

MEREDITH, ANDREW, M.F.A. Somewheres Else. (2010)
Directed by Michael Parker. 86pp.

This thesis is a lot about fathers and sons – in Philadelphia mostly, but sometimes on the Pacific.

SOMEWHERE ELSE

By

Andrew Meredith

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2010

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. THE OFFSEASON.....	1
II. SOMEWHERE ELSE.....	23
III. WE’LL GET HURT.....	39
IV. THE PUBLICAN.....	51
V. HOPPED A BLOCK HOME.....	64
VI. AT SEA.....	77

CHAPTER I
THE OFFSEASON

He shook me off all season long. I considered several methods of pushback and persuasion but mostly I would corner him in the locker room, the dugout, the hotel bars, the bus, the mound during conferences, the Pizza Hut on 81, and plead. He refused to see his best interests. “Julio,” I’d say, “Julio, you need to throw the fastball.” And he’d tell me it was his fourth best pitch, which, in terms of accuracy might’ve been the case but as far as talent and potential and the feeling that this is what he was here to do, no, the fastball was it. You can’t hit 97 on the gun in the bullpen every time and then not use it in a game. Finally after an appearance we’d made together at one of the owner’s car washes I said to him, “You either make it work or quit. You can get these triple A dicks out on slop but not up there. Don’t you understand potential, Dan?” It was early September and we’d all be going home soon. Julio just looked at me and smiled. He always smiled. He said, “You must be serious if you’re calling me Dan.”

With two outs in the top of the seventh of our last game of the season, I went to the mound. We were down 2-1 to Binghamton and their little shortstop, Vasquez, who’d already touched Julio for two solo shots was up. The count was full on five breaking balls. Vasquez had let the first two sliders past for strikes and then taken three curveballs outside. He was the only guy on their team equipped to hit Julio’s big, slow deuce and

he'd been sitting dead red on it all night. "Throw your fastball, Julio."

"On three and two?" Julio said.

"Of course. He can't touch your fastball. None of them can."

"No, man. I got him." Julio held his glove out for the ball.

"You smell that, Julio?"

"Smell what?"

"Burning wood."

Julio closed his eyes. He inhaled. "Oh like fireplaces?" he said.

"Half the houses in Easton are turning them on tonight. Some leaves are changing, too."

"I like it. You got my mouth watering now, Joe."

"We're all wearing our long sleeves. We're going home in a few days. Fall's coming, Julio."

"I'm not wearing long sleeves." His freckled arms, normally pink, were scarlet.

"I can't wait. My girlfriend and I are trying to get ourselves pregnant."

I pursed my lips. There wasn't time for us both to be tangential.

"I already tell you that?" Julio said.

"This is your last big at-bat of the season. You know you're coming out after this. This guy's tagged you twice tonight on curveballs. Why don't you go into the winter on the right note? Strike him out with your fastball here and you won't have to worry about it."

“I’m not worried about it, Joe.”

“I’m putting a one down. One means fastball in case you’ve forgotten that. I know it’s been a while since that synapse fired. I’m setting up inside. Hit my glove.”

“Alright. I will.”

I waited until he looked at my eyes. “Fastball,” I said.

“I will,” he said.

Reimdingner, the homeplate umpire, walked out to break us up but we were done.

I dropped the ball in Julio’s glove and bumped his chest with my mitt.

As we walked back to the plate, Reimdingner said, “You talk him into the fastball?”

“I tried, Dinger. I tried. That’s all I can do.”

I looked at Vasquez. I said, “You ready for what’s coming?”

“All he got is curveball,” Vasquez said.

I winked at him, and then held a stare until he looked down sheepish into the orangey dirt of the batter’s box and started to dig his cleats in.

I went into my crouch and dropped my fist in front of my crotch. I extended my index finger down and looked at Julio’s eyes. I thought he might shake me off or smile or laugh. He didn’t do anything. It’s not normal to leave a sign hanging there between your legs for so long; discretion and secrecy require brevity, but that’s what I did. I held my index finger there so long that I could see big Jenkins, our first baseman, smiling. Julio, playing the part of a happened-upon possum, gave me no hint of expression and he gave me no shake off. Normally if it took this long for a pitcher and catcher to agree on a

pitch the batter would call time and step out of the box but Vasquez seemed as stumped by Julio as Julio was by my finger. I heard a fan yell, "Come on, Julio. I'm cold!" Finally Julio nodded once but I saw no hints in his eyes or carriage as to how he felt about his assignment. I didn't know what was coming but I said, "Good, Julio," loud enough for Vasquez to hear. I retracted my digit and punched my mitt. Julio breathed deep, entered his windup and unfurled a twelve-to-six curveball that wasn't even doing the turnpike speed limit. Vasquez's thighs tensed and he jerked his arms down against his chest with great force but he neither strode nor swung at the approaching ball, the arc of which, even to his curveball-hitter's eye, must have seemed to be heading for a spot just an inch, maybe even half an inch too high for solid contact, but which never stopped falling and dropped past his belt buckle and across the plate into my target like one of the ducks my country teammates would be winging across America's wetlands in the next few weeks. Strike three called. Standing O from our thirty-six fans. "Mama Pajama rolled out of bed" over the stadium speakers. Shit. We didn't score again. In the showers I saw Julio laughing with some of the rejects from the bullpen, his torso a testament to the deep-fried happy hour sampler platter, and I thought how this tableau, after a season-ending loss, held all I needed to know about him. A waste if I'd ever known one. It was times like these when I thought hazing was wasted on the new call-ups. It's the guys who've been here two and three years, the Julios, who need to get woken up. Grab his hair and tell him, "You are a professional," before dunking his head in a toilet. "Other people rely on you." Dunk. "Do you know what that means?" Dunk.

“Do you know what people would give up to be in your shoes?” Extended dunk.

Back home that offseason I helped my father-in-law with his FedEx route. He'd drive and I'd lug and get signatures. A lot of guys who'd been drafted high, like Julio, had signed big contracts out of high school and college, but most of us needed to work in the winter. It wasn't bad. We'd stop for lunch every day at different sandwich shops and diners and he would tell me on each of these days that he never stopped for lunch when he was by himself. He wanted me to know how much he liked the company. I knew, too, how much he wanted me to take over when I was done playing. “It's easy money, Joe.” He called me Joe incessantly but I didn't call him anything. Once Kylie and I were married I couldn't call him Mr. Greene anymore. He had put a hand under my armpit and pulled me aside at the wedding reception and given me the “call me Dad” talk. I figured it was the Miller Lite talking because he'd never mentioned it again. I used to think I'd wait until Kylie and I had kids and then I'd just call him Grandpop but now I wondered if he'd be nameless for me into perpetuity. His most favored topic at our lunches was the superiority of FedEx to UPS based on FedEx's franchise system. “I can hand off my truck and my route to you, Joe. I'm a business owner. UPS guys are just mailmen, Joe.” It reminded me of the way everybody else in baseball talks about the Pacific Coast League. You'd hear guys say things like, “My dad could hit .330 in the PCL. And he's dead.” But I thought of how, whether I worked for FedEx or UPS, the first thing people would ask me when I told them what I did would be, “Do you call it a dolly or a hand-truck?”

Philadelphia set a record for snowfall that winter and Kylie's dad was happy to stay in the truck and pretend to make calls to the warehouse as I dug us out of the snow banks he slid us into. One morning, before the sun was up, with wind piercing my chintzy purple FedEx pullover, I shoveled for a sweaty hour on an empty access road down near the airport. I've broken seven fingers since high school ball and that was the only time they'd all ached in chorus. I didn't say a word to him the rest of the morning and at lunch he drove us to a deli and ordered two chicken soups.

After work I made extra money a few nights a week at an indoor baseball academy for kids whose dads had surpluses of money and unresolved existential questions. One night I excused myself early and in the parking lot slipped my Swiss Army blade into the front tire of a guy who'd been yelling at his kid the whole night. You can't only criticize a ten-year-old. The kid was spraying line drives around the gym all night but the dad only made a noise when he popped up. "Chin down, Jackie. Chin down on the ball." When he sprinkled in a "Chin down, goddammit," that's when I excused myself for the night. That'll get a knife in your tire every time in my book. The worst part about it was that the kid was never anything but stone-faced. He looked conditioned already, even at ten, to accept this kind of trickle-down misery. On the drive home I found myself thinking about Julio, wondered what he was up to back in Dayton, Ohio. Probably at a strip club, eating. He was the only guy I knew who went to strip clubs for the buffet. Any girl brave enough to wander into the dining area would be greeted with a declaration, shouted over rap-rock, of how he needed to eat so much prime

rib only because he was a pro athlete in training. I hoped I didn't sound to Julio like that dad sounded to me. I knew my intentions were good and so I didn't resolve right there to back off him altogether in the new season, but I thought maybe I would at least pipe down a little.

I kept in touch with our pitching coach, Haffning. He'd call and ask if I was staying in shape, ask if I'd talked to any of our starters. My answers, respectively, were always, "Of course. Have you met me before?" and, "Everybody but Julio."

The winter dragged. Just make it to spring training, I told myself. I'd had the February 14th report date written on the backs of my running shoes since September. I tried not to consider the antithetical nature of romance and any vocation that called you to duty on St. Valentine's Day. I tried to keep Kylie happy by doing extra dishes and walking her dog.

Haffning, approaching 60, a deacon at his church in Iowa, showed up the first day at the complex in one of those white Escalades with a pickup bed. He said, "You wouldn't believe the deal I got on it" before I'd said a word, so I knew he'd gotten a raise over the winter. Julio had let his hair grow out so now his hat floated above blond curls, and he'd gained weight. He walked around the locker room in his compression shorts and shower shoes, a big gold crucifix pointing down to his jutting stomach. He was still flabby, but he was bigger. I might even say that he was robust, especially in the middle and shoulders, like someone had put twenty pounds of steak under his top layer of rice

pudding.

Our first morning, he long tossed harder than he had since I'd been catching him. And right to my chest every time from forty yards. My hand had never hurt after long toss. "You feel strong, Julio," I told him after. I didn't want to ask about the fastball.

In the first bullpen session, Haff stood next to Julio and gave him a pitch – "slider" – and a count – "twenty" – and then locations – "low and away," "inside corner" "outside corner." Julio was the only pitcher we had that Haff didn't start with fastballs. Haff knew, too, that you had to ease into things with Julio. Butts, who was my backup for a season in rookie ball but had, in the eight years since, made the big team, retired after an off-field testicle injury, and been hired in his current role as the big club's bullpen catcher, had the duty of standing in the batter's box to help simulate a real at-bat. Julio was real strong with the sliders. Each one had a sharper break than any he'd thrown in games the year before and I could hear the seams of the ball hissing on the approach to my mitt. His cutter and his curve and even his change looked just as good. But a change is nothing without a fastball and the Julio we all knew wouldn't throw a fastball in a game. He always threw them in bullpen sessions like this one, though, so we knew what he had. Two years ago when he first came over he hit 99 one day and that, I've suspected since, had been the start of his problems. "Julio, you could be an All-Star," I told him that day. That was the first time I'd caught him. I remember Haffning pointing to the outfield and telling me the new guy, big 55 with the blond hair and the pot belly, he wanted to be called Julio even though the roster says Dan Becker. I remember being

excited about him. “Just ride the fastball, Julio. Ride it and you’ll be up in a month,” I said that first day. “Thanks, Joe,” was all he’d said and he didn’t smile as I’d soon realize he would when I said almost anything else. I could say, “What’s the weather look like for your next start, Julio?” He’d smile. “Oh, forty percent chance of hail. They won’t be able to see shit against me.”

Now, under the Florida sunshine, Haffning said, “Fastball, twenty.”

“Where you want it, Rich,” Julio said.

“Given what Buttsie’s already been through, let’s start low and away.”

I tried to get Julio’s eyes. Every time I’d ever caught him before he’d look in at me, even in bullpen sessions like this where Haffning was calling the pitches. He would look in at me and wait for me to nod or punch my mitt. He relied on me. Even in these artificial situations he seemed to feel more comfortable knowing I was in charge. But after Haffning told him fastball low and away Julio closed his eyes and inhaled. By the time he was breathing out, his elbows were up past his ears, ball hand and glove hand linked together and dipping back behind his head to start the windup. I watched his mechanics all the way through. That was part of my job. Julio is what they call a drop and drive guy. He makes an extra long stride to the plate, plants his front foot and uses it as a lever as the other foot pushes hard off the rubber. The speed he gets on the ball comes less from his arm muscles than from his thighs and ass and if he’s doing it right he get so low that his knee scrapes the dirt on the mound every time. The key to it is balance. Even with all those moving parts the head needs to stay still. Julio had found

the stillness. He looked like a monk sent to kill us all. As he released the ball he let out a grunt that sounded like he was at work changing the direction of the earth's orbit. He'd never done that before. The ball popped my mitt hard enough that I thought my hand had split in half inside it. Butts said, "Shit, Julio," and crept back an inch off the plate. I threw the ball back and without hesitating Julio repeated his delivery. Another grunt and pop that scared seagulls off the right field light stanchion. Right to my target. "Eye high down the middle," Haffning said, and Julio put it there so that the ball came in even with my forehead. After twenty fastballs Butts looked down at his spikes as he covered up his prints in the box. "Looks like we got a new Julio."

That night I sat on the patio of our little rented condo and Kylie brought me a bowl of ice for my hand. "Something happened to Julio over the winter."

She said, "What do you mean?" but was engaged in a tennis ball catch with her dog and didn't look at me. Her curiosity about baseball, about the nuance of playing it at its penultimate level that had been part of her initial intrigue with me, that had fizzled. Now we didn't go a few days without her asking me about quitting. "My dad's ready for you to take over his route," she'd say. I knew she didn't want to spend another year in Easton, even if it was only seventy miles from home. It made my blood run backwards, though, even to think that a FedEx driver could make more in a year than a catcher of professional baseballs. I remember talking to a guy who'd been in the majors a long time who used to come to our little town as a roving pitching instructor for the organization.

He was traveling with his daughter at the time, she was maybe ten, and he was hitting her fungoes on the field after our batting practice. He said, “The wives come and go but the kids are what you do it for.” And I was starting to think that Kylie and I would come and go without anything to show for it.

Some of the young guys, even though I’m only five or six years older, I’ve thought about them as sons. I took Julio out when he first got here and said, “You’re in triple A now. You need a suit.” And I took him to one of those big warehouses full of suits and ski jackets and told him to pick something out with a pink tag on it. Didn’t matter that minor leaguers only needed suits for funerals and court dates like the rest of the world.

Haffning penciled in Julio to start the spring training opener. The old Julio would’ve let that get to him and not in the way most guys would have. Most guys would jump around a little bit or let their eyes get big or treat everybody to buckets of pony bottles at news like that, any sign they were getting ahead. But Julio would smile all day until you told him he was leading the league in strikeouts or, worse, starting the one game playoff in Asheville. Then you wouldn’t get a smile for hours, maybe a day, and his shoulders would rise up a little bit. “You alright, Julio?” “Fine, Joe.” But the new Julio acted like he’d been told it was pizza day in the clubhouse. One afternoon in Sarasota he even tried a hot foot on Butts, which was the first time I’d seen that attempted before the ides of March. Somehow, apparently, Julio had tapped his glee.

Julio was lights out all the way through spring training, leaning on his fastball more each time out. He gave up four runs in thirty innings in Florida and went seven scoreless against the Mets' B team in his last start, a cold night game in Port St. Lucie that he'd spent busting guys in on the hands. After the seventh Haff stopped us on the way back into the dugout.

"I've never seen you look so good, Julio."

"Thanks, Rich." Julio smiled.

"You'll be up with the big shits by Memorial Day if you keep this up. If you didn't look pregnant I'd ask if you're on some of those funny Dominican vitamins."

Back in the clubhouse I asked Julio if he'd join me for a beer after the game. We went to a place in a strip mall in Dunedin called DooDoo's Tiki Heaven that he'd recommended on the strength of their suicide chicken wings. Before I'd even parked my car I knew that DooDoo's was a place that should've been seedier, more dangerous. Julio and I were large American men who worked with our bodies. I often thought it might be good for us, Julio and I, the whole team, fully-proteined twenty-first century professional athletes on the whole, to sometimes gather in places where we'd have to entertain the worry of being stabbed.

A college girl in a tie-dyed DooDoo's t-shirt and khaki short shorts seated us at the bar and brought us laminated menus, the front of which featured photos of milkshakes and the addresses of DooDoo's other area locations. "We should be in a place with no other locations," I said to Julio, but he didn't register it. Whenever I wound up in a place

like this I wondered where ballplayers in the '40s would've gone for drinks after games. Definitely not a bright place filled like this one was with the roving packs of banana-split-sharing, porky, sunburnt parents with their offspring and forebears purging out of silver minivans that we saw all over the Gulf Coast in February and March, in the grocery stores, the gas stations, and especially behind the cage while we took batting practice. There were two couples of them - the kids left mercifully at the hotel with their grandparents, apparently - on what appeared to be a double date, crowded around a pub table on the other side of the bar and I wondered what it would take for them, all four of them, men and women, to want to fight us. What if I lobbed this beer bottle at their table like a grenade? What would they do?

Julio ordered forty wings to start and a mug of vodka and pineapple. A few seasons ago I might've ordered forty-one just as a one-up, but now in my thirties I was more worried about my playing weight, and a whole slew of other hypotheticals urged prudence. I ordered the cobb salad, the flaccidity of which I steeled myself against.

"Julio, I've never seen you eat like you've been eating this spring."

"I always love to eat, Joe." He dipped a drumstick in blue cheese. He was the last ballplayer I knew that still wore a hundred dollar trucker hat.

"I know but everything about you is different."

"You're wonderin about me? Buttsie took me out a couple nights ago wonderin too."

"Yeah I'm wondering. You're throwing your fastball. You're gonna make it up

this year.”

“Don’t jinx it, man.” He knocked on the bar.

I decided to go silent. I wouldn’t speak until he at least acknowledged the mystery of how the new Julio came to be.

He put a wing in his mouth, twisted his head back and forth, and pulled out a clean bone. He swallowed and then sucked sauce from both his thumbs at once. “My uncle came over to my house a lot this winter,” he finally said.

“Your uncle,” I said.

“He just moved back to Dayton. He’s only a couple years older than me, definitely younger than you, but he’s sort of at the fuck-it stage.”

“He doesn’t have long to live?” I said.

“No, he’s fine. He just don’t give a shit. And he’d come over almost every night and we’d drink and play video games and wrestle. Wrestled the shit out of each other almost every night.”

“That’s one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard, Julio. I’m looking for something to help me.”

“Well, I swear that’s why I’m stronger, Joe. Best offseason of my life. At the end of it I got this.”

He lifted up his t-shirt at the bar and turned his back to me. On his right shoulder blade in maybe a 16 point Olde English font: “Fuck It.”

“I hadn’t noticed it in the locker room,” I said.

“It’s too tiny, right? Defeats the whole message? I’ve been thinking about that.”

“No, it’s fine. I guess maybe I can’t fathom why you’d have a credo tattooed on your back though. Wouldn’t you want it in a place where you’ll see it so you won’t forget?”

“Well, hmm,” he said. He looked up at the faux thatched roof above the bar. I was happy that I had at least brought some reflection to him. Then he smiled and looked at me. “Joe, you know what I have to say to that question.”

“What?”

“Fuck it.”

I shook my head.

“I’m just getting older is all. Growin up. I don’t know,” he said. “You’re not happy with my story? Buttsie left here asking directions to the tattoo parlor.”

“Butts is a moron. Butts reads Joel Osteen on the bus.”

“Buttsie’s in the big leagues,” Julio said.

I pushed my salad plate away. “Why wouldn’t you throw the fastball before, Julio?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ve thought of every possible explanation,” I said. “I thought maybe it hurt your arm. But it can’t hurt your arm worse than your curveball. Then I thought maybe you’d hit somebody in the face before-“

“I hit a guy in the face in Rancho Cucamonga,” he said.

“But I ruled that out,” I said, “because I don’t see you having that kind of sensitivity.”

“Probably right,” he said.

“But now you’re throwing it.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I was just throwin in Dayton this winter and it was just goin where I wanted it to. I think the big thing was time off.”

“This is the same uncle you were wrestling with?”

“Yeah, Uncle Greg. There’s something about that guy. Just brings out the relaxed Julio.”

“Well the relaxed Julio is a killer,” I said. “You ought to be proud of yourself.”

“Nothin to be proud of.”

“Let me ask you something, Julio.”

He put down his mug and used his whole hand to wipe pineapple juice from his lip. “And this is the only time I’ll ask you, but I feel like I need to get it over with.”

“This doesn’t sound good.” Julio said.

“Did you start juicing this winter?”

Julio dropped his head like someone had pulled a bolt out of his neck. He stayed like that without speaking long enough that I knew this wasn’t good. Finally he said,

“Fuck, Joe.”

“Well I have to ask,” I said.

“Why can’t you just believe what I goddamn told you. You ever know me to lie

before?

“No. But I never saw anybody as lazy as you make such an improvement.”

“You and your work. All you believe in is work.”

“It’s the only thing that matters,” I said.

“Telling everybody how much work they have to put in at the gym. How we have to study other teams’ hitters. How we have to run. Well I see you doin all that shit, Joe, and you been stuck in triple A for six years and can’t hit a curveball, barely hit a fastball. Christ you should hit ninth most nights.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t going to escalate with a teammate. “I guess I have my answer,” is all I said.

“Yeah? You think you have your answer just because I got mad at your question? You know what, Joe? I don’t even think you’re that great to throw to. You ride guys. You make em tight. You remember when you were hurt last year? Our guys threw four shutouts in two weeks. That’s unheard of. We had Kiko catching and now he’s in the show. That’s not an accident. Kiko can mash, too.”

“I don’t have to take all this, Dan. Like I said. I got my answer.”

Up north, Julio spent April dominating the International League with a precisely located four seam fastball, a pitch that deceives the batter by seeming to rise, when really, relative to everything else that sinks, it’s just coming in flat. Haff and I talked about him needing to change speeds before the league caught up to him. Most triple A guys could

hit fastballs and we knew as the year dragged on and he got tired his location would start to fail him. “You need to mix it up, Julio,” I said to him in the locker room after he shut out Pawtucket one Sunday afternoon.

“Are you ever happy, Joe?” he said.

“Talent isn’t a bar of gold, Julio. It’s a quart of milk,” I said. I didn’t know where that line had come from.

He laughed. “I thought, Joe, that it was just me throwin a ball.”

We spoke less and less as he fell more deeply in love with his new style. I heard him tell one of our relievers that we were all passengers on the Fuck It Express. I chose to take him seriously although he and the bullpen guy laughed as Julio then hollered, “Here comes the F.I.E.!” and pulled repeatedly on a phantom train whistle.

One hot afternoon after my turn in batting practice I was sitting by myself in the dugout when a local columnist named Melvin Mooney sat next to me.

“I’m just going to ask you. It’s totally off the record,” he said. Mooney wore a bushy beard and was notable among the players for his personal odor, a kind of hybrid of fried beef and musk. I’d been in Easton so long that Mooney and I had drifted through long periods of like, tolerate and hate. In the past season we’d settled into a comfortable indifference.

I didn’t say anything but sipped at my Gatorade, knowing he’d continue.

“Is Julio juicing?” he said.

“Fuck you, Mooney.”

“You ever see a guy change his style like this?”

“It’s a mystery, Melvin.”

“Mysteries are made to be solved,” Mooney said.

“I don’t agree. What about the Holy Trinity? You solved that one yet? What about Dr. Renee Richards? There’s lots of mysteries we can’t solve, Melvin. Why is Julio throwing 98 in games this season? Why is Julio about to make it up and we’ll be stuck in Easton another hundred years? Why are you sitting here next to me smelling like an Arby’s bathroom? I need you to go back to your office tonight after you’ve been through the press box buffet line a few dozen more times and take out a crisp manila folder and on the tab at the top in all caps write ‘UNSOLVABLE’ and put everything I just said in there and stop worrying about it.”

Before a start in Harrisburg one night near the end of May, Haffning pulled me aside. “Tonight’s Julio’s last start with us. We got the call an hour ago from the big boys.”

“Does he know?” I said.

“No I didn’t tell that fool,” Haffning said. “I’m not giving him one ounce of reason to change his approach. Let’s get one more night out of him and then his head is their problem.”

Julio was cruising that night, as expected. The opposing pitcher, Stasny, a guy who’d been with us the past few seasons, hit me in the ass my first two times at the plate.

Stasny didn't make eye contact after either one and I didn't charge the mound. I didn't know what was up but their first baseman told me Stasny'd been talking shit about me before the game, me holding back his career, not letting him pitch the way he wanted. "I'd argue his overall lack of talent and heart were bigger factors," I said to the first baseman. Back in the dugout after the second one I went up to Julio and said, "You know what you have to do."

He looked at me blank. I think I noticed his shoulders rise up a bit.

"OK?" I said.

He walked past me and headed to the cooler.

When Stasny came up the next time there were two outs, nobody on. I didn't say anything to him or even look at him but set up so far inside that I doubt Julio could even see me back there.

Julio's first pitch came in over the plate and I had to stab my glove hard to the right to get it. I stood up and asked for time, walked the ball back to the mound. Julio was nibbling on his lower lip, wondering what I was going to say. He held his glove out for the ball but I didn't offer it.

"You're telling me the control you have this year you can't put one in his back?" I said.

"Why don't we just get him out, Joe?"

"What kind of teammate are you?" I said.

"I just want to pitch, Joe."

“Just want to pitch? I thought you were the Fuck It Express. What’s one ball in Stasny’s back to a carefree individual like you?”

“Just gimme the ball.”

“You know you’re a fraud, don’t you? You know that if you ever get called up you’ll bomb. I hope the Fuck It Express has enough diesel to get you back to Dayton.”

Julio put his glove in front of his mouth. “Joe, guess what.” His eyes were narrow. I’d never seen that from him before. In the corner of my eye I could see Haffning closing in on the mound.

“What?” I said.

“I like Stasny better than you and I’m not gonna hit him.”

“You are a child,” I said. I couldn’t help but shake my head and chuckle. “You are not a man, Dan.”

Haffning, the deacon, said, “What the fuck are you two doing?”

I just shook my head. I couldn’t get the smile off my face.

“None of your business, Haff,” Julio said, without taking his eyes off me.

“What did you say?”

Reimdingner, the umpire, was out now. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up too?” Julio said to him over my shoulder.

“What?” Reimdingner almost augered himself into the ground giving Julio the heave. “Watch your man, Joe. Get him off the field.”

But Julio wouldn’t leave. I said, “C’mon, Julio. Let’s make this easy.”

“There’s nothing easy about it, Joe,” he said, and now big Jenkins had come and put a hand on Julio’s chest and begun to move him back, away from me.

I said, “Get off the field, Julio,” and took a step toward him.

“Naw. Naw,” he said and slapped Jenkins’ arm away from his chest.

“Get off the field,” I said. Only Jenkins’ body separated us.

Over Jenkins’ shoulder Julio threw an overhand right that barely caught my collarbone. Haffning and the infielders were between us in no time. Julio resisted so forcefully the effort by Jenkins and the others to push him back away from me that finally they lifted him up and worked to balance his big writhing, yelling frame so they could move him to the dugout. Only Reimdinger held me back but it was more for show. I wasn’t going anywhere. Julio, his face scarlet, speaking in tongues, a plane ticket to some big league city waiting, unbeknownst, in his locker, wriggled and spun, lost in his newfound fire, trying to get at me. All I could do then was smile like he had always done to me. Smile to let him know I was here and would still be here tomorrow working with young pitchers. He spit in my direction, hurled invectives, and still I smiled as he went off the field, carried across the first base line, up on the shoulders of teammates, down the dugout steps to the clubhouse, almost like he had won something.

CHAPTER II
SOMEWHERE ELSE

Jock had seen it as his duty, when drugs first came to the neighborhood, to do what he could. He walked Schmidty past the corner store where the boys stood every night, and when he got home he'd call the police and then Mary would tell him he was headed for murder. This was the routine for a few months until one of the boys came behind him one night and knocked him out with a club.

The shit storm that followed – emergency room for stitches, dog gone missing for two days, police report, phone calls from his daughters and son to please, finally, just move out of Sycamore, and Mary and her endless tears and naysaying – all of it seemed to him such a hassle that he wished he didn't have a family, wished it were just him in the old house. If he were alone at least there'd be an end to all the grief he took.

When he felt strong again, he organized a march. He was an organizer by nature: Knights of Columbus, 47 years a union man at Boeing. Over three weeks of nights after work he knocked on every door in the parish: Kensington to Venango to Allegheny to Castor, probably a hundred blocks of rowhomes. He would say, "We're marching against the drug dealers," and then detail the route, starting at the el stop at Kensington and Allegheny, snaking through one-way streets, passing the corner store and ending at the church parking lot for a prayer vigil. "Will you come?" he'd say. Almost every adult he

spoke to said yes. Hundreds of people. Maybe a thousand yeses.

The night of the march, home after work, Jock put on a shirt and tie. He had called the newspapers and the TV stations. He and Mary walked to the el stop at 6, an hour early. It was a warm evening and before they'd even made it off their block his glasses were slipping down his nose. Under one arm he carried a rolled up banner that he had hand-painted. He couldn't remember feeling so purposeful.

No one was there waiting when they arrived at the el. By 6:30 only Ernie, the church sexton, had come. Mary's term for Ernie was "a simple soul." They'd known him probably ten years now and every time they'd ever seen him he wore the same grey polyester suit, two sizes too big, missing buttons, and for the past year or so, smeared on one sleeve with what looked like grape jelly.

Every few minutes a new rush of people, down-on-their-luck people, came down the steps from the el platform and made Jock think back to when attractive people got off at this stop. It didn't seem that long ago when people at K&A were sharp: ties and jackets, women in hats, the look of bosses and managers and executive assistants. Now he saw sneakers, hospital scrubs worn like pajamas, missing teeth, a general heaviness or too-skininess to all of them. No one seeming exactly right. How long had it been since everyone had seemed right around here?

Jock paced and reminded himself of the Knights' pledge of service, how our own actions were all we could control and how Christian service was the highest peak we could achieve in this life: controlling ourselves to help others.

By 6:45 it was still the three of them. He couldn't look at Mary, who was listening to Ernie tell about his eczema. If he looked at her he'd throw the stupid banner in the gutter and go home. She had told him this was a bad idea. People would come, he told himself. At 6:51 the Newmans came, Chuck and Kathy. Chuck Newman and Jock had gone through twelve years of school together. They both still lived in the houses they'd grown up in, which qualified Chuck for Jock's ultimate estimation: a good Sycamore man. By 7 o'clock, seventeen people. Jock waited until 7:10, and when no reporters or TV vans had shown, he thanked the gathered. "Today we march for our neighborhood, for West Sycamore, the place we all love."

Jock and Chuck led the way, each holding a corner of the banner that read "No Drugs. No Thugs." Mary, Kathy, Ernie and the rest – mainly friends from church, older people like Jock – followed behind. Jock asked Chuck if they should sing but he didn't know any songs for marching. They moved for an hour, winding through little streets like Willard and Tampa and Coral, since they didn't have permits to stop traffic on any of the big ones.

As they approached the corner store, Jock walked so fast that he pulled the banner from Chuck's grasp, so that before he realized he walked a few steps with a fluttering white sheet tailing behind him. He grew more anxious the closer they got to Kensington and Tampa, the corner where the boys stood. Jock wanted nothing more than to lead his march past them, to have them stand there and stare him down so he could smile back at them, let them see true Christian attitudes, let them see how to move past violence. When

they were still a block from the corner store, Mary walked up behind Jock.

“How are you feeling?” she said.

“Fine,” he said.

“What do you expect at the store?”

“I expect a whole lot of nothing,” Chuck Newman said.

“We’ll be fine,” Jock said. “Whatever happens. There are seventeen of us. What are they gonna shoot all of us?”

When they made it up Tampa Street to Allegheny, to the corner store in question, there was, for the first hot Friday night Jock could remember maybe in his whole life, no one there. The store’s lights were on and he could see the same man as usual standing behind the counter but there were no boys on the sidewalk, there weren’t even people on their front porches. The only sound was the talking of a few marchers who didn’t seem to get the significance of the corner.

When the marchers made it to the church parking lot, Jock knocked at the rectory. A few minutes later Fr. Kresson, in black pants and a white v-neck t-shirt, led a few responsorials for peace, without benefit of a Bible, before the group dispersed.

As he was leaving, Chuck shook Jock’s hand and said, “Don’t let it get you down, Jock. Sycamore knows you tried.”

On the walk home Mary said to Jock, “Is it out of your system?”

“Is what out?” he said.

“It’s time to move, Jock. We’re old,” she said. “Lisa and Susan want us to move.

We can live with either one of them. You know that.”

“Well, I may know it but we’re not moving. We don’t owe anyone anything.”

“Why do you say ‘we’ like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t own me. You think because we’re churchgoers I won’t leave.”

Jock said nothing. She should know better than to threaten.

That night, while Jock and Mary slept upstairs, a car slowed in front of their house and discharged two bullets into their front window. Having slept through a lifetime of cheap fireworks and car backfires and drunken front porch screaming matches, neither of them woke up. Jock let the dog out in the middle of the night but didn’t notice the two holes in the dining room sheet rock.

Sycamore Park hadn’t been the same since I-95 came to Philadelphia in the sixties. The neighborhood was cut in half, east to west, and all the things that had made it comfortable, the nicer homes, some single homes even, and a few parks, but more important, the butcher, tackle shop, credit union, two churches, two funeral homes, flower shop, all these things were in the east part, the part that hugged the Delaware. The part of Sycamore Park west of 95, what ever since has been called West Sycamore, was just rowhomes and factories. Not much else beside a few bars and corner stores.

All through the ‘80s and ‘90s old neighbors poured out. A lot of them scattering further north into Northeast Philly, some going across the river to New Jersey’s middle

class suburbs like Pennsauken, Cherry Hill, Delran. Jock knew why they left. He understood it wasn't some unspeakable fear of blacks and Puerto Ricans. People left because of specific things, incidents, and if you could steel yourself against incidents, just get over them and see the good things in the neighborhood, then you could stay where you wanted to be. Jock's own mother took a fist to the ear about twenty years ago walking home from church. A guy took her purse and two months later she moved to an apartment building across the river. Jock wasn't going to begrudge anyone their reasons for leaving but he wasn't going anywhere.

The next night, after their morning of police reports and an afternoon price shopping for a new front window, Mary came into the living room with red eyes. "I talked to Lisa. I told her what happened. She got hysterical crying."

"Well, I don't know what to say to that," he said.

"Say you'll move to Cherry Hill."

"I don't want to move to Cherry Hill."

"You'll die here, Jock."

"We're winning now, Mary. If we made them mad enough to shoot at us, well, that's only good."

"What are you talking about?" Mary said. She was standing between him and the TV with her fists clenched at her sides. "Your mind is going."

"If you want to quit I can't stop you."

"I'm going to Lisa's house to stay. I'm done," she said.

Jock grew up in Sycamore. His father worked on tugboats in the Delaware. Jock and his brothers, Joe and Herman, used to spend every day of summer on the river – swimming, casting for catfish, waving to their father when his tug went past. They'd wave and yell to him until he blew the foghorn and it always struck Jock how the bellowing horn could be heard across the river in New Jersey, only a mile away but a place he'd never been.

One day when the boys were swimming and horsing around, Herman, who was a year older than Jock, slipped and caught his foot between the sharp-angled rocks of a jetty that was exposed only at low tide.

With an embarrassed grin on his face Herman tried to free his foot. After a few failed wiggles and jerks of his body he waved Jock over. "I'm stuck," he said.

Herman was thirteen and had begun to leave boyhood. He was working a few days a week at a box factory and his arms and shoulders were getting bigger for it. The pudginess that had been on his belly the previous summer was gone, replaced by sleek muscle and even a few curly hairs that trailed down to the waistband of his cutoff dungarees.

Jock swam over to the rocks and climbed up as Herman struggled to get his foot clear. "Let me yank it," Jock said.

"It's not moving at all, Jock." Herman's attempt at cool was betrayed by the trembling of his lips.

Jock knelt on a flat piece of one of the rocks that held his brother. He surveyed. Herman's foot had slipped into the black abyss at the junction of three rocks. Everything beneath the bulb of his right calf muscle was hidden from sight. Jock put both hands on his brother's calf and at first gently and then more forcefully tried to jimmy the leg up and down while twisting it subtly to the right or left, anything to find an angle that would free the leg. Nothing worked.

"It's not moving," Herman said. "It's not moving at all."

Joe, who was only nine, called from the banks near where an old man was reeling in a catch. "Hurry up, Jock. If the catfish are biting the tide's coming in."

"I'm gonna yank it as hard as I can," Jock said.

"My foot's not moving," Herman said. Jock saw tears on his older brother's face.

"It'll be fine," Jock said. "It'll be fine."

"What if it breaks?" Herman said.

Jock stood behind his brother and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Count to three," he said.

"Go get help!" Herman called to Joe.

Jock could hear water filling in under the rocks. "One," Jock said. He could feel his brother's abdomen trembling.

"It hurts, Jock," Herman said.

"Two," Jock said. "On three you pull too."

"OK," Herman whispered.

“Three.” Jock jerked so hard that he fell off the rocks into the rising water. When he came back up he heard Herman screaming and saw that his brother hadn’t gone anywhere but down on his ass.

Herman’s lower leg had stayed lodged but his thigh and all the rest of him had moved sharply to the right and stayed there. Amid his own horror at his brother’s agony, an agony he had compounded, Jock felt his thoughts drift away from Herman. He formulated the thought that Herman’s screams could be heard in New Jersey. The uselessness of the thought triggered a shame that further distanced him from his brother who seemed to be choking on his own screams.

After that, these memories: Herman passing out; Jock stroking Herman’s head and repeating “You’re fine, Herman;” water rising between the rocks, lapping Herman’s calf; the old man who caught the catfish wading out and trying to shift the immovable rocks; a crowd gathering; a fire engine’s siren; whiskey being forced into Herman’s mouth; police cars; a fireman hauling Jock away just as his mother gets to the shore; two men rushing from the back of another police car with heavy-looking black bags, one of the men carrying what looks to Jock like his dad’s band saw; Jock and Joe led into a car by a fat policeman with the collar of his sky-blue shirt turned navy with sweat. “I spent a lot of days on that river, too. I could sure go for a swim. Hot today. Hot for a ballgame tonight,” he says.

Herman died in 2000. Lately, Jock had gotten into the habit, while

working on his trains in the basement, of placing calls to him. He imagined calling his older brother at the nursing home where he'd lived his last few years. "I'm looking for Herman Syzmanski," he'd say.

"Speaking."

"Herman?"

"Yes."

"It's Jock."

"OK."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"Herman, do you remember the Groucho Marx movies?"

"Of course."

"And do you remember the Athletics?"

"Yes, I do."

"Those were good times."

"You're right. Why are you calling?"

"I might sell the house."

"Mom and Dad's house."

"Yeah."

"I thought you were going to sell a long time ago."

"Why?"

“Because the neighborhood is a shithole.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Do you have a tavern to go to?”

“Not anymore.”

“A restaurant? A bakery?”

“It’s the house we grew up in.”

“It’s just a house.”

“I’m sorry I called and bothered you. I can tell you’re bothered.”

“Because I’m not agreeing with you?”

“What if we went to a restaurant in town and got lunch someday?”

“I haven’t seen you in ten years.”

“That’s right. I thought that’s how you wanted it.”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. All of us. Mom and Dad and Joe, too.”

“They’re all dead.”

“Do you want to go with me to lunch and then maybe we can walk along the river?”

“I don’t think so. I think maybe we should just stick to the phone.”

“Why?”

“You know that our baby brother would be sixty-eight this year.”

“Oh, brother. When did I lose you?”

“Here’s what you do. You go through the house and kiss the banister. Kiss the

mantelpiece. Sit on the toilet. Go cook a hot dog in the yard and then get the hell out.

You don't owe that neighborhood. You'll die soon anyway."

"Why does all the weary world stuff get me down?"

"The weary world rejoices."

"I've heard."

"Fall on your knees, brother."

"Will you go with me to the river?"

"I'll be in touch, Herman."

"A fine night for a phone call."

"A fine night, Herman."

"Is Herman dead?" Joe says.

Jock shakes his head back and forth slowly.

"Your parents won't be home for a while," the cop says. "So where do you want to go? Do you have a granny that lives around here?" The cop looks up into the rearview and Jock shakes his head. "No? Maybe we can drive around for a while, see somewheres else besides Sycamore for once."

It only takes ten minutes of driving up State Road, north along the river, to leave the rowhouses and car lots and machine shops of Philadelphia and head into the woods of Bucks County. Jock has only ever been up this far once, for a class trip to pick apples. Driving through the woods every half mile or so the trees break and reveal the river.

Farms appear on the west side of the road, distant hills with cows, curves in the road.

“What’s happening to Herman,” Joe says.

The cop says, “Let’s stop up here.”

They get out at a roadside ice cream place and the cop buys them each an ice cream cone.

“The peach is homemade,” the woman inside the window said.

They sit at one of the picnic tables by the water.

“What do you think will happen to Herman,” Joe says. Joe’s eyes are big but he’s eating his ice cream cone.

The cop unclips his necktie with one hand and undoes his top button. He licks melting ice cream before it drips to his thumb. “Remember that you’re lucky,” he says.

“If you boys were a little older you’d be in the war.”

Jock says, “They’re cutting his leg off.”

The cop says, “Maybe not. Maybe he got lucky.”

Joe tries to be good but he sputters then takes a few quick, deep breaths in through his nose before finally he sobs.

As Joe cries, with one hand over his eyes and the other lamely holding the melting ice cream cone, a goose, with one jab of its neck, knocks the cone from his hand. The white bulb lies dead in the grass, separated from the cone, which the goose eats in one violent convulsion of his neck.

“Look at the goose. He’s hungry, too,” the cop says, and laughs.

Late that night, his first without Mary, after a failed attempt at his usual bedtime, Jock went for a walk down Allegheny towards the river. He hadn't walked out of his neighborhood and into East Sycamore at night in forty years. The dark tunnel made by 95 passing over Allegheny was a zone sensible adults didn't enter. His wife, probably awake in bed in New Jersey wondering about him, would have a heart attack if she saw him right now. How many stories in the last forty years had they heard of people meeting trouble in this tunnel? Remember you're an old man, she'd be saying. He told himself the buzzing traffic made a magnetic field that recognized him as Old Sycamore and would keep him safe the rest of the way home.

The tunnel was empty: no people, no rats or possums, not even broken glass. He felt himself smile. For one night at least the two Sycamores were one walkable neighborhood again. On the other side of the tunnel, in East Sycamore, in every block he noted the house of someone he'd played baseball with or necked with in an el car or who'd given him a summer job. They were all gone. He could smell the river as he crossed Richmond Street. He walked as briskly as he could, hoping no cars would slow down alongside him and no one on a corner would notice an old man alone at night and call attention. He made it. At the end of Allegheny Avenue, he let himself backwards down the short, steep bank to the riverbed. Under no moon, something, rats probably, stirred in the tall brush. A tug moved south away from him, toward Center City. The sand at the water's edge was damp but he sat anyway. Even as the tide pushed closer in

tiny waves he stayed sitting, and after a few minutes the water lapped over his walking shoes. From where he sat he watched the river rising around the rocks that had trapped young Herman, a pile left over from some old, crude dredging, what the neighborhood people had always called “the jetty.” What would Herman think of me, he thought. An old man sitting in the river thinking about him. I think about him more now than when he was alive.

His whole bottom was wet now, his wallet and keys submerged in pants pockets, but still he sat. He watched the headlamps of cars moving across the Betsy Ross Bridge to New Jersey. When the water came in high enough to lift him from the sand, when it was stronger than he was heavy, he stood and climbed up the bank.

He walked home with the Delaware dripping off him and felt a euphoria that reminded him of the first ten minutes of a good Friday happy hour at the old Sycamore Tavern, meeting his brothers and Chuck, all of them young marrieds. He remembered how he would go right for Mary when he got home from those nights. So in love with his friends and the streets of Sycamore and a house loud with kids, so in love with her. He never wanted anything more than what he had on those nights. Sometimes he’d rush her upstairs even with the kids sitting at the dinner table. “Mommy and I need to talk,” he’d say and grab her hand.

Now the quiet of East Sycamore gave way as he neared the heavy drone of nighttime big rig traffic on 95. In the morning he’d call her and tell her he’d put the house up and he’d move with her when it sold. As he got closer to the underpass he

thought he saw a young man walking towards him, but he didn't stop. There was no point in stopping. He entered the dark tunnel with his head up.

Up until Joe died, he would remind Jock of their trip into Bucks County in the back of a cop car to get ice cream. They would try to remember the cop's name. Something Irish. McSomething. They'd remember the smell of the manured farms and how the air felt cooler for all the trees, even though they were only eight or nine miles from Sycamore. They remembered the river playing peekaboo, appearing at regular intervals at clearings along the road. They remembered holding hands the whole ride home but not talking, not even the cop, who hadn't shut up on the way up. And they remembered how before they got in the car to go home how the old cop, wiping the last ice cream from his lips with a napkin, said, "Let's just sit here a minute." And he sat with his elbows on the picnic table and the three of them watched a white sailboat - with one man at the wheel, and another, maybe his brother, or his son, working the riggings - loop out across the river and then come back.

CHAPTER III
WE'LL GET HURT

Russell's dad had been shot and killed in a bar in Fishtown when we were in the fourth grade and almost as if his biology knew what he needed he was the one of us at fourteen tall and built with muscle. He wasn't worried about things like getting detention for talking back or the way last spring the big bone in his wrist had stabbed right through his skin when he hang jumped off his porch roof on my dare. I didn't go outside for days after seeing that. You can't even understand how many episodes of Facts of Life and Good Times and Gidget and Different Strokes and even some That's My Momma it took me to get the broken white edge of that bone out of my mind. But Russell was back on his board – a Vision Gator he'd shortened with a jigsaw – in two days, riding with his cast arm raised up like half of him was piloting an imaginary dirt bike that would get him out of Frankford. He knocked for me when I was still on hiatus.

“Why don't you come out?” he said.

“Maybe tomorrow,” I said. Another of my favorites was on. It was the one where Gomer, in his shocking baritone, delivers the national anthem on the Fourth of July in such a way that even Sergeant Carter's eye releases a tear.

“Can you feel the pins in there?” I said, nodding at his arm.

“Nah, they gave me this Tylenol 3 shit. I can't feel anything.”

One Monday morning later that summer, sunburnt on his front steps, proud of his new coral necklace, he told me about getting high with his cousins at a cookout in Wildwood. "It just felt like everybody was friends," he'd said, and I remember saying, "But they're already your cousins." Another day, while I was at school helping my mom decorate her classroom, he'd hopped in an open mail jeep on our block and drove it six blocks to the church parking lot.

"It was a manual?" I said.

"Yeah," Russell said.

Another day, I heard Harcum's dog, Flats, whimpering out back, something I'd never heard before. I made it to the back room of the house, what we called the shed, in time to see Russell running up the alley towards the street. He'd put enough BB's into Harcum's dog – Harcum, Russell's mother's boyfriend - so that the thing bled and had, for once, stood down.

Somehow Russell wasn't caught for any of those things, although his mother wasn't really a good one for catching in those days, tending bar at the Bent Elbo every night but Monday. He wasn't caught for anything that summer until the day at Wood's Deli. Chuckie Tyner had found out Russell was calling Chuckie's girlfriend, Michelle Morton, and Chuckie and his buddies were waiting for Russell when he came out of Wood's. There were four of them and Russell started swinging his board before they could grab his arms. He must've hit Chuckie clear in the eye with a wheel or the edge of

the deck because according to Russell, Chuckie started to make a noise, a high-pitched thing like an owl, that together with the blood made all of them stand there a minute, Russell and Chuckie's friends, still, with their eyes wide, looking at each other before Russell took off running.

The cops came to Russell's house that night. He spent a weekend in juvenile detention and the next time I saw him, when he was moving slow, he told me his mom had sent Harcum to pick him up. He lifted up his t-shirt to show me but I'd known for a long time what Russell and trouble and Harcum all meant.

"You going to jail?" I said. We were sitting on Russell's front steps.

"I have a trial in the fall. I have a lawyer now." He laid a hand softly on his chest after he spoke and, with his eyes squeezed shut, exhaled. This was the worst I'd seen him hurt before.

"Matlock?" I said.

"I could go to a juvenile jail in the Poconos for a year," Russell said.

"Are you scared?" I said.

"From what my lawyer says it could be the best thing that ever happened to me. He says it's like boarding school." He didn't look as scared as I must have.

"Why'd you go without me?" I said. "I should've been there."

"I have to call you every time I want a soda?"

"I got your back, man," I said.

"Besides what would you have done? You would've been like 'Let me chomp

you to death with my super braces.””

“You know I would’ve rocked them, Russ,” I said and flexed my biceps.

He slowly sat up straight and said, “Do you really think I need to go to school tomorrow? Do criminals need high school?”

“We’ve never not been in the same classroom,” I said. In the morning I’d start my freshman year at Northwest Catholic. Russell was going to Heard Technical High School to become an auto mechanic like his dad had been.

“Maybe you can come to jail with me and keep me company,” Russell said.

“What if Chuckie’s boys do something to you at school?” I said.

“They’re not going to beat me worse than Harcum,” he said.

Once school started I saw Russell mostly on weekends, but even then not as much as I would have before. He had a girlfriend almost from the day school started and he told me he had to take the el and then the 5 bus through Kensington to see her but that’s what he did most days after school. We played football the weekend before his trial and because my mom had been telling me kids like Russell don’t go to jail I didn’t think much of it.

The next Thursday we ate a late dinner of takeout pizza steaks in front of Family Ties. Mom had been at court all morning as a character witness for Russell – his seventh grade teacher and his best friend’s mother - and then worked late at school to catch up. I wanted to forget about anything involving Russell and court so I didn’t bring it up at all

during her check-in phone call in the afternoon nor since she'd gotten home, and neither had she. It was at the first commercial break that she finally put the TV on mute.

"I was in court today," she said. She put her sandwich down.

"Mm hm," I said.

"Russell did very well. He was very brave."

"So he got off," I said.

"He didn't. But he was very brave."

She told me that he would be going to a place in the mountains for a year. That the judge, just as Russell had said, had told him this could be the best thing that ever happened to him and that this is where he sends boys with potential. "It would have been almost a peaceful moment," Mom said, "except that Chuckie Tyner's mother had cried out 'Good!' when the judge said a year." She took a deep breath and pursed her lips hard as she would when tears were coming. "He came up to me and hugged me before he left the room. He didn't hug his own mother or Mr. Harcum," she said and shook her head. I don't think she wanted to believe that eating takeout at our house once or twice a week was the nicest thing Russell had in his life.

That night I lay in bed thinking about where Russell was sleeping, wondering if he was safe, if he'd made new friends. I thought about the last Fourth of July, only a few months before. We rode our bikes to Bridesburg to swim at a little beach on the Delaware at the end of Orthodox Street. There was one sycamore at the river's edge that had grown parallel to the water's surface, and while I threw pop ups to myself with a

tennis ball and made diving catches in waist deep water, Russell wasn't afraid to shimmy out the full length of its trunk, maybe forty feet. From there, poised, sensing that I'd stopped throwing the ball, hoping, no doubt, that people in cars on the bridges to New Jersey to the north and south of us were watching, he leapt out toward the channel current. When he resurfaced, after what seemed like a year, he bobbed for a minute and cleared the hair from his eyes. At that distance, too far to see the red rash of pimples on his neck, his eyes, narrow and dull up close, caught the sun and seemed bigger than they were. He waved for me to come out. "Don't be a pussy, George," he called. "Just try it," and then let himself go under again, before surfacing half way back to shore.

My mom and I settled into a routine that fall. It was our first school year since Dad had left and my bedtime on school nights went from 9 to 11. For the first time I became a first run viewer of what had been his favorite shows: NBC's Thursday night lineup of Cheers, Night Court and L.A. Law.

We had ice cream in front of the TV almost every night. It was a treat because Dad couldn't eat it and so we didn't keep it in the house much when he lived with us. For Thanksgiving that year we drove to my mom's parents' house in Maryland and I remember at dinner my mom crying halfway through saying Grace and my grandpop had to finish for her.

That weekend my mom and I went to the parking lot of the Sunoco station in our neighborhood and picked out a Christmas tree. Mom made a big deal of decorating it. It

was the only year I remember us making popcorn garland, and we listened over and over to the Carpenters' Christmas record.

The Saturday night before Christmas we were watching a MASH rerun when the doorbell rang. Mom went and I heard her say, "Oh, my lord." It was not something I'd heard from her before. I thought something was wrong, especially when she called me to the door.

There was Russell standing on the front step and he and Mom were both looking at me like to see if I could believe it.

Mom finally said, "Come in," and he took a step inside and she hugged him and started to cry before he could take another one.

"You got chubby," he said to me, and probably out of relief for it finally being said out loud in our house, Mom and I both laughed.

Russell told us he was only home for twenty-four hours, that his uncle had picked him up at the facility and that when he got home his mom was at work and Harcum told him to go out and have a good time.

Mom ordered a pizza, which she would have done anyway but she let Russell pick where from, and after we ate Russell and I walked to the video store.

"What's it like?" I asked him when we were outside.

"I'm learning to play guitar. I have friends. It's not that bad."

"Does anybody mess with you?"

"Hell, no," he said. "It's not like that. It's like school but I live there."

We both wanted Lethal Weapon but it was out and we settled on another new release buddy movie, but this one had Gregory Hines and Rutger Hauer. I don't remember the title but I remember in all the fist fighting and gun fighting scenes I looked over at Russell to see what kind of face he was making but it wasn't anything special. Mom looked more excited than he did.

After the movie, Russell, despite Mom insisting he sleep over, told us he was going home to bed. Before he left Mom gave him another hug and asked if he would be alright with us visiting. I asked if he had VCR access and when he said yes I told him I'd start taping Cheers and Night Court for him and I'd mail him the tapes. Mom and I stood on the front step and waited until he walked down the block and went into his house.

We were in front of the TV a few days after Christmas when the phone rang. I answered and gave it straight to my mom. It was Mrs. Cummings, the principal at the grade school where Mom taught, and where Russell and I had graduated earlier in the year. It wasn't strange for Mrs. Cummings to call so I kept watching Newhart. When Mom hung up the phone she reached out and squeezed my arm and pulled me in for a hug. "Russell," she said. I didn't say anything, didn't ask "What about Russell?" I knew it wasn't going to be good so I stayed quiet, stayed in those last few seconds of not knowing. "He was in a fight with two other boys at the facility," she said, "and one stabbed him with a knife."

Russell's funeral was closed casket, so I wondered what parts of him had been

stabbed, and I remember thinking how much bigger Russell's dad's funeral was than Russell's. When his dad died our whole fourth grade class was there and the church was full. The morning of Russell's funeral it snowed and not many people outside his family and some of the neighbors made it.

Later that afternoon I was shoveling our patch of sidewalk when Harcum got dropped off at the curb by a pickup truck. Harcum was still in his black suit but his tie was gone. Before the truck pulled away he had his cigarette lit by the driver.

"Harcum," I said. I had never said anything more to him than to ask if Russell was home. I couldn't believe I had called out to him.

He jerked his head back a little and I walked towards him. "What's up, George?" he said. He stood waiting for me.

"You know Russell hated you?" I said.

Harcum didn't say anything. He didn't even look at me but past me down the block.

"I'm going to kill your dog," I said.

"Oh yeah?"

"I'm going to kill your dog because you killed Russell."

He pushed me hard in the chest and I fell back into the snow. He faked like he was going to throw a punch at me and I flinched but he turned and walked up his front

steps.

“I’m going to kill your dog,” I said. “I’m going to kill your dog.”

Harcum said, “Go ahead,” before he closed the door.

That night we went out to a restaurant for the first time since Dad left. Mom said she wanted a night off. When I asked from what she said, “Everything.” She talked so much at dinner that I was done my chicken parm before she’d started hers. She talked about my dad and that she didn’t think he was ever coming back from California. She talked about going back to night school for her Master’s, how she wouldn’t be around as much after school next year and how I had to make more friends. She talked about Russell, too. Told me that Russell’s mom loved him and maybe even Mr. Harcum loved him but they had their own problems. Too many problems, probably, to do right by Russell. I didn’t tell her what had happened that afternoon.

She didn’t talk much the rest of the meal and was quiet on the ride home too, until I asked her what she wanted to watch when we got home. “I don’t want to watch anything tonight, George,” she said.

When we got home she kissed me goodnight and walked upstairs. Halfway up she stopped and said, “I hate to do this to you, but don’t forget it’s trash night.”

When Night Court was over I watched L.A. Law. I told myself to take the trash out and go to bed but then I watched the local news and after that flipped back and forth between Johnny Carson and Arsenio. At commercial breaks I’d walk out to the kitchen

window and see if Flats was outside. After David Letterman's monologue, I saw it come down the steps into the yard. When it was done its business it walked circles by Harcum's back steps, waiting to be let back inside the comfort of the house.

To picture the block I grew up on, trace a capital H, but laid on its side. One parallel is the sidewalk in front of the houses, the other the walkway behind each house's tiny backyard. The crossbar of the H is the alley that cuts the block down the middle, connects back with front. This is how people get their trash out, drag the cans from the backyards and down the alley. Harcum lived on one side of the alley and kept Flats, a boxer, in the yard full-time. We lived on the other side of the alley, maybe five feet across. Flats menaced permanently, spent most of his time right up against the fence and erect, but trash night he'd be so riled up from the steady scraping of the metal cans against the concrete alley, the hint of old scraps passing him by, that he'd spring straight up like boxers do and come within a claw of clearing Harcum's chain-link fence, which, that winter, came right up to my fourteen-year-old chest.

That night, when I finally went out back, Flats was out, too. I assumed he'd been out for a long time in the cold. He hugged the fence at the sound of the loaded can against the concrete and when I entered the alley he sprang up. He landed, reversed, and leapt again. I didn't look over. Flats made three jumps, his head clearing the height of the fence on the last one before I made it past the yard and out of the his sight.

Snow began to fall as I left the can at the curb. I knew what we would've done if Russell were there. We'd talk out the plan in my living room and eventually he'd draw a

map of the action on the palm of his hand like a 3rd down play. My job would be to kick Flats' fence a few times, make sure he was riled up, and then unlatch his gate. I'd run out to the street with the dog's nails clipping the concrete right behind me and when I cleared the alley Russell would be there armed with Harcum's crow bar. He'd drop it right between the lunging thing's eyes, crushing the top of its skull in one swing and maybe dislodging one of its eyes so that it would dangle down onto its cheek. I imagined we would be panting big plumes of vapor as we stood over it. Russell would pick up the bloody dog, maybe it would even still be breathing a little, and he'd leave it to die on Harcum's top step. It all seemed so right to me, so perfect in theory, and I knew I could never do anything like it without Russell.

Standing there at the curb in the snow I had forgotten myself, forgotten I was outside in the cold in a sweatshirt, forgotten for a moment I was at the same intersection of alley and street I had been imagining, and that my friend was gone.

CHAPTER IV
THE PUBLICAN

When she was done her fifth Hail Mary, having lifted herself up off the kneeler and sat back in the pew, she indulged herself a wish: please let it be Father Longo and not Father Singh. Father Singh was well intentioned but his homilies were earnest beyond reason and twenty-five minutes long. His accent was thick enough that sometimes bunches of minutes would pass between one of his intelligible standbys like “The Church is a lady.” But Father Longo, the new pastor, would in five minutes give five practical ways to live that Sunday’s gospel.

The 9 o’clock Mass at St. Paul’s was half of Susan Steadman’s Sunday morning routine for the three years since she’d moved across the river after her divorce from Bob. Wake up. Go to church. Come home. Go for a walk. This was her time: Sunday was her day off from her mother, it was the day each week she gave herself permission to stay home from the office, and although Caroline, her daughter, often appeared on Sundays with a duffel bag full of laundry (under the guise of visiting), she usually didn’t arrive until close to dinner. Sunday morning, as Susan saw it, was a reward for her life of faithfulness. And she loved it as such. When, last Tuesday night during *Jeopardy!*, her mother had turned and asked where Susan’s father was, Susan inhaled deeply through her nose, ignoring the odor of menthol liniment that had become as much a part of the

landscape of her mother's room in the nursing home as the recliner and the basket of plastic ivy, and saw herself on some future Sunday – this Sunday – reciting the Nicene Creed or crouching to collect a perfect red maple leaf along the Oak Spring Creek trail. “Mother,” she'd said, “Dad passed away two years ago.”

Now, as Susan settled back into her pew, she saw a familiar figure enter the sanctuary through a side entrance. It must have been only a fraction of a second before her brain recognized the man but the lag seemed interminable. *That isn't. No. It's not. Bob. No. It is. In St. Paul's. In Oak Spring. With his woman.* On a good day, in the privacy of her car or her apartment, she couldn't think of him with this woman without her lips tightening and her eyes closing and now here he was in her church.

Susan felt an instant gurgle in her stomach as she watched her date to the soph hop, now doughy and white-haired, lead his blonde into the second pew from the altar. He genuflected with the solemnity of a daily communicant. Susan's feet went numb. She spent the entrance procession – it was Father Longo – squinting. *Is it him? It is but it can't be. He wouldn't come here with her. He knows this is my church.* When he coughed and then reached for what could only be his roll of Certs, first offering his new woman one (as he had always done with Susan), before taking one himself, she could no longer doubt. The smile on this woman. The false smile. Those big white teeth. *I hope a steering wheel knocks them out,* Susan thought. *Or a fist.* She tasted blood in her mouth from biting the inside of her lip.

Susan didn't hear either reading, didn't sing the responsorial, couldn't pay

attention to the Gospel or Father Longo's distillation. Even the gift of peace, which had always been her favorite part of the Mass but had become especially important to her these last few years – the chance to touch and to greet and be warm – even that she didn't remember. She spent the Mass in a red-faced daze until Father Longo rose to address the gathered before the recessional.

“It's one of my goals as pastor,” he said, “to develop our community outreach.” Susan cocked her head slightly. She had been making notes to herself for the past few months, doodles on the back of grocery lists and in the margins of the newspaper that said, “Volunteering?” or “Look into weekend service hours.”

The priest continued. “I want to get more parishioners involved in things like visiting our sick, going into the poor parishes of Camden, tutoring, babysitting, career counseling, computer classes – all those things that translate our Christian love into action. Remember what James said, ‘There is no love without action.’ And so we have a new staff member, a new member of our parish family I should say, to help us with that. Casey, would you stand up? This is our new community services director, Casey Steadman.” With that the blonde rose. She turned to the congregation and unleashed a smile designed to crush doubt. *Don't smile at me*, Susan thought. “Casey and her husband Bob and I will be in the narthex after Mass so you'll all have a chance to welcome her.”

What kind of name is Casey? She'd heard it before, of course. Too many times now. “I love Casey,” he'd said. But each time it seemed freshly imbecilic for an adult

woman. For the first time in Susan's life she left Mass before the celebrant. She hurried to her car and sat with the door open for a minute gasping for air. She couldn't make herself on this cool fall morning feel anything but overwhelmed by heat. When she heard her name being called her eyes were closed, head back against the rest, and she was telling herself, "Just put the key in the ignition. Then turn the key. Then reverse out of the parking spot. Everything can be broken down to a small step."

"Susan," he said one more time. He was by the rear bumper.

The reasons she had for hating him were so many that over time her body had melted them down into one sensation – something similar, she had figured out one Sunday on one of her walks, to the kind of adrenaline override that lets an antelope flee a cheetah. She hated him because of this power he had over her body. He hadn't touched her in years, not even a handshake, and yet the thought of him, and especially his proximity now, robbed her of control of her systems. She was sweaty, her scalp tingled, her thighs felt weak, stomach gone, mouth tasted like she'd been chewing some kind of orange-flavored powder. Why couldn't she be the cheetah? She would maul him right here. Maul was a good word. Crush his windpipe and pick at his ribs. And even a real antelope would be miles away by now.

"Hi, Bob," she said.

"Listen," he said. "I should've called you."

"What do you mean?" She couldn't tell if she was going to make this harder or easier for him.

“Coming to your church. I should’ve called you.”

“It’s fine,” Susan said. Why did she say it’s fine? Why did she feel such a need to avoid?

“Is there a regular Mass you go to?”

“This one. Nine o’clock.”

“OK. Well maybe some week we could all get breakfast after.” He seemed shy. She could tell he was watching carefully for her reactions.

“Maybe some week.”

“You’d like Casey. She’s a good person.”

Susan couldn’t muster any kind of answer.

“She hasn’t worked in months and she had to take this job. This is what she’s trained for. What she likes to do.”

Susan looked at his penny loafers and nodded.

“I’ll see you, Susan.”

On the drive home Susan called her sister in Florida. “He was there. Sitting in my church. With her.”

“What kind of balls does this man have?” Arlene asked. “Did you ask him why he thinks it’s OK to join your church?”

“His wife works there now.”

“And she has to take this job of all jobs when she knows it’s your church and what they’ve already done to you?”

Susan didn't answer right away. In her head she repeated, "What they've already done to you." She told her sister she'd call her the next day.

Oh what she would do to Smiley in a steel cage. Smiley Casey Fuckbubble. Twenty years younger maybe but every muscle and sinew in Susan's body would pump with hate and that would make the difference. She could feel her fingers gripping the bitch's hair and slamming that toothy head down and jerking it back up and then down again.

Susan needed to stop these fantasies. So awful she was becoming. This woman – girl, really, she was probably only 35 now - was making her awful. Susan tried to give herself a talk. *Focus on your own happiness. Focus on what you can control. Bob Steadman will not take away one more day of your happiness. Spineless Bob Steadman. Do something you like today. Do something to treat yourself today.*

Now here was Susan staring into the woods. She was trembling in her kinkly nylon pants and fleece jacket and the white New Balance walking shoes she only wore on Sunday mornings. A lump swelled in her throat. Yesterday's storm, the remnants of a late season hurricane, had brought down a locust tree in the woods behind her apartment complex. The tree, as she was now discovering, had crashed through the footbridge that spanned the creek to the start of the walking trail. As hot tears came to her eyes she told herself that it was crazy to be this upset. There are plenty of other walking trails in South Jersey.

On the way back to her unit Susan saw Gene, the tenants association president. She didn't have a Gene minute in her today. Whenever they talked he would maneuver himself within a foot of her.

"Hi, doll," he said. His hairplugs were orange, but not in a way that conjured a natural redhead, and not even the orange of a leaf or of a sunset. The color of his hair was like an orange Tootsie Roll Pop. It was nothing God had made.

"Gene, the footbridge is gone," she said.

"Yeah, won't be fixed til January when the new budget kicks in," he said close enough that she could smell his coffee breath. Then he gave her the same smile he always gave her, a smile that said *I'm 74, but I'm alive and I want you.*

She felt towards Gene then a surge of her raw Bob hate. She wanted to bare her teeth at him. "How ineffectual are you, Gene?" she said. "Do you know what ineffectual means? You can't rent a chainsaw for an hour and get rid of that tree? Can't buy some boards to put down? The creek is two feet across. January?"

He hopped back a little, as if a snake had brushed his pant leg.

"Do you want me to do it myself? Do you want me to bring a chainsaw out here, Gene?" His eyes were opened wide but he didn't speak. She had never been anything but politely tolerant to Gene before. She turned and headed back to her apartment. He'll get over it, she thought. And then she asked herself if she'd ever walked away from an encounter hoping someone would get over it. Her sacred day was beyond salvation. She walked back through the parking lot of the complex thinking about Bob's sweater.

In church he had worn a blue oxford shirt under a red crew neck sweater, exactly the kind of set she used to buy him but that he'd never wear. Especially not on Sunday mornings when she'd leave for church with Caroline and he'd be in the kitchen in an Eagles sweatshirt frying scrapple and listening to the pre-game show. When he did leave the house, to teach, he always tried to look younger than he was for the girls at the college. She remembered a phase marked by cowboy boots and shirts with pearl snaps and one summer he even wore a banjo around his neck but only learned one song and here they were making payments on a brown Plymouth Horizon living in a rowhouse a block from the El raising a kid. Home, home on the range.

Susan spent the rest of her morning and early afternoon watching home remodeling shows and eating. She ate brownies while two men, a couple, antagonized each other as they redecorated a split-level ranch in Phoenix. She went through an entire box of Bugles while an obsessive-compulsive woman not only flipped a Tudor mansion in LA but simultaneously argued with her mother on a hands-free cellphone. She hated Bob.

When Caroline got there Susan said, "Your father was at my church with his woman today."

"Casey," Caroline said. "She's nice."

Even though Caroline was twenty-four and lived on her own, nothing made Susan angrier than the way she refused to take sides. Susan knew she had influenced her daughter in the years since that initial separation - she knew she saw her almost twice as

often as he did - but just once she wanted Caroline to say “I hate Dad,” or when Susan asked her usual “How’s your father,” Caroline would respond “I don’t talk to him anymore.” Nothing she could imagine would give her more pleasure than those words hanging in her kitchen as she broke an egg into cake batter. “You don’t mean that,” she would say. “He’s still your father.” But she never had the chance.

“Why are you still in your sweats?”

“Caroline, I’m going out.”

“What about dinner?”

Susan sat on the edge of the sofa where Caroline was already laid flat with an *Us Weekly*.

“Give me a hug,” Susan said.

“Are you OK?”

“Just give me a hug.” Susan squeezed her daughter. Her eyes closed as she inhaled deeply the scent of Caroline’s coconut shampoo. She knew it might be another week until her next hug.

She had memorized his address from all the divorce paperwork. 401 High Street, Stamperville, NJ. Stamperville was full of authentic three-storey Victorians with wrap around porches, which Susan had always loved and to which he’d been indifferent. It galled her to no end that he’d wound up living in one of them. Bob in a Stamperville Victorian. Bob offering Certs to a stranger. Often during nights with her mother Susan had imagined what Bob’s house looked like, what his wife looked like, what shows they

watched or if they even owned a TV. He'd always watched so much more TV than she'd thought seemed right for an academic. "Shouldn't you be reading," she used to say to him when she wanted to watch something. But maybe he's changed. He goes to church now.

She parked in a municipal lot at the borough hall and armed with no map told herself her Sunday walk would be to find his house. Just to see it.

She marched on sycamore-lined streets. She was jealous of the homes, felt foolish for being here in someone else's neighborhood. She thought of that smile and how old Bob had looked in church. She let hate fill her. *And my curse upon you dear husband will turn your tongue to a knife so you'll slice that woman, slice all the places you like to put that tongue, the knife sharp enough that she won't feel, and not a drop of blood until you've filleted her good and I'll take that meat, that meat so much younger than yours, and dice it up for one of my casseroles and leave it locked up tight in Tupperware inside the storm doors at your brothers' houses and your sisters' houses and they'll wonder Why did Bob leave Susan like that, after all those years, for this girl from the college who beats us down with her smile, why did he exile Susan to terminal casserole delivery, what's he doing bringing this girl to Susan's church and sitting in the second pew with her when he knows this is her parish, not the parish she wanted to join but the only parish in the only town in 15 miles of her mother's nursing home that Susan could afford a mortgage in, why is he here, he doesn't even believe in God. But Smiley must. Smiley must have faith. Like me.*

By the time she'd found the house she'd walked for thirty minutes at a decent pace. The sun was setting. Hanging on his front door was a wreath of pinecones and gold ribbon, the kind of thing she liked to make and give to friends. She collected the pinecones on her Sunday walks. From the street she saw Bob Steadman standing in his living room. Her husband. In an Eagles t-shirt. She did not see the woman with the teeth.

She found herself on his porch. She was shaking her head. "No more," she said. She felt her finger depress the button for the doorbell.

At the door a blond woman smaller than Susan. More slender, yes, but shorter, too. The blond woman said, "Hi. What can I do for you?"

Susan said, "Bob."

Before the blond woman could call or move Bob was behind her. "Susan," he said.

Susan's body felt different than it had that morning. The energy splitting her in a million directions, sapping her strength, now felt focused. She looked him in the eye.

"Why don't you come in?" He extended his arm and held it there, as if to guide her inside.

"Can we talk on the porch?" she said.

"Sure, sure," he said and he and the blond woman exchanged looks. Susan noted how the blond's eyebrow rose as she looked at Bob. She was concerned. This was a small victory.

Bob closed the front door behind him. “You’re upset about today, Susan?” he said. His voice was soft, like she was someone he needed to look after. This was his game.

She didn’t answer him. She thought how she might never be this close to him again, her only man. With his hair almost all white and his wire framed glasses he looked intensely, eerily like his mother. What would your Martha think of you, she wondered. She thought of the young woman inside, her replacement, and how she hadn’t known his parents. She was probably in grade school when I was holding his hand at their funerals, Susan thought. Hadn’t known him as a boy with black curly hair. Hadn’t seen him grow up, hadn’t seen him hold their newborn Caroline.

She took a step closer to him and he raised his hands to his waist as if he wasn’t sure what to expect. She dug her nails into the soft underside of his arm just below the elbow. Her eyes never left his. She pressed her modest nails into him enough until she felt the first hint of blood and then let her fingers make a slow damp pull down toward his wristwatch. He didn’t make a noise, just kept blinking at her, as if his silence was a much-belated gift.

She backed away, not wanting to leave him. She let herself down the porch steps and he didn’t move, just kept looking at her.

She walked back to her car, checking over her shoulder a few times for signs of the blond woman or even for police, but part of her suspected even then that what she’d done wasn’t worth much attention. On the way home she stopped at the Acme close to

her apartment and bought dinner for two, in case Caroline was still there when she got back. She told herself to enjoy the routine of the supermarket, enjoy the idea of providing a meal for someone else. She would buy a rotisserie chicken, creamed spinach, mashed sweet potatoes: things Caroline liked. She reminded herself that when she got home she should eat slowly, enjoy each bite. Near the checkout she bought a book of puzzles that she'd bring to her mother tomorrow, one that would last the whole week. She would need a new church now, she thought, but after a break. Take her time to find someplace new. Maybe a church with a walking trail nearby. A place to find peace. She would start her search next Sunday.

CHAPTER V
HOPPED A BLOCK HOME

At work they made us all sign up for Big Brothers/Big Sisters. My Little Brother lives in a shitty little apartment in the scariest part of North Philly and plays video games by himself all day. I've asked him not to play when I'm there but he hasn't stopped so I just read the Daily News or send emails from my phone. I've been a brother and this doesn't feel like brotherhood. I've never been a father.

Mandy came and gave and didn't take anything. But who remembers it was raining down cold as ice?

My grandfather's middle name was Maxmillian. I use it for my email passwords, bank passwords, some other stuff. Maxmillian. Maxmillia.

Sometimes when a girl falls to sleep with her head on my chest it feels good and warm. Sometimes it makes it hard for me to breathe and my back feels heavy against the mattress so I whisper "excuse me" and get up for the bathroom.

I want to tell Tony he doesn't deserve me as his Big Brother, want to tell him he's fat and really lazy. Other times I think of how fast I walk from my car to his apartment with my head down praying no one notices me, and I think his mom does a good job with him.

Think of these names: Marvin, Lester, Sidney, Allen. White people moved out of

those neighborhoods a long time ago. Even Jews left. Hagler. Haynes. Moncrief. Iverson. White people moved to the suburbs. Tyler is one of those five bedroom houses that gets delivered on the back of a truck. Devon is a concrete running trail under the power lines. Cooper should be quartered by four guys on \$6000 bicycles.

Consider me hypnotized by the lips on the girl who reads the news on the station I watch before bed. She could suck world peace out of the mullahs. The way her mouth puckers on the u in downturn. Heart-shaped. It's not all about sex. We'd be domestic. Price shoppers in produce. "Did you ever try making your own gazpacho?" "Did anyone ever put a tarp down on the bed and pour gazpacho all over you and then fuck it off?"

Tony plays a game called Doom 3. The other day I looked at his empty Filet O Fish carton and wanted to say, *Tony, you know what's doomed?*

My mother goes to church. I try but mostly I don't.

"This is my wife- Yes, she's on TV. These are our sons, Leonard and Melvin."

There's a new girl at work who wears tight slacks. Slacks. Carl and I play a game to see who'll be the first each morning to send the email that reports: "French cut" or "Thong you very much ;)" or "Gramma :(" or "Commando???? Is this the day????"

I'll be in the living room and think *I need that fantasy football spreadsheet I printed at work* and then I'll head into the kitchen looking for it and I'll check my email instead. When I make it back to the living room I'll remember that I forgot the spreadsheet.

Tony has a hard time paying attention to me. Even when I say "Tony, I need you

to listen,” he’ll nod but his eyes bounce between my feet, because he never looks me in the eye, and the TV where he has his game paused.

“Tony what are you going to do when you grow up?”

“You mean a job?”

“With your life.”

“CIA.”

“First of all, I don’t just mean a job. Second, I don’t know if you’re CIA material. The way things stand now you couldn’t get hired as a secret shopper. You know what a secret shopper is?”

He shakes his head.

“OK. CIA. Let’s say you show up at Langley. You’re heavy. You don’t make eye contact. They’re going to think you’re a terrorist in a fat suit.”

His eyes are trained straight down on his perfect white basketball shoes. He nods.

“But I guess that’s what Big Brothers are for,” I say, “to try to make you better.”

His fat cheeks start to quiver. He sits on the edge of the oversized couch, hunched over, looking down at his perfect shoes.

“I’m sorry, buddy.”

I put my hand in front of his face so he knows I want to shake. He doesn’t move.

“Listen,” I say. “Let’s consider this your rock bottom, OK? Does that sound like a good plan? Everything’s better from here?”

“Yeah.”

“There are some things I’ve been holding back that I really need to tell you.”

He looks at the TV.

“Let’s start with your clothes,” I say.

Tony stuffs a sad hand into his bag of M&M’s. I smack the hand before it gets to his mouth. I open my palm so he’ll dump the candy into it. He does, then he closes his eyes hard enough that it looks like his face will swallow them.

“This is a button-down denim shirt you’re wearing.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“And who is this embroidered on the breast pocket?”

Tony looks down at the shirt and then, slowly, back at me. “Bugs Bunny.”

“And how old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Tony unless the next generation of Xbox comes with a working vagina I can’t let you wear this shirt anymore.”

Tony doesn’t look at me.

“How about next time I bring you a new shirt?”

There’s a commercial I like with chimps on cellphones.

I had lunch at my grandmom’s house. BLT’s and Ruffles on paper plates in wicker holders. After lunch I raked the leaves in her yard. Locust leaves remind me of Grape Nut Flakes, which we always had in the house when I was a kid. After I raked I listened to her stories. I hear the same ones every time I visit. She can’t help it. She’s

like a Top 40 DJ. “Fred and Rose’s daughter fell off scaffolding.” “Kathy doesn’t think Tina will ever get any taller. She won’t even be five feet tall.” “That Stan Jones is a nice fella. Brings my newspaper up onto the porch every morning. All of his daughters’ names begin with J.”

It’s been cold lately. Cold enough to seize up the pipes at my apartment. I’ve been sleeping out too much. I should at least take my showers there. Run the washer.

Tony called but I haven’t called him back.

This is a great city to live in. Sometimes I tell myself to look at it like I’m not from here, forget everyone I know, and when I do I say the traffic’s light for such a big city and the restaurants are good. I should buy a place.

I said to the new girl I’m with I’m going to Atlantic City with Billy and Chooch and she told me she didn’t care have a good time.

It’s cold enough that I’m wearing a sock hat when I go outside to smoke. A sock hat and a parka in November.

Two nights ago I had the best pizza of my life from that new place on Market. Between Front and Second.

I might get a dog. My last real girlfriend, Mandy, she had a dog that I miss.

I hurt my ankle playing basketball at lunch. I had 72 emails when I got home from the ER. It’s broken. Crutches.

Chooch won three grand at the craps table. He bought his girl a two thousand dollar Louis Vuitton bag at one of the casino shops and I told him he was a sucker and

Louis Vuitton is out. He didn't talk to me the rest of the night but he texted me when we got back: "I gave it to her and she cried. Blow me."

Earth Wind and Fire! I would let Philip Bailey teabag me. I got these new speakers just for "That's the Way of the World."

It is fucking too cold to be walking around on crutches. Damn my fingers hurt.

The first time I saw my dad cry we were watching a special on starving Ethiopians. I was probably 9. Kids with flies landing on their faces and they're too weak to brush them away. His eyes were all red and wet and when I asked him if he was crying he just nodded at me. He didn't want to talk. I couldn't put it into words then but that's when I started to realize he was just a kid like me.

My new girl called me. She found out her step dad has cancer all through his body. He has two months to live. She's bawling her eyes out. I felt bad for her but we've known each other for two weeks. What am I supposed to say? "At least it's not your real dad?"

When I was twelve I won a city-wide debate tournament and on stage at the end the guy from the Rotary handed me a check, I remember he was a big guy with a huge mustache, a Craig Stadler-type but older, and while they were taking our picture he told me someday I'd be using this picture in my campaign ads when I ran for the White House. I thought about that for years but now I think he probably said that to the winner every year. Or maybe he wanted in my pants. A life lesson to share with Tony: beware mustachioed Rotarians.

Work is crazy this week. First week of the month. Everybody closes their books on the last day of the month so the start of the next we're balls deep in spreadsheets. Who sold what? Who made money? Who lost? Who can our company bend over? Who bought land in Prairie Fuck, Idaho to build a new PetSmart? Ah, commercial real estate transaction analysis, my own true love. If it weren't for six fantasy leagues and two-hour lunches I'd be napping on the El tracks right now.

I told him. I told him and he didn't listen. Billy got engaged last night. Finally found the right fat girl. I shouldn't say that. I'll either be best man or godfather. I hope godfather. I can come up with some baby names out the ass. I wrote all these down today at work in about two minutes while I was on the phone: Milo. Jade. Dax. Livingston. William. Celia. Rhoda. Valerie. Harper. Glenn (for a girl). Darryl (for a girl).

Billy left me a voicemail. Probably about being best man.

I went to Tony's yesterday after work. His aunt (rhymes with "font") was there. She's hot as shit. Probably five ten, nice mm hms and unh uhs and a tiny little waist. Ray Charles would've loved her wrists. I wanted to be like, "Tony, I know you're thirteen and it's only 4:30 in the afternoon and I'm some guy that visits you for credit at work, but it's your bed time now." I think something could've happened. When she let me in she looked at me. Looked at me like I was the white Taye Diggs or something. At the very least a young Clifton Davis. At least that's how I felt. I gave her my card. Outreach.

There's a girl with a perfect ass at work who's lived all over the country. She loves to tell me how weird Philadelphia is, how we're the only big city she knows where the people only socialize with people they knew when they were fourteen. I want to tell her I'm not a typical Philadelphian, that I'm post-provincialism, that I met her when I was thirty and would me spending the day curled up under her desk with my tongue inside her count as socializing?

Felt like snow on the way home. Really dark sky. Couldn't see the tops of the buildings.

The new girl's coming over tonight. Cindy. I'm making veal osso buco. "Yeah, I cook too, baby. I do it all."

Tony's aunt friended me on Facebook. It's on, Tamia Reynolds, Temple '04. It's on it's on it's on. Hope you like veal.

If it snows I'll have to shovel out my grandmom's on one fucking leg.

I talked to Billy. I don't know if he's mad at me or what. He asked me to be a reader at his wedding. "Is Chooch best man," I asked him. "No, my brother. Chooch is a groomsman." His half-retarded step-brother? The guy who shit his pants he got so fucked up at an Eagles game and had to ride home in January in the back of Billy's pickup? He's best man and I'm not even a fucking groomsman?

It's snowing.

It must be Billy's girl. She doesn't like me.

Last night when I got to his house Tony had on a Sixers t-shirt. Black. About

three sizes too big, but a start. Black jeans. And his white sneakers.

“Tony, you look good,” I said.

“Thanks.” He had a way of making every word sound like a sigh.

In a plastic bag I had a polo shirt I’d picked up for him at Target. I put it down on the coffee table next to a mixing bowl full of orange Sun Chips.

“I thought maybe we could go out today,” I said.

He paused, exhaled a chubby breath through his nose. “Where to?”

“Maybe we could go see an IMAX movie.”

“No thanks.”

“You don’t like IMAX?”

“Makes me car sick.”

“You like regular movies?”

“Depends.”

“Your mom take you to the movies?”

“Sometimes.”

“You like pizza?”

“Can’t eat cheese.”

“That’s why you’re in such good shape I guess.”

“My BMI is 37,” he said.

“Bowel Movement Index,” I said.

“I’m gonna stay here.”

“Where’s your aunt tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

Tony makes me feel so strange. On the way home from his apartment I called Mandy. I deleted her number from my phone three years ago so I wouldn’t ever call her again but I never forgot her number. Almost went to the grave over that girl. Never felt a pain like that. She sounded happy to hear from me.

Getting out of my car my crutch caught a patch of ice and I went right down. My wrist took the weight. Hopped a block home because I couldn’t squeeze my crutch.

Cindy came over and took me to the ER because it swelled up. It’s broken.

Well you kissed me and stopped me from shaking.

My boss called me in today and told me Tony’s mom called Big Brothers and told them Tony wouldn’t be back and also that she filed a complaint against me. Told them he hasn’t been the same since I started visiting. I told my boss that was exactly right. That I was breaking him down to build him up. He sent me home early. Told me he had to put this in my folder.

I’ll take Luther, I’ll take Sade, and you can have everybody else on this station. Make me listen to a Rod Stewart cover ballad every hour? No, sir. That is what the scan button is for.

Cindy was just telling me a few nights ago she thought Big Brothers was good for me, gives me someone else to think about besides myself.

It’s not good to start talking to Mandy. Not good. She always wants me to talk

about myself but now it's like what's the point? You got what you wanted. You got away from me. Now leave me alone about me. Let's just have fun when we talk. I'm at the point now where I just need to say, "You know what? If you want to keep hearing about me, real stuff, then we need to start doing this face to face." She keeps saying she can't believe we're thirty and single and I want to tell her I can't believe any of how I turned out. Single is the least of it. I just thought I would feel different as I got older. There's no change between today and when I was eight. I wake up and want the sports page. Work is the same as going to school. I get home and call my friends. It's all the same.

I had a dream last night that I couldn't open the front door of my apartment to get out. All I needed to do was turn the handle but neither hand was strong enough to grip it. I must have tried a hundred times in the dream. I kept trying new things. I went into the kitchen to look for a rubber gripper for opening jars. When I was rooting around in the drawers my hands worked fine. They just wouldn't work to open the front door.

"This is Tony's aunt, Tamia."

"Didn't think I'd hear from you."

"Have you seen Tony or heard from him?"

"No. Why?"

"He never came home from school."

"You try his phone?"

"It's off. OK. You were a last resort."

“You want help looking for him?”

She hung up.

A guy in a walking boot, a cast on his wrist, a cane in his good hand, limping around North Philly?

It is never this cold in November. We got a foot of snow at my uncle’s funeral a few years ago but that was the first week of December.

Bitch hung up on me. Do you want my help or not?

I called Mandy again. I told her about Tony. She told me I had to go look for him, at least show the effort to his mom. I told her I had one good arm and one good leg. She told me the percentage of asshole things I do was good for getting girls but not keeping them. She told me I was in the 60-70% range. I told her 60-70% was the rate I thought about her sister when we were having sex. She hung up on me but I know she always loved it when I said shit like that.

Cindy’s on her way over.

Tony, I want to say, Tony you’re fucked anyway. Nobody in your life will tell you this but you’re fucked. Your Xbox won’t save you, kid. That wrap around couch with recliners on the end your mom got at Rent A Center. No. Your mom doesn’t know what she’s doing. You’ll be home tonight. You’ll make them worry but you’ll be home. You’ll be one of those security guards at the Rite Aid in a nylon bomber jacket and a blue stripe down your pants eating chips, elbows on the counter and your butt out like a five-year-old telling old women what aisle the tin foil’s in, what aisle the gauze is in. Take a

Sprite out of the case for yourself. Different checkout girls every few months.

Cindy wanted Chinese but I told her I think I'm starting the flu. Sent her home.

I sat in the dark in my apartment. I zoned out so bad I didn't even hear the tea kettle screaming. When I got out to the kitchen it was glowing orange on the burner. I picked it up and it was almost empty. I'm trying to drink more tea. Reminds me of my Pop Pop Alphonse. He must've had a dozen cups a day. Tetley orange pekoe with one lemon juice and two sugars. He would save the bags and pack them down into the dirt around his rosebushes. Don't ask me. Now I'm wondering if I could get a little starter rosebush for my windowsill. What Would Alphonse Do? That's what I need to keep asking myself. Everybody loved that guy. He would think I'm doing ok. More like he wouldn't care. Wouldn't ask me. Would make his tea and ask me about the Phillies.

I turned the lights on. Put my hat and coat on. Started out for the subway. Seven blocks on a fucking cane. I told myself I'd decide when I got to the train how I felt, if I'd get on and head up to North Philly or not.

This is why you don't do shit like this. Fucking ice cold out here. Fucking ice cold thinking about some kid.

CHAPTER VI

AT SEA

On the morning my mother died of malaria during her mission to the last leper colony of Hawaii, a black-necked stilt landed on the railing outside her bedroom window. From her bed, Mother could see the bird and she muttered to Father, “The popcorn display.” “Indeed,” he said. His smile changed the course of tears on his cheeks, spread them out, so that the tropical morning light gave him a diamond beard.

I said, “Father, what is the popcorn display?”

Without taking his eyes off Mother he said, “It is a display the stilts use to scare away ground predators. The birds hop from side to side and flap their wings and screech.”

I knew that on a regular day, the kind before Mother was sick, he would have demonstrated.

Mother reached an arm out for my slender waist. She pulled me so that I was bent over the bed towards her – her eyes too big for her face – and she said, “Bobo, please, whatever you do in your long, beautiful, productive life, make sure you live by this one rule.” She coughed. Father, murmuring “Oh Marguerite” on the other side of Mother’s bed, stroking her hair back from her forehead, tipped a few droplets of water between her lips. When she regained herself, she said to me, “Shoot for the moon.” She paused then

for a faint drawing of breath. Her blinks, I remember, were no longer blinks but slow, single closings and, after a moment, or sometimes an interlude of sleep, willful openings of her eyes like a drawbridge. Father wept now. “Mother. Mother,” he said. His tears tapped against her bed’s fitted sheet. She squinted at him and her cracked watery lips turned down. She wanted quiet. She raised a slow finger in the direction of the bird, who still observed us, and said to me, “At least you’ll land among the stars.” Those were her last words, and they are what started me on this road called life.

Perhaps road is a bad metaphor because actually Father and I took a steamer back to the mainland after Mother’s death. Father had wanted to fly home to Philadelphia post haste but I said to him – and this, along with Mother’s rule and the stilt, her death, our nights on the beach, and the lepers who called to me, “Prince Bobo,” from behind a bamboo fence, is one of my earliest memories - “Father, flying coach is a little prosaic, no? Why not let’s sail the high seas home? Think of the good it’ll do us, Pa. May I call you Pa?”

We were on that blue Pacific for three weeks. And I mean blue. Our routine was to curl up in balls on our twin beds and wail and moan all morning and afternoon under our paisley duvets, then we’d each take a shower – I was getting too old to bathe with Father, he’d said– and we’d go for supper in the ship’s main dining room in our khaki suits. Even in our grief those suits didn’t feel, to me, apropos of luxury seafaring and between jags one afternoon I happened on a sidebar in *Underway* magazine about the pleasures of tuxedo-wearing at sea and the easy availability of said in the ship’s men’s

shop.

To that end, about an hour before the ship's dinner on our fourth day underway, I had a feeling come over me that I couldn't cry any longer. It was as if my tears were sands in Mother's kitchen hourglass and mine had run out. If I were to cry again it would require me to flip the glass and I couldn't see a reason why I would do that. This is how Mother was, too. When her mother died she cried for a day and that was it and she didn't seem much different after. Father, though, he couldn't stop flipping the hourglass. When I had this feeling I said, "Pa, can we go to the men's shop and have tuxedos made?"

"Bobo, you are ridiculous."

"I have seen men in tuxedos aboard," I said, "and they seem buoyed, if you will. As if the clothes can't help but improve everything."

"We sail home instead of fly to please you. I draw the line," and he drew his finger across the air between us, "at tuxedos."

"The tuxedos will stop your tears," I said.

"Go for a walk," he said, and jabbed his line-drawing finger in the direction of the door.

I didn't move.

"Go," he said. When I left and closed the door I stood in the long hallway and waited. I heard the springs of a mattress gasp, and then it started again. A long rumbling moan that could have come from one of Father's tapes of invasive Hawaiian frog sounds.

On the promenade deck, couples holding hands--women in shining dresses and

pearl necklaces and men, mostly in blue blazers and neck ties -- walked toward the stern. They were headed to watch the sunset. I went to the bow. I would not honor sunsets any longer. Sunsets were for Hawaii. Instead I would wait for the moon, my target, to rise.

With my pimple ball I played a game on the third deck overlooking the bow. I would heave the ball as high as I could, let it bounce once off the deck, and then catch it in my jersey, which I would turn up at the bottom like a net, the way father would turn his apron to carry potatoes to the cutting board. I called this game apron catch and I was the best player in the world. After a few dozen tries and a few drops I was able to secure the ball in my shirtnet without letting it bounce first. I was in a lather. Improvement. I had achieved improvement through practice. I wanted to tell Mother.

When I started to lose sight of the ball in the darkening sky, the moon not yet risen, I returned to the room. Father was standing as if he had been waiting for me. His hair was wet and parted and he smelled of the gingery German cologne Mother had given him for Tag der Kranken. "I am home," he'd said that day, inhaling deeply as he'd stepped through a mist of it. "I am a teenager again." Now, he wore the tan suit he'd worn just days ago to Mother's funeral. "You're late for dinner, Bobo."

"I thought you were crying for the night."

"Tomorrow we have tuxedo fittings."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Dinner," he said.

The next day Pa whimpered and sniffled under his covers until our eleven a.m. fitting. After the fitting he went back under. I was no longer joining him in tears but I stayed in the room, perched on my bed mostly, often following the ship's keno game on the in-house channel. He lifted his head from beneath his pillows at one point and said, "It was my fault, you know. It had been dormant in her since Mozambique and we only went to Mozambique because of me. The great herpetologist must travel with his family and all that. Ego." He buried his head again and cried until we picked up the suits at five o'clock.

That night at dinner we were the source of much happy murmuring, though Father didn't seem to notice, as we wheeled through the dining room in our black tuxedo suits to our table for two by the window. As we sat digesting our barracuda filets, a man sporting his own bow tie and white waist-length jacket approached our table. "Hello, dashing little boy. My name is Isaac," he said. "I am the ship's happy-go-lucky bartender and I have received permission from the ship's captain to share my magical powers with you and grant you one wish." With that he pulled from behind his back a children's dessert menu and presented it to me as if he'd pulled it from thin air.

"Please bring my dead mother back," I said, as any young half-orphan – a phrase I'd coined at sea – would have. "She's dead of malaria. The black water fever."

"Forgive me, son," Isaac said, even though I clearly wasn't his son, as my own father was sitting across from me, although Father didn't seem to be hearing my exchange with Isaac. His eyes were on the dark ocean.

Isaac continued. “I forgot to tell you that there are certain stipulations regarding the fulfillment of your wish and they are as follows: by granting you one wish, I mean one free dessert.”

“Oh.”

“What’ll it be?”

“Boston Crème Pie.”

“Comin’ up,” he said.

“Make it two,” Pa said.

Walking back to our room Father attempted conversation for the first time on our voyage. “I have had better fish. And that pie crust could have been flakier.”

“Father,” I said, and inside me I could see, rushing like a rogue wave, a swelling resentment over the wasting of the high seas adventure of a lifetime – Mother would want us to enjoy ourselves. “Father, is it so hard to be positive, to see the best in a given situation? Sometimes you’re too negative.”

“I am stuck on a cruise ship to San Francisco with a bunch of retirees. My back aches from digging my own wife’s grave. I am too negative?”

“Can we at least, Pa, do something fun while we’re on board? One thing? I know we’re grieving but I think we would feel better if you would stop crying all day. Just for one day?”

He didn’t say anything, but hung his head. The tuxedo, somehow, made him seem even sadder. He wore it only for me.

“Pa, it’s OK. I’m sorry,” I said, and took him by the hand.

He was snoring by the time I finished brushing my teeth. I fell asleep, too, despite the noise, by imagining myself herding penguins at the summer camp in Antarctica Pa had promised me. Penguinherd is a possible career, I thought.

In the night I felt a hand shaking my foot. When I opened my eyes there was Pa in his scuba suit.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Is this fun?” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“We’re going to have an adventure.”

“Of what stripe?” I asked.

He didn’t answer me but placed the case with my suit next to me on the bed. “Go ahead. You too,” he said, and pulled his mask on. When I was dressed – suit, gloves, goggles, flippers, oxygen mask – he waved for me to come and stepped out into the hallway.

We were the only two people on the ship’s deck so I was the only person in the world who saw Father commence to jogging in his wetsuit. It wasn’t a very fast jog with the flippers and the twenty-six pound tank, but it wasn’t walking. Without breaking stride he turned and waved at me to follow. I didn’t know what we were running towards, but I followed his call. Running in flippers requires great upward thrusting kicks and I felt myself glazed in sweat right away inside the neoprene suit. Soon I found

my rhythm and began to catch up with Father. As we approached the shuffleboard courts at the stern I pulled alongside Pa and made two thumbs up. Inside my mask I said things he couldn't hear. "Pa, we are having fun! We are running in wetsuits! I don't understand, but I am running in a wetsuit!" I don't think Pa was saying anything inside his wetsuit, and his eyes didn't look as wide as mine must have, but I'm sure he was gloriously happy, too.

On the turn at the starboard aft Pa pointed at something in the distance. I couldn't see what. He pointed in the direction we were running so I had faith I'd see soon enough. Pa's finger then traced an exaggerated "W" and I knew he was signaling Cassiopeia, the constellation the three of us would find first during our nights on the beach.

One of our last nights before Mother's illness we were by the water, wisps of clouds still pink from the just-set sun. I said to Mother, "What do you think I'll be?" and she said "President of the Himalayas. King of Rhode Island. But not a dominator. A facilitator of good." And while she was telling what I would be, Pa backed over to us as he kept his frog kite aloft and said, "Do you hear it?" Mother went quiet and then we heard it, barely, above the ocean's engine: a choir of the lepers healthy enough to sing. "I hear you singin' in the wires." Mother, between her surveys and her caregiving, had trained them to sing as a palliative, but Father and I had never heard it before.

"Your medical schooling has paid off!" Pa said. He wrapped her up like she was a little girl and pressed kisses all over her face. "You have taught them to call forth Cassiopeia through contemporary song. You have made them happy!" he said. "Glenn

Campbell medicine! Jimmy Webb medicine!”

On the walk back to the mission, with Father’s arm across Mother’s back, Father said, “Why Cassiopeia, Marguerite?” And then to me, “Do you know why your mother chose Cassiopeia, Bobo?”

“Because it’s shaped like a crown,” I said.

“Indeed,” he said, and smiled so that his brown teeth caught the light.

So now we were running in the flippers, staying clear of deck chairs, with Pa tracing Cassiopeia with his gloved finger, and I thought the greatest thing that could happen to the two of us would be if Isaac were to arrive with a cool drink. Then I imagined Isaac moving back to Philadelphia with us and making himself into a person I could play with and ride the Great Danes with. Or maybe Pa would be that person if he lost weight.

When we had made a complete loop of the cruise ship’s deck I felt I couldn’t do another, but Pa showed no signs of slowing. I wasn’t angry with him for not turning around to check on me but I did want to stop. I called to him but he kept running. I decided to make a sprint for him with my last kilowatt of energy. I dove at his legs the way I had so many times during rugby on the beach. I managed one gloved hand on his heel and he faltered and came to a rolling stop a dozen yards ahead of me on the deck. He reached for a shoulder. I couldn’t see his face but I removed my mask and made my eyes big. It is difficult to harm any creature with large eyes, I had heard Pa say before about frogs. When he righted himself he walked to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I wanted to stop. I should have let you keep going.”

He bent down to one knee so we could be at eye level. He removed his mouthpiece and lifted his goggles to his forehead, and then put his hands on my shoulders. He sang in a loud voice that wasn’t afraid to wake the cabins above us. “‘I am a lineman for the county / And I drive the main road / Searching in the sun for another overload.’ Do you know it?” he asked me.

“‘I hear you singing in the wire,’” I sang. Pa nodded and joined me, “‘I can hear you through the whine / And the Wichita lineman is still on the line.’”

Pa said, “Don’t forget them singing for her.” He peeled the suit’s hood back. “Feel my hair,” he said.

It was warm spaghetti.

“We are having fun,” he said. He put the hood back in place, stretched the goggles on, returned the oxygen nozzle to his mouth. He started running again, the flippers kicking high in front of him. I ran too. I hoped that he would dive off the ship at the stern and let us sink together. I had faith that in time we could befriend a humpback whale who would deliver us the rest of the way to San Francisco. But if Pa kept running laps around the deck I would follow him there too.