Steve told you, about being buried—that has legal grounds.”

I lifted my head up to the sun.

“Okay.”

“Yes, it constitutes an oral will.”

I could hear the enthusiasm in her voice, and at once I was mistrustful of it. Ordinarily Lisa was as serious and somber as her career required her to be.

I drifted off the sidewalk and came to a stop in the grass.

“Whatta you saying?”

“I’m saying you are legally responsible to tell someone in authority. It’s—”

“I did. I told my father.”

“And?”

“Bastard said no. No funeral.”

“Well, it’s not his place to say no. You have to tell him you’re the recipient of Steve’s

oral will and that has legal ramifications.”

Lisa’s most appealing trait was her high-minded devotion to the letter of the law. If there was a law to protect it, or a court to defend it in, then she, like Sandra Day O’Connor, was there to cite it and stand by it.

I made her clarify. Steve, in what he had said to me on Friday night, had communicated his last wishes to me, what to do with his remains. Knowingly or not, he made an oral, legal declaration, a conveyance of last wishes, or nuncupative will.

“You don’t have to listen to your father, in other words. You can take this to the local magistrate.”

That I heard clearly.

“Take my father to court? You’re kidding?”

“An injunction to start with. It’s up to you, but, in effect, yes.”

The trees over me rustled from a sudden breeze, sounding like a thousand rattlesnakes. She called it “petitioning the court for a temporary restraining order against the crematorium. A TRO, as in abusive spouses.” Her voice dropped in sarcasm. “That’s something you should know a lot about.”

I felt her jab and let it pass. A million questions piled up in my head. What would I have to say in court? Would the courtroom be packed, like in *Law & Order*? Would Mom have a stroke? Steve would fart down from heaven, guffaw, and throw an empty beer bottle at my father as he lied on the witness stand.

“Now, you can always hope it will all be a voluntary resolution. That’s—”

“It won’t. Nothing in this family is voluntary.”

It was the promise in my own voice I dreaded, the promise of legal battle. I saw myself at forty-two on the threshold of becoming another in a disgraceful group who took their own parents to court for one appalling reason or another. I foresaw God acting like a boxing ref before the start of the bell, spelling out the rules—no biting, spitting, poking fingers in the eye, or hitting below the belt.

“When’s it scheduled?” she asked.

“The cremation?” A line of panic ran taut through me. “Shit, I don’t know. I think Tuesday.”

“Well, you better ask.” I should make a few calls, she said—the hospital, the crematorium. “Also, you’ll need an attorney licensed in West Virginia.”

“You can’t do it from there? Online somehow?”

“No! And I can’t believe you asked me that. I can’t practice law in West Virginia.”

“Come down then. Fly down.”

“Oh, now I can come down?”

I said nothing. Seconds were flying by, sweeping me up in a legal action. I could feel the future swiftly moving into place. I dug the heel of my sneaker into the ground, mashing innocent little blades of grass into the brown dirt. Oral will? Me seeking a judicial restraint? How could I do this and not die from bad karma?

“Do you know any attorneys there?” she asked.

“No.” Just then, my eye caught sight of an aluminum ladder tilted up against it the bright blue side of a house across the street. “Yes.”

Or rather I knew someone who did. Greg’s old boss from years ago was an attorney. I

had no idea what area of law he practiced. He also owned a business painting houses.

“At least consult one, okay?” she said.

Consult I could do. I could also try Oxycontin while I was down here.

“This is hilarious, you know. Steve’s dead, and he’s having his rights defended now?

When all the years he was alive, the world just walked all over him?”

“It’s up to you. I’m just giving you information.”

Information, huh?

When her voice started breaking up, I was grateful to end the call. We said goodbye, no affection included, as always.

Head down, hands jammed into my pockets, I walked on down Washington Street. Oral will? Take my father to court? Inform whoever was in charge at the crematorium? Who did she think I was?

As if in answer, I got a text message from her: “We still need to talk about some things.”

To break up probably. I hit delete. Let her do her will. She would anyway.

As I walked, the dark blue shadows of afternoon pooled around the edges of my eyes. Cone-shaped evergreens, having collected sunlight all day, glowed over me like gigantic witches’ hats. Out across the town park, light and shadow were crisscrossing, making plaid grass.

I came to the edge of St. Mary’s Cemetery, on the opposite end from where my family was buried. Through the trees I could see gravestones that, not quite out of reach of the angled sunlight, dotted the shaded grounds with a bone-white glow. After glancing around for anyone who might disapprove, I jumped the low rock wall, landing down on the soft earth on the other

side, then ran sloppily out across the grounds, passing gravestone after gravestone.

“WALTER S. ALTON, BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER...PERRY COLLINS
III...BARBARA ELLEN CRANE, 1802—1884...”

I stopped and stood looking down. After more than a hundred years, here still was this sign of Barbara Ellen Crane’s life. It said, “I, Barbara Ellen Crane, claim this ground mine.”

What had she done differently from Steve to deserve this signpost where her life had stopped?

Across the shadowy slope was a loose arrangement of gravestones—tall ones, short ones, round ones. They were like people, and there were as many as people. Standing there, a chilly feeling came over me. Steve would never be there if my father had his way. Would I?

I stooped and touched my fingertip to her Barbara’s coarse, flat stone. A hundred years from now, another finger would feel this rough stone. I didn’t want to have strange thoughts like, “Barbara is alive in the stone,” like Michelangelo’s “David” or “Moses,” but I did. Her headstone was hers.

I said her name aloud, “Barbara,” and felt dangerously loose inside for it, loose inside for kneeling here in the afternoon and breathing her name into the grooves in the granite—grooves that were like her alphabetical fingerprint in a beautiful stone. For that second, I saw her, or felt her, or imagined her. She was alive again.

I sat right down on the grass beside her. Would anybody believe this? Cemetery stones were like unbound tablets that made up yearbooks of the dead, and Steve wouldn’t even be listed if my father wasn’t stopped. How could he be denied his place among others? He wasn’t denied a birth certificate, a social security number, or a driver’s license. He sure wasn’t denied all the

suffering in life.

I sat there for the longest time, feeling the grass in my grip—grass so cool and crisp it felt like slivers of metal, the afternoon breeze on my face, and, when I leaned back, Barbara’s stone edged against my back. It returned me to the moment.

I stood and drifted farther out across the grounds, my eyes floating over the stones.

“STEVEN W. BARRINGTON,” one read.

As I stepped up to it, I felt a shaft of light strike deep inside me, as deep inside as the center of the stone itself. I bent down and pressed my palm flat against the cool face of the stone, covering both the letter “N” in “STEVEN” and the middle initial “W” beside it. Then, with my other palm and forearm, I covered the letters “INNGTON” in the last name, the stone running down to my elbow as I did. Next, without lifting my hands or forearm off the stone, I pulled my head back as far as I could and read what I had spelled.

“STEVE BARR.”

It was that easy, that possible. Steve should have a stone as good as this one. I could see the deep, crisp, new letters: “Steven Jonothon Barr, born March 7th, 1960.” Praying hands, floral designs, frosted borders, glazed face—the works!—a handsome, stout monument for as much of eternity as he needed.

As I stood, the deep, windy sigh of a giant escaped me. Lisa was right. Steve did express his last wishes to me, and a Christian burial was his fundamental right. I had to take my father to court, whatever it took.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A half hour later, I pulled to the curb on tree-lined Jackson Street, reached over the backseat, and took a handful of photos of Steve from the shopping bag.

Steve decked out in a pink pinstripe suit.

Steve with a luminous green python coiled around his neck.

Steve in black leather pants and boots, with a tee-shirt that read, “Democratic Underground.”

Bizarre. Two-hundred and forty-seven of them. The number was astronomical. The Steve I remembered did nothing two hundred and forty-seven times.

What do I do with this many photos? Who do I show them to? I wasn't sure if I trusted them, their smell, if they were really Steve as he should be remembered.

I grabbed the bag and walked it back to the trunk—and locked it inside. Good riddance for now.

Driving on, I found Greg's apartment by way of the *Alice Cooper, Welcome to My Nightmare* poster taped to his front window. My brother was forty-four, and he still had an Alice Cooper poster on his window.

I parked and made my way across an uncut grassy yard on a straight path of closely laid gray and salmon-colored paving stones. There was no welcome mat at the front door of Greg's little white duplex, just a slab of concrete dusted with paint chips from the sun-blistered clapboards above. I heard a TV inside—a racket of gunfire and explosions. When I knocked, the glass in his door, black from the darkness inside, rattled. A moment later, my brother's

round, scraggly-bearded face loomed out at me through the dark glass. His eyes were unblinking and intense, his mouth slit-like and tight with distrust. When he opened the door for me, sharp copper highlights of suspicion were waiting in his eyes.

“Mom send you here?”

I shook my head.

“You saying you came here on your own?”

Though I nodded, he sighed, crossed his thick arms, sending creases through his brown plaid flannel shirt, and stood looking down at his tan construction boots, which had two-inch soles as pink as a pencil eraser. When he lifted his eyes, there it was again after all this time—that impenetrable, unnerving look of his, a murderous look.

“He hates us all,” Mom would say to me over the years. Hate wasn’t exactly the word. More like wary. As a family, we had neglected Steve to death, so we were not to be trusted.

“Whatta you want here, dude?” he asked, his nostrils flared.

The sound of my own laugh made me think of a nervously chewed straw.

“I’m supposed to be here for our brother’s funeral, remember?”

He squinted off into the last of the gray daylight and said in his straight-faced voice, “Dude, in this family, every day’s a funeral.”

I entered a space crowded high and low around me like the aisles of thrift shop—and nearly walked straight into a neon-blue surfboard wedged between low rafters and sticking out at me at eye level. An orange vinyl sofa with a long strip of silver duct tape across both cushions sat crowded up beside a bowlegged card table with a black trash bag on top, from which spilled jeans and dingy white T-shirts. On wood wall paneling above was a large caricature of Richard

Nixon called “Tricky Dick.” He had a bulbous penis for a nose.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something enormous and black bearing down on me—and jumped back.

“What, dude?” he said, giving me a creased-up look. “You never know when you’ll need a good truck tire in your living room.”

Truck tire? It rose up more than halfway to the ceiling and rounded down to the floor in a massive wide arch of nicked-up, tread-worn, pale-black rubber.

“Right off the DC Armory Bigfoot 5.”

“A monster truck?” I glanced all around. “But how’d you...?”

He nodded behind me. “Right through the door. How else?”

He stepped away, opened a dingy refrigerator, stuck his big head in, and pawed around in the shadow-cluttered yellow light, clanking bottles.

“Mom said you’re pretty miserable in New York,” he said, his voice muffled. “Got macaroni and beer. Oh, forgot—you don’t drink *beer*. Sorry, no Hollywood H2o here.”

I drifted over to him. “*Miserable?* You’re kidding? She said that?” It was true, but how did Mom know?

“That’s what she said...and cold, stale pretzels. Want those too, at Chef Greg’s?”

On the top shelf of his fridge was a tub of Quaker Oats labeled, in jumpy handwritten letters in black felt-tip marker, “Wallnut Cake Mix.”

Wallnut? Since when would he misspell walnut?

“Miserable, huh? Well, I guess that’s me then,” I said, stepping over a collapsed stack of *American Hunter* magazines.

“Yep. Something about an abusive relationship. Chip off the old block I guess.”

“Abusive? *Fuck!*”

He popped his head out of the fridge, his face a mustard spill of anger.

“Watch your mouth, dude!” He jabbed his thumb toward the ceiling. “There’s kids above me, and you can hear a fart through these walls.” In his hand was a drinking glass with something white and chalky in it. He smacked it down on the counter. “I mean, I really don’t care one way or the other about your personal life. I’m not surprised...in this family.” A second later, he reached into the fridge again and whirled around holding a cantaloupe up to his ear like a shot put, a zany grin on his face. “Hey, look, a brain on Alma!” As quickly, his screwy grin fell. “Dude”—he lowered the cantaloupe and palmed it like a basketball—“your brain on drugs, remember?”

I had no enthusiasm for his nonsense. *Abusive?* How could my mother say that?

Behind me, along with the monster truck tire, was another illusion.

“Dude,” I said, using his favorite stupid word, “you have a lawn mower in your kitchen.”

He rolled the cantaloupe back onto the wire shelf in the fridge—bowed it in and let it crash into bottles.

“Hey, this is the kitchen. That’s the living room. And that’s *not* a lawn mower,” he said. “It’s a Ferguson Riding Tractor.”

A dusty red monstrosity, it had a front grill like an 18-wheeler, headlights covered in a yellowy film, and, funny enough, the tiniest, cutest tires. I didn’t ask him to explain, though it too must have come through the front door.

Around the room were more bizarre sights—a short-handled sledgehammer on a black

particle-wood coffee table, the end of which was smashed off, leaving a savage, pulpy white fracture; a Buddha figurine on the kitchen windowsill, a green toothbrush jammed under its arm like a sword.

“Okay, we’re not here to check out my home furnishings,” he said.

I sauntered back over to him.

“I saw our father today.”

“And you feel sick? Wanna kill yourself? Better yet, him?”

“And he had an urn for Steve.”

His smirk flattened out, and his eyes went motionless. Despite how different we looked as brothers—his messy red hair, my straight brown buzz cut, his scraggy beard, my babyface, his small chin, my thick lips—we were only thirteen months apart. What I knew about our family, he knew. What I felt about growing up, he felt. He was my memory double, my childhood shadow, as sick as that made us both.

“Urn, huh?” He reached into a crinkly mess of Wal-Mart bags on top of a second card table and pulled out a small frying pan caked with something burnt, then proceeded to squint at its blackened surface. “Did he ask you to fill it with bourbon for him?” He flicked his fingernail against the back of the pan, making it ding. “Cause that would be his style.” He put the frying pan back where he had gotten it, cast an eye up at me, and said with a sigh, “And let me guess, you think cremation’s, what, wrong?”

His old intelligence glimmered through, but I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of making me answer yes or no. I took a step in no particular direction.

“I called Steve Friday night,” I said. “Mom asked me to...he started saying all kinds of

crazy things.”

Greg, moving over to the sink, threw an impatient look over his shoulder. “Okay.” He tossed a fork into the sink, causing it to clank around. “Like what?”

“Like, he rambled on about dying. Saying bury me near Granddad. About having...” As I tried to recall exactly what Steve had said to me, my eyes found in the middle of the floor a mousetrap of all things, fully cocked. “...oh yeah, the same ‘black heart’ as Dad.”

A crease deepened across Greg’s blockish forehead. He was turned at the counter, peering down in the direction of the mousetrap with me.

“Go on,” he said.

When I went on to tell him what Lisa had just said about me being a witness to Steve’s oral will and that it was my legal responsibility to speak up about it, Greg pulled up a chair and sat. He folded up his big arms and stared down at the scoured tips of his boots.

“Same black heart, huh?” He lifted his head, his eyes all of a sudden soft and remorseful. “Told me the same thing.”

I felt myself practically jump off the floor. “Whoa, what?”

“But with another spin on it. Called himself ‘evidence’... ‘don’t get rid of the evidence’.”

“What...*evidence*?”

Greg shrugged. “*Him*. His life, I guess.” Under the harsh angle of kitchen light, a vein ran sharply down over his temple, giving the impression that his head was cracked. “Said something else, too.” He chewed on his lower lip by dragging it under the flat edge of his front teeth. ““Don’t let Dad cremate me.””

“Whoa, wait a minute!” This time I did jump off the floor. I made a nervous-footed half

circle around him, only to come back front and center. “You mean, he used the word ‘cremate’?”

“I figured he was just screwy as usual,” he said, a greasy shine running down the bridge of his nose.

My eyes wheeled around the room like a paint roller blazing a canary-yellow trail across his grungy ceiling. “He knew? How would he know?” I paced in a little circle.

“Calm down, dude. He was sick and crazy for years.”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head.

“What don’t you know?”

“*Evidence?* That doesn’t sound like Steve.”

“You’re frantic-headed as always.”

I drew a long, cold stare at him.

“Just when were you gonna tell someone? Or were you *ever* gonna tell anyone, Greg?”

He scowled at me, then popped up out of the chair, standing well taller than me once again.

“This is your predicament,” he said, brushing past me.

“*My* predicament? Your predicament too,” I said.

“Like hell.”

I followed him over to the refrigerator. “Remember Weston?” I asked, breathing ice on his back. “Remember how we ran from Steve at his worst hour? Ran two hundred miles back across the state?”

He turned and faced me as squarely as if I were a reflection in a mirror.

“Yeah, I remember.” Whatta you want me to do about it, his eyes were saying. You wanna hear how much I regret it, his limp mouth was saying.

He pivoted on one boot and headed toward the sink, but ran out of room in that direction too. I found myself again talking to his broad back.

“Steve told you, not me, he *did not* want to be cremated. That makes you just as much a part of this as I am.”

He cocked a glare over his shoulder at me.

“Part of what?”

Again I told him what Lisa had said about Steve having conveyed to me his legal oral will and about my plan to take Dad to court. As he listened, the corners of his eyes gleamed with a rich, harsh brown of skepticism. I ended by giving my head a swagger, saying, “I hate to inform you, bro, but Steve communicated his last wishes to you, and that’s got legal ramifications.”

He stepped up to me, his chest and shoulders puffed up, his face squared off with a deep-seated glare. I could sound like my New York lawyer girlfriend all I wanted, he let me know, but calling him “bro” was a different matter.

“You fuckin’ smartass,” he went on, his voice digging out each syllable. “Coming back here.”

I could say any number of things to him. *Jealous? Pissed because my life turned out better than yours?*

Instead, I whipped out my cell phone.

“Talk to her yourself then,” I said.

I knew he wouldn't. Lisa, as smart as she was, would chew him up and spit him out. He leaned back from me, his face drawn up in a sneer.

“What, that Jew?”

Discussion over. He was a racist, a small town imbecile. I slid my cell back into my pocket.

“Fuck you,” I said.

His burly form closed in on me and bowled me to the floor. I heard a snap near my ear, like wood breaking. Something sharp-edged crushed under me, all while his big body landed on top of mine with a gruesomely warm, heavy-as-hell blanketing effect.

“You little prick,” he growled. “Dad always said you were a whiny little mama’s boy.”

A sharp pain cut through my lower back on one side. When my head then banged down on a metal edge, I realized he had flattened me on top of the folding chair.

I smelled beer on his breath just before he forearmed my head down hard against the floor. My eyes were jarred loose, it seemed, sending white flashes through my vision, and my back teeth felt loosened too, all while there were springy shoots of pain in my scalp from having my hair yanked by something.

I went out of body, seeing myself from above pinned on my back, open to blows. My fingers hardened into iron claws as I lashed up at his face. I hooked a nostril, pulling his head to one side, stretching his pig nose like a rubber mask. I gouged an ear, sending a wave of pain across his face. When I managed to get a finger into his eye, he jerked back, wincing.

“Hold it!” he shouted, lifting up, backing away, his hand over his eye.

“Fuck hold it, asshole! *Call me mama’s boy?*”

I shrieked that he was a bastard. I shrieked that he was a coward. He looked startled and disorientated by all my shrieking. His uninjured eye flicked nervously up at the ceiling as sounds of footsteps scurried across. He even put a sissy finger to his lips and hissed down at me, “Shh!”

I couldn't scream enough profanity at him—I couldn't find enough original profanity.

“And you misspelled walnut, you idiot!”

He backed away from me as if I were self-destructing. Or so I thought. Even as I still lay on the floor, he charged me again. But he looked terrified this time, as if something dangerous were chasing him.

“Get up! Get out of the way!” he shouted.

When he appeared about to dive on me and crush me, I clapped my hands over my eyes—only to feel nothing. When I opened my eyes, he was standing over me, his boots near my head, his thick legs and torso vaulting up over me, his arms stretched high overhead—and the enormous monster truck tire in his hands, tilting down toward me!

I was paralyzed. He had to kick me to get me to move, and it cost him a second's distraction. The tire dropped down low over me before ending up in his arms as an immense weight to curl, his face purple as he struggled to keep it from crushing me. All the while, the thick soles of his boots were nipping my sides here and there as he tried to avoid stepping squarely on me.

I scampered out of the way and gaped back to see him muscling the humungous thing up straight—walking it upright, step after step in his heavy-duty boots, his shirt stretched thread-tight in his arms and shoulders, his face so monstrously distorted from strain it was breaking

apart into sweaty, fuzzy pixels. When he finally had the tire standing and steadied, he threw his head around to me.

“You almost knocked it over on yourself, dumbass!”

The scream of real fear was in his voice and on his botchy, red face. All the while, I sat curled up on the floor, knees pulled up my chest, breathing hard, my eyes wild and flashing. Our panting filled the air.

“They’re probably calling the cops right now,” he said, nodding up at the ceiling as he stood holding tightly on to the giant tire. “You better get your ass out of here.”

I couldn’t look at him, yet I couldn’t stop my thoughts. *God he was powerful. He saved me.* Though, it was already forgotten that he was the one who had plowed me into the tire in the first place.

When I looked up again, he had left the tire and was peering at his eye in the little diamond-shaped mirror over the sink.

“You scratched my eye, you prick.”

As he examined one eye, both eyes swiveled around until he spotted me staring at him in the mirror.

“You’re bleeding,” he said.

I put my fingers to my face and dabbed my mouth, finding no blood, then to my forehead, my fingers coming back bright red and wet. I wiped the blood on my jeans and went on staring at him.

Creaky footfalls continued across the ceiling. Stepping to the center of the room, Greg yelled up—“We’re good down here! Ernest, we’re good, ya hear!”

“Well, I’m not good,” I said.

He pointed a finger at me.

“Dude, you better get a towel on that. Get it clotted.”

He tossed a dirty-looking gray rag at me from the counter, which landed on the floor.

When I stood to get it, he kicked out a snotty laugh and said, “You got a mousetrap hanging from your shirt, stupid.”

I groped around behind my back until finding the thing clinging to my shirt like an oversized leach. I flung it to the floor, only to hear him laugh again.

“I see you still fight dirty.”

“And you’re still twice my size,” I muttered back.

I moved away from him, disgusted by everything I saw, by how he lived—a frayed paintbrush on a white paper plate, an empty Cheez Doodles bag in the middle of the floor. Then my eye caught sight of something tidy in the corner. I stepped closer and leaned down. It was a small wooden case with a curved glass front. Inside, against a black velvet backing, were narrow, tiny shelves holding what looked like colorful little balls. Memory of what they were stretched my mind far into the past.

“What are you doing with Steve’s aggie set?”

“They’re not aggies,” he was quick to say back. “They’re marbles. An aggie is quartz. Marbles are glass imitations—and don’t get blood all over them.”

“*An aggie is quartz. Marbles are glass imitations.* Why didn’t you ever use that science knowledge of yours in life? You and Steve. You both were on the honor roll.”

He didn’t answer.

Why'd you become the town maintenance man? I had been waiting twenty years to ask him that question too. Why'd you bend your destiny over your knee like a tire iron? That too would be a good question for him.

I sat down on the floor again and squinted through the glass cover on the case at five rows of aggies, or marbles, displaying an array of watery colors. Some were filled with swirls of blue. Others were ringed like Saturn. One looked like green candy. Another was as yellow as the sun. One, I remembered. It was white with pink spots, like a gumball. Whenever we played marbles way back when, this marble was the only one I had any luck with. There it was after all this time. It seemed to have popped out of my memory and landed in this case.

“Why do you have these here?” I asked. “They’re not yours.”

“Because”—he dabbed a balled-up paper towel to his eye, talking out of the corner of his mouth as he did—“Steve asked me...to keep them for him, that’s why.”

“Keep them for him?”

“Until he came back.” He turned to me, his eye red and teary, good and poked. “You know, like Jesus? *Resurrected.*”

I gawked up at him. “Resurrected? He said that?”

“Your hearing still works even if your brain doesn’t.”

“Shut up. Mom said he was a...minister of some kind? Addiction. Something like that.”

“I doubt she put it that way.”

“But was he religious? Just answer me, Greg.”

“If you call religious drinkin’ snake ale with a bunch of born-again’s up on Mount

Mission, then yeah. Anyway, that was five years ago. Any more stupid questions?"

I got up off the floor. "As a matter of fact, yes."

His eyes in the mirror pulled tight with suspicion. "What?"

"Why doesn't it bother you that Steve's gonna be cremated?" I moved over closer to him. "Think, Greg. Everybody in our family's been buried. Remember Granddad's funeral?"

His eyes, in falling away, told me he remembered.

"Even Uncle Evan had a funeral."

As he listened, he stood with one ear cocked toward me, as if I should consider myself fortunate that he'd entertain me to that extent.

"And he was a big drunk," I added. "So don't you think Steve deserves a traditional burial?"

His eyes zeroed in on me in the mirror.

"Depends on what you mean *traditional*, dude?"

"Our tradition, Greg."

He hated it whenever I made sense. He became frustrated not so much with me, but with the greater game, as if life's one flaw was that in chess, even a dumbass younger brother could blindly step out of check.

"Besides, he always liked it in St. Mary's," I said.

His face squeezed into a scowl.

"Liked it?"

"We all did. Don't deny it."

We grew up playing on the grassy slopes of St. Mary's Cemetery. The rest of Alma was

rocky fields or railroad yard, with coal everywhere.

More than that, the cemetery was like our private neighborhood. Mrs. Higgins, our third grade teacher, who died suddenly of a stroke, was buried just below the crest, along a cinder path. Whenever Steve, Greg, and I'd come home from wrist rocket fights in the cemetery, Mom would ask, "You all stop by Bernie Higgins' stone? She was always fond of you boys"—as if Mrs. Higgins was on her front porch down in the cemetery, just waiting for us to stop by and say hello.

Greg remained planted in front of the mirror.

"So, what, you just expect me to speak up to Dad? Tell dear old Dad everything dear old Steve said?"

Actually I had in mind that he take the witness stand in court with me, but that seemed too much to expect at the moment.

"Yes, I do," I said. "He gave me all kinds of shit reasons today. Said there was no money for a funeral. Said the Catholic church doesn't want Steve buried—is that because of the born again thing? Said he also missed last rights. I mean, which is it?"

The twitch of his eyes told me he didn't have an answer, and the wrinkle in his lips said he didn't want to deal with it either.

"You have been away a long time, haven't you?" He turned and tossed the balled-up paper towel in my direction. "You know, there's twenty years of history here since you."

"Meaning?"

When he came boldly toward me, I retreated a few steps back, expecting the worst.

"Relax," he said, peering uncomfortably close at my face. "You better clot it now, dude.

It's running down your neck." He pointed at the dirty little gray rag on the floor. "Use the mirror."

I snatched up the rag and swaggered over to the slanted mirror. Blood was smeared across my forehead, and the rest of my face looked wild, hellish, and older. A broad pain sprang from the back of my head.

"What the hell's wrong with us?" I asked.

If he had looked at me, he would have seen my harmless, lopsided grin.

"Seriously," I said. "You ever wonder why we don't have children? Why none of us are fathers. Mom has no grandchildren."

He definitely didn't like these questions. He angled his body away from me, his face looking smacked with red grapes.

I knew he didn't want to hear about New York, and so many other areas of conversation were off-limits—if he liked working for the town, how it was living on the old black side of town. Happiness, love, passion, the meaning of life—these had always been out-of-bounds.

"Hey, whatever happened to Mr. Jacobs?" I called out. "That guy you used to work for? Part-time attorney? Something like that."

"Part-time *disbarred* attorney you mean?" He gave me an unsmiling face. "Speaking of headstones. He's got one now."

So much for the one West Virginia attorney I knew. I glanced over at the noisy refrigerator.

"You shouldn't refrigerate cantaloupes," I said.

"I'm not, dude."

I shook my head and went on wiping blood off my face.

CHAPTER NINE

A short while later, I was racing my purple Mercury down the backstreets of Alma for the highway. The thickly graveled road, under the spin of my tires, puked heavy stones up against the floorboard, making a metallic clatter. Greg was seatbelted in on the passenger side of the sprawling front seat, rigid-shouldered and smiling like a crash test dummy.

“Hey, you’re the one who’ll get the ticket,” he said.

My first beer in years had turned me into a lunatic. “Why in the fuck did I come back here?” The spray of my spit reached the windshield. “Why’d I ever think I could make peace with this godforsaken place?”

Greg leaned across the seat to see the speedometer.

“Fifty in a twenty-five will get you”—he sat back, gravel roaring under us, trees blurring by—“oh, a 120 dollar ticket, unless they consider this reckless.” He pointed straight ahead. “Watch that”—the car shuddered across a bare washboard stretch, jolting us around—“d-ip-ipp.”

I flung a bleary look across the long seat at him. “How are we gonna bury Steve? Dad said he needed last rites. We’re not priests. Can you even give last rites to someone dead?”

“...of course reckless driving means impounding the car, and I’ll have to walk home.”

I slapped the dash. “Our brother’s dead!”

“That he is. And I’m trying to steer you to his old apartment,” he said, his voice growing stern. “Now take the next left.”

There was no next left. The gravel road instead widened into Route 41, a patchy old hard

surface. I stomped the pedal down—40...50...60—houses and trees blowing by, the car airtight and, without the gravel, silent.

“Okay, well, out here, if they smell beer on your breath, you’ll get a night in jail and a DUI.” His voice went up a pitch while the dark foliage raced by like blotchy microfilm images. “Plus, if you wreck, this thing will roll over half a dozen times—so slow the fuck down!”

I braked hard to make what looked like another vintage West Virginia country road. Greg grabbed the overhead handle as the big car tilted around the turn.

“Uh, dude, this is the next right.”

Right or left, this was no country road. It was newly paved and lined with shiny copper mailboxes embossed with horses and mallards. Every quarter of a mile or so was a Neighborhood Crime Watch sign. Nothing but blacktop and curb. West Virginia was like a digitally clean image.

I eased off the gas as my rental rolled up on a strange site—a corridor sheered right through the trees, the deep-brown dirt of the land tilled up. McMansions. Those creatures of modern construction. They were everywhere. Under construction, they were like presents being unwrapped, the silver paper blowing off. “Stone Ridge Estates,” a new billboard read.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Why, your favorite godforsaken place.”

He told me to keep going, that he knew another way to Steve’s. The farther we went, the more unfamiliar. New signs, new roads—I couldn’t go slow enough to see it all. Shenandoah Valley Community College? Where did that come from? The bricks looked so phony.

Whole hills, where I remembered them, had been leveled, along with farms. Snaky roads

in my memory had been replaced by wide blasts of macadam. The old pale-blue Millville Bridge had been swapped for a high streamlined superstructure with flashy black handrails. The riverbank, at one time crowded with flimsy trailers on cinderblocks, was now perfectly landscaped and dotted with Chesapeake-blue condos, their roofs shimmering in the evening sun like gold candy bar wrapper.

I glanced up in the mirror to find an SUV square on my ass. I couldn't get over to my right, couldn't get over to my left.

"Jesus. Gettin' around Manhattan's easier you know."

He said nothing. I threw an annoyed eye in his direction.

"You know?" I said again.

"Okay, tell me," he said, his hands dropping into his lap again. "Whatta ya doin' in New York, besides running from this godforsaken place?"

"Well, aren't you at least curious? I've only been there for ten years...working for Williams-Benbridge Academic Publishers."

"No," he said, slowly shaking his head. "What are you *doing* in New York?"

I was taken aback.

"Dude, your problem is you're running from the past, but still living in it," he said.

I glared over at him. "Oh, I'm still living in the past?"

"This whole fuckin' place has changed. Nobody's around anymore. But you still see ghosts everywhere."

I situated my eyes far ahead. You bet I saw ghosts everywhere. Me at nineteen getting Tammy Breeden pregnant, fighting with her husband, the charge of battery, the moment in court.

Ghosts of me at twenty, working in John's Diner, breaking dishes, getting fired. On a construction site in Bluedale, getting high and stealing out of coworkers' coolers, then nearly walking off the seventh floor. Ghosts of me taking a tire iron to my tan Buick Skylark, battering it up one side and down the other, leaving a trail of pockmarks from front to rear; cracking bathroom mirrors and buckling plasterboard walls in crappy apartments around the county; bouncing checks, bailing on rent, hating everyone, myself, no hope of ever finding my way out of West "By God" Virginia.

The horrible thing was, I saw these ghosts wherever I was, whether in New York or in this county bulldozed flat in every direction for fifty miles.

"You need to desensitize yourself," he said.

I stared across the seat at him.

"What'd you just say?"

His face twitched. He had been clear enough.

Desensitize was the most intelligent word I had ever heard about the matter. How did he ever choose it?

"I don't get you," I said.

"What don't you get? That I didn't go to WVU like Mom wanted?"

As a matter of fact, that was one thing I never got. He and Steve both had been the smart ones in the family, the math whizzes. Algebra, geometry, calculus—Greg especially had aced them all. If there was college material in the family, Mom always said Greg was a natural.

How could he live with himself now being the town maintenance man, cutting grass, plowing snow, fixing busted water pipes? The job, when we were kids, had belonged to a short,

bandy-legged, white-haired man who Greg himself had laughed at and called Loser Bill. You could choke on the irony.

“That’s her expectation of me,” he muttered to his window.

“So what’s your expectation of yourself?”

He was silent.

“Greg?”

Again silent. We rode on, the sunset spreading yellow and red fires across the sky.

~

By the time we reached Jefferson Avenue, it was dark. Root-beer-colored light showered down from street poles as we coasted through. Payless Shoe Source. Joe’s Jeans. Sport Clips.

“I don’t recognize this place at all.”

“Man, you don’t recognize anything.” He looked hard across me for something in the darkness beyond my window. “Turn up here.”

“I thought he lived down by the junction.”

“They moved him. Turn.”

I pulled into a foggy-white apartment complex and, as instructed, drew slowly past a row of plain gray doors. These were garden apartments, having, in the shine of my headlights, scanty pink flowers and plastic-looking bushes in front, dusty windows and flimsy pale-blue balconies above.

“Slow,” he said.

I toed the brake, bringing the car to a creep in front of an apartment with an uninviting slope to the sidewalk in front, as if the ground had sunken from something occurring unnaturally

under the building.

“This is it,” he said.

As we stared at the faded gray paint on Steve’s door, I imagined our lines of vision coming together halfway there and continuing on as one.

“You been here recently?” I asked in his low voice.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pointed across my body, and I drove in the direction he pointed, easing into a mostly empty parking lot, there shutting off the engine. Silence filled the interior—pressurized it, as if without the engine running, we were vacuum-packed together.

Keys out of the ignition, I reached for my door.

“Sit tight,” he whispered.

He sat hunched forward, scoping out the parking lot and row of apartments, his eyes shining in the candy-orange light from the high poles. Around us were sagged-down, older-looking cars in sleeping bags of shadows. The dash clock read 7:10, then 7:11. In the distance, through the raised windows, came the faint swish of cars on the avenue, sounding like gentle waves at the beach.

“Okay.”

With him leading the way, we got out and shut our doors softly. Met by cool night air, we headed across the lot, our jagged, distorted shadows thrusting over the lighted asphalt.

Steve’s apartment door drew close. On the sidewalk in front, Greg, as bold as the night, stepped through a row of plastic-stiff bushes and up to a skinny, moon-white window. The sash slid up effortlessly in his hands. I glanced up and around at the nearby apartments to see which lighted windows had a clear view of us. Meanwhile, Greg, as husky as he was, threw a leg over

the sill and ducked his head under the sash, briefly leaving himself half-gobbled up by the window's black mouth before being swallowed all the way in. Again I glanced all around. We were too old for this Frank and Joe Hardy crap. A moment later, the front door opened and swung back into the inky blackness. Greg waved me inside with a flash of his gray sweatshirt.

I stepped into the stench of cigarettes.

"Aromatic, isn't it?" he said, disappearing ahead.

Light came on, sending a blast of white walls up around us. I shut the door behind me.

"Honey, I'm home," he said, his hand dropping away from a wall switch.

The place was all but vacant. On the floor was a bare mattress crowded in by boxes, shopping bags, and a few loose items: red-handled can opener, cylindrical jar filled with ear-pink seashells, and framed photo of a beach with the poem "Footprints in the Sand" drifting down it in glittering blue letters.

"You've cleaned up in here already?" I asked, in a tone of indignation.

He gave his head a single turn.

"Nope."

"Well, somebody sure did."

Everything was pulled in on itself as if retreating from something advancing on all sides, like a universe receding. 7-11 coffee cups were stacked inside one another. Rows of empty clear-glass jelly jars, their labels removed, ran alongside the grungy, blue-striped mattress. Flour-white Wal-Mart bakery boxes, also empty, teetered up into a tower at the head of the mattress. Arranged on top of a produce box were a sliver of white soap, a bigheaded Scooby Doo toothbrush, and a can of Dollar Store shaving cream.

“What, there’s no bathroom?” I asked.

Greg nodded toward a door in the corner. “Speaking of which.” He took off toward it and shut the bathroom door behind him.

I stood alone in the room. With everything pulled into the center of the room, the baseboards were bordered with wide areas of bristly ash-blonde carpet. Walls were blank.

I stepped closer to one of these walls and put my hand flat against it. Solid. Flat. I ran my palm over it. Smooth. Endless.

Lisa and I had these same eggshell-white walls in Brooklyn. But on our walls she had artfully arranged a Van Gogh sunflower print, a Hamptons sunset, a New York bridge scene, a clown, another sunset, and on and on—each picture slightly higher or lower than the other, like musical notes. She had created rhythm on our walls. A song we stopped hearing.

I drifted back over to the strange clutter around the mattress—stack of yellowed newspapers, half a dozen magazines twisted into billy clubs, and a heart-shaped Russell Stover Valentine’s candy box with a belt coiled up inside it.

I lifted an end of the mattress and looked under—nothing.

On the floor in the corner of the room was a plain gray trimline phone, with a clear cord running down the baseboard to a wall jack. Was this the phone I had reached Steve on Friday night?

I stepped over to it, dug out my cell phone, found Steve’s number under “dialed calls,” and double-pressed. A second later, a shrill ring shot from the old phone, sending a frightful sound around the walls.

I let it ring. I wanted to hear it as Steve had heard it on Friday night. He might have been

lying on the mattress, staring up at the blank ceiling, feeling completely alone on his last night. Maybe he had needed this strident sound to awaken him from whatever stupor he was in. It seemed a good sound for someone whose soul was going deaf.

On Friday night, when I was on the phone with him for the last time, I stood in my dark kitchen, staring across the Brooklyn rooftops, at the rectangles of chimneys, right angles of roofs, and bars and lines of endless telephones poles and wires that made up the Park Slope skyline. Steve was breathing into the phone, sounding winded and tar-filled.

Have a life-saving operation? Who was anyone kidding? He was dead already.

“I got the devil in me, bro,” he kept saying.

“Steve, just have the operation. For Mom’s sake.”

“No—no! They’ll see it, bro. They’ll see my black heart. No way in hell!”

He was agitated, and I didn’t want it getting back to Mom that I had caused him to burn a cigarette into his wrist or something.

“But what if it’s a gold heart?”

“Gold heart, yeah”—he laughed hard, then started coughing—“old Mark. You’ve changed, bud.”

I smiled down at the dark floor, pressing my toe against a board over and over, making it squeak.

“You ever comin’ home again, man?”

I sighed as if really thinking about the answer, but I was just trying to let him down gently.

“Not even for my funeral?”

“Stop.”

“Hey, bro, I gotta ask you to do something. It’s important.”

The tone in his voice—I hadn’t heard it in years. The drugs were lifted away, and his voice was tuned in.

“I wanna be buried near Granddaddy Roy, okay? On the hill, so that I can see the river.”

I could hear him puffing on a cigarette, the crackling of paper, the incinerating of tobacco flakes.

“Mark, promise me.”

On the far side of Fifth Avenue, an eerie, brick-red glow rose up the side of the Mamma Mia Bakery, as if a lava flow ran through the street.

“I promise.”

“Tell Mom I’m sorry,” he said, drugs dragging through his voice again.

“Steve—”

He hung up, and my eyes fell into the crack of black night between the double E’s in the neon-red Sleepy’s sign across Fifth Avenue. I called back, but he didn’t answer. Ten minutes later I called back again. What else could I say to him? What could I ever say to him that made a difference?

The sound of a flushing toilet grew abruptly louder as Greg opened the bathroom door and came back out of the black space.

“Steve’s not taking calls anymore,” he said.

I turned to him, slipping my cell back into my pocket. “What?”

“Someone cleaned the bathroom. Mom maybe.”

“Really?”

“See for yourself.”

I stepped over to the bathroom, and he enjoyed bumping into me as we passed.

Just as I slid my hand over the light switch, the smell of bleach hit my nose. Bright, empty, and clean. No shower curtain, just metal rings scattered across the rod, and the tub, though scuffed and scratched, was clean. Toilet too. No rug or shower mat either. The medicine cabinet was bare and sparkling. No pill bottles. Nothing. Spotless.

“Mom did this?”

He didn’t answer. He was busy looking through Steve’s duffel bag on the floor—dirty white socks in a Wal-Mart bag, two cans of chicken and liver Meow Happy cat food, a handful of squished-empty, travel-sized tubes of Colgate tooth paste.

“Check out this box,” he said, tapping the toe of his construction boot against a big brass-stapled produce box.

I stepped over, bent down, and pulled back the box’s end flap. Inside were cloudy old plastic bags of Easter basket grass, chipped-up, pumpkin-shaped candles, tattered fold-out paper turkeys, and scruffy white-yarn snowflakes. The sweetness of our family’s past holidays rushed into my mind.

“Our old decorations?” The ceiling light shined in my eyes as I peered up at him.

“Mom gave ’em to him.” He threw his big shoulders up in a shrug. “He wanted them around him.”

“He just wanted them around?”

“That so hard to figure out?”

I reached into the box again and this time pulled out a wad of soft fabric that filled my hand like an oven mitt. The material, folded over and balled up, was camouflage-patterned—blotches of dark woodland greens and browns.

“Shit,” I said.

Greg was staring down as if I held a gun or briefcase of money. “His old hunting hat.”

As I stared into the splotches of woodsy colors of the rumpled, soft-brim fatigue-cap, my mind went back to Steve’s senior year in high school, when the camouflage cap had seemed to hide the dark thoughts going on inside his brain.

He was changing during that period, becoming what doctors would call mentally ill. He stopped running, stopped reading his thick books on American history, stopped carrying around his Nikon 35mm camera with a telephoto lens. Moody and withdrawn, he let his appearance go, the ends of his hair turning ratty, his face becoming covered with a scraggly beard. He dressed in holey jeans with a knife pouch at the waist, held on by a metal-studded leather biker's belt.

At first Mom thought it was a just a phase. But by summer, when Steve announced he didn’t want to go to college, she knew otherwise.

"What?" she cried out, standing with her arms folded, a frightened grin on her face.

"College sucks," he muttered.

"Well, how do you know, Stephen? That's simply ridiculous. You've wanted it since I can remember."

As I watched his face twist up in defense of himself, I wondered what happened to the honor student, track star, and cool older brother ready for the world. His only answer was that he wanted to stay in Mendon County and work at Miller Asphalt with Uncle Rob.

Over the following weeks, a sad mood fell over the house, and it was our mother's heartbreak we were feeling. Our father, during this time, was nowhere around, though we didn't know or care why. Not having him around was good.

Then one day in the summer, at the kitchen table Steve set his fork down with a clank and, with his arms knotted up in his lap, said, "Mom, I'm seeing orange."

Our mother's face went in a direction we had never seen before, as if all the worry creases from raising us were suddenly pulled in the opposite direction, like hair combed backward.

"I'm sorry, Steve," she said, "I don't follow."

Greg succeeded in provoking the moment. What, pumpkin orange? he asked. Hunter orange? Home Depot orange?

Orange clouds, orange grass, Steve said. Orange walls and orange bathroom sink.

"Like an orange tint over the world," he said. Then he added another item to the list. "Orange gun, Mom."

Fright whittled her face twenty years older on the spot. It would prove to be the point of no return.

Over the next year or so, Steve deteriorated into a scruffy, hollow-eyed loner. His eyes, darkening like an eclipse, were seeing unspeakable sights back across a thousand years, it seemed—medieval wars, continent-wide famines, and plagues. His square shoulders drooped from the despair of it all, and his arms seemed to lengthen down toward the ground as if he were devolving into a primate. Greg said he walked like an orangutan.

Daylight alone made him ugly. Cloudy days especially made his face bluish and ill-looking from one angle, blotchy from another. Worst of all were the thick, red whiskers he was

refusing to shave—coarse, ugly whiskers that seemed to attack his face from the outside, like an army of tiny angry arrows rained down upon both cheeks. To think my brother had once looked like Errol Flynn and John Travolta both.

Shortly after he started working with Uncle Rob, he quit. Uncle Rob told our mother that Steve had mouthed off to the boss. Mom was mortified. She couldn't apologize enough to Uncle Rob. It would prove to be the easiest of her apologies to come.

In the spring, Steve spent his days hunting deer out of season in the Dacker woods. Mom let him borrow her car for the drive up on Rt. 17, hopeful Steve would find himself in nature. He found himself all right, himself primeval. One day she discovered blood all over the back floor of her Buick. Steve said he had killed a fox, and it had bled through the tarp before he could drop it off at Bob Moreland's to be taxidermied. Mom, not sure of his story, was thinking a doe out of season. Greg never said what he was thinking. Neither did I. Whatever Steve had killed, it took rags and rags to clean up. Bleach never got rid of the smell.

At home, I was keeping my distance from him. All he talked about was killing—killing deer, killing people. Killing Dad.

"I'll shoot the son of a bitch," he muttered.

Our father, back some days, gone others, was supposedly spending his evenings with Uncle Dale in Jeffersonville, working on cars. But we all knew otherwise. There was a woman somewhere.

Steve was more the threat anyway. I could feel the evil in him, as if he were a sweaty, hatchet-faced man hiding behind my bedroom door. Whenever he looked at me, his eyes plunged into me like shiny forks. He dragged his feet everywhere, too, as if wearing weighted

shoes. The promising athlete who had once run like the wind was now shuffling like a three-hundred pound man.

Erier still was how he stood dead-still in places around the house—in front of the circuit breaker box in the kitchen, in the middle of the living room and hallway. A painful drawl crept into his voice. Whenever it left his mouth, it seemed to finish a journey from some smelly ancient place inside him. I wanted to ask Mom what was happening to him, but her face always looked ready to shatter from the question. Greg was useless. He was almost as moody as Steve.

Then, *boom!* In the gray light of dawn, Steve emptied his hunting rifle out his bedroom window. Blackbirds flapped out of the trees. Always the blackbirds, so many of them, their squawks and shrieks filling the misty morning.

County jail. State hospital. Group home. Years of obesity, drinking, and chainsmoking. Death. And here we were. I sat staring at the hunting cap for a long moment before dropping it back into the box, where it belonged.

“What’s in this one?” I asked Greg, tapping the box beside it.

When he shrugged, I helped myself to opening it, undoing the crisscrossed flaps. On top of magazines and smaller books, as if waiting to be first on a shelf, was the thick, white-covered book. *The Mental Health Resource Handbook*.

“Well, well, our old family book of lies,” I said.

Greg, staring down from above, was grim-faced.

Soon after Steve was diagnosed, my parents dutifully bought this highly recommended book. First book we ever saw them read. Not even the beloved Bible got read in such an open display of painstaking page-turning. They even discussed it together like in a book reading

circle.

I hauled the book out of the box—thing was heavy and floppy.

“He had it out sometimes,” Greg said.

“Why? Looking for more lies to ruin his life by?”

Sitting cross-legged with the book on my lap, I began turning pages, lost in a stream of pseudo-medical gobbledygook. The preface alone was twenty-two pages. I stopped on the title of chapter one.

“Dimensions of the Disaster,” I read, droning, making fun of the self-important wording.

“Dude. Put it back. Mom will want it.”

“Should be burned.”

The silence I got back from Greg was loud. So loud, I gave a long curious gaze up at him.

“What, don’t tell me you think he was schizophrenic?” I asked.

He dropped a superior look down at me. “No doubt about it.”

“What?” I slapped the book shut. “You always said he wasn’t.”

“Yeah, well”—he put his hands on his hips—“I’ve had a few years to observe him. What difference does it make now?”

“It does make a difference. You saying it doesn’t, whether Steve was schizophrenic?”

At first, he didn’t like this question, so he took a few uncertain steps away. “You’re looking at it all wrong, bonehead.” Then he came back over to me, and from his stride, I wondered why he didn’t use this same cockiness in life—in college, in an office, with a woman. It was confidence a man could rule his life by. “Dad or not, a person can have—what’s it called?”

Give it to me.” Fingers fluttering, he reached down and, with a quick, strong hand, took the book from me. As he held it up to look through, his big thumb pinched the thick fore edge, flicking free the first few pages so that they waved open before his eyes. “Abnormal dopamine...neurons. Something or other. Basically, they misfire.” He held the book down by his side. “Think of it like a spark plug.”

In a snake-like strike, I snatched the book back from him and put it behind my back.

“You think of Steve like a spark plug. I’m not. Dad broke his spirit,” I said. “He nearly broke mine.”

He scowled and aimed his log-like arm down at me. “You’re fuckin’ afraid of the truth.”

He circled me. I turned with him, spinning on the bristly white carpet, keeping the book behind me.

“What, worried it runs in the family?” he asked.

“No.” I got up off the floor and backed away from him, clutching the book. “Every counselor I’ve seen says the same thing—dear old Dad’s the one who damaged me.”

Despite the good ten feet between us, he stood square with me. “Welcome to the family,” he said.

“Zoloft, Prozac, Paxil,” I said, pecking my finger down against the book. “I’ve taken the same crap as Steve.”

“No, you haven’t. He took anti-psychotics. Haldol for one. There’s a big difference.”

I was sick of his smart mouth. “Fuck you. Our problems came from our horrible childhood.”

“Speak for yourself. He heard voices right in front of me.”

“No, he didn’t. He just said he did.”

He burst out laughing, then glanced around for a witness to my outrageous comment.

“He was sick of the depression,” I went on. “He’d say anything to get doctors to stop it.”

“You weren’t even here, dude. How do you know?”

He could smirk all he wanted. I knew what I knew, and it was more than a gut feeling.

Call it a fact I couldn’t bring factual words to.

“I saw him at least once a week,” he said. “And that was going out of my way to avoid him.”

“What, and he was eating flies and watering plastic plants I suppose?”

He glowered and stuck his hand out. “Give me the book.”

I continued to back away from him, around the far side of mattress. He came after me, in slow, crouching steps, his arms out from his side like a wrestler.

“What were you diagnosed? Bipolar?” he asked.

I stayed on the opposite side of the mattress from him, moving backward and around in steady steps. Steve’s junk lay in the center keeping us separated.

“Nope. Just garden-variety low self-esteem. What about you? Sociopathic?”

He laughed. His eyes were fixed on mine, his mouth curled, wet, and wolfish.

“Passive-aggressive. That’s you for sure,” he said.

“Antisocial personality. That’s you—and don’t make my head bleed again.”

Faster, he circled the mattress after me. Faster, I moved away from him. Then, in one swift move, he stepped across the mattress and stripped the book from my grasp like a football, shoving me away at the same time. He laughed at his easy victory.

Then he stepped back and fanned through the book, looking up and down the pages. His eyes stopped dead-center on a page.

“‘Family factors in teen anger and violence’. Listen.” The book lay open in his hands. “‘Authoritarian childrearing attitudes’—sounds like Dad, right? ‘Exposure to violence and family conflict’—Dad for sure. ‘Lack of involvement in the child's life’—dear old Dad again. ‘Low parental education and income, poor family functioning’—yep, us Barrs.” He turned the page. “Oh, no. ‘Warning Signs of Violent Adults.’” He glanced up at me. “This oughta be good, right?”

“Shut up.”

“‘Cruelty to animals.’ Hey, that’s you, dude. You used to shoot a BB gun at our cat. Killed it.”

“It died from sores.”

“Thanks to you shootin’ it.”

“Asshole.”

“Whoa!” he said, raising the book up in defense of himself. “‘Frequent loss of temper.’ You again. ‘Fascination with weapons and carrying a weapon’—okay, both Dad and Steve on that one.” Then his mouth got a funny little bulge, and he fell quiet, staring at the page.

“‘Spousal abuse.’” He stood looking at me, a knowing glint in his eyes. “You’re the one with the temper.”

“Dad, not me.” My voice was feeble, my eyes scared.

He closed the big book over his finger. “You sayin’ you never hit a woman?”

I went quiet. Deeply quiet. I could hear pipes whining in the walls. I could hear horns

on the avenue. I could hear myself breathing, feel the bones grinding in my feet.

“Dude.” His shoulders dropped, and he let out a long sigh. “Closed fist?”

A long moment passed as I drifted to one side of the room. The walls weren’t so blank now. They were playing my memories—horrible memories of when I had held a long shiny kitchen knife to my throat and Lisa was crying out, “Oh, god, stop, Mark!” I went on shouting, “I want to die! I want to die!” My spit was flying all over. I was stomping my feet, hissing and grinding out deep, abrasive sounds, trying to rip my mouth off its hinge.

I turned to Greg. “I’ve taken lithium,” I said. “I’ve done anger management.”

As I grappled for words like “positive affirmations” and “cognitive behavioral therapy,” I could hear my sentences breaking up, leaving long awkward seconds between words I couldn’t find.

I slid my back down the smooth wall behind me until I touched down softly on the carpet, my knees tucked up to my chest. He stepped over and handed the book down to me. I took it and lay back flat on my back along the baseboard, the thick book under my head like a pillow. He gave a long look down at me in my restful position, and in his softening face I read his horrible pity for me. It put me in a blank, bottomless moment.

“Then it’s a good thing the family genes stop with us, right?”

The blunt-ugly truth of his comment, the loose stand of his body, the unwound expression on his face—it was the best and worst I had seen him.

I let my head fall to the right and looked around heavy-eyed at Steve’s vacant apartment. Somehow it seemed mine now. I was now the girlfriend beater in residence.

CHAPTER TEN

It was 10:17 by the dash clock when I pulled up beside my mother's house. Once inside, I took the narrow, wooden steps upstairs. Crooked and steep, they rose like a hidden staircase in a castle. At the top were small shutter doors to my mother's room. I spoke into the beams of orange light between the angled slats, my voice vibrating in the thin strips of wood.

"Mom? It's me."

"Yes, I'm here," came her faint voice. "Come on in."

In was down. I pushed open the buttery-white shutter doors like saloon doors in the Wild West and took the set of small steps down into the room, where I stood in the center of a pale-blue rug. My mother, wearing a light-colored nightgown, was seated nearby at her old treadle sewing machine, which was used as a desk for addressing cards and other writing tasks. Lamplight fell on her, turning her hair silvery and her face waxy.

Her room was a 19th century slave room. The floor dropped down like magic, two feet lower than the rest of the second floor. With ruffled white window curtains and crisscrossing shafts of streetlight in the darkened corners, the room looked like a shadow box. The best things in the house were tucked in here. On an antique cherry, ladder-style bookshelf were nestled a dozen milk-faced porcelain dolls with bouncy red, brown, and blonde curls and little pink gowns. In a corner was an ebony-black armoire faced with faux gilded carvings of tiny elephants, lions, and swans. Beside it, the dresser top showcased antique perfume bottles: a square cobalt-blue bottle with a spotless white atomizer, a beveled clear-glass one with a flashy gold neck band, a

vermilion heart-shaped job, one that looked like the Taj Mahal, and another like a miniature fifth of Seagram's Canadian Whisky.

"I was just reading Steve's old letters from camp," she said. In her knobby fingers were crinkled sheets of ratty-edged notebook paper dense with black cursive. "From YCC. You remember, don't you?" She peered up at me through horn-rimmed reading glasses.

I stepped closer to her, causing a floorboard to creak.

"Mom, about earlier. Dad had no right to cremate Steve. I told him—"

She raised her hand, the sleeve of her nightgown sliding down her bone-thin arm. Her face drew down into an old tree of wear, the lines around her mouth creviced. She removed her glasses straight out.

"Mark, now listen to me. Not a week ago, your brother Steve said to me, 'Mom take me over to see Aunt Kathy.'"

I drew up straight.

"Aunt Kathy?"

"Kathy who's been dead for thirty-three years, yes." She sat back in the oval frame of her chair. "Last month he mistook me for my sister. Called me Rosie. Time before that he told your father he ought to get his old job back with the railroad."

"Railroad? Dad never worked for the railroad."

"You see my point then? You're not to take anything Steve said about being buried seriously."

I took a step away from her, causing the same floorboard to creak again.

"Mom, no one's been cremated in our family before."

She gave me a solemn nod. "I know."

"Then why? Was it money? 'Cause I—Dad said the church doesn't want him buried. Is that true?"

"Listen, this is just what's best in this case. Please." She pressed her hands flat on Steve's creased letter as if protecting his young ears. "Besides, cremation is not that uncommon today, Mark."

"It was for Steve. And how was it best? Mom, it was rushed!"

"Rushed?"

"Just burn Steve up like trash!"

"Oh, Mark." She gave me her sorrowful smile for an upset child. "You are not making any sense. It was not rushed."

The county coroner, Dr. Remington, she said, happened to be in the ER Saturday morning. He signed the both the death certificate and cremation permit right then.

"Mark, you don't have your facts. Please. You have no idea what your father and I have been putting up with these last fifteen years, worrying over that boy. You—" A crease drew down the center of her forehead while her brows furrowed across, dividing her face into fours.

"What, Mom? Just say it."

"I'll say this. You upset your father terribly this afternoon."

I leaned back from her.

"Oh, I upset him?"

"Yes, you certainly did. All you boys are so eager to hate your father."

"Well, we have good reason to. I mean, you just seem to forget everything. I don't

know, like that time he shot that .38 at me.”

“Oh, good lord, boy. I never forgot that. The bullets are still lodged in that poor tree out back.”

I had been misbehaving, which in Dad’s eyes meant anything but deep, silent repentance for being a sinner. So he popped off a couple of rounds from his snake pistol into the tree beside me, right in our backyard, to hell with neighbors and laws.

“And the time he made us stay awake for four days? No, five!”

The bastard had caught us sneaking out of the house one summer night. He stayed after us for days, putting us to work on stupid things, not letting us sleep, figuring if we appreciated our beds a little more, that would cure us from sneaking out of the house.

At night, he made us stay out in the garage. He hammered the workbench apart so we couldn’t sleep on it and even hosed down the concrete floor and threw sawdust all over it, making a soggy mess we wouldn’t want to lie on. On the third night, we somehow slept leaning against the wall.

Mom crossed her arms, sending creases through her gown.

“And you seem to forget what he did for you when you had that 106 degree fever.”

I hadn’t forgotten. Dad carried me into the bathroom and dropped me into the bathtub filled with cold water and snow brought inside by the bucketful. I wailed out, thrashed around, and shuddered so hard I thought I’d snap apart. But he held me under up to my neck. I must have blacked out. Some time later Mom took my temperature again. It was down to a 103.

Doctors said he may have prevented brain damage, although the joke would later be that every stupid thing I did in life was from brain damage.

“Mom, it doesn’t matter. He still abused us.”

“Oh, good lord.” Her voice ground down into a wet-throated gurgle. “I don’t need that word from you.”

I stepped into the rain of light from the lamp.

“Mom, it’s not just me. Ask Greg if he—”

She slapped her hands down on the letter, paper popping, wood desk thumping.

“I will not listen to this!” Her voice was splitting, and her face was clenched into a furious little fist. “You blame him for everything. Blame, blame, blame. All you boys do.” Her eyes were so narrow and dark they looked crushed together. “Now you are acting like a child, Mark! On this issue with Steve, you are.”

I glared at the barrel-shaped lampshade behind her, baked brown from years of hot light inside.

Didn’t she see the big picture? Steve’s death was essentially a crime, and we all should be disturbed, made restless by it, feverish for answers. My brother did not die of anything natural. How could self-hatred and self-abuse be natural? Babies are not born hating or abusing themselves. They are not born chainsmoking or guzzling beer either. They are not overmedicated and left alone in a small room to survive, having neither foot in life’s daily rhythms—waking, working, eating, loving, and resting.

This was a crime of neglect. I was guilty. My mother was guilty. Hell, the governor was guilty. We all woke morning after morning deciding, consciously or otherwise, not to deal with Steve or his type.

This moment asked one loud question—what happened? We happened.

My mother leaned across the sewing machine table toward me, her forearm clamped down on the beveled wood edge as if she were crawling toward me.

“You are not a parent, Mark. You cannot know how your father and I feel right now. We just saw our first child with tubes and hoses stickin’ in and out of his mouth, all taped up, belly so big from drinking, bloated up on the operating table.” She banged the table with the side of her fist. “No parent should outlive their child—I know all too well now what that means.”

She turned her head to the side and gave it countless little livid shakes. “For years your father and I grieved over that boy. Years. One week Bill called his doctor. Next week I did. That snotty SOB Dr. Miller kept sayin’ the same thing.” She made her voice sneering and nasally. “Just make sure he takes his medications.”

With her thumb she rolled the thin, white-stoned gold ring around her middle finger, around and around, the ring trapped in a red groove between her veiny knuckles.

“Well, he took his medications. And he took them.” She let out a sigh, and her head fell to one side. “And the poor old soul took some more.”

“So why didn’t you ever—”

Again she raised her hand to silence me, her mouth clinched.

“So there he was. So drugged up he couldn’t get out of bed in the morning. And, yes, we complained, before you ask. And we complained. And they said, ‘Oh, well, Mrs. Barr.’” Next she made her voice whiny and apologetic. “Why, he has the wrong medication. There was something better all along.”

I stepped toward her again. “Just what wrong medication?”

She chuckled. An ill-sounding, closemouthed, end-of-life chuckle.

“Something better came along. Can you imagine that? After two, three years on the wrong medication? And this happened more than once over ten years. Always something different he should be taking. Always another appointment.”

She pressed the side of her hand across Steve’s letter, nursing out the wrinkles.

“I could have sat in on therapy with him, they told me. ‘Oh, why didn’t you, Mrs. Barr?’” She made her voice dainty and kooky-sounding. “‘Other mothers do.’ Could have driven him over to that community center in Statesville.”

She sat glowering off into the dark. Grief was built up under her eyes like dripped wax.

“Dumb, dumb Jane. Wallflower Jane.”

“Stop, Mom.”

“We’re all a bunch of dysfunctional hillbillies down here. You’ve made that clear. Go then! Run on back to wherever you—”

I couldn’t look at her. She was crazy and pathetic. I moved over to the window, where light from the lamp made a dull-yellow mirror of the panes. In the wavy old glass, my mother’s reflection, as she turned and stared back at me, oozed out from her sides, dissolved into the slave room, became part of its shadowy corners.

Once she had been a beautiful mother. Smooth pink skin. Crystal-clear eyes. She wore bright dresses. Her hair was red. But life collapsed in on her, and she finished nothing else. She didn’t finish clerical classes when they were offered for free at the vocational school in Jeffersonville. She didn’t finish to full retirement at the power company—quit as typist three years shy of full pension and social security. She couldn’t even finish off her marriage. She let my father come around whenever he wanted, do whatever he wanted, say whatever he wanted.

“So you see,” she said, floor creaking as she stood. “You’ve gotten yourself and everyone all upset today. For nothing. Steve simply wasn’t talking sense.”

I wheeled around.

“Why do you think I got so upset today, Mom?”

She looked down at her brown slippers, one of which was toeing the floor, checking for loose boards.

“Mark, I am sorry about your problems. I really am. Good lord, yes.” She paused to double-press a board. “This family’s suffered enough.” She lifted her head, her face coming level. “Think how I feel as a mother. None of you boys ever married—except you of course. But you and Lisa can’t be very happy. I can see that.”

I coughed up a laugh—popped it out of my mouth.

“Well, that’s not very funny,” she said, her face drawing long.

“Oh, yes it is!”

I wanted to slap my leg and laugh again. It was definitely funny.

“Mom, don’t you see? No funeral for Steve because we’ve all suffered enough?” I turned as if speaking to someone beside me. “I mean, does anybody else here not get this?”

Her face pinched up in anger all over again.

“Mark Allen, I told you—”

“Mom.” I took a big step over to her. “What’s wrong with those little ground plaques at least? They’re all over St. Mary’s. Like memorial plaques. Bronze. Small. Uncle Gary has one. That would be perfect for Steve. It would honor him.”

My voice was down a notch, and I stood so close to her I could smell the mint scent of

heat rub. IcyHot was always her favorite. Her nightgown was not white, but faded blue, and worn out with snagged and frayed threads. Her fingers, as she rubbed them, were age-spotted and wooden-looking from arthritis, and her eyes were jumpy and worried-looking.

“Mark, please, your Uncle Gary was a veteran.”

“I know, but those other kind. Not military. You see pictures stuck in them. Set down in a marker.”

She stared off into the low shadows that filled the corners of the slave room like huddled-together, dark spirits.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“And there’s a memorial service, not like a funeral—and those can be done in any church. Nondenominational, whatever.”

My enthusiasm was boyish and piping—sickening really. She dropped her hands on her hips and faced me again.

“Your father will be here again in the morning. Why don’t we talk to him about it?”

“What? No!”

Was she serious? We talk? My family had an open-door policy on shouting—but talk?

“That is, if you aren’t too busy blaming him,” she added. “Now I’m tired. And you’ve been up since last night.” She stepped back over to the sewing machine desk. “There’s salmon cakes down in the refrigerator. I went out of my way especially to make them today—we all used to love them back when this family had some semblance—” She stopped flatfooted. “Hear that?”

I heard nothing.

“Is that another loose board?” Her hands were back on her hips. “You wanna do something so bad. Fix my floor.”

“Mom—”

“Goodness, Mark.” She turned fully around to me. “The man’s seventy-five years old. He’s had a triple bypass, a gall bladder removed. One kidney is barely functioning. You can certainly sit and talk to him decently this one time in your life.”

Not a tremor in her voice. Not a ripple on her face. She was completely serious. I inched closer.

“One kidney?”

“Yes, despite how ornery he acts—he’s always been that—he’s in bad health now.”

“Well, what’s his doctor say?”

She swept her slipper across the floor, finding another squeaky board, over by the rug.

“Which one? He has five.”

“Five! Jesus, when did all this happen?”

In the harshly shadowed room, she swung her head around and overpowered me with a face that was a bright lantern of scorn.

“When? While you’ve been away this past decade. That’s when.”

I felt the slap of her words. How I saw my father, how he stood in my mind—all of a sudden, everything was now loose and weird. He was a statue falling. He was a body on an operating table, tubes and hoses sticking out of his chest. He was laid out in a casket, alongside Steve.

Mom went on testing the floorboards.

“This wood’s two-hundred-years old. Scrapped from the barges that ran up the Republican. Your poor grandmother would be appalled, how dried up and splintered it is.” She glanced back to catch my expression. “Yes, Mark, I’m sorry, your parents are old.”

I stared down at the floor with her. Everything was ironic. Meaningless. Deplorable. Like these loose floorboards.

“Here’s one,” I said, my sneaker snagging a nail.

I stooped and ran my fingertips over the raised square head of the nail. I tried pushing it down with my thumb, then pulling it up by my fingernails.

“Well, wait, as long as you’re down there.” She stepped away and opened the drawer of the sewing machine desk, then came back with a hammer. “We’ll be waking the dead with this.”

“They’ve slept enough,” I said, taking it from her.

The hammer was familiar. On its faded red handle were three large drops of white paint, dried decades ago but still looking wet, swollen, rolling down and around like tears. I squeezed the tears and felt the muscles in my arm run in hard lines. Then, with careful aim, I brought the rounded head down against the small, square-headed nail.

Tap...tap.

After half a dozen more cautious taps, I had patted the nail flush with the lumber, careful not to hit one too many times, not to bruise my mother’s precious old wood.

“Here’s the next one,” she was quick to say behind me.

I took care of that nail in fewer, bolder raps.

“Now here.”

The toe of her slipper was pointing at another one.

Tap...tap...tap.

The sound and one-two-three rhythm, rising up the walls, brought the old slave room to life. Eyes opened up in the plaster around us, eyes of ancestors, wondering with a gasp—what’s happening? Who’s working?

I felt around for other protruding nails, sliding my palm in a wide circle across the rough old floor. Mom stood over me.

“You want gloves? So you don’t get splinters?”

I said no, then looked up at her. “When’s he coming?”

“You know your father. Whenever it suits him.”

I had questions. How bad was his kidney problem? Was it because of his drinking? Other questions. Did his shack in the woods out by the crossroads even have running water? I never knew. How could the old bastard take care of himself out there?

I went around the room on my knees, my palm picking up dust, turning sooty as I swished it around, Mom following. Under the sewing machine desk I went, sliding the chair aside, then the rug, feeling the smoother, cleaner, darker floor beneath. Along the way, my eyes followed the wood grain like a great sharp-eyed bird following the patterns of hundreds of rivers below, looking for a raised nail like the head of prey. The more popped-up nails I found, the more I wanted to find. Taps of the hammer became raps, which became strikes. I got my effort and rhythm down to three even hits per nail, tops.

I ended up in a corner, along the baseboard, blocked by furniture, my body trapped. I sat back against the wall and rested, the hammer on the floor.

I had questions about Steve, too. What wrong medications were given to him? Why

didn't someone sue?

Then there was the bigger question of Steve's reliability, and Mom could be right. Bury me near Granddad—in the next breath my brother could have said to me fly me to the moon.

Promise me you'll fly me to the moon, Mark.

She went on sweeping her slipper over the floor for raised nails.

My father would be coming in the morning, and I would need to talk with him. Civilly?

Not a chance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On Sunday morning, I drove into Jeffersonville to use the free Wi-Fi at McDonalds. After answering a few emails, I was back in Alma. I had been gone less than two hours.

In front of the house was a reunion of two cars—Dad’s old red Ford pickup and Greg’s turtle-green Datsun, their bumpers a civil distance apart.

My father and Greg were here. All of us now under the same roof?

I stepped into the living room to an argument that did not stop for me.

“It’s blank.” My brother, standing in front of the coffee table, was holding out Steve’s urn. His nostrils had their usual pugnacious flare. He was dressed in the same jeans and flannel shirt as the night before.

“Blank?” Dad said. “Whatta you mean blank?”

He sat dead-center on the lemon-yellow sofa, a smug look hanging cockeyed on his face. Granddaddy Roy’s deathbed was now his stolen throne, and there was no living in-law around to stop him.

“As in bare, plain,” Greg said. “You know, unembellished.”

Dad kicked out a short, hard laugh. “Okay, smartass, just what the hell should be on it?”

“Uh, his name for starters.”

Dad sat up. “For starters?”

Mom quickly moved between them, her arms crossed for trouble. “That can be added. Right, Bill?”

“How in the hell should I know.”

“Maybe just a floral pattern then?”

“No, his name,” Greg said.

“Well, if you add that,” she said, “put his middle name, too. But make sure it gets spelled right. J-o-n-o-t-h-o-n. All o’s. Lord, we don’t need it misspelled. He had that trouble all through school.” Her voice trailed off in a mutter. “Never knew why it was so difficult for them.”

“And his birthdate,” Greg went on.

Dad flailed around on the couch. “How about his damn social security number while we’re at it?”

“Bill, we’re just trying to resolve this. The poor soul’s in another place now.”

“Well, he sure as hell is that.” He spotted me just inside the front door. “Mark, where in the hell you been? For someone visiting, you sure roam around a lot.”

When Greg turned to me, his face was unlike I had ever seen it. He looked scared for me.

Mom cleared her throat. “Mark, I’m afraid there’s some bad news.”

Whatever it was, it was written all over her face too.

“Bad news?” my father blared. “Damn it, Katie. Why you have to put it that way?” He said in my direction, “It’s already been done.” Then he turned and stepped away.

Already been done? What had already been done?

“He’s been cremated, bro.” Greg’s voice hung in the air as a dust-filled, dry mumble.

“Damn, Katie,” Dad said, whirling around, a chewy, angry flash on his face, “I told you it was being done over the weekend sometime. You never listen.”

The floor began rolling under me. I felt my shoes backing up until my heels hit the legs of a chair. I sat down hard in the ladderback chair, the wood slats shifting.

Steve cremated? Set fire to, burnt to ashes? His bad heart, bad lungs, bad liver—
incinerated?

“Oh, dear lord, poor Steve,” I heard Mom say. “Mark, I’m sorry.”

Sorry? I locked on her regret-strained eyes. She had bungled the dates! Greg couldn’t look at me, and I knew why.

“Did you tell him, Greg?”

His fat mouth remained solemnly clamped, his eyes reduced to penlights.

“Did you tell him!”

“Katie, what the hell they talkin’ about?”

“Bill, I don’t know.”

My face was curled, dirty, and hardened like the suction cup on a toilet plunger.

“Just like Weston, huh, Greg?”

As he stood in a stupid, frozen gaze, a horrible laugh cut me on the inside like glass. Fate just played with the calendar. Tomorrow, Tuesday, became the weekend that had just passed, and Steve was cremated under my nose.

Being done over the weekend? Since when did a crematorium operate on a weekend? He rushed it! The bastard made it happen as fast as possible. Didn’t anyone see that?

A hundred years from now, the grass on the other side of Granddaddy Roy’s grave would still be grass. Seasons would come and go, leaves and snow falling, and Steve’s bones would be nowhere in the ground.

Didn't anyone else hear the violent storm on the loose in here, the walls howling and wailing, tearing themselves apart, rafters and plaster busting up like popsicle sticks? The colors smearing like a fingerpainting? The voices of the past drowning in our ears filled with water?

My father's eyes remain unsympathetic. "I told you it was decided. You seem to be forgetting something. I'm the one who—now where's he going?"

I headed for the front door.

"Mark, come back." My mother's weak voice tapped my back like a ball of paper.

As I stepped down the walk to the car, bushes and bricks scraped by in harsh greens and loud pinks. Inky shadows jabbed at the corners of my eyes. Houses, eyeing me as I passed, turned as if to grab me from behind. Dark trees arched down over me like the globby limbs of monsters. Thousands of grass blades crawled toward me, then scrambled back like sand crabs. All the while, the potholed, scruffy street swarmed alongside me as a swollen, rock-jutted dirty river.

I opened my trunk, grabbed the shopping bag of photos—then stared down at the rental car's black felt-lined truck. So much spotless, empty space. A black hole.

I slammed the lid and marched back up to the house—in one angry, smeary motion.

"What's he got there?" the cremator asked.

I set the weighty bag down, glanced around the room, then moved the bag over by the ladder-back chair. There, with my back to everyone, I pulled out photos, one by one, and placed them down like tarot cards across the chair's orange vinyl cushion.

Steve sitting cross-legged in a field of dandelions.

Steve, in the same field, flying a rainbow-winged butterfly kite.

Steve climbing a black-iron spiral staircase, blue sky behind him.

“Pictures of Steve,” said Greg, his voice off to my left.

“Pictures? My Steve?” Mom asked.

The room phased out around me as I went on placing down photos.

Steve dwarfed by a statue of a war general splotched with green rust.

Steve wearing a white chef’s hat and stirring bright red peppers in a wok with a long-handled, blond wooden spoon.

Steve on a crowded sidewalk, holding up a white placard that read, “Free Yourself from Political Bias – Dewey Jackson for Congressional District 3.”

I was building a collage, laying out pieces of an abstract puzzle, a photographic mosaic. I was bringing Steve back from the ashes, returning him to the cosmos one inch of printed color at a time.

Greg stepped up beside me, picked up a photo, held it close to his eyes, then flipped it over.

“You found your evidence, dude. Professional too?” he said.

I had nothing to say to him, nothing to say to any of them.

Mom appeared on the far side of him. “Professional pictures? Steve had no money for—ooh! What in the world!” she cried out.

Dad crowded in. “Is this some kind of damn joke? That damn boy’s got a lady’s hat on.”

“And makeup, Bill. Mark, explain this. Where did you get these? Did you take them?”

Explain it to yourself, Mother dear! How does it feel, not knowing Steve after all?

Steve waving out the window of a run-down farmhouse, a rain-flattened American flag

hanging over the sill.

Steve looking straight into the camera, a sharp shadow drawn down across the bridge of his nose like a scar.

Steve in the bluish glow of a computer screen, the reflection of a red grid making him look made of mesh.

“Bill, I don’t understand. This isn’t our Steve.”

Ha! Now Mommy dearest was getting the picture.

“Mark, your mother asked you a damn question. Answer her. What in the hell are all these?”

Let them wiggle and squirm.

“Some kind of weird dress up,” Greg murmured. “Pretty recent too.”

With the cushion and arm of the chair filled, I ran the photos across the top of the bookcase.

Steve on a wide open sidewalk, a sun-blached sign for Boulevard Diner above him.

Steve bowling, his portly shape caught in an awkward delivery, the lane behind him Christmassy with frosty blue.

Greg plucked up another. “Thirty-five millimeter?”

“Damn it, Mark, did you hear me?” Dad said.

Go ahead, Daddy dear. Get your blood pressure up. Have a heart attack. Please.

“This one’s taken out on Benton Avenue,” Greg said, following me around. “See the sign for the army surplus store?”

With the top of the bookcase covered, I laid the photos out across the only clear surface

left—the cushions of the deathbed.

Steve sleeping, a peaceful look on his face, soft white pillows all around.

Steve in a forest-green shirt, his face glowing a handsome russet tone.

Steve writing with a pencil, his eyes down close to his lines of careful cursive, his free hand poised on the desk, fingers up like spider legs.

“Katie, I’m putting a stop to this nonsense, damn his—”

“No, Bill.”

I dipped my hand into the shopping bag all the quicker, handed out photos across the flat surface all the faster. With each photo I placed down, I stuck more thick tape over their big mouths, more thorny fig leaves over their small thoughts.

Steve with a faceful of pink watermelon.

Steve under a canary-yellow umbrella.

Steve waving from the back of a candy-apple-red, old-time caboose.

“Good lord, how many are there?”

I was just getting started, mother darling. I had two hundred more pieces of evidence to go.

The photos soon covered the deathbed, all three cushions, both arms, and the back, turning it into a spread-out, mountainous photo album of Steve, the man of many faces.

Wherever I could find open space, I slapped one down.

Beside the phone—Steve on a golf course, in a butter-yellow sport shirt.

On the window ledge—Steve leaning back against a sporty red car with the personalized plate “Sun-Kid.”

On top of an empty flower pot—Steve on the far side of a brown pond, his dark, pickle-shape silhouette hard and clear among monochrome reeds and brush.

All the while, between my eyes and the end of my arm, a kind of tunnel vision took over.

Steve in a children’s library, blue and yellow polka-dot bookcases all around him.

Steve on a checkered floor, one foot on a white diamond, the other on a black one.

Steve in a glittering boutique, holding a white porcelain china doll.

“Wait a damn minute!” my father boomed. The sound smacked up against the ceiling like something solid.

“Mark, please,” my mother said, her voice trembling.

Greg grabbed me by the arm and spun me around.

“Stop, dude.”

My father stood holding up one of the photos. His face was bluish and bony, gripped with as much fright as fascination. I waited for dear old Dad to have a stroke.

Then his shoulders drooped, and his arms lengthened down toward the floor, the photo of Steve in his fingertips. The room became quiet. Mom was rubbing her hands, staring down. Greg was moving around the living room as if at a yard sale, burying his eyes in the photos. Granddad, in his silver picture frame, was keeping watch from across the room, and Steve was smiling at me from his graduation picture beside the urn.

“He told us not to forget him,” I said.

My father turned to me, his tortured smile revealing the glint of a gold crown in the corner of his mouth. As a boy, it had made me think of a Mr. Goodbar wrapper stuck in his teeth.

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“Little chance of that now, you bastard,” he said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I stomped across the clumpy field at to Whitey's. He watched my every miserable step from his front porch.

"Can't imagine why you're over here," he said, as I climbed the steep porch steps up to him. "When there's a family powwow goin' on at your house."

My eyes felt blistering red, and sunlight, hitting me at an angle, made my face feel like an ax blade sharpened on one side.

"They cremated him, Whitey."

The red in his stovepipe neck drained away, and he sat back in his wheelchair.

"Not what you wanted?"

"He should have been buried!"

I brushed past him and plopped down on the porch swing. The blotchy-gray mulberry stains that covered the narrow wooden slats seemed all I had just shouted down from above. A long, heavy moment passed. Across the field, my mother's place looked all the more decrepit, the bricks baked down in time. I told Whitey all about Steve's phone call on Friday night and his request to be buried beside our grandfather.

"Sure he was sober?" he asked.

"Yes." The porch swing chains popped and boinged as I shifted around. "No."

"They honor him?"

I turned to him. "What?"

“Your parents, they honoring Steve?”

“Fuck no. They’re shredding him like an illegal document!”

He leaned over the wheelchair to me, his neck thrust out. His hair was so thick and white and his cheeks so frosted with whiskers that he looked made out of a blizzard. “Son.” He winked a silver-blue eye at me. “Honor don’t need no a coffin. It holds itself just fine.”

I glowered straight ahead. “I need a coffin. I showed them your photos.”

“And?”

“And they went ape-shit.”

“Even your mom?”

“Her poor brain exploded from two hundred and forty-seven big questions laid on her.”

“Don’t apologize for makin’ them think. But I told ya, Stevie was loaded in half them.”

Again he leaned over the side of his wheelchair to me. “Let them go lookin’ for cracks in the paint. You and I know the wall’s just fine.”

I grunted. “Won’t ever get this one settled inside, Whitey. No closure.”

“Well, some lives don’t get that. They just kinda sit sideways in a bad place.” He shifted his thick body around, his chair creaking. “My grandpappy was ninety-four when he died. Everybody said, ‘Oh, he lived a good long life.’ Mark Snyder, cop over in town—your mom knew his family—went down in the line of duty at forty-one. Everybody said, ‘Oh, he’s a hero.’” He turned his big head to me. “Then there’s your brother.” He patted the armrest, his big gaudy gold ring dinging against the chair’s metal frame. “You hungry? I am. You’re driving, I’m buying. Come on.”

Just like that, he wheeled away, around the side of the porch. My legs didn’t want to

stand, and I wasn't sure about going anywhere with him. Still, I got up. He was already drifting down a plywood ramp to the driveway. I took the little decline behind him, which didn't bow under me, as double-thick plywood wouldn't.

He pushed hard on the wheels, spinning and digging through the chunky gravel. I caught up with him at a faded little yellow car, where he was holding out keys. Reluctantly I took the keys and stood sizing up his big chair and perked-up head with the tiny passenger's door.

"You saying I'm too fat to get in?" He opened the door himself, positioned his wheelchair beside the seat, and lifted himself in by standing and plunging down into the little bucket seat. "Goodness, my ass. Not supposed to drive with this back of mine." Reaching out, he squished the wheelchair together with one arm—compressed her like an accordion. "Throw this in the back, will ya?"

I dragged the skinnyed-up chair over the rough gravel, opened the back hatch, and hoisted it up. I pushed it this way, slid it that way. If the clunky footrests weren't getting hung up, then the big wheels were trying to bust through the rear seat windows.

Finally I got the back hatch closed. When I sat up front, Whitey's big shoulder met me like a wall.

"Okay, so how do I honor him?" I asked.

"Can't honor him if you don't know him. First, honor me with pancakes. Drive."

"I know him," I muttered back.

I got the right key into the switch, started the crusty little car, and headed out his bumpy dirt lane.

"Sure you don't wanna take off that frown?" he asked. "Give us more head room."

“Nope.”

Accelerating on the main road, the little automatic sounded tinny and whiny. Steering wheel quivered. Tires felt hard and small, thumping over every seam in the road. It pulled to the right too, and the windows rattled. Yellow smiley face stickers covered a dusty sun-cracked dash.

“Welcome to West Virginia,” Whitey said, trying to close his own glove box, which kept falling open.

On old Rt. 340, roadway dashes were faded down to splotches. Tattered blank billboards floated by like sails on derelict ships.

“Whitey.” I squeezed both hands around the skinny steering wheel. “I ask God for forgiveness. I ask myself for forgiveness. I ask my girlfriend, soon to be ex. I ask Steve. Now I’m sure I’ll ask his ashes.”

“Son, you’re not Steve.”

“What?”

I turned to him so fast his nose hairs looked like white caterpillars burrowing inside his nostrils.

“You’re not your brother. Your father didn’t cremate you.”

I squeezed the steering wheel tighter and glowered at the roadway as if scraping it down to the dirt.

“Damn, Whitey, I know.”

“You sure? ’Cause I’m smellin’ a lot of personal payback here. Steve made his own life. You make yours.”

The roof of his little car crushed me into the seat. I didn't need this lecture from him. Who was he to say who cremated who and to make remarks like "personal payback"? Maybe he needed to honor me as Steve's brother.

He glanced over at me.

"He take the bullet for you?"

"Bullet?"

"Genetic bullet. I heard on one of them shows there's five to ten genes that predispose us to schizophrenia." He shifted around in his seat. "Then again, maybe your brother just got lazy?"

I let out a dark laugh. "You sound like my father."

"Fuck you too. Son, people 'round here are lazy. The whole county's lazy. West Virginians' lazy. Hell, I'm lazy!"

I didn't mind another laugh.

"Well, lemme ask you." When he turned to me, his full head of hair and big shoulders gave me the impression of a St. Bernard riding up front with me. "Apparently you're not lazy. You went to New York."

"And D.C. before that. And Minneapolis before that. Rhode Island. Florida somewhere in between. Maybe I'm sick of being everywhere else because I'm afraid of this place."

His silver-blue eyes held on to me. "That's fair enough."

The boxy little car whined on. We took the bypass to the Tarrytown East exit, then came into Jeffersonville by another span of the old county road. He pointed me to the Howard Johnson's. I turned in, and we rode around the back.

“Her car ain’t here,” he said, looking all around.

I didn’t ask. My forehead was bunched down in annoyance, and I felt my lower jaw cocked to one side like a weapon. With my back and shoulders rounded over, I sat in his front seat like a smoldering hulk.

He may have known Steve in the last few years, but I had grown up with him. His mind and eye may have been behind a few photos and his privileged finger on the shutter button, but I had memories of my brother he couldn’t imagine, real moments, not dressed-up for the camera.

I drove around to the front of the restaurant, my eyes hot and distracted. I brought the car to a stop and made Whitey look over at me, and I made him sit quietly for a second.

“Who speaks for Steve, Whitey?”

The blues of his eyes, once cool and steady, now jumped around in their white pools. He nodded sadly and looked away.

I was satisfied. I was not some vengeful, halfcocked kid. Blame belonged where blame was due, and someone had to make it stick. Steve deserved not our pity but our righteous memory. He deserved justice. I knew that little about honor.

We pulled on, passing a sign for Big Iron Classic Truck Show and Charity Drive, then turned on Piedmont—PW’s Shoes, Dollars for More, Lucky 7 Pawn Shop. Pizza boxes and curled-up newspapers littered the sidewalks. All around were sunken buildings attacked by graffiti—metallic-blue, Japanese-like characters spraypainted over frosty white plumes of zigzagged nonsense.

We stopped beside a gray clapboard house with a big American flag hanging limp and twisted over a browned lawn.

“Charlene Winters?” I asked.

“Who? No.” He laughed. “You’ll see.”

As I parked tight along the curb, two boys on the porch darted inside, and a big girl stepped out. She was shaped and colored like a sundae, widest in the middle, with chocolate-dark pants and a vanilla-white shirt with yellow lettering sprinkled all over it like banana slices. Her hair was tied up like a black jelly bean.

“Sherry May!” Whitey called out as he opened his door. “Whatta ya know?”

She sat down in the green chair on the porch and said nothing. While I hauled out the wheelchair, rolled it around to Whitey, and he situated himself in it, she watched intently.

“Know who this is?” Whitey asked, wheeling himself up the walk toward her. He jabbed his thumb back at me as I kept a step or two behind him on a walk not wide enough for both of us.

She drew her knees up to her chest, hugged her legs, and dropped her head down like a doggie.

“Steve’s little brother,” said Whitey.

“So?” Her voice was gruff and pouty.

I knew her look and manner. Overgrown body, cockeyed face and missing front tooth, loud, simple way—she was retarded. She could be fifteen or twenty-five.

Whitey turned his head to me, his eyes sparkling. “Steve’s girl. She gets all shy around boys,” he said in a loud whisper.

Steve’s girl? Was he serious?

She bolted up out of her chair and blurted out across the empty concrete porch, “Shut up,

Whitey, you big meanie!” She was smiling as she glanced bashfully at me.

Whitey cranked his big white head around to me again and said in the same loud, troublemaking whisper, “She ain’t never had no boyfriend before your brother.”

Steve had a retarded girlfriend? He had sunken that far? The day was already hilariously horrible. Not it was getting plain gross.

“He ain’t no ghost, girl,” Whitey said. “You gonna talk to him or not?”

“He ain’t talkin’ to me!” she blared, pointing her big arm at me.

Listening to myself say hello, I went outside my body. There was a metallic echo between my mouth and ears. She burst out laughing. I felt sick.

“He’s from New York,” Whitey said, throwing a thumb back at me. “That’s his problem.”

She plopped back down in the bouncy metal chair, folded up her arms, and sat with a huffy moon face. “So?”

I stepped out on the thinning grass. “Uh, I’m from Alma,” I said to both of them. “Grew up in the same house as Steve, remember?”

Her small brown eyes twitched between Whitey and me.

“Whitey, you liar!” she said.

“Yeah, Whitey, you liar,” I said.

Her mouth fell open. Her eyes went from tiny and screwy to big and amazed. She let out a witchy cackle.

“Well, you two get to talkin’ then,” Whitey said, spinning his wheelchair around, “while’s I head over to Marv’s for a spell.”

I stepped in front of his chair. “Where you goin’?”

He looked up at me. “Thought you wanted to know your brother?” His big sweaty face squished out triple chins in fleshy red rings. “Or not?”

He rolled away, taking my tongue with him.

Marv’s was a pool hall two or three houses down. We had passed it as we pulled over to park. As he wheeled farther away, an uneasy feeling drew down around me, a feeling of not wanting to be left alone with her. Sherry sat staring down at the gray concrete, as if dreading me too.

I put my sneaker up on the concrete porch and my hand on the square column.

“So you knew Steve?” I asked.

She nodded glumly.

“How was he this last year?”

“Sick.”

“Yeah, he didn’t like doctors, did he?”

She shook her head. “Said he had bad in him.”

“Bad? They said that? Were you at the hospital when—”

She stood up abruptly and flounced down the walk that ran alongside the house. My foot came off the porch, and I stood flatfooted. A squirrel scampered away from the house. Birds yakked over me. Up the street, a dog barked.

Let her go. Good riddance. I was ready to walk home. But she stopped at the corner of the house and whirled her big arm around. “Come on!”

As I followed, she was so heavy that twigs were snapping violently under her squished-

out, pink sneakers. Maybe I needed to rethink who my brother was. Maybe he had no decency left in him. How do I honor a swine?

Clearly, loneliness was an affliction in my family. At one time Steve had a chance to be cured. Back in junior school, he did yard work for the Taylors. He always had his shirt off, showing off his muscles for Meg Taylor as he swung a hoe. She was nearby, wearing a gardener's hat and gloves. Dr. Taylor was seldom around.

When Steve came home later, a faraway look dwelled in his eyes. He didn't want to be bothered by Greg and me. He wanted to sit alone with Mom in the kitchen and talk. He talked about the strange but good things she fed him, like soy burgers and romaine salads. Mom was always silent.

Then Mrs. Taylor invited him to dinner, just the two of them. Steve wore a baby-blue blazer that had found its way into our house from a relative—Mom would laugh years later he had looked like a valet attendant in it. Steve even took Mrs. Taylor a romantic book—The Love Poems of Lord Byron—and read one to her over Bavarian chocolate cake, we learned. “She Walks in Beauty” went something like “...the night of cloudless climes and starry skies. All that's best of dark and bright...meet in her aspect of love and”—something else.

Then, all of a sudden, he stopped going over to the Taylor's and became sensitive to any questions about it. Mom was concerned for him. I'd wonder for years if he had loved Mrs. Taylor so much he went crazy over her.

Somehow I now had my answer in this retarded girl. I couldn't say whether Steve had given up on love, but I could see he looked for it in a different place.

When I turned the corner of the house behind Sherry, I stopped. All across the backyard,

on sheets of propped-up plywood, were mural-like paintings—big, rounded green mountains, deep blue lakes, white-spired churches, and little red houses in a valley spotted with dandelions and stick people wearing polka-dotted neckties.

I drifted closer. A bright-yellow ball of sun filled half a sheet alone. An airplane, with little smiles inside a dozen windows, flew through a fluffy white cloud. A black bridge complete with beams and cables crossed a lake dotted with sailboats. Where the train bridge reached the mountain, a circle had been jigsawed through the plywood for a tunnel. It was filled with a peek of lawn on the other side.

On another sheet of plywood, a blue river was hopping with white fish. On still another, a yellow desert was dotted with pink flowers and home to a lone green cactus with a cowboy hat hanging off one arm.

The sheets of plywood, set end to end with small gaps between them, formed two long walls across the yard facing each other, making a kind of corridor. Down in the middle of this art gallery, Sherry sat on a white bucket like a ticket collector. Painted around the bucket, in a goofy pink letters, with a misspelling tucked in, were the words, “SheRry mAyEr of WonDer LaNd.”

“Stevie made all this for me,” she said.

“Steve made—”

I didn’t recognize my brother. Not in the simple, crisp wholesome images. Not in the statement of life—clean earth, honest houses, pretty churches. I didn’t recognize the clever construction either, the two-by-four strips buttressing up the plywood.

“That’s where it starts,” she said, pointing across the yard.

“Starts?”

“Where it starts!” she said again, infuriated with me in her blown-up way.

As I walked alongside the big paintings and ran my fingers over the rough wood, I felt the cold blue water of the lake, the velvety green leaves of the mountains, and the hot yellow of the sun. Sherry trailed along, carrying her bucket throne. She had a pink captivated face.

“Stevie got me this for Valentine’s Day.”

She held up her hand, and light fired through a big heart-shaped piece of red paste on her finger, setting it aglow.

I stepped closer. It was a bubble gum machine ring. Lucite crap. A nickel toy. But it was the loveliest shimmering vermilion too, and Steve was her rich, sweet boyfriend. Her beaming eyes and smile said so.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, my voice swelling around the lobes of the heart-shaped gem.

A voice rasped out from behind, “Aah, now they’re in love!”

Whitey was rolling his wheelchair off the concrete walk and out onto the grass toward us.

“Shut up, Whitey!” she said.

“Yeah, shut up, Whitey,” I said.

Again she cackled.

Marv’s didn’t open till noon on Sundays, he said.

Sherry ran over to him and grabbed the handles on his chair. “Hey, watch me push him in the lake!” In a lumbering run, she pushed him over the bumpy grass toward the painted lake. At the last moment, she braked the chair, and Whitey, pumping bike pedals in the air with his arms, pretended to row across the water.

She rolled him in every direction as fast and hard as she could, and he cried out “whee!” I sat down on her bucket throne and watched.

“Now through the tunnel,” he said, pointing her first toward the hole in the plywood, then up at the plane. “Wait, let me use my Frequent Flyer miles first.” As quickly he swung his arm over to the painted church. “No, take this sinner to church first.”

I caught up with them over by the pink desert flowers and green cactus. She was grinning hard at me and shaking with laughter.

“Surprised?” Whitey asked me, nodding around at the murals.

“Surprised I forgot.” I glanced around the cheerful yard. “Surprised by the subject matter too.”

Steve, I told them, had painted our school mural years ago on the side of the junior high.

“You can still see it from the main road...a colossal saber-toothed tiger, hissing and clawing through the fog, ready to eat villages and rip apart cities, fighting back from the nuclear brink.”

Whitey turned to Sherry. “And he wants to stay in Alma. Be a big mistake, wouldn’t it?”

She didn’t answer him and didn’t take her eyes off me either.

“Told him to go back to New York where he belongs,” Whitey said.

“Maybe I belong here.”

“How they make it so big?” she asked.

Her mouth was like Whitey’s glove box—it just fell open and words, like papers, dropped out.

“They use some kind of big projector, don’t they?” he asked.

“Oh, no, they work by a grid,” I told both of them. “Steve showed me. They start with a small picture of a tiger. Like this.” I framed a square with my hands. “Then they make a grid of boxes over it. You know, with a ruler.” I held an invisible ruler in one hand, a pencil in the other, and proceeded to draw lines in the air. “Then they make a super-big grid on the side of the school wall—same proportions—and draw box to box, working from the small version.” My arms fell by my side. “Simple.”

Whitey was shaking his head. “No shit? And your brother did that?”

“Him and The Art Club, yeah. Fire company held those double-tall ladders for them.”

Whitey cocked his head, his steel-blue eyes going sidelong. “I can just see old Steve on a fire company ladder, slinging paint around.” He lifted his big boot out of the shiny footrest and tapped Sherry on the leg. “Can’t you?”

Looking straight at me, she nodded ever so slightly.

“You should stay,” she said.

“Come again?” asked Whitey.

“He should stay in Alma.”

I plopped down on her bucket throne again and grinned. “I should? Why?”

She looked over at Whitey. “He’s like Steve, ain’t he?” she said, smiling her missing front tooth at him.

Whitey threw back his head and yowled out, “Ooh, I smell my pancakes now! We got ourselves a homecoming. Like brother, like brother!”

“Shut up, Whitey,” I said.

“Yeah, shut up,” she said.

For his off-the-wall nonsense, she ran him all around Steve’s version of wonderland once again. She was big and blundersome, strong and loud, like him.

I couldn’t help my bucket-sized smile, and my mind was lush with questions. How was I like Steve? What was Steve like with her? I had bigger questions. When had I ever enamored a woman with a gift made by my own hands out of lumber and nails? Then the biggest question of all—could honor for Steve be as simple as a smile, a look in the eyes, a feeling? If so, I was seeing it.

At some point, Sherry saw in my face an invitation to talk. She rolled Whitey over to me.

“You wanna light a candle for Steve over at Union Baptist?” she asked.

“Yeah, you all should do that,” Whitey said, nodding. “And let me get back to my Sunday morning court-ordered recreational drinking.”

He pivoted his chair, ready to get a move on, but she grabbed the handles of his chair and ushered him over to church again. She knew best. After all, she was “SheRry mAyEr of WonDer LaNd.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Early the next morning, I was in my car for a drive. I needed to think. My mother was right. I did blame my father for so much. As a matter of fact, for so very long, I had condemned my whole family from afar. In my mind, they were down-eyed, low-thinking victims of their own regrets. I thought of them as corn dried dead in the fields and houses in the clutches of storming walls of ivy. They lived in my TV set as America the obese in the nation's second worst state for it. They made nothing of their lives but could make a day out of nothing—moving a stack of firewood ten feet in the morning, then going to three different tire stores in the afternoon only to remember they first needed to see about brakes, but now it was too late in the day.

They believed they were entitled to do nothing and did just that. They had been born in this country, so much of the work had been done before them. They needed only to run public school to its brash end, then occupy to land that was theirs for sixty, seventy years, all while remaining ignorant and lazy if so be it.

But the truth about my family was much more ordinary. They were people. Mom, up until five years ago, had been a volunteer at the Alma Food Pantry. Before that, while still having strong legs, she had pushed wheelchairs at Alma General. Greg, she told me, still helped out every other month with an initiative by retired appliance repairmen in the county to provide free electrical and mechanical repairs to the poor. My father was known at the Jeffersonville SPCA for bringing in strays and phoning in later to make sure they had found homes.

My family had their decency. They just didn't blog or tweet about it, didn't make up T-shirts about it or march in the Fourth of July parade. Like everybody else, they lived by the minute, hour, and day. Every morning Mom put sugar water in the hummingbird feeder and watched from the porch swing as the little buggers hovered as if standing on air. Their hearts beat 300 times a minute. She was also reading the historical society's series *Mendon: Arsenals to Zoos*. She was pleased to see her childhood preserved in fine books. Dad continued his lifelong collection of hubcaps. He was up to 631, though he couldn't be sure about that number. It may actually be 1631. Using a hatchet and wood rasp on an old stump near his shack on Mount Mission, he recently made a wood sculpture of the impeached William Jefferson Clinton. This he did for a fine American cause: target practice. Greg, whenever the urge struck him, wolfed down five loaves of rye in a week. He took it on like a project. Every time he went to his fridge, he slapped down two slices on the counter, dropped in a slice of bologna and one of Swizz, squirted on hot mustard, plopped it all together, and chomped away. When asked why, he said a little gluttony left him feeling contented for months.

They were people. Definitely not my kind of people, but people.

Outside Alma, sunlight slanted over the bygone farmlands, making a surreal scene: new highway decked out with massive concrete cloverleaves, miles of big beautiful cars, their shiny rounded roofs rising up like migrating herds of hippos. As I drove, I imagined all the streets and highways in America, grids of vehicles spreading out for hundreds and hundreds of miles—and nowhere was Steve. His fat body was stuffed into no rusted old truck. He would drive by no one anymore. The eye of God squinted out between ash-gray clouds at the fine layer of dust on my dashboard. In the quiet of the moment, inside the airtight vehicle, he agreed with me.

I exited off the bypass, turned left at the crossroads, and passed the little green sign for Dacker. Aka, cracker. Milk jugs, bean cans, and tires were strewn along the shoulder. A white commode seat was lying like a Frisbee in a dried-up creek bed. An aluminum chair frame sat nearby. Walking out in the road was a boy with a big head of wiry black hair, pimply pale face, and mismatched clothes, including lime-green polyester pants. With him was a pug of a girl whose eye shadow in passing was the bold blue of pool stick chalk, her wavy poodle hair looking drip-dried.

Up and down and around my big car went, for half an hour along the winding road, past funny little mountain churches—the Church of the Sacred Born, Mount Mission Tabernacle, and one with no sign I remembered being called All Saints Retreat. On sloped yards were trailers missing doors and leaning off cinderblocks, their dark doorways filled with fat women gawking down at my car. I passed a diamond-shaped yellow sign. WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK, it read. Soon after, a second yellow diamond appeared. WATCH FOR FALLEN ROCK. I was truly impressed that, here of all places, West Virginia had made the distinction between the present and past participle.

Toward Jeffersonville, a superhighway climbed up on the summit, and SUVs by the hundreds continued to pound down the majestic green and blue mountain to a mound of unimpressive earth. Gone from the land was God's rugged art. It was a suburb-eaten has-been.

On Jefferson Pike, a billboard for "24" on Fox showed a prairie-sized image of a man aiming his square-headed gun straight down into traffic, right across the dainty white spire of the Trinity Methodist Church. My parents' only friends, the Hutchinsons, had been married there, and Dad had been best man and Mom bridesmaid.

New cloverleaf on-ramps swung dizzyingly around like rollercoasters high over top of townhouses located down where cornfields had once been. In seconds my eyes went from SUV-scraped concrete barriers to old county macadam from the days of my father's Desoto.

Some streets I dare not look down. Then, at the last moment, I did. Ridge Street. The mansard roof still rose high over the block like a scoundrel's rain-flattened hat. My eyes found the second window from the right, and I saw again, after all this time, his fat hairy belly shaking as he jerked a load of cold semen on my bare chest.

I had met him that day. I had heard he needed help moving furniture and paid well. The rest I was too afraid to remember.

But I did remember. I remembered as he penetrated me feeling myself fall away inside, tumble backward into cold black space. It was the feeling of dying alive.

Well down Clinton Avenue, I came to my old drab-red high school, and a familiar pang returned. I had spent my graduation day along the river in Alma, watching a tin can caught in an eddy, circling and circling all morning, never getting free, never sinking either. As I sat on the bank, head down between my knees, I wondered how I could have become so angry and withdrawn, how I could be finishing at the bottom of my class. All of high school my face had been hot from the feelings inside—not liking myself, never feeling good enough, everyone looking down on me. On this day, I didn't have a smile to show, or a friend to sit with.

I threw every rock and stick on the riverbank at that tin can, trying to knock it free or sink it. A hundred times I missed, and a thousand more times that can kept spinning.

I tried not to remember more, but on down Clinton, sunlight's prism through my windshield bent and twisted more memories. Grungy plywood covered the windows of the

family planning clinic where Tammy and I had gone for the abortion. Farther on, a Meineke muffler shop had replaced the red-shingled, tin-roofed Romero's Pizza where she had been a waitress. Also gone was the Dingle Dee Motel where we would go. A block away stood the old brick building where the legal aid office had been located. The secretary, Patty Samuels, whose older brother had taught history at the high school, had used a Polaroid instant camera to photograph Tammy's bruises at the hands of her crazy husband. She blew on the pictures to help develop them. Her breath, I never forgot, was spearmint.

I was happy as hell to get on the brand-new bypass, where, for a while, there was nothing but white dashes I had never seen before. I tried to see only new places—Merrill Educational Technologies, St. Thomas Social Sciences Library, Barnes & Noble. But my eyes soon fell into the crevices of the old landscape underneath, into memory chasms. The world around me was like those little wiggle pictures in a Cracker Jack box, toy images that, with the slightest change in angle, flickered into another image—a prince transforming into a villain with an eye patch, a gymnast doing a flip. I saw either the present—GNC, Costco, Home Depot—or the past—2nd Avenue Deli, Pope Hardware, Ranson Railyard.

Who could cope with this madness, this free-falling into the depths in time? I couldn't. How could Steve have?

~

I drove past Alma General again. My eyes locked on the brick building, then ran the full length of it. At the last minute, I turned in and parked near the Emergency Room.

The automatic doors opened to a big, modern city hospital: wide, antiseptic-white floors, playful green and yellow murals on the walls of parks and children playing, and a staff in unisex

blue scrubs marching up and down long corridors. Not what I remembered with my mother, hobbling in decades ago on a sprained ankle.

The women behind the main counter had their heads down, and most had phones to their ears. One looked up. She had a soft, rose-tinted face. For my pleasant voice in explaining that my brother had been a patient in the emergency room and for politely asking the name of the doctor who had treated him, I was rewarded. She moved her mouse around, then typed in Steve's name.

"Twenty-first of April," she said. "Dr. Imam Jada." Her eyes lingered on the screen. In the amber glow, her skin was luminous and her blonde hair fiber optic. She lifted her dollop-like, greenish eyes to me. "I'm sorry for your loss."

I held my eyes on her. Jaclyn, her nametag read.

"Where would he have been treated?" I asked. "Would you happen to know?"

She cocked her head to one side and smiled ever so slightly, as if she had been waiting for me to ask. "I'll show you," she said.

In the long moment it took her to come around the long counter, I glanced back at the waiting area, where the TV was off, then down the long halls, and at various doors and small signs above them. I tried to see my father here on the night Steve died, but it was hard to imagine him anywhere that wasn't scruffy, broken down, and depressing.

"Your brother most likely would have been taken to one of the resuscitation rooms," she said. "That's for life-threatening conditions—heart failure, catastrophic injuries."

As we walked side by side, I nodded earnestly as if being told important information. She wore small, spotless-white shoes, the laces neatly tied.

“Sometimes it helps with grief for the surviving family members to visit the ER. We actually try to encourage it.”

I kept my eyes straight ahead and was listening, strangely enough, with my brother’s ear. Jaclyn had a gentle voice Steve would have liked. She was a sweet girl, he would have thought.

“We have two resuscitation rooms. I can take you in unless—” She peeked ahead into a doorway. “Nope, it’s been prepped.” She stepped back to let me see.

In the center of room was an ultramodern stretcher on numerous wheels so uniform and tight they looked coupled together as on a locomotive, with a few smaller and larger wheels raised off the floor at various heights. The horizontal frame that held the powder-blue mattress was jacked up high. An orange-screened monitor was mounted to the front bed rail and an IV machine on the side rail, with clear plastic tubes fanning down from it. Plastic storage compartments were attached under the frame. It was a hi-tech stretcher equipped for a round-trip to the afterlife.

Two old-style, basic stretchers were parked against opposite walls, both with dumpy white mattresses. Pink-tinted curtains opened up around them, and a shiny-steel wheelchair was positioned near each. Across the back white wall were rows of black blood pressure cuffs and clear-plastic oxygen masks, with silver canisters standing underneath. Around the room, beige counters and steel carts were arranged with rolls of gauze, blazing-white medical tape, and folded linens.

I couldn’t see Steve dying in here. With firehouse-like order to everything, the room was emotionally freezing. It was not about life or death. Suction tubes, monitor cables, yellow bins, red trolleys, whiteboards, black chest straps, orange defibrillator paddles, box-like ventilators

with dozens of buttons, switches, and red lights—this room was a medical science works.

Did I expect to see Steve’s dried blood on a scalpel, parts of his heart on a steel table, everything left as it had been when life left him?

Yes.

But the world constantly renews itself. Barbershop floors are swept daily of piles of hair. Garages dispose of worn-out tires and blackened oil collected from the day’s business. Restaurants wash dishes and linens. Vacated apartments are re-painted and re-rented. People remarry. Children grow up to have their children. Time gives everyone and everything a bright new face for each new day.

“Were you two close?” Jaclyn asked.

For a bewildering moment, under the coiled fluorescent lights, my mind jumped tracks, and I thought she was asking about Lisa and me. As I wondered how to untangle my heart from her question, she spoke again. “I have three older brothers, and I know if one of them...”

She seemed both professional and personable, and I wondered how she managed it. She must have been twenty years younger than me, which meant I was likely older than the oldest of her brothers. Maybe I was as old as her father.

“He smoked and was overweight for years,” I said.

“Oh, that’s too bad. We have such much evidence now against that lifestyle.”

Evidence? I turned to her.

“You were here that night?” I asked.

“Me? No, I’m in admin.”

Her smile, built around gopher-like front teeth, was clunky and girlish. Yet her eyes,

when they grew wide, were enchantingly green.

I fell into a quiet stare at the room, chewing on whatever morose thought I could. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her glancing around at the passing blue scrubs in the hall. She had been away from her post too long, I knew.

A nurse stopped, and she and Jaclyn, stepping away, spoke in lowered voices.

“Sir,” I heard a second later.

I turned to see the nurse’s black face, richly complected and shineless.

“You the designated family member in your brother’s medical care?”

I was baffled by her question, by how it was worded and why it was asked now.

“If not, you’ll need to bring us a written permission from that person.”

Her lips were a soft, flat blue, a lipstick color that complemented her chocolate brown skin.

“My mother. He was a ward of the state.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m his brother.”

“I understand, but the hospital must abide by a privacy policy.”

She looked at me. I looked at her.

“What’s the name?” she asked, in a curt voice as she turned away.

As she marched over to a stand-up computer across the hall, I told her.

“Barr, Barr. That sounds familiar...okay, here he is,” she said, her nose up close to the orange screen. “Oh, just a few days ago, too. I was on Friday. Wait, now I remember. Your father”—she glanced over at me with a slight smile—“what a sweet old gentleman.”

My mind rocked around. Sweet old gentleman?

Just then, a third person joined us. He had hard, demanding eyes, which matched his white shirt and loud-red tie. He wanted to know who I was and what I was doing back in the ER. Jaclyn moved closer to him, as did the nurse, and the three of them infected one another with tense, scared eyes.

“Sir, if he was a ward of the state,” this man said to me, “we need a release from the court.”

Really? I smiled at him, admittedly a sliver-like, sinister smile, and it shook him. His blue eyes drew wider, higher. His lips became puffy and greasy. His forehead shifted up and down.

“I’m his brother,” I said.

“That is irregardless. We have to act in accordance with—”

“Irregardless?”

“In accordance with hospital policy, which is actually state law...”

His blue eyes were blinking rapidly. His greasy lips were churning. I could not help but laugh inside. What, was I scary-looking? Did I look angry and threatening? I was just standing here with sad eyes. Why did the world see a dejected man as a threat?

“Did you pay for his care?” Jaclyn asked me. Her voice was still compassionate, and I loved her for it. “If you did, we can release medical infor—”

“No, that’s no longer the case,” the man said to her, his eyes firing in her direction. “Will you take the gentleman back up to reception?”

I was no gentleman, and he knew it.

I wasn't interested in anything at this point. I didn't care about his precious privacy policy. I just wanted somebody to tell me why it happened, why Steve was dead, but my father was a sweet old gentleman.

I took one last look at the resuscitation room. As my mother had bleached Steve's bathroom, so the hospital had sterilized this room after his death. I'd find more of Steve at an empty crossroads outside town, or in the deep woods, or on a dusty shelf in Goodwill.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I got home, I was greeted by Steve's little white truck in the sun of the backyard. Greg must have driven it here last night from the parking lot where Steve lived. When I saw it last, eleven years ago, it had been mostly white. Rust was now climbing up the feeders like sunburnt grass. There were no deep dents in it, but it looked loosened all over, as if it had tumbled down a long hill. Gaps ran around the hood and doors, and the bed looked cockeyed to the frame. The cab appeared squashed down, like a man with no neck.

"It's for sale," my father said behind me.

I whirled around. He had a tired step as he crossed the yard, one leg lagging behind the other. Daylight brought out age spots on his face. They looked like a fine splatter of a dried Tobasco sauce. There was also a silvery bristle to his hair I had not seen indoors.

"Mark," he said, his voice drawing up straight. "Whatta you lookin' for down here?"

I was in no mood for him, despite my talk with Mom last night. Our Kodak moment in the living room yesterday had taken its toll on me, and that said nothing of the fact he had blasted Steve to ashes.

I lined up my eyes with his. "Answers," I said.

He stopped, his shadow knowing to stay well behind him, and a smile curled up on his face. "Answers?" Then he ambled past me and stood with his back to me, looking at Steve's truck, his reflection stretched over the windshield. "You remember that damn Colombo character on TV?" He turned his head slightly toward me. "He was lookin' for answers." He

shuffled around the side of the truck and stared through the hazy driver's window. "But at the end of every damn show, there he was still shaking his head." He peered in the bed, a smile laid crooked on his face. "Isn't that right?"

My father was a two-note ass. If he wasn't bullying me, then he was just weird and tricky. If I cut him open, I'd find a bullwhip coiled up where his heart should be and three shells and a pea nearby.

Why even talk to him? He could ride and torment you, bait you and bulldoze you, only to shoot you with a pop gun. If you asked him the time, he'd show you a wristwatch with Chinese characters on the face. Everything on his terms, to his liking. It was his way of both disowning and reowning you. Same old bastard.

"Or maybe you don't know your questions then," he said, throwing a saunter in his step as he came back around the truck.

"Oh, I know them all right. Some people just aren't ready to be asked them."

He planted his back foot, and his square face became creviced. "Now watch yourself, buster." His jaws grew iron gray. "So you have a bad feeling about your papa."

As we stood alone in the yard, I had to wonder why he hadn't me killed me already. All those years he had the chance. He could have smothered me in the night with a pillow. When I was lying up in that room behind me for a whole spring with a fever from shingles, and the spring before that with something else, he could have dropped by from the factory, forced a bottle of penicillin pills down my throat, and gone on. No one would have known. Mom always sad I was a sad boy. Maybe I had swallowed them down on my own.

No more backtalk. No more screaming. No more spoiled, mouthy Mommy's boy to turn

him crazy with rage, to bring his neck veins to a bulge, his face to a sun-burnt red, his voice to a roar, and his hands to clutch for a belt or tire iron.

I almost wished he had done me in. He made my life's hate the way a sculptor makes the form of a man. I was left forever trying to change myself out of stone.

I shifted away from him and drifted a few steps out into the high grass.

"Hold on. Don't run off to your mama," he said. "Let me tell you something about your brother." He threw an arm back at the truck. "Spent six, seven dollars every month on motor oil. Bought an air filter too. Eleven dollars. Climbed up under there, chewed up the oil pan bolt every time, then overtightened it so's he couldn't get it off next time. Got oil all over himself and the ground. Said, 'But Dad, Dad, the oil's dirty.' Did all that," he said, "made all that damn effort, but didn't have the good sense two nights ago to pick up the phone and call 911. And wouldn't have neither if I hadn't."

As I turned to him, my ankle gave slightly, throwing a wiggle into my body. "You called 911?"

"Damn right I did. He called me and said Dad, 'I think I'm having a heart attack'."

I went closer to him. "He called you?"

His face squeezed up into a tree knot.

"Damn it, Mark. You hard of hearing? You have to repeat everything I say? No wonder you can't find your precious answers." He lowered his eyes and wrung his hands together as if trying to squeeze the knobiness out of his fingers. "Of course he called me. I'm his father."

I imagined the two of them on the phone together. Did Steve beg Dad to love him finally? I would have.

Dad scuffed back through the grass to the front door of the truck and leaned against it.

“I said, ‘Steve, let me get off the phone so’s I can call an ambulance for you.’ I finally had to hang up on him, or he’d have moped and moaned till he dropped dead on the spot.”

I stood staring at him, waiting for the slightest slipup to his story.

“He say anything else?”

His face turned grape-colored with ridicule. “Like what? ‘Bury me near my sweet old grandpappy, Pa’?”

The grass blades around my shoes were endless. Home was the ugliest place there could be.

“Why didn’t Mom tell me any of this?”

“Well, there’s your mother for you. She doesn’t tell you all half the story. She’s damn secretive. Like her mother.” He put his shoe down hard, as if stepping on my mother the grasshopper. “Methodist side of the family.”

He bent down and ran his fingers over the treads of the front tire, edging his nails into them to gauge their depth. “Yes, Mark, I was also at the hospital when he died.”

“Right when it happened?”

“Yes. Right when it happened.” He stood, shambled around to the hood, placed both hands down on it, and, with all his weight, leaned over, making the truck sink. Then he stood up, letting it bounce. “Needs shocks,” he muttered. After slapping his hands together to get the dirt off, he slid his fingers under the edge of the hood for the latch. “The doctor, little fellow with a Hitler moustache, came out and told me a few minutes after he was pronounced dead. I was sitting in the waiting area. Only soul around.” His mouth was clamped in a dogbite, and he gave

his head a hard shake. “They had that big damn TV all the way up. Hurt my ears to sit anywheres near it. Wanted to put my shoe through it. Some crass-sounding females talking about pregnancy.” He turned to me, the ills of the world on his face. “And your mother wonders why in the hell I listen to the radio.”

As he headed around to the driver’s door, he had a more pronounced, faltering step.

“Mom told me about your kidney problem,” I said.

“Your mother talks too much.”

“Oh, now she talks too much. A moment ago she was too secretive. The first tip in talking to Colombo is to keep your story straight, Dad.”

He dug keys out of the pocket of his shabby gray pants, then squinted to get the long silver key into the door, like an old woman threading a needle. “You’re a smartass, you know that?” The door squawked open.

He reached in under the dash, pulled, and the hood sprung up—popped loose like a button coming off a jacket. I let him raise the hood himself, since I surely wouldn’t do it to his satisfaction. But I was quick to peer down at the engine. Hoses, belts, pulleys, pumps, springs, everything encased in grit, crammed together yet trying to pull apart at the same time—hurt my gut just to look at.

He let out a low whistle. “Lordy, look at that. I see half a dozen gasket leaks right off the bat. Look at that damn brake fluid. Dirty as river water. Lines’ surely contaminated. That’ll make brakes spongy as hell—now watch out.”

I stepped well back so that he wouldn’t dare brush into me as he reached into the engine on my side of the truck.

“Know what that is?” he asked, tapping his finger on a gunked-up nib with three small hoses fanning out from it.

Of course I didn’t know. I was a miscarriage in the family when it came to engines. I let strangers far and wide raise the hood on whatever I was drove, men who couldn’t speak English touch my engine, foreigners fuss with my brakes.

“It’s the fuel return valve. Regulates gas flow. You should know that.”

I said nothing, just stood as hard and barren as I could make myself.

“Mark, tell me something. You ever gonna live you life right?”

I choked on my own laugh.

“What, so I know Dostoevsky better than dipsticks. That means there must be something wrong with me?”

In one step, he came chillingly close.

“Watch your mouth. You know what I’m talkin’ about, buster. You never confessed your sins.”

Sins? Really? Those pissy button-sized evils I had a million of?

“That divorce of yours was never annulled in the church.”

My mind buzzed around. In fact I was divorced, nearly twenty years ago, after a two-year misadventure forgotten like a strange, short-lived job never included on my resume.

“And now you’re living in sin. A Catholic’s supposed to marry a Catholic. Not shack up with some damn—”

I stepped back and stood with torque to my shoulders and a flare in my eyes.

“Yes, Dad?”

“Don’t tempt me, buster. There’s a reason why Hitler hated the Jews.”

A solid laugh fell out of my mouth like a perfectly good sofa out the back of a moving truck.

“And there’s a reason why the Protestants hated the Catholics. Come on.”

“No, that’s a different ball game.”

“And why blacks still hate whites.”

“Now watch yourself.”

“And why no one likes reactionaries.”

He stood up straight. “You think your old man can’t still lay you out flat?”

Yep, if he wasn’t shuffling shells on me, he was cocking back his bull whip. I didn’t care to look at him anymore. I knew something about engines after all. Most of us were part of one—a bearing, rod, or valve. We were part of the big human machine. But my father was a loose wheel, a noisy muffler, a cracked windshield. He made an effort with no one.

Living in sin? How exciting to be depraved and even condemned when my life was really just monotonous and weary.

Just then, a shadow angled across the fender, followed by the swishing of footsteps through the high grass.

“And here’s another boy not living his life right,” Dad said.

“Just in time for compliments I see,” Greg said, arriving in the sun.

Dad leaned over and buried his head in the dark engine. “Compliments hell. I told your mother all along this would happen.” His voice, caught in the recesses below, became deep and gritty. “I wanted you boys to go to St. Mary’s Parochial so you’d get a little manners in your

education. Then Boyd Vo Tech so you'd learn a damn trade." As he reached far into the crevices, his chicken skin neck was red and straining, and he was grunting as if his stomach was being crushed. He popped his head out. "But the damn woman fought me every step of the way on both. 'Bill, they need their public school education.' Well, where'd that get you? Tell me that? Especially you, Greg."

Greg looked at me and shrugged. "Harvard for me."

I felt like smiling but didn't.

My father's displeasure for Greg was packed hard. Greg had been the mechanically inclined son, the one who had delighted Dad by showing an interest in and aptitude with cars. He'd stand outside with our father on the most brutal winter evenings, holding an extension light while Dad lay on the cold ground under the car fighting with a frozen starter or slipped timing belt. He was there when Dad needed help rotating tires and bleeding brakes. He was there to clean up tools. He even read our father's Chilton auto repair manuals.

But Greg didn't go on to be a mechanic. He remained in Alma to be much less, and my father had worn the skin off his tongue in disapproval of him. Only because of Steve's death was Greg even here at the house, and Dad's resentment was livid and waiting.

He stood up again, fished a chrome-ribbed penlight out of his pocket, and smacked it against his palm until it came on. The faint beam put a yellowy quarter-sized glisten on the oily wall of the engine. Bending down again, he reached for where he aimed the beam. I peered over him to see him shove a grit-covered rubber fitting tight into place. Greg, waving to get my attention, pretended to push my father's head into the blades of the radiator fan. I didn't smile.

"Watch your shirt, Dad," I said.

“Watch your own shirt,” he said back. “To hell with this one.”

He was a confounding bastard all right. He made me think of some vanished American industry—a cigarette maker, an asbestos producer, something that had died out for good reason.

He rose up at that moment and barked at Greg. “This thing have a sputter when you drove it?”

Greg, surprised by the unexpected question, said no twice. Then, as if snapped to action, he put his fleshy forearms down on the dirty refrigerator-white fender and peered in under the hood with us. It seemed he had popped his head under a tent or into a cave, and all of a sudden we were three big heads hovering in the oily darkness. A grainy shadow covered us, taking the harshness out of our faces.

“Now I got something to say,” he said, moving over to make room for Greg. He looked over at me with a sour face. “Mark, you’re damn disrespectful. Those goofy pictures yesterday. I want them burned, you hear?”

I rose up so fast I nearly hit the hood with my head.

“Burned?”

“Yes, burned, buster.”

“Like Steve? *You are* Hitler, Dad.”

He rose up after me, his face a murderous purple. Greg quickly stepped over. “Dad, no! Mom’s watching.”

Hitler turned around first and, seeing her, controlled himself enough to dunk his ugly head back down into the engine. Mom was on the smokehouse steps, out of earshot. She had her hand to her forehead to shield the sun, an odd smile glowing on her face. It was her we’re-

all-in-the-arms-of-Jesus smile.

Her family was working on poor Steve's truck finally, how nice. So important that the men of the family lean over a smelly, dirty truck engine with their backsides stuck out like cows at a watering trough. Mercy, what ever was this mechanical contrivance men could never get enough of?

In truth, dear Mother, we were pilloried here, arguing to the end, staring down at the engine of our convoluted souls.

"Dad."

"What, Greg?"

"You'll find a warped front brake rotor."

"How you know?"

"Cause the pedal pulses."

"Well, we'll just see about that."

"Whatever, but it pulses."

Dad rose up and cocked his head toward Greg. "You used to have some knowledge. Now, this thing a pushrod 4 you think?"

Greg's eyes worked left and right as he sorted through his head for an answer. "'91 Toy? Should be. Unless it's a 2.7 liter. Check the block."

"Damn short camshaft if it is."

Dad went on like an archeologist peering over his find, his penlight poking here and there, his nose sniffing for details. Greg leaned closer and talked faulty ignition and AP sensors, his eyes following the penlight beam as it hovered here and there like fairy dust. She stepped

back inside.

Inching back closer to the engine, I said what needed to be said. “If only you could have worked on Steve’s heart this way, Dad.”

He turned his head ever slowly toward me, like an idle screw. The glow of the penlight misted on his chin and around his eye sockets, making him look drawn and eerie.

“If only,” he said.

Greg looked monochrome. The white of the fender mixed with the dark of the engine to wash the color from his face. He didn’t say a word. The two of them could talk rod bearings and harmonic dampers, but not a word on souls.

“Where would his heart be?” I asked.

The old bastard’s profile held still for a moment. Then the slightest crack of a grin escaped. “In the gas tank. Pickled.”

Greg was not amused. “He was cuttin’ back Mom said.”

“Well, not enough. Sides, if I were fixin’ him, I’d start with his damn head.” He nodded down at the engine. “Damn K-Mart battery. I taught him better.”

Had he? Or had he left us stupid about ourselves. No doubt he had taught us to put our ears to a running engine and hear what was wrong: idle screw half a turn too rich, belt timed forward, low compression on third cylinder. He had taught us to read tire tread wear like a tracker reading footprints. But he never taught us to tune our ears to ourselves, to know ourselves inside, to troubleshoot our moods. I am sad for this reason. I am angry because of this, and this is why I am needy.

I didn’t ask where Steve’s lungs would be in the engine. There was no reason to. I was

about to throw a torch down the gas tank.

“Dad, I’m scattering Steve’s ashes.”

“Damn you, Mark,” he said, turning to me. “You touch those ashes, and they’ll be hell to pay!”

“There’s always hell to pay, Dad. I’ve gone chapter seven in hell, okay? I’m scattering them on Granddaddy Roy’s grave. I’m lettin’ you know now.”

“Mark!” Greg hissed.

“You little SOB—”

The front of my father’s shirt was a dizzying grid of green lines as he came toward me. Again Greg stepped in.

“Get the hell out of my way, Greg.” He thrust his arm over Greg’s shoulder at me. “Tell that damn brother of yours the ashes must stay together to be consecrated. He’ll be committing your all’s brother’s soul to an eternity of mortal sin if they don’t.”

“I won’t be committing him to anything,” I mouthed back, backpedaling. “Someone else did that for him. I’m honoring his wishes the best I can now.” I threw in a nasty sneer. “Honor, Dad. It’s real simple.”

“Honor your damn father first!”

Like hell. I turned and walked straight across the yard to the smokehouse door, and stepped inside. As I passed my mother in the dining room, I put on a pleasant, breezy smile.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said.

I went upstairs like a robot, turned into Steve’s old room, stopped at the windowsill

where he had blasted his hunting rifle decades ago, and whipped out my cell. Through information, I got the number for St. William's Crematorium over in Randolph County and dialed it. As it rang, my eye drilled into my father down in the backyard bent over Steve's truck.

"152 Ring Road, Mount Mission," the lady said a moment later. "That's the address we have on file."

"No, the ashes should come to my mother's. 1633 Blue Bonnet Lane, Alma," I said.

She gladly changed the delivery address and said the ashes should arrive by Parcel Post by the end of the week. I could also pick them up in person, she said, but I should call beforehand to make sure they hadn't already been mailed out. As far as the crematorium being open on weekends, she said it operates as needed, which sometimes includes weekends.

"Just depends," she said.

"Okay, thank you—oh, and I may I ask another question?" I added a nervous laugh. "I know why my family chose cremation, more or less, but I was wondering why others do, generally speaking. Could you say from your perspective?"

"Well, it varies. I think many have trouble coping with the loss, and it's just easier. For some it's a cost issue. Other times it's really a preference."

As I listened to her voice of authority, I realized that cremation versus burial was like an exit poll—reasons for one over the other were varied and personal, but well understood and all too common.

I thanked her, hung up, and threw an ugly knifelike grin straight down between my father's shoulder blades. Even if the old bastard somehow got the idea to take the ashes from this house when they arrived, then I'd just drive over to the crematorium and grab them there

first.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I dared my father to burn the photos of Steve. He'd be hurting Mom now. She had taken up the project of sorting through the hundreds of them according to her own tastes and categories. Later that same morning, right in front of him, she sat at the kitchen table examining photo after photo under her magnifying glass. There was a painstaking, scientist look to her, hunched over, the neck of the desk lamp coiled down, her face in the blast of light.

In the afternoon, when it was just the two of us and I expected her to lecture me for my second blowup with dear old Dad, she instead gave off an inviting grunt. "Either it's me," she said, shaking her head, "or my eyes."

I stood over the microwave with my tea cup. "What?"

"Well, you'll think this sounds funny. But his hair, it's parted on the wrong side. Should be on the right."

My mother was old, grieving, and had been left alone in this house for years, glued to Fox News and fretting over those horrible liberals in power. Who knew what she was thinking. I squinted down at the photo. Though the part in Steve's wavy rust-red hair was sharply combed, it took me a second to figure out my right from his. Sure enough, the part was on the left. It made him look a little odd. I stood up straight, rubbing washboard wrinkles out of my forehead.

"That's not all," Mom said. "His shirt looks inside out to me."

Again she was correct. Around Steve's blue collar and shoulders ran dense white

stitching that should be on the inside of his shirt.

“Now here’s the funny part,” she said. “Mark, please look at the painting on the wall and tell me what you see.”

Under the magnifying glass I saw a painting in which a wavy river was above fluffy blue clouds.

“My god, it’s upside down.”

“There’s more,” she said, a tinkle of delight in her voice. “The coffee cup.”

I moved the magnifying around until I found the coffee cup on the counter. The word “LOVE” on the cup ran upside down and backward.

I stood up straight again. Mom asked it first. “Was he playing some kind of game with us?”

We examined a few pictures together, but found nothing else cleverly disguised. Shirts were right side out, pictures right side up.

“It can’t be a mistake,” she said. She looked up at me. “Can it?”

Her question made me all the more uneasy. The photos held an ominous promise, and my mother was on the hunt. What else would she discover?

I wouldn’t have to wait long to find out. I microwaved a lemon grass tea and headed back upstairs. I settled into my room at my computer to read a Wikipedia entry on cremation: “The chamber where the body is placed is called the retort...the body is first placed in a simple corrugated cardboard box. During the cremation process, organs and other soft tissue are vaporized”—I winced at the language—“a cremulator is then used to grind bone fragments until white-ash in appearance.”

As I sat shaking my head, a sound escaped the walls, came out of the plaster itself. I held still. It was laughing, a dead woman laughing.

Grandma?

I turned and called down the hall. “Mom?”

No answer.

I hurried down the hall, in a soft-footed hopscotch over loose floorboards, and stopped at the top of the stairs. The laughing, coming from downstairs, now sounded more like sobbing. It rose up the darkened staircase like music tortured out of an instrument.

I barreled down the steps, my knees kicking through the darkness, and rounded the living room, rattling table legs, lamps, and vases. Mom was still in the kitchen, under the blast of a lamp. Her face was twisted up, as red and beady as a pomegranate, and her body was shaking. She had one hand over her mouth and a photo in the other.

“Oh, good lord, this boy!” she cried out, bearing a mouthful of old teeth as she smiled and fanned her face with a photo. “He’s a riot!”

“What, Mom?”

“He found it. He always said he would.”

She handed me the photo, her mouth clamped to hold back laughter. In the picture, Steve was holding up a figurine of a fawn.

“You remember?” she asked.

At first, no. Then a memory slid down over my mind.

On the morning of the shooting long ago, Mom’s miniature fawn had gotten knocked off the bureau in the bathroom. The fawn’s tiny brown legs and cute little eye-spotted head

shattered in a thousand directions. It was just a dimestore knickknack, but that afternoon and into the evening, Mom was down on her hands and knees, picking up any pieces she could find, half sobbing, muttering to herself. Fragments were everywhere—in the cracks of the floor, behind the toilet, out in the hall. One piece, a black speck of a hoof, had popped up into the bathtub. I remembered her look of hopelessness. What were the chances, she asked our father, of her finding every piece? How could she ever glue the poor thing back together without it looking like a cracked-up mess? What if some of the poor little creature had already gone down the drain? In the quiver of her lip, we saw her change forever, we thought.

Now, after all the years, she was laughing over it, an extreme laugh, too. Her droopy earlobes, jowly cheeks, and pointed nose were all trembling.

“It’s identical,” she said, taking the photo back from me. “Goodness, it must be among his things at his place. I’ll have to remember to check.”

I stepped away from her and glanced around for something she might have had too much of—Mogen David wine, pills of some kind, anti-inflams for her osteoporosis, sleeping pills. I saw nothing but uninterrupted clutter—scads of dusty ceramic angels, starfish that seemed leeches of time, crusty wooden spoons, fish-shaped plates, and a wall-mounted, hand-cranked can opener that had been dull for thirty years.

The whole kitchen felt sick and tilted with dingy walls and sad yellow light crying down on everything. I stepped out into the living room where I switched on the tiffany lamp, which threw off a mosaic of cobalt blue and daffodil white. I took in the freshest breath of light I could.

When my mother called me in New York on Saturday morning, she already was in shock.

“Hi, Mark. I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time.”

I was drifting down the sixth floor hallway of the Flatiron Building, knowing I couldn't step into an elevator with my mother on the phone. "No, no, I'm here, Mom."

"I can call you back if...Mark, I don't know else to say this. It's bad news, I'm afraid."

I came to a stop. My mother had two modes: one, her frail mother mode, and the other, her former office administrator mode. At the moment, she was in the latter. I hadn't heard it in years.

"Your father and I have been up all night at the hospital, so if I sound tired..."

"Hospital?"

"Just a minute..."

She cleared her throat. Her allergies. For years she had had a frog voice because of them.

"Sorry. Anyway, Steve was unconscious when the ambulance people got to him. So your father, he..." Her voice quavered. "Steve had a heart attack, Mark, and the doctors were unable to revive him."

I would always remember where I was standing. I had reached the far end of the hall, by the out of order water fountain, and had one hand on the handrail leading downstairs, about to take my first step down.

"He's...gone," I heard her say.

I sat down right on the spot, on the top step.

"The doctors tried and tried—oh, lord, this all feels like a dream..."

I was grateful in the vaguest way for how solid and safe the stairs felt. They framed my lower back and side like a giant bookend and kept me from falling through the hole suddenly in

the world.

“Gone?”

It was not what I wanted to say, just the easiest thing to say.

“Yes, he—he died at 2:43 this morning. Your father said, ‘Katie, better get a priest over here.’ This was before he...so I called the church, but of course there was no answer at that hour. Father Cambi—Cambiatti, I think he said his name was. I wrote it down somewhere. Anyway, I want to write and thank him...so young-looking, you’d never think he was a priest. And nice. He came in the morning. Said a prayer. It was too late for the Last Rites. But it was a comfort, to us anyway. Steve didn’t go to church.”

I was going numb, my body melding into the stairwell under me.

“I know, Mark. I know,” my mother said. “It’s going to take us all a long, long time to...”

I sat pressing the cell phone tight to my ear.

“I know it will hit me later,” she went on to say. “I just know it will. Your father says I’m in shock now and shouldn’t be calling anyone.” She was quiet for a second. “But I just have to believe he’s in a better place. He has to be. He was never happy in this life. We all know that. Never.”

I could hear my mother already giving Steve up to God—God who hung over West Virginia like one of those velvet diner paintings of Elvis. I sat nodding, discarding every word and sound I was thinking of using to respond. All the while, I could hear my brother’s voice from last night—“Don forget me, bro.” The five hundred miles between his apartment and mine were reduced to a millimeter inside my mind, and the time between last night and now seemed

more precious than the entire span of his life and mine.

Voices filled the stairs above me, echoing around the high shaft of walls. Not wanting to be sitting here, I hurried on down and around, flight after flight, my mind spinning and descending with the stairs. Across the lobby I went, past the watchful doorman, phone drawn up to my ear, eyes trained on my dirty Payless sneakers as they blurred over the shiny marble. I burst outside into the light-filled, noisy city, the blazing yellow of cabs fissuring across my eyes as if the world were a shattered mirror. Traffic horns played around me like trombones in chaos. Up the sidewalk I went, my eyes flying over a barrage of stains and litter—brown splotches, red wrappers, and orangey cigarette butts.

“Mark...you still there?” my mother asked through the racket as I jogged to the corner.

“I’m here, Mom.”

“Now, Mark, let me say, I don’t want you to feel obligated to come down,” she said.

I found a spot on the sidewalk to stand without getting run into by people hurrying by.

“But...”

“Now I know how busy you are up there. It’s okay.”

Okay? Steve was dead. I had been dodging home for a decade. Not this time would I.

I found a park bench, sat, and stared off into the blur of traffic whishing by. I felt myself float out of body. My brother was dead. It really happened. The years of Steve bungling around Mendon County, moping through life, were over. Looking down the long line of cars and buildings, I saw the universe blink like a camera shutter snapping shut over the world. When it reopened—no Steve. Time wasn’t fooling around anymore. She had dropped him off and was marching on into tomorrow, next week, next year. No excess baggage.

It took my mother to finish the phone call. I would have sat there forever, mumbling “wow” and “unbelievable” over and over. She asked me to call her later, which I said I would.

After hanging up, I walked down 23rd Street, my cell phone wrapped up in my fist and cocked down at my side like a stone to throw high and far. Only forty-five. Forty-five was for car accident victims and the terminally ill. Steve would be so ashamed. I was glad he wasn't alive to know he was dead, as strange as this sounded.

It was all savagely clear. What dies is gone. What lives, lives only until the next moment. Then maybe it dies, or lives to the next moment. The way the rusted grill of a truck shaves past your knees on a street corner, it was clear. Part of me smiled at the swiftness of the cruelty—even though it was long overdue.

“Jesus, Steve,” I whispered. “What in the hell did you do?”

I walked with dazed eyes into the famous New York oblivion—people and cabs all in endless motion. I saw trim men in suits who could have been Steve, their faces chiseled with purpose. Why didn't Steve have purpose?

Block after block I walked until just plopping down on a bench, where I let an old man near me see the despair on my face. Despair was a kind of New York weather.

“Dead?” I said to myself.

I just talked to him last night. Time didn't give me much of a chance. What was I supposed to do to save him? What?

“Mark?” My mother's voice crooned out into the living room to me. “Where'd you go?”

I drifted back into the kitchen.

“Recognize that?” she asked. “Longwood Park.”

She held up a picture of Steve standing in front of glossy black Revolutionary War cannons on grass that looked too lush to step on.

“Goodness, Mark, what is it?” She placed the photo down on the table and tilted her head to one side. “You miss Lisa? That it?”

I was quick to shake my head.

“You must.”

“I don’t, Mom.”

“Well, you must. Now here’s something.” She held up another photo. “Why take it right at midday?”

Steve was seated in a classroom by himself, among rows of bright-blue chairs with wraparound wood-grain writing desks. The hands on the plain wall clock behind him were standing straight north, like a barbed rocket ready to launch.

“Coincidence?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” She tilted her head in the other direction and gave me a simple earnest look. “Why you suppose?”

I shrugged and eyed the piles arranged around her.

“Mom, how you feel about all these pictures?”

She gave me a fiddly grin. “Well, I don’t know exactly.”

I knew how she felt. She was more alive inside than ever. I had 247 colorful photos of my own, and I felt alive, too, whenever I remembered them.

I had lived adventures and not all were misadventures in psyche clinics. In D.C. I had lived so close to the National Zoo that from my bedroom window, I’d hear lions roaring in the

morning. In my Boston apartment above Fatima's Bakery, the smell of Portuguese sweet bread poured through the central air. As a winter innkeeper on coastal Rhode Island, I had my run of a nineteenth-century Spanish pensione treated to half a mil in renovations: round terra-cotta roof tiles, sea-green windows, Greek Revival oriel window overlooking a slate walk, spiral fluted columns, wrought-iron window boxes—the works. It was like being inside a painting. In Strangle Creek, Florida, I had lived in a little cinderblock house on stilts. Every morning I'd dash to my car across a yard teeming with fire ants, armadillos, and those wiggly-fast racer snakes washed out from under my porch in the rain overnight. In New York, before I met dear Lisa, a wrecking ball had swung just feet from my studio apartment window for months. Like a great pendulum, it threw its long sinister shadow across everything inside, before sending back a ka-boom that hurled itself from wall to wall. Window blind quivered, panes jiggled, table legs rattled, and plants trembled. If I came home early, I stood face to face with the hulk of Manhattan, weighing in at 100 decibels.

At night, when these memories shuffled through my mind, they were still exciting to me, and they kept me awake as I went through them with my own magnifying glass.

I peered across the table at my mother.

“Mom.”

“Yes, Mark.”

“Steve had a girlfriend.”

Her face produced a zany, terrified smile. “Girlfriend?”

“Yes, she's nice. We're going to light a candle together—”

“Oh, not that flaky child? Mark, you mean that simple-minded creature over on

Piedmont in Jeffersonville? How in heaven's name did you come across her?"

"Mom, she's not 'simple-minded.'"

"Well, whatever you call it. She's not, well, I don't want to say the word, 'normal'."

"Oh, so now Steve's normal?"

She wagged a photo at me.

"Now that girl is—was—just a friend of his. An acquaintance. I wanna make that clear right now."

"Then why'd Steve buy her a Valentine's ring?"

She slapped the photo down on the table. "I will not hear this. This is positively silly."

"Mom, he made big murals for her and—"

Once more she raised her hand to silence me. I sat back. She studied me for a moment, her eyes zipping around my face, as if parts of it were missing. Then she leaned forward and asked in a voice that was like a wall of soft color, "Did she take these pictures? I can't imagine she'd have the know-how."

I shook my head, and she sat back.

"Are you ever gonna tell your mother at least who took these pictures?"

I said nothing, made no move, offered no cooperation toward whatever I knew.

There were plenty of places to hide my eyes, as the kitchen won a blue ribbon contestant in the category of clutter: old adding machine in the center of the floor, coupons scattered around it, rows of empty Mt. Olive jars, along with a withered-up mop in a bucket, a flashlight in a flower pot, and a can of Raid inside a Jim Beam box. Along the wall were Atom Bleach jugs labeled "water" and, against the baseboard, a hardcover titled John the Baptist: In Jesus' Heart,

on top of which were Snoopy and Woodstock refrigerator magnets, an unopened bag of Candy Corn, and a Scotch Wrinkle-Free Glue Stick.

“Well,” she finally said, her voice fluttering with the light notes of a flute. “Would you please ask whoever took these pictures—what in God’s name do they all mean? His mother would really like to know.”

I nodded, and the matter was further avoided.

~

While she went on looking at the new and strange images of Steve, I hauled out of a dusty trunk in the living room an old family photo album in which he was preserved as a boy, in washed-out little Kodak Instamatic snapshots as softly colored as ancient frescos. I took the album into the kitchen and sat down opposite of Mom at the table. She barely glanced up from her engrossing search.

In one picture of a young Steve, he sat on his green banana bike that, in the paled image, did not sparkle anymore. In another of him around the same age, he stood barefoot on a sandbar, squinting at a yellow leaf that, in the distressed little picture, barely had a trace of yellow left. In yet another faded picture, he was wearing his old church uniform that was vanishing off his body—instead of an indigo tie, a vaporous bluish one; instead of a blazing white shirt, a monochrome one; instead of rust-red hair on his head, barely a tint remained. “First communion, Steve, April 1974,” read Mom’s looping handwriting on the back.

I positioned the photo album on my lap, the stiff pages turning before me like a paddlewheel of time.

Steve and Greg tumbling around in a huge pile of leaves in our backyard that I

remembered not as brown but as crayon-purple with coleus.

Steve pretending to be Hieji on “Jonny Quest,” sitting cross-legged on the floor and playing a rose-pink toy flute, wearing a brown towel on his head piled up in a goofy, lopsided turban.

Me blowing out little soft-green candles on a white cake as tall as a stovepipe hat, my cheeks inflated, the tiny flames putting up a fight.

How adorable we all had been—piping hot pancakes of youth, with little round mouths not yet creased by the bittersweet life. Steve had the virtue of a young prince’s nose. Greg had straight, blameless eyes and a simple, pure forehead. I was a gapped-tooth lollipop of happiness.

I took the album over to the brighter table lamp and sat in a small cane chair. Page after page peeled open to rooms in the past.

Steve on the front porch in his track uniform that, if Whitey had photographed it, would be shimmering satin blue and white, like the national colors of an Olympian.

Greg shirtless in the garden, swinging a pick, the muscles in his arms and shoulders sun-bleached.

Me in a railroad cap, holding our cat Tom Fritz in my arms like a baby, half the photo underexposed, unleashing a solar flare upon the poor sleeping tabby.

Everything good was in these pictures. Steve sharp-eyed and intelligent, Greg peaceful and prepossessing, me smiley and silly. What had been the problem then? I knew the answer, yet I would never know the answer. The difference between what I saw pictured before me and how I had long felt about this past was the difference between looking at a rainbow and seeing a storm, at a flower and seeing a snake.

Drinking and yelling don't show up in photographs. Cleverly placed backhands, not leaving bruises, are vampires to the camera. Kodak doesn't show ugly.

I put the photo album aside, snapshots of Steve flashing through my mind—Steve finding an arrowhead in our backyard, beating Uncle Tommy at arm-wrestling, climbing Point-of-Rocks and waving across the Republican River at us in some loud windbreaker.

On the edge of the coffee table sat Steve's hourglass urn. I picked it up. It was as light as Styrofoam, hard as steel. Its screw-on lid eased off without a sound. When I tipped the urn to the light, I peered in behind the flow and down its shiny throat at different angles, looking for something, anything.

A folded letter.

A family heirloom.

A glass tube with a cigarette and match stick inside, along with the red words, "In case of emergency, break glass!"

As I ran my finger around the lip of the lid, I remembered when Steve had worked the potter's wheel at the county fair for art class. All week that summer, he had sat under a canvas tent, at a clay-splattered machine of wood that looked like something out of the Old Testament. It was a crude little table made of two-by-four's, having a wooden wheel underneath and a smaller one for a tabletop. Whenever people meandered up to his booth, Steve kicked the bottom wheel over and over, like Fred Flintstone on a bike. That turned the top wheel on which sat a big lump of mocha-brown clay. With steadied hands, he drew a cup or bowl to life from the clay. Splashing water on it, he morphed his spinning, squishy creation up and out, down and in, shaping many hemispherical creations. Vase. Pitcher. Jug. Urn? This very urn that would hold

him for eternity?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I was not eager to call Lisa that evening. But all of Sunday had passed and now Monday too, and I hadn't called her once. As on Saturday, I stood in the deep thistle grass of my mother's backyard to get a good signal on my cell. Lisa's phone rang and rang before she answered.

"There you are," she said. "Nice of you to remember me. I've left—"

"Four messages, I know."

"You counted? But not very well. I left five, and you didn't call back?"

I felt the chill of dusk over me, the empty black field behind me, and the lonely mountains around me. In just seconds, I was the smallest, most joyless creature in all of creation.

"I'm waiting, Mark. Did you go to the courthouse this morning?"

I found the edge of the railroad crosstie sunken in the grass and sat down hard on it, the splintered old wood like a hard kick in my ass. Firefly-like splotches of streetlight roamed across the dark grass.

"No."

"Oh."

"Lisa, fuck all this family crap."

She let out a deep sigh. "Mark, you gonna tell me what's going on or not?"

"Steve's been cremated," I said, marching the words out in the unemotional tone she

preferred.

“Oh, god. I’m sorry.”

“Mom says he’s at peace.”

A long moment of silence followed.

“Well, brace yourself. We’re not.”

A heavy, slushy feeling entered my legs, poured up right up to my hips like wet concrete.

“Mark, there’s no good time to bring this up. And I’m sorry, but you’ve avoided me on this, and you know you have, for weeks. But we have some things to talk about.”

I knew her tone. It cycled through my life every five to seven years. Mindy in Virginia. Tracy in Boston. Angela in Minneapolis. The tone of quitting, walking out, leaving. Each, when she left, brought to mind the many before her—my victims in an ever deepening pit of regret. Never was there an end to them, the final one.

“Lisa, I didn’t want you coming down here. I said I’m sorry. Please.”

“Mark, it’s not how I would have seen you there. It’s how I already see you here.”

I held still, the crosstie floating a thousand miles over the dark earth.

“You tell me you’re fine. You don’t need medication. But you rant and rave—you throw things. You threw your keys at me the other day.”

“Lisa, stop. Let’s—hey—let’s go back to Pisa and, you know”—my scared grin scraped and sparked against the dark night—“push the leaning tower up straight, remember?”

“No, Mark.”

“Then Tucson. Remember the resort we—”

“No.”

“Then a day trip.”

I heard her sigh. Then I heard her take a breath.

“I think we need space.”

A cold air raced over the field and grabbed my neck. My head went backward, forward, up, down.

“Just for a while.”

Space? All we ever had was glorious, useless space. No children. No friends. Our only visitor was the super with his plunger. Two chairs in our living room instead of four. A loveseat instead of a sectional. A reading room instead of a guest room.

“I’m so sorry this came up,” she said. “I didn’t expect it to.”

My eyes grabbed at the dark weeds and lunged from rotted stumps to rusted painted cans caught in the streetlight. How could I lose Lisa? We were perfect and terrible for each other.

“Lisa, the last time—”

“Yeah, the last time you almost broke my rib!”

“I was only hugging you.”

“You were crushing me!”

“Because you were trying to leave me.”

“Because of the million things you did. Mark, we were supposed to be about not being like our parents, remember? About breaking the cycle? Our good karma, remember?”

“Please. It’s not my fault, Lisa. You heard Dr. Rosenblum. It’s hereditary. Hereditary.”

“Mark, listen. We are past this. We were past this three years ago. You are not, not, not schizophrenic like your brother. This is behavioral.”

Behavioral? I'd show her behavioral! Using the palm side of my fist, I hit myself in the head, growling and muttering, "I hate myself, I hate myself." I let out a hideous, gleam-like laugh only to feel my face fall in a pile of gloom.

"Mark, stop this tailspin. Take your—"

"What, Xanax? I'm fuckin' crazy like Steve, right?" My voice ground down in my throat, making a low gurgle.

I turned to the smokehouse door. Where was my mother now? Where was her we're-all-in-the-arms-of-Jesus smile now? I spun away and looked for Whitey across the field waving to me from his porch. But he was nowhere to be seen. I wanted both to laugh my guts out and rip my head off.

I stomped across the yard, jeans swishing, phone held to my ear like something to stop the bleeding. My foot struck a brick hiding in the grass, exploding pain in my toe.

At my car, I rummaged through my overnight bag still on the backseat. In it were two medications: one taken every day, for anxiety, the other as needed, for emergency. This was an emergency.

"You take it yet?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know—have I?"

I snatched out my miserable little bottle of go-to sedatives, practically yanked the cap off, popped a laughably tiny pill into my mouth, and swallowed it down like air.

"Yes."

"Okay, shh. You'll feel better, honey. Shh." She let out several of these gentle sounds, as if hushing a baby.

Now she was compassionate? Now she was loving?

“No, I won’t feel at all.”

I hated what this drug did to me, the keenness it took away, the heavy daydream it left me in the following day, my head as heavy and dumb as a bowling ball, the world happening around me in echoes of voices, all beautiful emotional life muted.

I sat breathing hard, cut in half at the waist, a heavy keystone of dread wedged into the bottom half of me. The world felt scrambled. The sky had come apart. The unspoken had spilled from my mouth.

Too late to walk in the Prospect Park with her.

Too late to meet her after work at Mario’s Shells.

Too late to put Springsteen on in our apartment and let him play, to laugh out loud in the middle of Seinfeld, to bake an apple cake and put a mezuzah on our door.

Too late to do the things the living can do.

I peered down inside the bottle at the pile of little round pink bodies. How do I live past this moment?

I shut the halves of the phone, knowing she’d never call me back tonight. When I dropped my cell on the seat, it seemed we had just said goodbye forever.

I revved my car to life and gunned it onto the dark lane. Potholes hammered the tires. The steering wheel shuddered. Change fell off the console, dinking down against the frame of the seat.

On the worn gray surface of the old highway, I floored it, flying by Tina’s Mexicana and Mendon Food Mart. Outside Jeffersonville, I turned left and right on the congested roads.

Breath after breath, I tried to relax. But I felt pangs where my breath should have been, each ache drawing high and tight inside me and swinging across my chest like a pendulum.

If only I had my earplugs. I wore them in New York not for screeching garbage trucks at night, but to close off voices in my head to one room, to stop hordes of whispers from escaping around jambs and down long walls in what seemed a kind of madness mansion.

If only I had an energy drink. Energy was speed to jump the broken bridges in my head.

Or a warm bath to quiet the hysteria.

I came upon Steve's old apartment building. Drab white, its windows covered in dust, it sat far off the highway. Why couldn't it all be a mistake? Why couldn't Steve still be alive to wander across the highway to Wal-Mart for his junk food fix? Mom said wandering aisles was his only exercise. She nearly walked right past him a few times herself while shopping.

I turned in. What's wrong with believing in ghosts? I ran into Bryan Bowers, an old classmate who had sat behind me in homeroom all through elementary, junior high, and high school. As we came face to face in an aisle, he looked up and said, "Hey, man," as if he had just seen me an hour before in biology class. I said back, "Hey," with a slight smile, and we kept going our separate ways for, who knew, another thirty years.

I ended up fixating on the reflective glare of Jumbo Cookers. A clerk was straightening up stainless steel saucepans nearby, making them clink. Her old body crabbed along the aisle, her hands reaching here and there.

"Can I help you find something?"

"Faith and happiness. You have those?"

She was unamused.

“My mother needs an electric can opener.”

Short and herky-jerky, she walked me two aisles over. Edlund. Spectrum. Hamilton Beach. Unfortunately, she couldn't recommend a brand.

“Everything's so nice in here,” I said.

“Well, we try.”

I was quiet a second too long, taking in all the flashy, superhero-like can openers, and she was gone. She smelled my fear. It was an odor. Who wants to be around someone who's fighting for his life inside?

In every aisle, I was a gargantuan with buckets on my feet. Clank! Clank! The tinny banging of my panic echoed off mirrors, picture frames, and vases. The store spun around me like a chintzy merry-go-round of glassware, lamps, rugs, curtains, and office furniture. Puritan navy blue shirts and Faded Glory khaki shorts burned before my eyes, licking and crackling.

I needed to set myself down somewhere, like a limp roll of carpet against a wall or a tool in drawer. If only I could be swallowed up into a wall like a cadaver in a morgue drawer, like Steve.

I was atop a tower of time, the hours ahead like a sharp pinnacle I would impale myself on, or miss altogether and fall headlong into the blackness of night. All my life it had been like this, my moods going to hell in the day, turning insufferable at night, the next day never coming fast enough.

I zigzagged to the exit, passing an exercise bike. If only I could hop on it and crank up my happiness.

I burst outside into a filthy world—sooty cinderblock buildings, skimpy ill-green trees,

and a bleak, colorless night sky. Long narrow shadows crisscrossed the parking lot like black searchlight beams hunting for me.

Why this madness?

“Fear of abandonment,” one counselor had said.

Abandonment? Old cars were abandoned. Houses too. As a child, I had never been left in a church or train station with a note pinned to my shirt, “Unwanted. Find home.”

No, I had a hideous growth, an anaconda on the end of my tailbone. It thrashed and coiled, trying to suffocate and crush me, and we wrestled, crashing through life, destroying my jobs and relationships. Numerous times I had macheted it to pieces only to see it grow back together. Tonight it was more swollen and violent than ever.

In the car, I grabbed my cell. No message from Lisa. Just a blank orange screen. I dug out my bottle of Xanax. Why wasn't it working? Had I taken her cat's stupid travel tranquilizers instead?

Do I dare call 911? I knew what was ahead if I did.

“Are you in crisis?”

Yes, all my life I had been in crisis! I told you so before. Don't you remember when I called you in Minneapolis? Then again in New York?

If I said yes, the uniforms and vehicles would come for me, and I'd descend into the system. They'd paperwork me. They'd take my shoestrings. I'd sit behind cloudy plexiglass on a hard metal bench, in frosty air conditioning that would kill my bacteria. I'd shiver. They'd feed me a bag lunch at four in the morning. It would include a celery stick. I'd use the milk carton as my head plop, my pillow of sorts, as I lay on my side, trying to curl up inside myself to

beat the icy air. I'd use my brown paper bag as a tiny blanket over my gooseflesh forearm.

In the morning, I'd be absolutely cured. I was not mental. Just a bad night, I'd assure the doctor. I wasn't like these toothless deranged fools around me. I didn't chainsmoke or drink. I was ambitious. I did animal rescue on weekends.

I'd lie and say this was my first time hospitalized for psychiatric care, knowing he'd have no immediate way of finding out otherwise. Yes, I was committed to seeing a counselor on the outside. I wanted to be well. Oh, and I had insurance.

"Good," he'd say. "So the next step is making amends with yourself, right?" and I'd nod my head off. Then he'd say the magic words, "I'm releasing you to the general population."

The general population. I sat in the general population right now, in my dark car outside Wal-Mart. Shadowy shapes of shoppers drew loose trails back and forth across the lot, in and out of the silhouettes of cars.

Again, how do I get past this moment? If an angel of rescue fell randomly from the sky a thousand times, she'd never come close to me.

I aimed a single index finger like a torpedo at the dash, striking a little button with a glow-in-the-dark red diamond on the face of it. Emergency flashers began pulsating in orange bursts on both sides of my car while two green eyes in the dash blinked and clicked in time.

Emergency!

Emergency!

The lights flashed up the sides of darkened cars around me, reflecting off taillights and windows. They throbbed across the parking lot, catching the cuffs of shoppers' pants, their wire-frame carts, and fleshy profiles. They echoed off the aluminum face of the store's doors,

following grooves and seams in thin straight lines. They punched through the darkness in every direction, striking out on a mission to attach themselves to every surface.

All the while, shadowy shapes continued to pass in and out around me. Some paused and cocked their heads in my direction. Then, the flashing orange struck one man full in the face. Steve! His face was tangerine and distorted, but it was him. He was there for an instant. Absolutely there! Then gone. Absolutely gone.

~

I woke in my car in the Burger King parking lot across the highway, big greasy French fries all over my lap.

To hell with Lisa. I would never go back to New York. She made all the money—let her pay the rent by herself. My four measly copyediting clients wouldn't know or care where I was, thanks to email. It was a lousy virtual world, so thank god I had brought my laptop with me.

She had warned me she was unhappy. The only reason we stayed together after our last fight was that I had said the most incredible thing to her: I had her mother, of all people, to thank for not being kicked out onto the street—not because her mother liked me, just the contrary, but because she had left her daughter without the self-respect to get rid of me when she should have. It was a terribly hard but honest remark, and Lisa broke apart in insane laughter for days.

I brushed the fries onto the floor, revved up the car, and headed out into the car-filled night. All my life I had been lost in the night with my problems. In Florida, I was a nervous shadow on the bank of Cherokee Lake. In D.C., I sped the 66-mile loop around the Capital Beltway at midnight, eating a bagful of Suzy Q's. In Brooklyn, I hid in the syrupy-black tree

cover of Prospect Park. Now I was looking for comfort in the West Virginia dark, only to find an uneasy sameness around me. I came to a light. The woman in the silver SUV beside me looked like the woman at the last light in the black SUV, who looked like the woman in the blue SUV a hundred miles up the interstate. I could be anywhere in America.

Motel 8, Bojangles Chicken, Happy Bob Silvers Chevrolet—the Alma side of the county was dark and asleep. Where the old highway became desolate, I pulled over and parked down a gravel lane that had once led to an overlook but was now taken over by billboards and a housing development. After driving the lane to its end, I parked, locked all my doors, and climbed into the backseat. There I pressed my back against the seat, knees drawn up to my chest, arms pulled around them. I rocked myself, chanting, “HALT! Are you Hungry? No. Are you Angry? Yes. Are you Lonely? Yes. Are you Tired? Yes.” How could it be that of the hundreds of millions of square miles that made up the surface of the Earth, suddenly there was nowhere for me to go?

In Rhode Island, I found this same point of nowhere on the tip of Loon’s Neck Point. There the sea wrapped around me as if I were alone in a raft, the frothy waves moonlit to a luminous green. Nowhere to go.

Growing up, I had a favorite record album cover that I had taped over Mom’s wall plaque in my room. The wall plaque read, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” The album was by John Cougar. The title that ran across the front was “Nothin’ Matters and What If It Did?”

When I got older, I thought it was the stupidest, gloomiest, most juvenile-minded remark ever. Now I wasn’t so sure.

I heard a noise outside. The crunch of a leaf. I hauled myself over the seat and roared this old Ford muscle car to life.

My headlights soon found a small blue H-for-hospital sign, and I followed it back into town and through the dark, doorway-lined downtown, on out past a bright 7-11, and around the old rotary that when we were growing up had a giant sculpture of a McIntosh Red Apple in the center. On the next street, the neon-red sign for Alma General appeared through the leafy black glare on my windshield. The sign still looked like Cheerios lettering.

I pulled over to the curb and powered down my window. The long, low building was a checkerboard of lit windows. The longer I stared at these windows, the more it seemed my eyes were cutting holes into the past. My brothers and I had all been born here, and Steve, first out, was first back in, to die here.

Years ago, after he shot his deer rifle out his bedroom window, cops dragged him into a psyche ward that had been located on the far end of this hospital. Hours later, in a cramped room, a doctor with a lisp talked to our family about clinical depression and chemical imbalance. He asked whether there was a history of mental illness in the family.

We all looked around at each other. Mental illness? We were all crazy, yeah, but normal crazy. We did well enough in school. None of us were, like, retards. And Dad was too much of an asshole to be mentally ill.

Steve, the doctor told us, was schizophrenic.

Again we all glanced around at each other. How? When? Why?

But there were no concrete answers, he said. The disease was unfortunately a mystery. Sometimes it just happened to boys in their teens. The end result was, Steve's poor brain was

messed up, his wiring all wrong. He was like our TV when full of diagonal lines and hissing snow.

Greg and I, I never forgot, had one thing to say. Schizophrenia our ass!

So dear old Dad's backhands and hours of screaming at us, what, had nothing to do with it? Oh, what a relief to know we were all safe from "psychological damage." Why, it was all biology's fault. Something bigger than Dad and God had messed up.

After more meetings over the months, they called it quits. In Mendon County, they knew when to quit. When a car's frame gets bent, total the car. When fire gets past two or three rooms, let the house burn. If your son is schizophrenic, game over. All those millions of diseased brain cells—who knew what kind of shattered thoughts were rolling loose in a demented man's kaleidoscope?

It was decided the best that could be done for Steve, essentially, was to keep him doped up for the rest of his life. So it would be. Now he was dead.

I dropped the car into gear and pulled on. The big steering wheel seemed to turn itself through my fingers. The highbeams roared up the lush dark countryside on south Bloom Road, and the tires glided effortlessly around curves. Crisp mountain air rushed through the cracked window.

At the Route 17 turnoff, the First Pentecostal Church of Mount Mission, just as I remembered it, stood squat and blackened against the luminous night sky. I pulled over into a crunchy gravel lot and parked in the bluish-black shadows of the overhanging woods. Here, high on the mountain, the chirping crickets were so robust they sounded like little power drills and saws grinding away at the hard trees. Waist-high weeds that, sharpened on one side by

moonlight, flickered and flashed around the car like thousands of knife blades. Overhead, moon-white flares of clouds whistled across the sky, drawing long glow-in-the-dark exclamation points down to the horizon.

Steve a minister here? I couldn't imagine it. To think of him was to be menaced by a tragedy. His whole life seemed a printing blunder, like halves of two opposing books glued together.

I took out my cell and dialed Steve's number again. As it rang and rang, I stared up into the starry sky. One summer, he made a constellation out of half a football field and a bunch of rocks. The field was located on the far side of the junior high. Striated black rocks, white-streaked rocks, plain gray ones, chunky red ones, some crumbly chalky ones, adorable pink nuggets—all were configured into a whirling pattern that was artful, ancient, and, in recreating our Milky Way, accurate. You could see Earth, the swirling line of white rocks that was The Big Dipper, and the chunk of brick in the center that was Mars. He used a small bluish rock on the edge of the field as Pluto and ten wheelbarrows of gravel for the rings of Saturn. The Moon, a peppery black rock, got thrown at a dog and unfortunately lost, and Little Dipper was mistaken for a goofy upside-down question mark and removed.

Greg claimed that the arrangement was actually a complex solar calendar. I thought it swept across the field in a beautiful hurricane of planets, moons, asteroids, and comets. Mom said that in the morning sunlight lit up the dew-glistened rocks like gems against black velvet.

Today the field was crowded with modular classrooms. Whatever happened to all the rocks? Rocks just don't disappear.

Growing up, I'd constantly fire rocks out of Mom's backyard. I cocked my arm back and

launched them as high and far as I could. Each sailed high the trees before clacking, knocking, thumping—playing pinball in the timbers—and finally falling with a thud onto the woodsy floor, where it would be left to lay untouched through time, covered by deadfall or worn cold by wind and snow.

But they were still there. Things just don't disappear.

Before placing the rocks around the field, Steve had artfully raked the ground down to crop circles of dirt, spinning these parallel grooves with a simple garden rake. Even now, I thought of how vulnerable those graceful lines had been to a week's breezes and afternoon sprinkles. How fragile, too, my brother's fingerprints had been on the many different rocks—how quickly had the rain washed them away? How quickly had the sun burned them away?

I stared up into the night sky. Maybe there had been a Zen message there after all, and in it I'd have found the meaning of Steve's life and why it'd come to an end.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You’re staying?” My mother, her face drawn and puckered, didn’t know how horrified she looked.

“Just for a few days.”

She folded her arms so tight her blue flannel shirt seemed to suffer because of me. At the same time, her eyes hardened and drew close together, and her brows bunched down.

“I can’t imagine why,” she said, “after your little talk with your father yesterday. I just found out.”

I sighed and looked away.

“What about your job, Mark?”

“I can do it by email.”

“And Lisa?”

“It’s okay. She’s fine.”

“Fine?”

She was my dear mother, but smiling was not in her favor. Her teeth, uneven and yellowed, were from another time, when people didn’t see or care much about their teeth.

“Oh, don’t tell me that, Mark Allen. You two’ve clearly had a fight, haven’t you?”

Again I had nothing to say.

Mom had met Lisa about five years ago and, ever since, pretended to like her. For the last two decades, my poor mother had been pretending to like any woman I brought home

because it meant I hadn't yet destroyed my final relationship in life and there was still a chance for me.

On the kitchen table was a red tapered candle in a ceramic angel holder. The angel had bowed wings and held her hands in prayer.

"That for Steve?" I asked, nodding down at it.

"What? Oh, yes. The candle was blessed at the Shrine of Fatima in Charleston. That's something I suppose."

Dried wax had run down the sides of the candle like tears. They were profuse tears, dribbling on top of one another in a long, hard cry.

She moved slowly over to the piersafe where she lifted the blue-striped porcelain bell as if just to peek under it. "Goodness, one son gone, one son back," she said.

"Just for a few days."

"Well, I won't interfere."

Good, I thought. Don't.

~

It was Tuesday morning, and she insisted on fixing me breakfast. Spoons rattled, bread toasted, and a bowl of steaming oatmeal landed under my eyes. Mom came into the kitchen—I didn't see her step out—holding what looked to be a bookmark. She rounded the table toward me.

"I was trying to find your brother," she said.

She handed me a fragile old news clipping. I took it, conscious of her standing close to me. The clipping was from *The Spirit of Mendon*, the fancy Old English logotype being the last

of its kind. “Alma Honor Roll Students Say Cheese,” the headline read. Names of honor roll students were listed at the bottom in alphabetical order. Steve Barr was fourth in.

“His name?” I asked.

“No, no.” Mom’s eyes were sunken and haunted-looking, and creases in her flannel shirt pulled tight around her folded up arms. She held her black-handled magnifying glass. “Him.”

I knew what was motivating her. Steve’s obituary in the paper came and went, and we failed to get a copy. Not for lack of trying. I checked every High’s and 7-Eleven in the area for the weekend edition, but no one carried *The Mendon Times* anymore. It was *The Bluefield Democrat*, *USA Today*, or nothing. Mom called *The Times* and was told she’d be mailed a copy, though it may take two weeks or longer.

I slid my cereal bowl aside, placed the clipping down on the table, and took the magnifying glass from her. I leaned down close to the newsprint and brought the magnifying glass into position—the faded faces of children in the photo exploded into an immense grid of tiny brown-gray dots overrunning my eyes. I looked away.

This time I peered down slowly with the lens already in front of my eye, letting the dozens of little faces unblend, form into perfectly spaced dots. Almost right away I made out Steve’s grin. He sat in the first row.

The little bugger was alive in the constellation! I grinned until the swells of my cheeks pressed out against the metal ring holding the magnifying lens.

“Bingo.”

“Really?” cried my mother, hovering over me.

Steve was materialized between two worlds, as if in limbo. When I rose up just slightly,

his little bespeckled face, going supernova, obliterated into the newsprint cosmos.

He was countable, too, like beans in a jar. Visualizing a picture frame rectangle around his face, I stepped my eyes from dot to dot, counting eight down and six across. Steve was forty-eight specks.

“Yep, got him,” I said, just above a whisper.

“Good lord, where?”

As soon as I stood, she took the magnifying glass from me and sat. With the magic glass to her eye, she peered down where my finger was pointing.

“Oh, there he is. I see him!”

Her swung-up smile and clear brown eyes—she was both pitiable and dear, clutching the slightest memory.

Backing away from her, I saw a bigger picture. My brother never had a proper life. He didn't wear a suit to work for thirty years like Granddaddy Roy, didn't carry a shiny steel lunchbox like Dad or drive a truck like Greg. In the world of flesh, he was dotted. Immaterial. His mental illness had reduced him to a kind of halftone realm.

But a casket was not made to hold forty-eight dots, and St. Mary's Cemetery did not bury empty caskets. Could it be—cremation was best?

Just then, a second clipping got my attention, placed on the edge of the table. I moved quietly around my mother, crept my hand onto the table, and slid the second clipping away.

Alma—June 17, 1979.

A 16-year-old was arrested after firing multiple rounds from a high-powered rifle from a window of his parents' home in Alma. Bullets struck

nearby houses. There were no reported injuries.

Steven Jonothon Barr was taken into custody and held for psychiatric evaluation, pending arraignment on a felony charge of aggravated discharge of a firearm.

The youth, a high school student at Alma High, has no prior history of violence.

Authorities said neighbors reported...

Putting the clipping back, I told my mother I had to use the bathroom. She barely said a word as she went on peering into the forty-eight dots. Instead, I went to the top of the house, to the very tip-top. Step after step, I climbed the splintery treads, the blue walls passing by, then the dingy white ones, all the way to the attic door. I would have climbed out on the roof if I could have. I would have stepped up into the sky, marched up into the clouds. Anything to run from this feeling inside.

Why did it take photographs and newsprint dots of Steve for us to see him, to miss him, to love him? They were just bits of paper and color, just expressions, clicks of a camera. Why couldn't we see him in person for who he was?

The attic had once been a kind of game room, with a ping-pong table and toys scattered everywhere. Now it was packed tight with junk—swollen cardboard boxes, rusted iron lamps with bucket-shaped, waxy-brown shades, and curvy wooden chairs without seats, exposing frames shaped like toilet seats. Books, picture frames, vases stuffed with tubes of holiday gift wrapping paper—the house looked built around this clutter, the walls pushed up against it, and the steeply pitched roof pressing it all down, shaping out the nose cone of a time capsule rocket

carrying junk from Earth, circa 1950.

The hazy daylight that seeped through the lone window on the far side of the attic seemed to travel to the top of the world to reach here, only to cast a sinister glint on the long black rafter nails that jutted down through the ceiling. This was not a space to stand up in. Nor was there anywhere to step. Boxes took up most of the floor, and wicker laundry baskets and stacks of books took up the rest. National Geographic and Time Life books. Books on outer space, Africa, modern machinery. How to Make Birdhouses. Portraits of American Presidents—a bluish-faced Andrew Jackson gripping his saber shared the cover with a thin-faced and sickly Woodrow Wilson.

As I squeezed my way toward the center of the room, I kicked over a shoebox of Lifesaver-colored plastic bangles, sending them clicking and rattling on what little floor was left. The commotion sounded like loose poker chips, as if a casino table had been tipped over. I cringed and found myself staring into the eyes of a tall, trim man in a military uniform in a tarnished, ornate silver frame.

My father. I could never get away from him, even up here at the top of the world.

On the floor nearby was what remained of our old goldfish aquarium, a roof-less right angle of cloudy, greenish glass walls with a red reef rock left on the uneven sea floor. As I waded over to a dresser, my weight on the floor caused the drawer handles to rattle in synch, like brushes against a cymbal. The air grew warm and close. Sights seemed one of a kind and beautifully strange. A pink footpan collecting dried-out paintbrushes, a can of brightly labeled Lucky Leaf blueberry pie filling standing like a paperweight on a faded Yosemite Sam car mat, a box of Tuna Helper filled with yellowed packets of sugar, and a Harlequin Romance bookmark

with a buxom, orange-haired vixen on it sticking out of the thick text called Social Darwinism and Environmental Reasoning.

I found a snug space on the floor to hide myself in. The wood grain was sharp-edged like fish scales, and the boards withered. But they were warm, and I curled up on them and shut my eyes. My shoulder felt meaty and comfortable to rest on. I felt safe.

After a few minutes, I opened my eyes to see a clunky desktop calculator just inches away, along with a paperback. The words on the spine were too big and close to read, and for the longest while, they just blurred across the base of my field of vision as I gazed beyond into a black crevice between two towers of boxes. If only I were a miniature man who could disappear inside this crevice, never to be found.

Where would this crevice lead? Had Steve already jumped in?

These boxes had outlived him. So had the nails in the ceiling. All this junk had. What did that say about junk?

My attention shifted back to the blurry book spine. To read it, I pulled my head back. *Kung Fu: Adventures of Caine*. Steve's beloved book. Without sitting up, I picked it up, held it over me, and thumbed through the browned pages, skimming the big easy words.

Back when Steve had been on a Kung Fu kick, he had crept around the house as if the hallways were covered with ricepaper and his bare, super-flexed karate feet were too nimble to tear it. He crouched in the shadows only to pop out and startle the bejesus out of us. Whirling his arms around like lethal weapons, he whispered, "Looked for, he cannot be seen. Listened for, he cannot be heard." Then he disappeared back into the shadows only to reappear suddenly somewhere else in the house to remind us he could neither be seen nor heard. Greg eventually

got him good by saying, “Confucius say, ‘Smelled for, he stinks to high heavens.’”

Where were these words in the paperback? I turned page after page, instead finding an inviting story, “...Caine wandered through the ripples of burning sand in his bare feet, his last mouthful of tart berries three days ago, his last sip of spring water longer...”

My eyes caught a bit of dialogue.

Caine wondered, “Is it good to seek the past, Master Po? Does it not rob the present?” Master Po answered, “If a man dwells on the past, then he robs the present. But if a man ignores the past, he may rob the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of our past.”

I closed the book, returned it to the floor, and shut my eyes. Was I dwelling on the past? Was I robbing my present? Or were the roots of our family diseased with pathogens? If so, better to cut down the tree, right?

I had read some time back that, at the cellular level, each of us completely regenerates every seven years. Essentially, we become brand-new. In other words, for years I had held a grudge not against my father, but against my great great great great grandfather. Like the difference between despising Henry VIII and whoever Henry XV was.

I made my way back to the attic door and would have left if not for a bright green-striped shopping bag that caught my eye. It was the only color in the room not faded or decades old. Inside this crackly Dollar Tree bag, which sat on a huge upside-down flower pot, was an even brighter glossy-red Filene’s Basement shoebox. I lifted the lid to discover a mess of pill bottles, dozens of them—dark-brown and plastered with red and yellow warning labels, others translucent light-brown, many with bulky childproof caps, a few with simple screw-ons, most from Rite-Aid, one or two from Wal-Mart.

I sat down on the flower pot and read through them. Tegretol, Haldol, Risperdal—all were prescribed to Steve. My god, so many. Thora something, Zypre something. Most were empty and dusty, and a few labels were too worn to read. Dates were all over the place. 11/23/2007, 07/12/2003, 04/2/2006. So were doses. 15MG, 900MG, 0.25MG, 100MG. Doctors' names kept changing. Miller, Jacob. Goldendale, Thomas. Khan, Jason.

Fuck! Steve had been seriously overmedicated.

I pawed through the bottles, making clicky, hollow rattles. Invega, Zoloft, Lithium. So damn many. 2 refills. 3 refills. May refill 30 X by 09/20/2004.

My mother was right. How could anything Steve thought, said, or did be trusted? His mind had been contaminated for so long: harassed by loathsome feelings toward himself, drugged up in Dracula's castle of an insane asylum, brainwashed by halfwit counselors, and disoriented and discouraged further by the downtrodden in group homes. Steve didn't know who he was, what he thought, or how to behave anymore. His head was a reckless, diabolical machine gorging on its own misapprehensions. Call him schizophrenic, tell him symptoms, and he'd eat the set of instructions on how to behave as one and then follow them like a Frankenstein created by the ghouls of mental health.

There was something else in the shopping bag. Two cleaning sponges, withered, worn, and hardened. My mother preferred this kind of sponge—soft yellow foam on one side for cleaning, wiry green mesh on the other for scrubbing. Though dry and stiff, a chemically scent rose from them. Bleach.

Bleach smell for the second time in just hours. She had cleaned Steve's bathroom and collected all his pill bottles from his medicine cabinet and stashed them up here in the attic.

I stared across the attic, through the topsy-turvy city of clutter, and on through the triangular space left under the ceiling of nails. What else did she take from Steve's apartment? What else was up here?

~

Mom was waiting for me downstairs.

"This should cheer you up," she said, holding up a bold blue corduroy jacket that cut a trim, handsome silhouette.

"Hey, Steve's old jacket." I made a beeline for it.

"Got so he couldn't fit into it anymore with his belly."

"Still looks new."

"Had it drycleaned some time back. It was in one of those garment bags for years."

The jacket was amazingly preserved—pressed and decked out with big white buttons and a collection of pockets on the sleeves and chest. After wiping my fingers on my jeans, I ran my thumb over the velvety ribs of corduroy.

"Try it on."

"No, no."

"Well, why not? Greg's certainly too big for it. Through the shoulders anyway."

I ran my eyes up and down the lush vertical grooves of marine-blue cotton, countless tufted channels fabulously straight and flawless.

"They don't make corduroy jackets anymore, do they?"

"Oh, I think they still do. Now, Mark, you need a jacket. You didn't bring one, I'm presuming. It's still spring in these mountains. You can't run around here forever without one."

“Blue is my color.”

“Well, it sure never was Steve’s, not with his carrot top. Now try it on. I’ll have to give all this to Goodwill eventually.”

“Goodwill? No way.”

I slid my arm into the silk-lined sleeve, which greeted my skin with a cool, comfy fit. The heavy cotton jacket fell over my shoulders as if made to fit.

“Lands, look at that. You and Steve always were the same size before he started drinking. Better button it up to make sure.”

The buttons, under the twist of my fingers, popped effortlessly through the holes, pulling the jacket high and close.

“Very nice.”

There was a dressing mirror in the corner, one of those long, cheap plastic ones for the back of a door, this one leaning loose up against the wall. In the narrow reflection, I was a manly trunk of corduroy blue. I looked thinner, taller, my chest fuller, my shoulders wider.

I breathed in deeply, hoping for the aroma of Steve’s once-young and healthy life, but got only a vague scent of fabric mixed with dust and time. Were his skin cells still in the sleeves, his body hairs, his DNA? Was I strange for thinking this way? I checked the breast pocket for a note or penny from Steve. But it was lint or nothing.

I turned to Mom. “You think he’d mind?”

“Goodness, no. He’d be happy to see you in it. Now you can’t wear it in the rain. It’ll get ruined.”

As I stood with one eye on myself in the mirror, I saw myself strutting down the litter-

blown avenues of Brooklyn. I saw myself fast-walking the magnificent Upper West Side, where ordinary apartment buildings looked like the Library of Congress to me. I saw myself scurrying down to the subway platforms, down steep, dank, cramped concrete stairs to gloomy undergrounds, ready to take on the MTA on its most inept day—delays, route changes, overcrowded cars, skipped stops, locals going express, ready to turn subway travel in Gotham into an action-adventure movie.

I saw Lisa and me strolling arm and arm down Sixth Avenue, her finally having a reason to dress down in her old jean jacket her niece had hit up with a Bedazzler.

Why didn't I have this jacket on all my life?

~

Later that morning, I cleaned up my mother's backyard, not wearing Steve's good jacket but an old flannel shirt. I walked paint-slopped cans by their rusted handles over to the fire barrel and grouped them in the high grass. Beside them I dropped sticks. Knobby, witch-fingered sticks. Beside these, a crushed milk carton, blue cigarette lighter, STP oil can, deflated football, pieces of cinderblock.

I reached my bare hands into the scratchy weeds and gooey dirt, finding colorful flashes of trash. A Frisbee still as neon-yellow as the day it was lost. A piece of a red plastic flute. I threw it all in a heap on the ground, then stood up straight, and walked around to the front porch where the street lay shabby and wild before my eyes—high, blight-bitten sycamores draping down over scruffy, leaning picket fences, harsh sunshine scorching unmown yards, concrete walks raided by weeds, and stoops cluttered with clay pots in which stood skeletons of plants. All I wanted at that moment was to step into this lovely torn-down scene and stay forever—not

think, not feel, just be. I didn't want to mourn Steve or miss Lisa. I just wanted to be in the right place.

The last place I had truly belonged was here. Throughout my twenties and thirties, I let so many neighborhoods slip by. In D.C., where I had lived after college, they were too black for me. In Rhode Island, too Portuguese. In Minneapolis, too Episcopalian. All my adult life, the only evidence of my ever having lived anywhere was a trail of expired Blockbuster accounts.

My ex father-in-law had once said I had a paranoid flare. That I always thought was an astute and tolerable one-time judgment of me. He started his sentence this way: "Mark, you're basically a good guy, but..." He saw my strangled silence as a timberland waiting for the spark of madness—and was right. He knew well before his daughter.

Peering out around a clump of branches, I spotted old wobbly-legged Mr. Waller up the sidewalk, walking a black poodle. Was this the same poodle from eleven years ago? How did he do it? Stay in one place forever? Further up the street, a grungy bullet-headed kid was bouncing a basketball against the side of a thickset bungalow. When he walked by earlier today, I had read his tee-shirt: "I know I'm a fat, lazy, forgetful, disorganized slob, but I'm a nice fat, lazy, forgetful, disorganized slob."

I sat down on the front porch and stared out at the land I had grown up on. Was home the problem? Or was I?

Surprising myself, I popped up, trotted out to the front walk, and stood before the street. At once I was surrounded, strategically speaking. I imagined half a dozen rifles trained down on me. Mr. Waller's three-story white clapboard had red-shuttered windows ready to hold guns on me. If I walked up to his house, would I find the same old white wood door with Jerry's bullets

still lodged in it? Pete Lancaster's old Victorian had a big upstairs portal window, along with three first-floor windows tall enough to step into, all leveled straight at me like galleon cannons. The rundown, sooty farmhouse behind it had huge dormers, each divided up into a dozen little panes. If the windows on my street could fire at me, I'd be dead fifty times.

"Here I am," I said to all the houses. "Steve Barr's brother, remember? Go ahead, get your revenge."

But nothing. Barely a bird chirp. One squirrel scampering. A leaf falling. Mr. Waller up the street, with his back to me, was staring off into nowhere. The dumb kid beyond went on bouncing the basketball, sending smack-like echoes down the street.

I walked. How long had it been since I had shown my face on the street? What great shadow of shame had I drawn down over myself here? Mr. Waller noticed me only once I was fifteen feet from him. I quickly smiled and gave him a little windshield wiper wave of my hand. He glanced down at his old dog and towed it closer to him.

"Good afternoon," I said.

He nodded and again dropped his eyes to his dog, making sure it was out of my way so that I could pass. But I came to a stop before him, and his face went on alert. Who was I? What did I want? Did I just come from the Barr house?

"I'm Mark Barr," I said, keeping my voice buoyant.

His eyes, small and sunken, held tightly to me. Have you returned to shoot my house too? Was he thinking that?

"Hello."

He spoke the word slowly and monotone.

“I grew up here,” I said, making sure he realized so, keeping a bright, proud smile as I pointed across the street at my mother’s.

“Yes, I remember you,” he said, in a tone that fell between neutral and chilly.

He remembered me? Of course he did. But what did he remember? That I had been a little hellion? His knotty old face gave no hint. Again he glanced down at his dog.

“How’s Katherine?”

“She’s fine.”

No, she wasn’t fine. No, it wasn’t a good afternoon. No, I hadn’t grown up here—I had grown out of control here. He knew that.

Why couldn’t he look me in the eyes? Yes, my crazy brother had put four slugs in his front door.

“The street still looks good,” I said, glancing around.

When he chuckled—and he did so freely—his face opened up and captured a younger look.

“Oh, you think so? Trees could use a trimming, don’t you think?”

I took his question seriously. Man, I made it the most important question I had ever been asked. Hands on my hips, I pivoted and studied the high limbs.

“Power company never comes back here anymore,” he said. “They used to trim every year or so.”

I saw what he meant. Trees had overgrown the power lines, which ran taut and thin through clumps of branches like black sewing thread supporting a mobile.

“The town promised us a repaved street ten years ago.”

“*Ten?*”

He nodded deeply. “March of ’97. Your mother was at that meeting. Said to me afterward, ‘Gene, I’ll never live long enough to see it.’”

When we smiled together, I felt the soft center of my bones, and no longer was I sure what I was made of.

I had never stood this close to him before. He had always been a somber, watchful, one-dimensional figure beyond the barrier of his yard. Now he was an explosion of details—his face ridged and grooved like a hybrid of tree barks, his hair whitish and wispy as corn silk, all magnified and seamlessly in motion.

He looked down at his dog again. “How are her eyes?”

“Tells me not to worry.”

“And of course you must.”

Again there was an effortless, straight-on smile between us. Could it be that people simply forgive and forget?

His poodle, he informed me, was not a poodle but a Portuguese Water Dog, sometimes called a Labradoodle. The dog I remembered had died eight years ago. She was Eleanor, a toy poodle.

“Eleanor?”

“After Eleanor Roosevelt. I named this one Kissinger, after Henry Kissinger.”

My heart opened in delight. What a fabulous names!

“Hello, Mr. Kissinger,” I said.

We went on to chitchat. He didn’t ask about my life, where I was living or what I was

doing. He didn't dare touch on the subject of Steve, even as my mother's source of grief. I wondered if he even knew Steve had died. He didn't say a word about my father either. With my family, he seemed to have a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

Instead, the conversation clung to town politics. Alma's last half dozen mayors, he said, were all disgraces. The worst was a realtor, Terry Jack—which sounded like the name of a crook, didn't it? Jack tried to sell off a hundred acres of pasture out on Grafton Road to the state prison commission, not giving a damn that as a consequence we'd have a supermax prison less than half a mile from Sandy Pines Elementary.

"Immoral bastard," he said.

I stooped down to rub Henry Kissinger on his head and mentioned the old Miller motel out on Gravity Hill Road, which had stood throughout my childhood like a king's mansion. It never looked better, I said. He told me Marian Miller's grandson now owned it.

"Turning it into a Montessori school."

"Whoa, a Montessori school? Here in Mendon County?"

"So you know a little about it then?"

"Did my thesis on constructivist education."

His saggy eyes opened up, and his tired, downturned mouth lifted into a high smile.

"You're an expert then?"

"No, hardly."

He was further impressed that I had taught summer camp classes at Monarch Montessori School in Brooklyn. I didn't bother to add that, for all the hoopla about collaborative knowledge associated with the school, I was little more than a room monitor for them.

From this point on, it was all Montessori talk. His niece taught at a Montessori school in Virginia and was raising her daughter “in the belief,” he said. As he went on about how remarkable she was, it occurred to me—I knew nothing about him. Had he ever been married? Did he have children? Was he born in Alma? What had he done for a living? All these years he could have been anyone in the world.

At the same time, I didn’t recognize myself. Here I was on a potholed street in Podunk, West Virginia, talking self-construction, adolescent liberty, and spontaneous activity—the educational theory of Italian educator Maria Montessori—with an elderly man whose only words to me as a boy had been, “Keep off my grass.” It was both a breakout and full-circle moment, talking child-centered education where I had once been victim to a child-decentered upbringing.

He wanted to know if I had read any books by David Kolb. Yes, I had read all of them, I said, but the most indispensable book on the subject was *The Silent Way* by Caleb Gattegno.

“Give students only what they cannot reasonably find by themselves,” I quoted, “and let them do the rest.”

Briefly, I felt gigantic, lightheaded, and thunderously impressed with myself all at the same time. Then it hit me, as if I had just read not David Kolb but Tony Robbins, say, *Turning Disaster into Your Life’s Best Decision*. I saw all the connected dots. Every breakup, quit job, broken lease, dropped friendship, and abandoned plan in my life led to a powerful thrust in the right direction. The right direction was the opposite of the wrong one.

Henry Kissinger had to pee and was tugging Mr. Waller the other way. No doubt the dog knew more than both of us. Best to quit while ahead.

After saying goodbye, I headed back down the street. Once safely in my yard, I turned to

watch him heading away. Maybe he was just lonely. Maybe when he lay his head on his pillow in the dark, he suffered too. Had he wondered all these years why Steve had shot his house? He must have remembered that my brother had been a polite boy who did well in school. Maybe those four slugs went through his door and hit his fireplace, sofa, or a beloved family painting on the wall. Or maybe they came to a stop inside his pantry, and he had to throw out a whole bag of Gold Medal pancake mix.

I walked around to the back of my mother's house and stood staring at my reflection in Steve's truck window. My father had left the driver's door unlocked the other day. It squawked as I pulled it open, as if yanking a tail feather off a crow. Inside was a smelly mess—beer cans on the floor, ashtray full of butts, McDonald's bags and red French fry cartons everywhere. I grabbed an empty Wal-Mart bag off the floor and began picking up trash. Steve would not want to be seen this way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next day, I was driving into Jeffersonville when a green and white sign caught my eye. West Mountain Health. Behind the sign was a long building, half bland concrete, half new brick. Steve, I remembered, had been treated there at some point.

I pulled in—no, careened in. I tore the car off the highway, my wheels ripping the earth like paper.

Did I expect to be shown his records, to have his treatments and counseling sessions discussed with me, to be taken on a tour of the facility? You bet. What was a surviving brother not entitled to?

Maybe they'd discover that for years they had overmedicated him and, tragically, ruined his life. Maybe they'd drop to their knees and beg me for forgiveness. Better yet, maybe they'd pay Mom millions in damages.

The parking lot was dark-black and smooth, the lines bright-white. I parked and got out. In my trouser pocket, as my backup plan, were my own medication bottles in need of refills. I went through the tinted automatic doors—and stopped. The floor was a stark black and white checkered pattern, a giant chessboard. Was it the same floor I had seen in one of Steve's photos?

I headed for the men's room. In the glaringly bright restroom mirror, I looked terrible—drawn, big pores, the old scar on my chin savage-looking. Evidently, being back in West Virginia showed.

“Hi, my brother was a patient here, and I'm wondering if I could speak with his doctor.”

I ran this line through my head several times. Sounded good. Reasonable.

“Hi, I don’t have an appointment,” I ended up saying to the receptionist instead.

Walk-ins were fine, she said, and, as quickly as the automatic doors had opened and closed behind me, I went from a man with questions to a patient with empty vials in his pocket.

I sat and filled out forms. Over the years I had been in so many psyche clinics that when it came to waiting rooms and forms, everything seemed done a thousand times before—crossing my legs to hold the clipboard level, getting used to the pen and my own handwriting, which began as cursive, then switched to print, first uppercase, then upper and lower, my lowercase looking goofy.

I dashed through the medical questionnaire—no to obesity, no to gout, no to asthma. Happy to scrawl my signature on two unread waivers with a cramped hand, I flipped back to a question I had skipped.

Describe symptoms.

If I did one more thing on this earth, it would be to have a field day with this question. But not today.

Even the examination room where I was taken seemed identical to one I had been in before, as if in ten thousand tries, I just found two snowflakes alike. The plump nurse who took my blood pressure said, “I think we went to high school together.”

I gave her face a serious look with a soft smile.

“I was Penny Mills back then.”

I didn’t want to be cruel with my thoughts, but I saw absolutely nothing in her face that I could have possibly remembered from when I had been a teenage boy.

She lingered beside me as if wanting to say more. For a second I thought maybe she knew that my brother Steve had died and was thinking of a way to offer sympathies.

Instead, she left the room, and I sat alone in disbelief. Here I was a patient in West Mountain Health, a name my mother had said over and over, usually when grumbling about appointments Steve had missed.

Had he ever been in this very room? Had this blood pressure contraption on the wall ever been strapped on his arm?

Beside it, in all its sinister glory, was the symbol of the Hippocratic Oath—a serpent corkscrewed around a pole. As a boy, this image had frightened me, and it still did.

The doctor came in, a medium-build man in the usual white coat, asking how I was.

“I was hoping you could refill these.”

He sat in the chair near me, took both bottles, and read them, rolling each in his fingers.

“Depression, anxiety...says no refills.”

His eyes were intense, and they set upon me like high-gloss black beads.

I knew how a doctor’s generosity worked. It came down to how sympathetic or charming you made yourself. Doctors were the depressed ones. They see patients all the time. They’re worn-out and need cheering up. When you motivate them, they do their best to help you. They prescribe the right drugs—see you through the procedure. A happy, caring doctor is a productive doctor. It was time for me to go to work.

I was on an extended stay with my family. My regular doctor was in New York, I said, which, except for the regular part, was true. He waited to hear more.

“I have these, well, episodes.”

He watched my hands rub nervously up and down my jeans.

“Describe them.”

I did. Yelling. Throwing things. Hitting myself. Threatening to kill myself. He didn’t blink.

“I’m tired of losing the people I love.”

I appreciated that his eyes didn’t flee and his expression didn’t weaken. But none of this was really the truth. It was but one version of it, the express version. I did hit on key words—violent episodes.

I had seen a number of psychiatrists over the years, I said. No to bipolar and manic episodes, no to any dissociative disorder. Yes to obsessive tendencies, anxiety, and depression. But no one thing and nothing categorical or severe.

Then I got myself into trouble trying to name the Prozac and Zoloft cousins I had started but quit, which ones had caused finger and tongue swelling, which ones rashes, why all caused drowsiness at the lowest dose, all of which may or may not have been the result of their being combined with other meds whose names I couldn’t remember nor the low-income clinics where I had gotten them, not even the city where they were located.

Once again I was a new patient without records. Wherever I had gone for treatment, I had been a new patient without records, thanks to breaking treatment somewhere else. I could appreciate that from his point of view, I was like a junkie, and it was his impossible job to trace back the use of a dirty needle.

He looked down at my form.

“Says here there’s a history of mental illness in the family. Schizophrenia?”

He noticed? How many times they had not.

“My brother.”

“And this was considered in your case?”

What a beautiful question. I could not be sure whether it had ever before been asked in this clear, direct manner. Then I did the unthinkable. I shrugged.

He smiled ever so slightly. It was not an unkind smile, but a surprised one. I was surprised too. This wasn't part of my charming, get-the-refills routine.

“Do I have anything to worry about?” I asked.

“There is a genetic predisposition, yes—you have not brought this up with any previous doctors?”

Again I shrugged. “I think I have.”

By now I felt utterly foolish, floundering, sounding totally stupid about myself. At the same time, I was fed up with wondering what was wrong with me. Maybe it was time to reexamine everything.

He went through a checklist of symptoms: auditory hallucinations, delusions, racing thoughts, lack of emotion, neglect of personal hygiene. I could have checked off a few, but didn't dare. Instead, I found something better to say.

“My mother says I blame my father.”

“For?”

“For my brother. And me. Our father was hard on us. Hitting. Yelling.”

“Well,” he said, with a long sigh, “you may well have a right to blame.”

My eyes narrowed on him.

“Childhood trauma—and abuse is the most common—is a significant factor in most cases of adult psychosis. Roughly two thirds.” He interlaced his hands on the clipboard. “But let me be clear. It’s a factor. Not a cause.”

As I nodded, I could feel my face becoming studious and leathery.

“Think of a diabetic. He inherits the tendency for diabetes, the genetic vulnerability. Then he doesn’t exercise, has a poor diet. He causes the stressors for the disease to develop.”

“So my father...”

“May have well contributed to the environmental and psychosocial stressors that brought on your brother’s schizophrenia. But whether blame is healthy”—he gave me a grim smile—“that is a counseling matter.”

I wanted to shout it out. This man was as clear as colors.

“But regardless,” he said, putting down his clipboard and crossing his arms, creases pulling through his jacket. His eyebrows gathered low over his eyes. “I strongly advise you to commit to a plan of treatment.”

I was seized by his tone—flattened against an imaginary wall. At the same time, I was relieved to be spoken to this way. I felt like a child being scolded.

“All uptake inhibitors cause drowsiness to some degree, often swelling too. But these symptoms diminish. Sometimes it takes three, four months, or longer, to feel full benefits—were you never informed of this?”

How could I honestly answer him now?

He picked up the clipboard again. Scribbling on my form, he glanced up at me. “So I have your word you will commit to a plan of treatment?”

I sat up straight in my chair and nodded more times than necessary—I nodded as if God himself had asked.

“Good,” he said.

He said that in addition to a new script for Xanax—with his caution against overdependence—he’d like to start me on an SSRI that reported fewer side effects. I was all nods. He could prescribe Bayer Children's Chewable Aspirins, and I would take all of them, exactly as told.

Every word he said was so clear. How could it be that I had been to all these psyche clinics from Red Plains, Minnesota, to Warren, Rhode Island, but only now was I hearing the facts as if for the first time—in a clinic that, according to my mother, had failed my brother?

He also encouraged me to commit to long-term cognitive therapy. I didn’t dare mouth back that I had been getting so-called cognitive therapy for as long as I had been getting fillings in my teeth—and the cavities kept coming.

I couldn’t look at him enough. His black hair was swept over his ears in thick, even layers. He had razor burn on his neck. Just recently I had read an article about razor burn. It said to rinse your razor after each short downward motion. I wanted to tell him this tip.

“Dr. Patrick Chamberlain,” his nametag read.

It was not a county name. Where was he from? Why was he in Mendon County? He looked like he could practice in Manhattan and be my Brooklyn neighbor a few streets north, in the nicer homes near Prospect Park.

We sat for a long moment while he continued to scribble on my form. On the wall behind him hung a small pastel print of two winged cherubs. One cherub was kissing the other

on the cheek.

“How is your brother today?” he asked. “Better I hope.”

I nodded, my eyes still on the cherubs.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I came home late that afternoon to find a small cardboard box tucked inside the storm door, propping it open. St. William's Crematorium, the return address read. I froze.

It was here!

Without disturbing it, I opened the front door and bellowed in, "Mom!" She soon appeared, looking startled. I nodded down at the box. "From the crematorium." I stepped in and around it, holding the storm door open so as not to let it boot the box inside.

"Darn him," she said. "He never knocks loud enough."

In my stretched out position, I craned my head around to her. "Who?"

"The mailman. Mark, goodness, come in."

I let the storm door close slowly. As it did, it slid the box into the house. We both stood looking down at it.

"Steve's ashes?"

"I expect so. But I don't understand. Bill said it was being mailed to him."

"Must have been a mailing mistake," I murmured.

There was a white label across it and a long barcode followed by "Parcel Post" and "38-A" in zippy black marker.

"Whatta we do?"

"Well, better put it in the parlor for now," she said.

The box was so light it felt empty. Still, I carried it with both hands and placed it on the floor in the parlor, up against the wall below the mantel, well out of the way. I stepped straight

back and gave it a long wary look. I didn't want to make my mother curious, so I returned to the living room, where the coffee table caught my eye. It was conspicuously empty.

"Where's the urn?" I spun around. "Mom?"

"Your father took it."

"What? Took it? Why?"

My loud, tense voice seized the dainty old room, and the eyes of my grandparents widened in picture frames around me. What did they think of me? Was Katie's youngest brash?

"Mark, he didn't say, and I didn't ask."

She continued on toward the kitchen, leaving me puffed up with outrage. I chased after her, my heavy footsteps shaking a lamp stand.

"When, Mom?"

"This morning. That's what his note said. Lord, who can read his crabbed handwriting. His and Greg's both."

"You let him?"

She turned to me, her mouth edge-shaped with irritation. "Mark, I wasn't here."

My temples were pounding. He took it? The bastard! I whirled around and stared back at the empty coffee table. But what good was the urn without the ashes? I didn't understand his little move. I was thrown by it. So much, the room became wrinkled and narrow-framed before my eyes.

I caught up with Mom again in the kitchen. "Mom, what's Greg's number?"

"Greg? Well, I'll have to look for it. It may take me some time."

"Well, how much time?"

She stepped up to the piasafe and wiped dust off a small picture frame with her sleeve. “I can’t keep this darn place clean no matter how hard I try.” Then she sat down, her cane seat not making a sound. “Goodness, we have poor Steve’s ashes now, but nothing to put them in. What a disgrace this all is.” Then she looked up at me. “What, Mark?”

~

She wasn’t kidding about it taking her some time. Half the evening passed while she fussed around looking for it.

I kept watch on the parlor door from the living room. I didn’t dare leave Steve’s ashes unguarded to drive over to Greg’s. The old bastard might come back this morning and steal them too.

Mom searched for Greg’s number on notepads, slips of paper stuck to the refrigerator, any piece of paper in a drawer, complaining the whole time it was no wonder she couldn’t find anything with all the clutter in the house. No way would his number be listed in the phonebook, so I didn’t even check.

I paced. I sat in the old ladder-back chair. I paced some more. I sat on the deathbed. Whenever I stood or sat, my eyes slid in the direction of the parlor. All the while, the streetlight, deflected through the window, illuminated the Charlie Brown paperweight on the knickknack shelf, and the little round-headed boy, unaged in an orb of tangerine-tinted water, blinked his inverted apostrophe eyes at me. “Rats!” he said.

Finally Mom announced from the kitchen, “Here is it. Lands sake, it was on the refrigerator all this time.”

I hurried in.

“Oh, but it’s his cell phone number,” she said. “Will that work?”

I plugged the number into my cell and texted Greg: “Greg, it’s Mark. Hitler stole the urn!” I made sure the text went through. I doublechecked. I even sent it twice just in case and doublechecked that one too.

I went back out to the parlor door and glanced back for my light-footed mother. When I heard water running in the kitchen sink, I slipped into the parlor and shut the door without a noise.

Darkness fell over my face like a cloth, and the chilly air smacked of the cement smell of old plaster. All around were shadows of clutter—stepladder, boxes, cans. Rays of streetlight shot through the far window and splintered the musty air that hung under the ceiling, giving off just enough light to see. I inched closer to the cardboard box under the mantel and soon stood before it. It was a cube of gray at my feet.

“Hello, Steve,” I whispered.

I found a stool to sit on and stared hard at the box, as if to penetrate it.

“I tried to stop the cremation. I really did. Old Hitler rushed it.”

I waited for his voice in my head. But nothing.

I slid the toe of my sneaker on the floor in figure eights. Shadows of an old dresser and lampshade were like heads and shoulders of a small audience waiting to hear what I’d say next.

“Sorry I ran out on you at Weston way back.”

I hoped he’d say he understood, that we all were young and scared back then, in however I could hear him, maybe in the way God had never spoken to me. But all I heard were pipes running in the wall, along with pigeons or bats rustling, getting stuck in the chimney.

“I was afraid of you while you were alive. Afraid I’d end up like you.”

I was glad to hear myself so honest, and I went on to whisper everything to him—that Whitey had given me the photos of him, that I saw his bare apartment in town, met Sherry, and even went to West Mountain Health for my own fucked up head.

But again nothing. No Steve. Just me alone in my mind.

Do I tell him about Lisa and me?

I flipped open my cell. No reply from Greg yet.

I sat cross-legged on the dirty floor just to get eye level with Steve’s ashes.

“Could still bury you beside Granddad Roy if you want,” I whispered. “Dad said you’ll be consecrated if you stay together. Catholic doubletalk.”

Be like burying a mason jar in the backyard with a garden shovel. Then my mind conjured up an image of a backhoe shattering the urn in the years ahead, leaving chards no one would ever notice, ashes swallowed up by the brown earth.

“Could sprinkle you on old 340 where you’d always run.”

But, no, his ashes would get soiled with truck exhaust, if not blown away by it.

“How ’bout on the old track up at the junior high?”

Again there was a worry. No doubt there’d be a surveillance camera catching me, and I’d get arrested on some charge for some morbid act within five hundred yards of a school.

“So how do I honor you?” I asked him. “Give me a sign.”

Again I checked my phone. Who knew where my text message had gone? It may not even be Greg’s number anymore.

My eyes soon turned bleary, and I lay back on the floor and stared up at the gray ceiling.

Back when there had been a TV and sofa in here, we'd make a mess of this room. We pretended we were Sergeant Saunders, Kirby, and Little John from our favorite TV show, "Combat!" We were pinned down under raging fire from Kraut machineguns in the ruins of some bombed-out town in France. Low-flying planes were strafing us. Greg, slinging shells from his cheeks, scampered around in his flannel Superman PJs, from the big rubber plant to the knocked-over cardtable, which served as a villager's overturned apple cart. Using my stick gun from behind the green armchair, I cracked off well-aimed shots. Steve pushed the sofa around the room, sliding it over the floor, grumbling and growling, gripping an imaginary steering wheel as he motored the furniture into the village like a tank.

Today, on the dark TV screen of the parlor air, I saw again the grainy semi-sepia tone of the old black-and-white series: the stone buildings gutted open by bombs, rafters splintered and dangling, reminding me of dilapidated tobacco barns in Mendon County, the missile-shaped windows of the church tower, infested with snipers, and the tower itself rising tall and angular against the hazy monotint sky. For a moment, Steve was alive in the aura, in the outer glow where he had once sat as a boy, on his knees, agape, his clattering plastic submachine gun from J.G. McCrory's at the ready.

Then I blinked, and he was gone. The parlor went quiet around me, as the house went quiet around it. Though it was still early, Mom had gone to upstairs apparently. There were no sounds of dishes, no running water, just a swell of darkness hanging over me.

As I pictured the dark land outside, I knew that even if a great light were raised upon it, there were no hidden spaces where I might find Steve. He was no longer on this earth—not in the next neighborhood, not on the far side of the world either. I had the proof—this box from the

crematorium. Yet everywhere I'd look for him would be another space waiting to be filled with him.

I slid back against the wall and gazed at the box from the crematorium.

~

I was startled awake by the chirp of my phone. I sat up and checked the incoming text.

Greg!

"No, Hitler didn't take it," his text read. "I did."

He did what? He stole the urn?

I replied as fast as I could. "You took the urn?! I have the ashes!!!"

A good minute passed.

"Got the urn, doofus. Heading to Home Depot for stuff. Bring the ashes and meet me there."

What, tonight? I checked the time. It was still early.

Using the same shopping bag that had carried photos of Steve into the house, I quietly carried Steve's box of ashes out to the car. After zipping into Jeffersonville, I caught up with Greg in Home Depot, in the building materials aisle, as he texted further. A red can of Big Dave's Roc-Hard Plaster sat at his feet, and he was squinting at the back of a floppy plastic package in his hand. "Gibraltar Galvanized 2.5-Gauge Steel Dimpled Lath," it read. Though it was after nine at night, he was still dressed in his all-blue town worker's uniform, with a clump of keys hooked on his side. He glanced not at me but at the space beside me.

"You didn't bring a cart?" he asked.

"No, I didn't bring a cart," I said back, giving off the same hard-eyed look of annoyance.

He continued to squint at the fine print on the package. “Mom’s house is from the stone age. Don’t know what in the hell’s gonna shore-up her kitchen ceiling. Bridge pillar maybe.” Again he glanced at the space beside me. “Dude, a cart.”

I rushed off for one and stopped two aisles away, in doors and windows, where a fancy screen door caught my eye. “A Charlestowne 36- in. Solid-Vinyl White Screen Door,” the big box read. The screen was shaped in three ornate ovals, a large central one above two smaller ones. The wood border around them was punched and pierced with crescent moons, curlicues, and angel wings. Talk about giving Mom’s drab house a much-needed touch of artsy style.

I grabbed an empty cart at the end of the aisle, hurried back, and hauled down the boxed-up screen door. It was not heavy, but tall, so I propped it up in my cart like a big headstone and rolled back over to Greg.

He coolly turned to the cart. “Okay, I guess I should have asked for an empty cart.” His eyes lingered on the screen door box. “Mom hates vinyl.”

“Shit. Really? Well, I can always return it.”

“Or you can always put it back now.”

“Her house needs work, Greg.”

“Suit yourself.”

I pushed the big cart, which rolled quietly. He walked beside me.

“Where’s the urn?”

“Safely in my possession,” he said.

“Mom thinks Dad took it.”

“That’s the general idea. So don’t go tipping her off.”

“You forged his handwriting on the note?”

He didn’t bother answering. Instead, his face was tough with the same old message:
Anything I could do, he could do better.

“Why’d you take it?” I asked him.

“I have my reasons.”

We moved down the aisle side by side, glancing here and there, like roommates grocery shopping.

“So whatta we do, Greg? How do we honor Steve? What, drive the urn to Weston and christen the side of the old insane asylum with it?”

He stopped, threw back his head, and laughed an open and airy laugh. It caught the attention of two men in orange aprons perfecting a display of Weber grills.

“Now that’s good,” he said, grinning.

We turned a corner. Paint cans filled shelves twenty feet high on both sides, clear to the end of the aisle. From Navajo White to Jade Palace to Morocco Red, and all the tints in between, fanned out ahead like a booklet of paint swatches.

“I’m waiting,” I said.

“And I’m thinking.”

We turned another corner. Ceiling lights—disk, oval, square, ball, octagonal, pentagonal—all swarmed over us in a lambent array.

And another corner: appliances galore. Maytag Ovens 10% Off. GE Spacemaker Dishwasher, ~~\$779.00~~, \$701.10.

“Mom would love that French door refrigerator in polar white,” I said.

He turned to me. “And the ashes are in the trunk?” he asked.

“A *locked* trunk, yes.”

“What, don’t trust me?”

I glanced over at him. “Why’d you take the urn? Don’t trust me?”

In the next aisle, bathtubs were stacked up in a vertical showroom. Hourglass tubs in white and Bermuda sand. Rectangular ones in primrose pink and ebony. They were like women: some simple, functional, and neutral; others low-slung and spunky; a few with swanky gold faucets and curvy posteriors; one geometrically freaky and blue-toned; another blockish as an oil tanker; still others slender and mysterious.

I couldn’t imagine what type of tub Lisa was. My mother in the form of a bathtub, on the other hand, was unmistakable: a cast-iron, polished brass, ball-and-claw pedestal bathtub. Elegance. Yesteryear.

“Dude,” he said. “I know you’re bent on tossing them all over Granddaddy Roy’s grave, but—”

“No, I’m not.”

He stopped and turned to me again. “You’re not? Then why’d you—”

“Tell Dad I was? A diversion.”

“A diversion?”

“I’m open to anything. You know Steve had a girlfriend? We could give them to her?”

“That fat girl?”

“You’d be lucky to have that fat girl.”

He moved on with a grunt.

Shiny chisels, drills, brass fittings, and chrome-coated wrenches as far as the eye could see. A dozen portable generators, including a glossy black “Silent Diesel” Greg mumbled he’d like to have. Water heaters, soldering irons, air purifiers, coffee makers, cordless vacuum cleaners, crystal chandeliers in aged-iron and brushed-nickel finish—we were in a city of merchandise. Gas ranges, microwaves, toilets—no part of the American house left unstocked and undisplayed. Shelves rose two stories, turning aisles into canyons. Boxes large and small had been forklifted up. Bundles of charcoal bags were heaped on pallets, spun up in webs of plastic, and held aloft by orange scaffolding. The store was an aircraft hanger turned orange-boned warehouse.

“We really should fix up Mom’s, you know,” I said.

“Should we now?”

“What if we just painted the house for her? Maybe varnished the floors or whatever? Caulked those loose windows?”

“Just fix it up in no time, huh?”

We passed a wall of doors. White doors, blond doors, oak doors, doors with four panels and six, a plain black door—they ran in two rows, one on top of the other. Which one door would I open if I could?

On the end was a red wood-grain Knotty Alder left-hand door. Looking at it, I felt my head tilting to the left. I was partial to the left. Leftist politics. Famous left-handed people: Michelangelo, Helen Keller, Barack Obama. Life’s answers fell out of left field.

Next was a wall of bathroom mirrors. Our ugly mugs jumped from shimmering ovals to spotlessly clear rectangles to smoky-tinted diamonds. In one mirror, I was a spanking-ugly,

ultra-bright distortion of myself. In another, a twinkling calmer self-portrait. In still another, I was a curious off-kilter likeness, a kind of bad forgery. In still more, my face was nuanced with moods: hints of depression, tinges of temper, overshadowed lovelorn eyes.

Greg was stopped up ahead, among shelves jam-packed with tiny boxes of electrical switches and outlets. I drew the cart up beside him, and he tossed in a FireStop Intelligent Combo Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm with Voice Alert.

“Take the urn and ashes back to the New York with you,” he said.

“No way. Steve belongs in West Virginia.”

He shrugged. “So you wanna curse him? Why didn’t you say so?”

We cut through the flooring department, where under us was a Brazilian cherry floor.

“You ever ask what Mom wants?” he asked. “Maybe she wants the urn in her house.”

He reached up and turned panels of area rugs hinged to a long pole, like pages in a big book.

“I’m running out of ideas, dude.”

“Mom just wants us all to be civil.”

Welcome mats came in a range of homey patterns—gray paving stones in a garden, blonde straw in a barn, old bricks, and colonial cobblestones. Which style would she like?

Gingerbread and cabin birdhouses. Gilded iron porch lanterns. Everything was bursting with a rustic newness, the best of old and new.

If only I could feel the same way inside. If only I could put my old memories on display like gussied-up merchandise and shop through them, leaving some behind, picking out others that, in having been resurfaced or repainted, were all the more sweet-smelling and nostalgic.

How would it feel to replace my childhood of broken sticks and kicked cans with a

fiberglass-handled Tru Temper garden rake and copper watering can? Or my first and only marriage with a Duet High-Efficiency Washer and Ventless Dryer with a lifetime warranty? If only I could use a Simpson Megashot pressure washer on my soul, then a Titan Airless Paint Sprayer on my spirit.

I slid a package off a hook. Defiant Polished Brass Doorknob and Deadbolt Combo with SmartKey. Then I took one off the hook beside it. Brandywine Stainless-Steel Privacy Knob.

If only my regret and loneliness could be locked behind these mothers.

Ahead, Greg stood with his hands on his hips in front of a row of little red wagons for boys. Behind them were big-wheeled, coal-black wagons for daddy, the Super Duty Wagon Barrow.

“Why didn’t either of us have kids? You asked me that.” He glanced back to see me staring at him, and his eyes flicked around in annoyance. “What? It’s a good question.”

“You don’t know?” I said. “We’re emasculated.”

He said nothing, made no objection, which greatly surprised me. We moved on and, at the end of the aisle, split up briefly. He came back to the cart with a 3-in-1 Air Nailer and Stapler. I came back with a Maple Mountain mailbox with antique bronze accents.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You can return it if she doesn’t like it?”

As we came upon shovels and rakes, I told him that I saw a doctor at the psyche clinic where Steve had gone and was prescribed a different drug for anxiety. He was unmoved by this irony.

“Hopefully I won’t beat up women any more,” I said, stabbing a garden spade of humor at his feet.

He stood before a chest-high triangular display of lemon-yellow bottles of Bug Kill!

“You asked me my expectation of myself.” He made rare eye contact. “Stay sober.”

I saw his lips move and heard the word. But my brain got hung on it, stuck like a computer. When I was silent too long, his voice came at me in frustration.

“You mean Mom didn’t tell you I’ve been in AA for the last year? I’m surprised.”

AA was clear enough: businessmen, housewives, young girls, shriveled-up, red-faced drunks—all sitting in a circle, confessing, empathizing. Add Greg Barr, maintenance man in Alma.

So he had been hiding behind a bubbly, roaring waterfall of beer here in Alma. Hey, why should any of us not be screwed up? Steve a schizoid, Greg an alcoholic, and me jacked with personality problems.

“Look,” I said, pointing.

Stacked against a wall and waiting to be passed out was a row of orange-handled post-hole diggers.

“Shit.”

“Shit exactly.”

Whenever Steve gave Dad backtalk, Dad sent him out in the field behind our house with a post-hole digger and made him sink holes for hours. All evening Steve’s lean figure bore defiantly against the horizon, thrusting the digger into the earth and pinching out mouthfuls of dirt. At times he looked to be biting the world, one square foot at a time, as though he were mosquito working to kill an enormous beast.

He was let back in the house only once he was wretched and scrubby, his hands blistered,

his shoulders worn, his face miserable, his spirit too weak to be contemptible.

The next day, the field looked beaten by his fists. A field mouse had been mashed. A blacksnake mutilated. One of our dogs, in looping across the ground, sprained an ankle, or whatever a dog has down there.

“Fifty bucks each,” Greg said, cocking his leg back as if to kick the brand-new diggers over domino-style.

We ended up outside in the garden section, where flowers, grouped in reds, purples, and yellows, looked chilled in the night air. As I turned in a circle, my eyes latched hold of all my mother wanted but would never buy: a barn-shaped storage shed made of red cedar, a wrought-iron garden bench, and a Martha Stewart patio umbrella in “country yard yellow.”

We ended our shopping spree in front of a new-fangled, all-plastic, lightweight lawn mower that looked like a miscreation of a vacuum cleaner, bathroom scale, and baby stroller, all hunked together and airbrushed python green. “Sun Joe,” it said on the side.

If we bought it for Mom, Greg said, she’d just stick a trash bag over its funky head and pay the neighbor’s kid to take it away.

At checkout, he whipped out his army-green nylon wallet.

“Even-steven?” he said, ripping opening the Velcro flap.

My mouth fell open. His power tools and drills cost twice as much as my ceiling fan and mailbox. But I nodded and pulled out my trim, snotty, oxblood leather wallet. “Even-steven,” I said.

It was good to say our brother’s name this way, as if we shared him, as if we loved him the same, as if he were safe between us.

Once we had passed through checkout, he turned sharply to me, his face lit up, zany, and smiley.

“I’ve got it! It’s just what I would do with the ashes. I mean, it’s what I would do.”

“What?”

He moved on with a smirk. “You’ll see.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

That night I slept on the deathbed so as not to climb the creaky old stairs up to my room and wake Mom. I lay curled up in my jeans and sweatshirt, clutching a hard decorative pillow, gazing out at dozens of pinnacles and domes that were the candles, ceramic jars, and portly vases spread out around the living room like the tops of a miniature sleeping city. The deathbed felt stiff, solid—oddly resistant to death. I had to wonder if there was some strange force in the upholstery that kept it stiff. Streetlight, seeping through the window sheers, sparked the tops of metal picture frames and put an eerie glow on Steve as he smiled at me from his graduation picture.

His ashes were spending the night in the cold trunk of my car, and I worried for them. I worried for everything that was happening. Greg was keeping quiet about his plan with Steve's ashes. Maybe he thought I'd steal his idea. Or shove it in Dad's face.

I lay awake for a long while, missing Lisa for no good reason. We weren't calling or texting, and two days had passed in long round-the-clock cycles. I was chilled by the feeling I could actually survive without her. At times it seemed I was stretching sideways, lengthwise, bending in time and space.

How could I have accepted such unhappiness for so long? But how do I know what happiness feels like when, first of all, I don't think I deserve it?

~

The sun barreled up over the mountains, like a night watchman's flashlight barging out of the dark. It shone on a million specks of dust on the window sill. I slipped on my shoes and a

tiptoed across the living room, led by the soft-white glow of a Snoopy nightlight in the corner. One hand was numb, my face creased and hot, and my head still lead-heavy with Xanax. In the kitchen I grabbed a banana and, in the cast-iron sink out in the smokehouse, splashed water on my face. In the small cockeyed mirror above it, I was oily-haired, red-eyed, and unshaven, my teeth gunked with banana.

I left the house quietly and eased my car out the lane to the main road that cut through dark, dewy town. The plan was to meet Greg at his place, where we'd transfer Steve's ashes to the urn and do whatever ritual he had in mind. On Ridge Street, the sun was so blinding as it came out of the valley that I drove squinting out of one eye, through a tiny tunnel of roadway surrounded by invading splinters of sunlight. Was this how Heaven's ascent had appeared to Steve? God had surely taken his soul—the Devil wouldn't be interested in a man whose agony surpassed his own.

On Polk Street, my stomach knotted up. My father's old white pickup was coming toward me. The two of us were aimed at each other, a mere dotted line between us—it felt like the end! Would he ram me, pry open my trunk, and take the ashes from my smoking car?

As we passed, I shut my eyes, and a shiver ran through me. I leaned forward and eyed him in the rear-view mirror. No brake lights. He just kept going. Did he just come from Greg's? Had he grabbed the urn and, not recognizing my rental, was now heading to Mom's for the ashes?

I had to find out.

I attempted a U-turn right in the street, but ended up doing a jerky five-point turn that entertained a cat, a couple of squirrels, and an old man walking his dog. I caught up quickly with

Dad and tucked my big car behind a dirty white delivery van that had pulled out between us.

He didn't go to Mom's. He turned down Johnson Road. I followed, keeping my distance. Then he pulled out onto old 340 and stopped at the oldest Citgo station in town. I parked around the rear, in front of the vacuum cleaner and air hose, where, turned around in my seat, I could safely watch him through my dusty rear window.

I was spying on my father while in my trunk were my brother's earthly ashes. Wherever I was going in this life, I had a long way to go.

From here, Dad cut across town by way of backstreets only old-timers knew about. I had to stay well behind him, as we were the only two cars on the forgotten streets. Stores from another era were well spaced out: Jimmy's Lockworks, Weatherly RCA, Beau Johnson Barbershop, followed by a street of duplexes.

Then Carlo's Restaurant appeared, and I felt a long, sad pull inside.

Lisa and I had our first date at a very different Carlo's, the chandelier-lit dining palace near the Chrysler Building in Manhattan. We shared sweet pea Mascarpone ravioli. Our first kiss later that very evening was on the lush garden plaza of the United Nations building. Our first night together was six floors above the East River Park Promenade, with a span of the Manhattan Bridge looming beyond our window and across the bright night sky, its thick black cables slung through the moon as if towing the big orange ball out of the black river. Our so-called love, if nothing else, had enjoyed some grand backdrops.

Dad, meanwhile, was slowing ahead. Without signaling, he turned into Jeffersonville Manor Nursing Home. I drove on past and cut into the lot next door for the closed-down Acme. I made a hard right and eased up to the weeds and scraggly trees between the store and nursing

home, where I found the ideal blind. I could see my father through a gap in the branches, as if through a telescope. He sat in his truck, combing his hair in the mirror.

I perked up. Who was he here to see?

He stepped out and, looking spruced up, walked with a good stride toward the front doors. His shirt was tucked in, his shoulders up straight, and his hair neatened. Swinging from his hand was a small black shopping bag. Whoever she was, he was taking her whatever he had just bought at the Citgo station.

What ever can you buy in Citgo for a lady in a nursing home? A Yoo-hoo and Milky Way?

I was dying to follow him inside. But once inside, I'd surely be asked who I was there to see. What would I say? And how would I keep tabs on my father without being spotted?

So I waited. And waited. After twenty minutes, he came back out and nearly looked right at my car as he walked across the lot.

From here he took the street to the end, turned back onto old 340, and pulled into the Food Lion shopping plaza, where he wheeled to a stop in front of Dollar Tree. I parked well away and watched as he stood outside his truck, holding on to the side mirror, as if catching his breath or just bewildered. Then I flanked him on foot across the parking lot. His head and body were so stiff he didn't glance left or right, and when I followed him into the store, I was so close I caught the door closing behind him. He had on mismatched sneakers, one white, the other black, with laces on the black one coming untied. His belt had missed most of its loops. He was white-whiskered, raw-boned, and pale.

While he stood in front of the display of Gold Bond foot creams, I took up a position in

greeting cards an aisle over. Looking perplexed, he turned to a clerk who walked right past him. Then he turned to a man who so towered over him that my father didn't raise his head fast enough to find the top of the fellow before he passed. He was muttering to himself.

I crept closer—right down his aisle—and pretended to look at suntan lotions a few feet away, on the other side of the aisle. But I got too close. His big inflamed eyes moved a fraction to catch sight of mine pulled sideways, eyeballing him. Briefly, we looked like two reptiles investigating each other. In a flash, he turned to me, and I to him. Our faces were startlingly close.

“Mark!”

His bark slapped the sides of the store, and I skipped off the floor.

“What the hell you doing? You following me, you little”—he shot his arm out at me, his fingertip like a spear point. “Where’s my urn?” His eyes were bloodshot, and his jaws clenched. “Tell me right now!”

I went spontaneously stupid, my mind like Saran wrap under flame, crinkling and melting. As quickly I felt my face draw up in a mocking grin. “Your urn?”

He struck his chest with the side of his fist, his voice thudding around like a pendulum in a tall clock. “Yes, my urn, damn you. I bought it. For Steve I bought it. I want it back. And his ashes.” One of his terrible sliver-like grins appeared. “I’ll have you arrested.”

I took a step back. “Go ahead.”

His face turned purple and gnarled. “If I had my cane with me...your poor mother called me in the middle of the night, hysterical over it. Now you’ve got her worried sick. Your own mother, as much as she puts up with you.”

“Well, maybe we—I don’t have them.”

“We?” He planted his hands on his hips. Craggy lines filled his red neck as he glared up and down at me. “So your damn brother Greg’s involved too.” Again his long finger came at me. “Now this goes for both of you. You remember what I said about Steve’s soul being consecrated.”

Oh, would he just shut up about Steve’s consecrated soul! We still had our bodies. We still had feet to hold shoes. We still had moles on our backs, cavities, ugly pores on our noses, and thick tendons behind our knees. All that Steve was, was gone.

“Why, Dad? You didn’t care that Steve told me—and Greg—that he wanted to be buried and not cremated!”

He came right back at me. “Didn’t you hear your mother? That boy said one thing one day, another the next.”

“Honor, Dad! Real simple. You don’t honor him.”

“Just what in the hell should I do to your satisfaction? Play ‘Taps’ on my dinner plate with a spoon?”

A laugh billowed up inside me, and it pushed a grin out on my face, son of a bitch.

“I can’t think of ‘honor’ when it comes to that boy.”

“Well, I can. And so can Greg, and Mom. She wants to fix up his old room.”

“Nonsense.” He turned to the Gold Bond display. “Now why the hell you following me like a damn mugger? Get over here and help me.”

“No. You started this tug-of-war.”

“Damn it, I need a set of eyes. I’m looking for anti-corn powder.” His voice slowed and

became low as he studied the wall of tubes in front of him. “Your mother says it comes in a green tube. I don’t see any green tubes....”

“There’s nothing but disdain in your voice when it comes to Steve.”

He went on looking, even angling his head, as if trying to find a library book on a shelf.

“I’m not full of tender feelings, no,” he murmured. “I make no apologies for that...now here’s a blue tube.”

“You demean him. You ridicule him even in death. You talk about him with no respect. Everyone deserves some respect when they’re dead, Dad.”

My mouth was flying. My upper lip was sweating. I wanted to rake his face raw with my words.

He flashed an aggravated face in my direction. “Mark, he’s not gettin’ a free pass just because he’s dead. And you have a funny way of standing of there demanding something like respect.” He turned and stepped toward me, his eyes bulbous. “You know what’s awful, simply awful. My own son”—he waved his hand through the air as if dismissing me from existence—“never has a kind word for his father.”

There was something almost commendable about his royal fuck you for me. He knew he was old, ugly, and going to die hated and laughed at, but he didn’t care, and he especially didn’t care what I thought. That took sad, amazing courage.

Yet at the same time he looked around the aisle for one person to pity him for having a mentally ill son like Steve and a horrible one like me. When would he realize I was not the last person in the world he could look to for understanding? Just the opposite, he was only man I ever had hard feelings for. For billions I had kindness.

A harsh light baked down on him, making age spots on his arm look like dinosaur skin. I caught a whiff of his tooty-fruity cologne.

“Who’d you go see at the nursing home?”

I had to repeat myself. Twice. He flicked a big wet eyeball at me.

“A friend, if you must know.” He pointed at a tube with his big blue-knuckled hand.

“What’s that one say?”

I moved closer, picked up the tube, and read it. “‘Soothes and softens for ultra healing.’”

“Anything else?”

“‘Penetrates through five layers of skin’s surface to start healing at the source,’ okay?”

“What else?”

I grabbed the tube back off the shelf. “‘Now with vitamin E!’—Dad, this is what I don’t get about you—”

“Mark, I’m not interested. I’m looking for anti-corn something or other....”

“I remember when you cried at Grandma’s funeral. So why can’t you shed a tear for Steve too?”

He reared back and gave me a thunderstruck look. Then a high-pitched laugh popped out of him. He had a chewy, salty, half-crazed smile. “Me?” He shook his head in short, furious turns. “Buster, you are clearly mistaken about that. Mary Dodson and I were never—”

“No, your mom, Dad. Grandma Barr.”

His face did a kind of reverse. Wrinkly areas became smooth, other areas wrinkly. His shoulders fell, and his voice went up. “My mother? Belle?”

“Yes, Grandma Barr. It was raining, and—”

“Oh, shit, Mark,” he said, picking out a tiny orange tube as if to throw at me. “It always rains at funerals. You’ll have to do a lot better than that.” He waved me off. “This ain’t no story hour.”

“No, it was fall, Dad. I had that stupid Casper the Friendly Ghost umbrella.”

“Well, I’m sure it was stupid, yes, whatever you had, but I don’t remember that far back, and I don’t see how in the hell you can either.”

“Uncle Earl was there. He—”

“Listen.” His face bled purple again. “I’m trying to find something for my damn corns. They’re killing me, and you are imagining this, this kid’s nonsense.”

“No.” I set my voice down hard. “I was standing under all those black umbrellas. Father Stack was going on with the service, and your face was all red and sad. I saw tears in your eyes. I can remember clearly.”

A big spiteful grin swung up on his face. “Well, you ever stop to think that maybe it was the damn rain on my face, Colombo? Oh, which reminds me.” He turned to me. “I saw that turn of yours back in town. That was a damn illegal stunt you know.”

“Dad.” I kept my voice steady and earnest. “You were staring down at Grandma’s casket. You were beside Mom, under the same black umbrella.”

“Well, I would have been. That’s no evidence of anything. But I remember a nice day, no rain. Your story’s not holding water, and I’m gettin’ short of patience here.” He looked one way down the aisle, then the other. “Not a damn soul around to help.”

Briefly, I pretended to look for his stupid green tube. White tubes, lots of gold-capped tubes, a few blue ones. No green. Here I was with my bogeyman, the shouting, slapping,

purple-faced madman in my nightmares, looking for anti-corn cream.

“I remember the leaves, Dad. They were golden, all over the ground. And the rain made them stick to everyone’s shoes.”

“Steve—Mark. Damn it!” The old bastard coughed up a high-pitched, mortified laugh for calling me Steve. “That damn hill down there’s full of sugar maples. They turn yellow whenever in the hell they drop—after a spring rain usually.”

“So you remember?”

“No, hell, I don’t remember, and I’m tired of this. My mother died in the spring. May, April at the earliest. Damn it, if you hadn’t been running all over creation these years, you’d know a little more about your family—oh.” His face suddenly changed to a pleased look.

“You’ll thank me for telling you this. You got a signal light out in front. That’ll get you a ticket ’round here for sure, buster.” He aimed a finger at me yet again. “Something else, buster. That damn car of yours sags to the left.”

“Sags to the left?”

“Sags to the left, yes.” He made a deep absolute nod. “Busted shock absorber mount on that side. You better fix it, or you’ll wear out the tie rod on that side sure as hell.”

I shook my head. He was crazy. Impossible. I turned to leave.

“Hey, hey, where you goin? Don’t run off. Come back here!” he snapped. “What makes you so all-fire sure of yourself? Tell me that.”

I stood glaring at him.

“Mark, you know why that damn hillside down at St. Mary’s grows so well?”

I was puzzled. “You mean the grass?”

“And trees, yes.”

“Rain?”

He stared at me, as if to say guess again.

“Runoff from above?”

He shook his head in straight, even lines, marking out my incorrect answers. Then he wrung his hands together. “Everybody in this poor town has cried down there.” His face became blockish and solemn. “I can think of three boys down there dead from motorcycle accidents, and your cousin Eddie’s one of them. Then there’s your cousins Ritchie and Darrell, and Uncle Bobby. You don’t remember how tragic they all were. If you did, you show them some respect for time to time. All dead in a year.”

I remembered my cousins all right. Ritchie, my second cousin, was found dead in his trailer from cocaine. Months later, his brother, Darrell, ran off old 340 and was killed in a ditch. Soon after, Uncle Bobby ended up adding to a national statistic on carbon monoxide deaths.

“My mother,” he went on, “remarked forty years ago that there sure seemed to be a high rate of cancer deaths in this town. And now she’s down there in St. Mary’s adding to that high rate.”

Radon cancer. I was five. Aunt Helen had lung cancer, and another cousin had throat cancer.

“Then there’s Perky Menefee, your mother’s friend from school. Lost both her girls in a house fire. One was just two-years-old. And that Walter James boy too.” He turned back to the display. “They should call that place ‘Hill of Tears’ Cemetery.”

You could never tell he had read a book in his life until, on rare occasion, like now, a few

of his words pulled on the threads of life's allegories.

He picked out a small white tube and rolled it around in his fingers.

“Seems mighty important to you that our old man cry like a woman. If I did ever shed a tear or two, and I can't imagine I did—my mom was a hard woman—then St. Mary's hillside would be the spot for it.” His voice grew whispery and pained. “I'm not adding my son to that place. But don't you worry. He'll still get his tears.”

We stood in silence for a long moment. He was so close I felt our shoulders touching.

I was forty-two and unlearning everything. The mystery of life was no mystery, and the world was smaller and simpler than promised. Why should my life's mission be just to start again at the beginning?

“Why do his ashes have to stay together, Dad?”

He wrung his blue-veined, big-knuckled hands together as if they hurt. “I had a book of Catholic rites and sermons...let's see, ‘The sacrament of blessing for the journey’”—his voice drew down into a priestly drone—“As it has pleased Almighty God, in great mercy to take upon himself our dear brother here departed, we commit his soul to his family and home with your consecration.” He turned to me. “Now it doesn't say to spread him from the sky in a damn crop duster.”

“So what happens in consecration? What, Steve, gets a boarding pass to Heaven?”

He gave me a sidelong look, his temples burnished with gray hair.

“Tell me, you come all the way down here from New York to aggravate your old man? ‘The vile become glorious.’ That's what happens.”

The vile become glorious. I knew poetry when I heard it.

My life's problem, he went on to say, was that I didn't read the Bible. Years ago I hadn't paid attention in CCD either. My brothers neither.

"So now you're gonna scatter your own brother all over the ground like bird feed." He stood facing me. "Honor my one wish, Mark."

In his face as he waited for me to answer, I saw deep lines, scared eyes, and across his forehead more lines of torment. I had him where I thought I wanted him, but he also had me where I never thought I'd be.

I walked to the front of the store. "I think the man back in aisle three needs help," I told the girl behind the counter. I put enough concern in my face to move her to action.

"Okay, thank you." She stood from her knees, having been straightening a shelf.

I circled back around to greeting cards, where I took up my old post. The girl proved ever tolerant and helpful. At one point she even put her hand on his shoulder. From my angle I could see white hospital tape on the back of his left arm, stuck over a large bruise. Had he fallen? Come to think of it, he looked dehydrated. His lips had no color, and skin was flaking off his forehead especially.

At one point, he turned to the willowy pale girl, said something, and gave her a boyish saucer grin. She laughed with a closed mouth. He said something else, and she laughed even more. By the time he was finished with her, he had her looking like a well-baked pie.

When she walked him to the front of the store with something she had helped him pick out, I saw just how slowly he was going. Still, he didn't know how lucky he was. Steve should have died from old age, wheeling to the end on a busted shock absorber mount, sagging to one side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“What’s today’s date?” I asked.

Greg gave me a ruler-straight gaze. “The twenty-ninth.”

“The twenty-ninth of April,” I said, for the record.

The box containing Steve’s ashes sat in the center of the card table before me. I was perched on the same metal folding chair that a day or two ago had put a knot on the back of my head. Greg’s cluttered apartment loomed around me, edges of boxes sticking out violently, clothes laying over everything like moss. It made me think of a grimy, dimly lit office in a salvage junkyard.

Greg, standing beside me, slapped a utility knife into my hand like a scalpel.

“Do the honors.”

The box, not big enough to hold a pair of shoes, was plain and simple and had a single strip of clear tape sealing the top flaps together. With my thumb, I eased the short wedge-shaped blade out of the knife and drew the tip down between the flaps.

“Not too deep. You’ll—”

“Cut something inside, I know,” I said.

He took a slurp of his coffee. As instant coffee went, it was worse than most. My cup of it sat on the table, getting cold.

“Dad was banging on my door this morning,” he said.

I pulled the knife out and turned to him. “You answer?”

“Hell no. Fucker’s crazy. Left a note.” He laughed and took another slurp. “Said we

were goin' to hell." He rocked heel to toe, a grin creeping forth. "Going? I've driven through a couple of times this week alone."

Next, I carefully slit the tape where it hooked over the sides of the box. First one side, then the other, not turning the box but rather moving myself around it.

"He just doesn't want to shed any tears," I said.

I had already told Greg about my little run-in with dear old Dad earlier in Dollar Tree and what he had said about St. Mary's Cemetery. My brother had few remarks. Instead, with one swipe of his arm, he cleared the card table of dirty clothes, and we got to work.

"Figured out one thing about honor," I said, handing the knife back to him, blade drawn in.

He dropped it on the table. "What's that?"

"It's something you do that doesn't hurt everybody around you."

"You sayin' you're having second thoughts about this?"

"I'm sayin'—hell, I don't know what I'm sayin'. Just that it's pretty important to Dad these ashes stay together."

He bent his big body down, picked a spoon up off the floor, and flung it toward the sink. It made a single clank.

"And they will—except for some of them."

"Yeah, but he meant all."

"Well, tough."

I turned to him. His face was smug and thick and squared off before like the heart of a tree.

“Tough,” he said again. “Dad just wants to control the situation and keep Steve’s ashes in the urn for eternity.” He stuffed his big hands into his pant pockets and rattled change. “That was Steve’s problem his whole life—trapped.”

“Yeah, but we can’t have it both ways, Greg.”

“Sure we can. It’s called compromise.” He nodded down at the box. “Dude, before he comes back banging on my door.”

I pulled back the flaps on the box ever slowly to a thick plastic bag filled with Steve’s ashes. Whitish and finely ground, they looked right out of a wood stove.

I sat peering through the plastic at them.

“I don’t understand the Bible on this one, Greg.”

“And neither does Dad. His head is baked. ‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’ Christianity totally accepts dumping human ashes from a crop duster, okay?”

Again I turned to him. “But does he? I mean, he practically said please to me. I think he really thinks of this as, I don’t know, Steve in gold dust. If we pour out just the tinniest bit, what’s that, the equivalent of his finger? His kneecap?”

Greg looked pained by my questions. “Dude, religion’s as gummy as overcooked noodles. Dad tries to read it like a Chilton repair manual. Don’t you.”

He wheeled around and stepped over to his monster truck tire, which loomed over the apartment like some kind of dark token to modern progress. There he reached down into the bottom of the tire, half his arm disappearing, and pulled out Steve’s urn—plucked it out like a message in a bottle waiting for him in the notch of a tree. Then he stepped back over to me and stamped the urn down beside me on the card table. He flicked a fingernail against it, making it

ding.

“Whoa, you had engraved it!”

The lettering was artful and finely edged in, holding little veins of light in its grooves.

Steven Jonothon Barr

March 7th, 1960 – April 24, 2005

In Loving Memory

His face rounded up into a doughy, embarrassed grin. “Whatever.” He stepped away and quickly came back from the kitchen with a cooking funnel. “Ready?”

“No. I stood, cupped my hands around the compact bag of ashes, and lifted it from the box like a heart to transplant. As a mass, it was soft to my fingertips but weighty.

“Now don’t sneeze,” he said, carefully slitting the top of the bag. “And don’t think neither, dude.”

Thinking was all I could do. I didn’t want to anger God on this one, and I didn’t want to defy what was so important to my father, which somehow amounted to the same.

I was also thinking something else. My brother was amazing. Maintenance man might as well be city manager, which might as well be Catholic Brother, which might as well be sheriff. Yes, Greg was an unexplainable blip on humanity’s big screen, but he still had himself together.

He held the funnel in the neck of the urn with one hand and the urn itself with the other. I tilted the bag ever slowly, and ashes slid down the slope of the red plastic funnel like flour and

disappeared into the urn.

My face felt made of lead.

“Breathe, dude,” Greg said.

Every few seconds, he wiggled the funnel to shake the ashes freely through the narrow neck.

“Sands in an hourglass,” he said.

“So white.”

Steve was a trillion fine particles that took long minutes to crowd into a narrow-necked urn. I thought of New York’s hundreds of thousands of cars and trucks daily cramming into the Holland Tunnel.

When we were finished, I gently blew the funnel clean into the urn, and Greg screwed the lid back on tight. I was left holding a plastic bag with a white residue of ashes around the inside. How do we collect these few ashes? Was this enough to jeopardize consecration in my father’s mind?

I couldn’t wait until the world exploded one minute from now, or tomorrow, whichever came first.

“She’s done,” Greg said.

“And I’m done for.”

“Still your call.”

No, it wasn’t. Didn’t he understand? It was everyone’s call.

We carefully placed the urn in my black book bag, which I then slung over my shoulder. Also in my bag were Mom’s good leather-bound Bible and her sandalwood rosary.

“Pray we don’t get spotted,” he said as we made our way out the door, into the late morning light.

We stopped at my car so that I could put on my uniform for the ceremony. Steve’s blue corduroy jacket fit beautifully. It hung from me like the best of two worlds: his and mine.

“Nice coat,” he muttered.

“Mom gave it to me.”

“I’m assuming.”

Driving to where Greg wanted to sprinkle the ashes was out of the question. Our tag numbers might get written down, he said. So we walked.

The sidewalk on Washington Street was narrow and cracked-up. Walking shoulder to shoulder on it, we seemed gigantic on the small street built two centuries ago. Crabby wooden houses looked three-quarter-sized, their yards miniature and front walks made for baby steps.

We passed High’s, Milton’s Salvage Yard, St. Mary’s Church, and all the pretty houses in between. I was reminded of the furious leg motion that powered New York City—long marches down avenues, side streets, across wide intersections, a city run on ball-and-socket energy. Here was a car world. Sit in a car, get out of a car. A world of flabby butts.

“You know Steve called Dad on Friday night just before his heart attack,” I said.

“What’s that say?”

“Says he was desperate.”

“And the nurse in the ER called Dad a ‘sweet old gentleman.’”

“Says she was out of her mind.”

I told Greg about the big bruise on Dad’s arm. “Mom said he gets dialysis now. I

mean”—I threw a jaunty step in my stride to stay with him—“tell me again why we’re goin’ to so much trouble over Steve’s ashes when Dad’s, what, slowly dying from kidney failure?”

He stopped, turned to me, and cocked his head. “When did you say you were going back to New York?”

“I’m serious. They’re gettin’ old.”

Mom was more the worry. The filmy glaze on her eyes from glaucoma and her humped back were both worse. How often was she seeing her doctors?

At the crest of the hill past the old grade school, Greg stepped into the lead, and we picked up a sandy-colored pig path off Clearmont that meandered and zigzagged as if trying to get us lost. From there we cut through a weedy lot, crossed a patch of woods, and jogged down another pig path full of beer can tabs.

A quieter, cleaner woods soon hung down low around us. The trees closest to us were streaked gray, and around one stump, in leaves and twigs, lay a mess of tiny white larva-like eggs. Nearby was a cluster of bleach-white mushrooms arranged like figurines in the black dirt. All around, sunlight stippled through.

Greg stopped and scanned the woods.

“We’re on government land.”

“Government?”

“Let’s just keep movin’.”

We crossed a rickety, moss-covered footbridge. The trees, like a hundred overlapping umbrellas, were so heavy over us it seemed as dark as nightfall around us. I stopped to see my wavy reflection in a rust-colored stream. The banks were emerald-green with moss, and in the

trees beyond were traces of stone walls cocooned in ivy.

A few steps on, as if going through a door in the woods, we entered a clearing—rising up before us was a pile of bleach-white driftwood as high as a house. It looked like a giant jungle gym. Sticks and more sticks were all wedged and stuck together as if a thousand people wearing blindfolds had tried to build something together, each pushing a stick in at different angles, making a great impressive mess. A Sprite can gleamed from deep within it. A faded blue fence post and chunk of flashy white Styrofoam were hung up in the mountain of thatch. Fishing line was entangled on ends of sticks, and one stick had black rubber car weatherstripping wrapped around it. In the trees nearby, clumps of old brown leaves were stuffed into the bony fingers of dead limbs. The ground was slimy and spongy.

I ran my hand across my stubbly cheek. “Was this place ever underwater?” I asked.

“Creek run-off. Twenty-five years of it.”

We were at the old site of what would have been the YCC retreat for teens. Back in the early eighties, Steve and a dozen other boys from Alma, along with a supervisor, broke ground here. Camping for three weeks one summer, they worked all day chopping down trees, sawing them up, cutting weeds, and dragging out deadfall. They dug ditches for the foundation of a cabin and laid the concrete base for the site’s flagpole. They built a rock dam in the creek, bathed in the icy water in the evenings, cooked beans and burgers over a cowboy-style cauldron fire pit, slept in tarp tents, took nature walks, and played mountain-style football.

Once they were back in school in the fall, the Job Corps put in a windmill on the knoll. Then the project was cut over money. The windmill and steel lattice tower, rusting as bright as autumn leaves, were later removed.

According to Greg—I didn't remember it at all—Steve and another boy, near the end of their three-week work camp, were chosen to raise the American flag during a small ceremony. Steve and this other kid ran the flag up the pole all dramatically, arching their backs as they made great pulls on the rope, like soldiers at Iwo Jima. Supposedly somebody from the newspaper took a picture of them.

Today, the woods crawled at us from every direction, as if trying to chase us out.

“Let's just do this,” he said, glancing around. “I work for the town. I can't be caught trespassing.”

We stomped through the brush and up on a rise, where a weed-choked concrete saucer lay embedded in the earth like something crashed down from space. We scraped the sides of our shoes over the circular slab to clear off leaves and vines, Greg with his rugged construction boots, me with my worn-out sneakers. In the center of the slab, which was about the size of a pitcher's mound, was a plugged-up flagpole hole.

“You sure it was an American flag?” I asked, dragging my shoe through matted leaves and sunburnt twigs.

He slapped a fly off his shoulder—whacked the mother good, making it pop off his body like a button off his shirt. “No, it was the Russian flag.”

“Well, it could have been the state flag. That would have different symbolism.”

The yellow and green leaves behind me were reflected in his annoyed eyes. “So wWe got symbolism either way.”

We went on sweeping off the round slab.

“You figure out what you're gonna read yet?” he asked.

I unshouldered my book bag and, after reaching in, carefully handed him the lustrous, elegantly shaped urn. In the daylight it instantly turned as bluish green as the pines around us.

I took the Bible in one hand, the rosary in the other, and let the book bag drop. I stood for a second with a solemn gaze down at the flagpole hole. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, whose—”

“Ho!” Greg’s voice echoed over the woods more than we wanted, making it harder now to remain undetected. “Where you gettin’ that from?”

“The Bible.”

He nodded down at my hand. “You don’t even have it open.”

“It’s from the Bible as quoted in *Wings of Paradise*.”

The muscles around his eyes squeezed in.

“A movie?”

“A novel.”

He shook his head. “Whatever.” He slowly unscrewed the lid and tilted the urn cautiously, like a small syrup jar, only to bring it back upright.

“What?”

His shoulders fell. He sighed and held the urn down by his side like an empty liquor bottle.

“Damn it.” He chewed on his lower lip. “I hate that bastard.”

A second later, I lowered the Bible and closed its halves over my finger.

“Me too.”

Then his eyes looked into mine for a long second, and he knew. Honoring our brother

should not mean hurting our father.

“Now we gotta walk all the way back,” he said.

We stood staring down at the disk of Steve’s good deed, the concrete spotlight on which he had raised Old Glory. It seemed a simple, honorable mark in his life. But how could it be his best? A good tribute and a remembrance, yes, but he fulfilled more.

Greg quickly replaced the lid and held the urn close to his chest. Steve’s ashes would not lay here.

We sat down inside the concrete circle, on opposite sides, off-center from each other. Greg’s knees were drawn up to his chest, his big thighs stretching his loose jeans, his broad shoulders pulling his brown plaid flannel shirt tight. He held the urn in a strong grip. I ended up cross-legged, my body folded up like tent poles as I leaned back on arms locked straight, Steve’s jacket the rich blue of a pup tent.

All of a sudden, a cloud passed over the sun, and all around, shadows appeared like specters through the many tree-like doors in the woods. The lemon and lime leaves high above winked out, the roof of the forest on a dimmer switch. Off to our left, the afternoon sun was streaming through the trees, while straight ahead, the creek ran red and eerie through a forest pinpricked with sunlight.

“Wonder what it feels like to raise a flag?” I asked, my head cocked back.

I imagined the steel flagpole, stout and shiny, running straight up into the sky, reaching up into nature’s great domed stadium. Congressional interns went to D.C. for the summer to raise flags over the Capitol. A girl in our high school had done that.

Greg sat back like me. He looked uncertain whether to set the urn down on the concrete.

“What’s next?” he asked.

“Here, I’ll take it,” I said, reaching for it. As he handed it to me, in the glancing sunlight I made out the words, “In Loving Memory.”

“Home,” I answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was nearly noon by the time Dad, Greg, and I sat down at our old kitchen table for breakfast. The table seemed too small to hold us all today, like a table for kindergarten children. Greg, who had already gone by work and returned, muttered that he better just take the day off, which was already half gone. My long-waisted father, towering over me to my right, let him know that being sociable wouldn't kill him.

Mom was shuffling back and forth between the cabinets, refrigerator, and pie-safe, apologizing and complaining that she didn't have clean dishes ready, that she didn't know if she had oatmeal, that the pancake mix was a good five years old, and since she didn't eat eggs regularly, she'd have to check the expiration date on those too. She brought out our old coffee cups with Currier and Ives winter scenes on them—family antiques fissured around the rims from having been used in a microwave.

I hid my eyes inside the tiny blue crosshatched lines that made up the sleigh scene on my cup, just as I had as a boy.

As soon as a pitcher of powdered milk landed on the table, Dad poured a glass for himself, which left a wide chalky film oozing down the length of the plastic pitcher. A moustache of this stuff covered his ruddy skin like laundromat powder detergent.

He leaned forward and put his elbows on the table.

“Katie, there's a Catholic mortuary over in Cantonville, where they put urns up on this marble shelf overlooking everything. In this light. Behind special glass.” He sat back, the old

family cane chair creaking. “I thought that would be nice for Steve.”

Greg’s surprised face was waiting for mine.

Mom rubbed her knuckles, her eyes beaded in worry. “Well, maybe his urn should remain here in this house,” she said.

For years she had preferred that Steve stay out of the house, saying it was best he kept to his state-subsidized apartment. He was too brooding otherwise, too down. Unbearable, she often said. She could never help him.

“Just where in this house?” Dad asked.

My eyes dashed from her to him, and back again.

“Just where in this house?”

The whole kitchen became quiet, waiting to hear. Oven mitt, cookie jar, spoon rest—all were tuned in.

“Well, there’s the living room.”

He dunked his head down and swung it back and forth, as if clearing his ears of water.

“Oh, no you don’t. Not on your life. Not beside that king-sized picture of Roy the Family Man. No, siree.”

“Bill, for god’s sake.”

“Well, Katie, damn it, he was my son too.”

Again I glanced over at Greg. This time he answered me with creased brows and a wrinkled frown.

“And the slave room’s out of the question,” Dad added.

Mom was back to rubbing her knuckles and staring off into space. So many times over

the years I had tried to find that spot she was staring at. Who or what at was there? Grandma? God? Answers on the wall?

“Well, the parlor was his favorite room,” she said.

Our old man’s neck popped up straight like an accordion straw unfolding its pleats.

“The parlor?”

“Yes, as a boy. He was always in there, hiding things.”

“What things?”

“Yeah, what things?” I asked.

She looked amused by our mutual interest. “Anything colorful. My jewelry for one. You all remember onion skins? Said they were like gold paper. I found them under cushions in here, when we still had furniture in here—I thought you all knew about that.”

“I didn’t.” I turned to Greg. Apparently he didn’t either.

Maybe I didn’t know anything. My father caring where Steve’s ashes were kept? Mom having an opinion on it? The four of us seated at the kitchen table, discussing the matter. Was this finally love in my family?

Everyone’s talk was so bold, too, like colors of construction paper—coal black, red rose, sunflower yellow, polar blue.

Dad pushed the bowl of dusty wax fruit on the kitchen table away from him as if finally saying he had always despised the sight of it.

“The parlor’s not fit, Katie. The plaster’s fallin’ down in there. There’s pigeons in there at night. Mold everywhere. Floor rot ’cause the ceiling leaks.”

She stung him with her shiny worried eyes and frown-clenched mouth. “But the mantel’s

still sturdy, Bill.”

“Well, nothing else sure is.”

Greg spoke up. “It can be fixed up in there easily enough.”

“Easily enough?” Dad asked. “By who?”

Here we all were. We had woken up this morning alienated. But we were still all one another had.

“By me,” he said.

“And me,” I said.

They say nothing in the universe moves faster than light. I wasn't so sure. Greg's chair legs scraped our mother's poor precious floor as he stood. With my brother leading the way, the four of us marched single-file out of the kitchen for the parlor, a troop, a family.

~

Moments later, Mom was holding a feather duster bursting with psychedelic red, yellow, and purple feathers. Greg held the urn by its trunk down by his side, like a cold beer just pulled from a plastic six-pack ring. The inscription was visible for all to see. Dad was muttering that if his knees weren't so bad, he'd get on a stepladder himself and prove that the old cherry mantel wasn't level and needed sanding and varnishing besides. He looked tired, stood with a slight lean. Mom, her mind on her task of dusting, reached up for the mantel with the feather duster, but wasn't tall enough. She turned to Greg, but I was closer. Taking the goofy-looking feather duster, I reached up and ran the feathers across the mantel. Mom, standing back and watching, already had bigger things on her mind.

“His school pictures would look nice up there,” she said.

“Now damn it, I told you not to overload it, Katie,” my father grumbled.

“And, Mark, you have something to put up, don’t you?”

Dad didn’t like the tickled ring in her voice. “What’s he got?”

I quickly finished dusting the mantel, stepped out into the living room, and came back with the children’s book *Colter’s Run*.

How we all had loved John Colter, the rangy, legendary frontiersman. Stripped naked and running for his life in his bare bloody feet, he got away from a pack of spearing-throwing Blackfeet Indians across miles of woods and marshes. Steve, pretending he was Colter, would run up and down the dirt road along the river, just to tell us afterward, with a sweaty, grinning face, that he had gotten away too.

Greg, meanwhile, raised the urn up to the mantel.

“Hey, hey, who gave you permission, buster?” Dad asked.

He placed the urn in the center of the mantel, took a step back, eyeballed the mantel’s span, then moved the urn a few inches to the right. He did this several times, inching it over.

“That’s still not centered, or level,” Dad was quick to say.

My brother turned and walked straight out of the room, saying nothing. Just as Dad called him a sorehead to his back, he marched back in with his yellow-striped, aluminum carpenter’s level. Reaching up, he placed the level on the mantel. Even I could see the tiny light-green bubble centering itself perfectly in the upright darker green tube. Then Greg whipped out a metal tape measure, one of those self-retracting jobs in a shiny clip-on case, hooked the tape over the end on the mantel and, making it zing as it unwound, ran it across the long length of wood. “Hundred and six inches,” he said. He walked the self-rewinding tape

back to the urn. “Fifty-three inches.” Then, with a flick of his wrist, he unhooked the tape—the high-strung flexible ribbon, in a scream of vibrating steel, rocketed across the mantel and coiled itself up inside its case like a scared little genie on a short leash. He turned to Dad, tape measure already slid into his front pocket. “Level and dead center,” he said. He glanced over at me, his eyes twinkling.

“Listen, smartass, there’s only a couple of pegs holding that damn shelf up there,” Dad said. “This house is two hundred years old. First, though, comes fixin’ that ceiling. Or it’s all coming down.”

Mom, meanwhile, was in full decorating mode. A mantel should have candles and a wreath, she said. Red candles and the eucalyptus wreath in the attic would be perfect.

She floored all of us when she marched back into the parlor carrying half a dozen lilac-covered photo albums jam-packed with the 242 photos of Steve. The debut picture in the first album was of Steve decked out in black leather pants and boots, with a tight tee-shirt that read, “Democratic Underground.”

From album to album, she had arranged all these photographic creations of her son according to her fancy and carefully placed them square to one another behind clear plastic protective sheets. Left to right, top to bottom, the collection ran through the albums in frames animating Steve to life. They were not so much reminders of him but expressive demonstrations of his unexpected flare, not keepsakes but a portfolio of his quirky creative gush.

“And, Bill, I won’t take no over this,” she said over her shoulder.

Five albums were carefully placed between jade owl bookends on the mantel on the left side of the urn, and the sixth stood cracked open, pages of photos displayed, on the right side of

the urn.

“And his track trophies, Mom.”

“Steve—Mark. Damn it! Those old trophies have lead stands. Why don’t you put his barbells up there while you’re at it?”

Mom stepped in front of him as if covering him up from view. “Greg, can you nail up a crucifix while you’re here?” Her eyes found me. “Mark, the one in my room.”

As I hurried through the house, my eyes caught sight of unfamiliar things—a John McCain President 2008 calendar, a Sears ProForm stationary exercise bike, and a powder-blue electric blanket neatly folded inside a clear plastic storage bag with Miss Luxury, California U.S.A. in girlish cursive across the front.

Had these things been here yesterday?

There were other twinkles and flashes that made the house seem newer, brought into the 21st century: an aqua-marine pump bottle of Germ-X Aloe Hand Sanitizer, a vitamin bottle of DHA Algal-900 with Green Tea Slim Extract, and slick red issue of Wired with the headline, “Google Fuels Social Unrest.”

What new would I see tomorrow?

I had to put my dirty sneaker on the flimsy side rail of my mother’s bed to reach the crucifix. It popped off the wall in my fingertips. Plain and black, it was made of light, hollow-like wood. The paint on the wall around it had faded, leaving a small, sharp ghost of itself.

I turned away, but looked back up at this little ghost—twice. I even put my foot on the side rail again and reached up and touched the silhouette. What was I trying to feel?

Then I hurried back through the house with the crucifix in my grip, around sharp corners

and down steep steps. I imagined myself an Olympic runner entering the stadium with the ceremonial lighting torch. Greg was waiting for my handoff. Two taps of the hammer put a tack in the wall above the urn, and the crucifix went up.

We all stood back. It was the perfect pinnacle for the room, right above Steve's final resting place, a simple black cross, strong, distinct, and complete, the stamp of God.

Mom turned to Greg, Dad, then me. "How does everyone feel about this?" she asked. "What are your thoughts?"

Silence.

How did we feel? We are our thoughts? Those questions had never been asked in our family before. Steve was dead, and suddenly we all had feelings and thoughts?

I drifted out of the parlor and into the living room. The morning air coming through the storm door, which had been propped open with a brick, was breezy and cool. Strange crimson contrails fell down the sky. Eleven years had passed since I had been home, and I was here to realize what I had known six years before that. You can't, you shouldn't, go home again. Still you do, and must.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I couldn't very well paint the parlor with it still full of clutter, so Steve's old bedroom was next in line. I stood in the center of it, holding a gallon can of Home Depot paint by its thin metal handle. Setting it on the floor, I stepped up to a faded-green wall. Streaks, smudges, blotches—marks were everywhere. Scuffs from the sole of a shoe. Traces of bluish scribble. Tiny dents. I moved to the next wall. Something reddish spilled. Spongy-shaped faded spots. Two L-shaped marks. I didn't remember these walls being so scruffy and roughed up. Strangest of all were brush strokes that were scored through the faint sea-green paint as if made by steel bristles.

I stepped back. From one angle they looked like cave markings. From another, well-expressed anguish. Did Steve hate himself when his shoe had gouged in this mark? Was he crying inside when this black streak was left?

My mother peeked in and asked, "Don't you want to put a dropcloth down to start?"

"I will. Mom, how old's this paint?" I asked, running my hand over the mineral-green plaster wall.

"Well, let's see...." She stepped in and around the clutter on the floor. Like every other room in the house, Steve's had become a space to dump a box or bag, a lamp that no longer worked or wicker laundry basket always in the way elsewhere. "Your brother must have been four or five when your father painted it—I believe there's still an extra can of it down in the smokehouse."

I cranked my head around to her. "From that long ago?"

“Now Mark.” She stood with a cocked head and ragged smile. “You know nothing gets thrown away around here.”

“Mom.” I stepped over to her. “Then maybe we should paint it the same color?”

“Goodness, no. This green is a hideous color. Well, not hideous, but, I don’t know, not appropriate. Not now anyway.”

I gave her a long look.

“Not now?”

She folded her arms tight, her blue flannel shirt binding around her arms. “The house’s has changed, Mark.”

I felt my brows crease ever so slightly, as if giving the rod on window blinds half a twist.

“Oh, you’re starting trouble. I can see that,” she said.

“No, no, I’m just wondering.”

“Well, I know you and your wondering.” Her forehead gathered up into a tree knot.

“No, eggshell white is the right color for this room.”

Eggshell white was the right color for every room, according to Mom and the Methodists, the chaste and proper color.

So be it. I got to work, spreading out newspapers along the baseboard. My father would insist I spackle the tack holes and fine cracks, wait a week, sand and wipe the walls, apply a primer, wait another few days, then a thin layer of paint, the first of two. Screw all that. Paint was a blast, a miracle. Let it happen. Be headlong and feverish. Go Jason Pollack with it. Just keep it on the walls.

I pried the gleaming lid off the paint can and poured a gulp of rich white into the roller

pan. Then I loaded up the cotton-candy-pink roller and jumped in. Creamy new paint blasted the faded old wall with bold whiteness, renewing it instantly. Mom stepped back, uneasiness on her face.

I made long rolls up and down, throwing it on heavily. Paint was the great rejuvenizer. It botoxed the walls. Holes and cracks—gone. The besmirched, pitted, and ugly became the flawless, pure, and radiant. Watching the roller cover dust and scratches and an endless variety of scraggly marks—it was mesmerizing. It was like being reborn. Every tumble of the roller cried—renew! Begin again!

“Mark, slow down. Don’t you wanna do the molding first?”

“I will. Just wanna get a feel for the paint.”

Feel for the paint? I was the strange son, the one who made everything emotional and complicated.

“Whoa.” I brought the roller to a halt. “Lookie here.”

Mom squinted at the wall but couldn’t make it out.

“Go Orioles!” I read for her.

Her face barreled up into a smile. “Oh good lord, you remember that? After all this time.”

Steve had doodled the words on in hot dog letters so long ago, and they now lay on the paint like a fossil in the sand. He knew everything about the ’79 Orioles. Strutting around the house all summer, he rattled off stats. Switchhitter Ken Singleton was hitting .309 from the right side, .287 from the left. Manager Earl Weaver was ejected from six games in May alone. Mark Ballanger’s first home run of the season was the fourth of his career and 101st team home run of

the season. Steve even memorized the start times of every game in the season—July 17, Orioles at home against the Blue Jays, game time: 2:10, Dennis Franco to start.

Posing in mirrors, he pretended to be famous Orioles announcer Chuck Thompson, his voice funny and deep: “The 2-1 to Murray. Gonzalez readies, rocks and fires...the pitch, swung on—there’s a hard line-drive down into the leftfield corner...rolling around, Berrymount can’t get to it. Here comes Singleton, May’s charging in behind, and the Orioles break the tie to take a 4-2 lead!”

At night he sat out on the porch, radio pressed to his ear, straining to hear the faint broadcast of a game that drifted a hundred miles into our mountains. On cloudy nights, he sneaked up to the cemetery to pick it up. WBNO in Baltimore. Thompson’s words dropped out of the dark sky and into Steve’s head like sentences in an adventure novel—Al Bumbrie speeding back for a fly ball, Lee May rocking his bat.

During the day, the look on Steve’s face said he was traveling with the team wherever they went, thanks to Thompson’s descriptions of Toronto as a beautiful city, County Stadium in Milwaukee as huge, and the Green Monster in Fenway Park for what it was.

By all-star break of that year Steve was starving to talk baseball with someone. Mom warned Granddaddy Roy, who was a fan of a lesser degree.

“Yeah, but Martinez,” Steve said, shaking his head, corralling Granddad on the sofa, “he’s got me worried.”

Martinez worried everybody. The joke on the field was that whenever Martinez pitched, not only were there moths around the mound—but butterflies in everyone’s stomach.

The lamp brought out every wrinkle on Granddad’s face. He said a word or two, paused,

nodded, blinked, twitched his nose, then said something else short and comforting. Still, Steve looked at him with the weight of his young world on his face.

“Why do they keep trading away their farm league for some overrated pitcher?”

Mom laughed in the background. It was a delighted laugh.

At some point, Granddad tried to chase Steve away with cigar smoke. But it didn't work. Steve went on to yammer about the unhittable forkballer Joe Kerrigan—and pitching wasn't even his interest. He liked hitters. What made the game was their line-drive singles, doubles in gaps, and home runs.

As quickly as his baseball phase had come, it was gone, and Steve moved on to geologic rocks in our backyard and insects in our basement. Now, all these years later, Mom and I stood looking at the wall, at this evidence of his young life.

“I'm afraid you'll just have to paint over it,” she said.

“Are we sure?” I asked.

She nodded, and I made it fast and painless, blowing the roller over it—all gone.

Or was it?

There was a secret reason for my slap-dash approach. If I painted over the Mona Lisa, experts could carefully remove my cheap Home Depot paint, and there'd she be, unblemished and all the more radiant for the world to worship. If I soaked Steve's walls without first sanding away these precious scuffs, smudges, and stains, then the evidence of his growing up in this little house might not be destroyed but instead preserved underneath, interred, laid to rest.

So little of him was left as it was. What remained might want to be resurrected.

The painting wore on. Soon gone was any loving feeling for the eggshell white. It was

pancake batter factory-whipped to a cream, and I was wheeling it on. At times, I made a game of it. I turned the roller into an airplane, landing it down on the wall, testing its wheels on the runway and lifting off again. Other moments, I laid into the wall with the same vigor that, as I was boy, I had attacked our backyard with a push-mower, charging through the grass, getting the barrel of blades whirling into a blur. The whole time, Mom was well across the room, arms folded, pacing in and out of the tired light from the window, afraid to watch.

Finally, I finished one whole wall, and a great plane of white shone over the room. It looked like one side of our house had been opened up to the world.

Mom came out of hiding. “Well, Mark,” she said, “you might as well know.”

In that instant, I heard the great highlighter pen of our family’s history book squeak across a page and saw a line of neon yellow being blazed down. The worst turns in our family’s life had been introduced by that phrase.

You might as well know: 1973, father lost job at paper mill due to drinking.

You might as well know: 1974, father lost job at construction site due to drinking.

You might as well know: 1979, parents split up.

You might as well know: 1981, Steve sent to insane asylum.

You might as well know: 1982, Greg quit welding school.

And on and on.

I expected her to say she or Dad had cancer or Lisa had called her to say she had put my belongings out on our Brooklyn stoop.

“And this is a big if,” my mother said, backing into it. “But if we ever get this house fixed up and if your father doesn’t put his foot down first—which he’s likely to do—then I’d like

to rent out this room.”

I saw the blurry shape of my own nose and felt my lower lip coming loose from my face.

“Rent out Steve’s old room?”

“Well, yes. We could use the extra money.”

Strange, empty questions crowded into my head. How did I get so much taller than my mother? Why didn’t she dye her white hair?

She looked down and dabbed her old brown slipper here and there on the floor, on the lookout for loose wood nails. Then she swished it back and forth over the dusty planks, searching for popped-up square heads. Steve, using a metal detector from Goodwill, would search for Civil War bullets in our backyard in the same swaying motion.

I stepped over to the window and perched myself on the sill, my arms crossed and legs stretched out. “So, what, you’ll be a landlord now?”

She turned to me. “Gosh, no. And don’t use that word. I never liked that word.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you, Mom?”

“Well of course I am. Anyway, this all’s a big if, and down the road as I say.”

I looked down at the window sill and edged my thumbnail into the thick old paint. In the days after the shooting, Dad had found a brass shell casing on the floor that cops had missed. He set it on the window sill, and for the longest time afterward, it sat upright here like a little shiny monument.

“What would Steve think?” I asked.

My mother’s eyes came at me like a pair of swallows, wings tucked in, soaring side by side. “Oh, he’d be furious,” she said. She made her voice whiny and nasally. ““Mom, rent out

my room? That's not fair!" Then she laughed, an eight ball of a laugh. "Or who knows?" She shrugged. "He might be all for it."

I stepped back into the center of the room, head down, toeing through yellowed newspapers on the floor.

"Well, I have some news too, Mom. I'm not going back to New York."

Waves rippled across her forehead, and a scared smile swept up on her face. "Well, of course you're going back. You've been up there for close to ten years, Mark. Whatever this is about, you can't just abandon Lisa."

Abandon Lisa? That would be like the butler firing the queen.

She folded up her arms. "Mark, I thought you, well, liked New York."

Here was my chance to set the record straight, to come clean.

"Mom, I was always afraid of this place."

Her face fought with itself. First her forehead scrunched up. Then her mouth gathered up on one side. Next her eyes jumped around. "This house?" she asked. "Not your mother I hope?"

"No. This town. This county."

She looked sideways at me. How in the world could I be afraid of Alma, of Mendon County, my heritage? The lower Appalachians were where we Irish railroad diggers had lived, worked, and died. I had gone to elementary and junior high here, had young friends, and grown up here. How could I be afraid of so much I've known?

"But I'm not anymore," I was quick to add.

"Well, good then, Mark."

My mother didn't have a trite word in her mouth until now.

"I was everywhere else because I couldn't be here," I went on.

"Well, if you say."

Words fell out of her mouth like stale chestnuts.

"I always wanted to come home, Mom."

Her foot found a loose floorboard, and she stamped down on it as if snapping closed a Tupperware lid.

"Mark, you must go back. There's nothing for you around here."

Must. Must was a beautiful word, but late in coming. Did she ever lean across the kitchen table and talk to our father in this manner? Bill, you must stop your harsh ways. Or when Steve refused to go to college? Did she ever say—you must go, Steve. Or you must go, Greg. Or me? You must go to your high school graduation, Mark.

How do I tell my mother I was a flop as a New Yorker? I could not regale her with rich stories of apartment life in Brooklyn, exciting jobs in Manhattan, Yankee games, and Harlem fairs. In the city of nine million, I had one friend, at best two, and both of them were really just acquaintances.

One was the security guard at Neergaard Pharmacy at 9th and Fifth. Tahir was from Pakistan. He was personable and charming to me, even though I didn't understand a word he said—perhaps because I didn't understand him, I felt or imagined something deeper than what could be purchased by the flawless counterfeit bills of glib contemporary English. At the end of his frenzied breathfuls, in a clear flash, he'd say with a bright smile, "God is great." That I understood.

My other friend worked at the neighborhood post office. Evita was from Puerto Rico. Whenever I approached her window—and I made a point of it—she asked with a smile, “How you feel?” I loved how she skipped “do” and got right to the heart of it. How you feel? It was a cultural thing, a fast route to the soul. I could choose. I felt happy. Sad. Confused. Lonely. Tired. She made all these answers welcome.

These two people were all I had to show for a decade in the greatest city in the world. My mother would never understand.

“Give it a week, Mark. See if you two can...”

I could give it a week, yes, but I had already decided.

~

The next day, I took on the job of revarnishing my mother’s precious old embattled floor.

“Good heavens!” she cried out. “Mark, what are you doing?”

I was down on all fours in the upstairs hallway, with her magnifying glass to my eye, inspecting shoe impressions left in something black and encrusted on the floor.

“Mom, was there ever a big paint spill here? Black paint?”

“No, but one of you all broke a jar of mayonnaise right there—Mark, please watch for nails.”

I looked up at her.

“Mayonnaise. Up here?”

“That’s just what I said at the time I expect.”

I lowered the magnifying glass back down to the floor. Whatever it was, long ago it had made a mold of shoeprints. I could make out the Adidas logo, which actually looked like the

Playboy logo amid a zigzag pattern. I also found the Pro-Keds brand, and the tread around it was an alphabet soup of circles and squares. Mixed in was a shoeprint with a waffle iron tread.

“Mom, I think I can see Steve’s old Adidas track shoes.”

She was watering the spider plant by the window.

“Oh, Mark, from that long ago? I doubt it.”

I put my grungy size 9 Wal-Mart sneaker beside Steve’s shoeprint, which was long and narrow, ideal for a runner.

“He was the only one that wore that brand,” I said. “They were too expensive, remember?”

She put the watering can down on the sill and turned to me. “And his came through the school at a great discount. Good lord,” she said, coming closer. “But how?”

“This heavy paint, gunk, or whatever acted like a cast. If you look—”

“Wait, now that might be tar.”

“Tar?”

Someone had spilled roofing tar there, she said. My brother Greg she thought.

I handed her the magnifying glass, but she couldn’t stoop that far. So I took it back and looked again for myself. In the mishmash of shoe impressions, I also recognized our pointy-toed church shoes from long ago.

I sat back on the floor. All my life I had been leaving no trace of myself wherever I went, no footprints on asphalt lots or beady sidewalks from Minnesota to New York, none on iron stairwells or marble corridors, none on office floors, colored classroom tile, or carpeting. Nothing of me anywhere, nothing permanent. Cheap sneakers, tight loafers, plastic-looking

dress shoes—all had worn out under me to no avail.

“Mom.” I looked up at her. “Still think we should revarnish the floors?”

She crossed her arms and sighed.

“Yes, I do.”

Or should we frame this spot in the floor as our Walk of Stars?

I cracked open the can of Hudson Floor Varnish and brushed it on in flowing, glistening strokes. It put on a show, bleeding evenly from the bristles, laying down a glossy, glasslike, rich-brown coating, and covering the scruffy dry floor with a magical dark shine.

“Say goodbye to our old footprints,” I said.

“And hello to our new ones,” she said back.

The End