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Tell Me a Sad Story

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TELL ME A SAD STORY

You buy a candy apple red Ford LTD—eight cylinders, seventeen and a half feet from hood ornament to rear emblem—hitch a small trailer to it, and at five miles over the speed limit you drive away from El Paso and the Chihuahuan desert. You drive past the Guadalupe Mountains, you drive through the Ouachita Forest in Arkansas, through Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville, forgoing motels for rest stop naps, feeling high and familiar on the pavement you've spent so much of your life traversing—all the while, your six-year-old son buckled in next to you, learning firsthand how to cross the country.

When you come out of the Holland Tunnel the sun is rising. Benny sees the buildings in Manhattan lighting up and his mouth opens and you think that you have undoubtedly done right. He needs to know more than just the border.

You drive to Queens and sign the paperwork for the room you've leased. After this you unload the contents of the trailer: one futon, one red cutler recliner, an end table and a lamp, a TV and a telephone, a box of plates and pots, four boxes of clothes and towels and sheets, and one box of toys. Then you take a shower, make Benny do the same, and, too awake from the drive to sleep, take the A-Train to Aqueduct Station.

It's December and the kick of anticipation in the crisp air has you talking for two as you walk up the steps from the subway: "The first time I came to this track I was fifteen," you tell your son. "I was tall for fifteen and wore a jacket with padded shoulders and a wool hat pulled low. No one batted an eye."

At ground level, in front of you, is Aqueduct Racetrack, multi-leveled and magnificent in its endless glass, as if the purpose of the structure was to view the world from the position of royalty; but your eyes focus only on the entrance, the internal organs of the machine. "I almost blew it when I went to cash my first winner," you say. "The horse paid \$3.20 and I'd put down five. When the

lady behind the window handed me eight bucks I started to argue; but a guy in line pulled me aside and explained how things work, that it was \$3.20 for every two, not one, that I bet.”

“Why aren’t we going to the turf club?” Benny asks as you walk through the glass doors, handing a leather-skinned woman with thick, bright-blue eye shadow twenty-five cents for a racing program.

“Because this is ‘The Big A.’ The turf club here costs money,” you say, aware he’s at best half-listening. “Are you shivering?” you ask. His arms are wrapped around his torso, making his sweater look like a straitjacket, even though it was only a short walk from the subway to the front doors. You go on: “That was when I was living in Pleasantville Cottage Home. Me and a few guys put together about twenty dollars and came down here to get rich. We didn’t get rich, but we did win. Or *I* won. They just waited outside.”

You remember getting back to Pleasantville that first day, all the other abandoned teenagers wanting to see the money. The next time you went you had a pool of forty-five dollars, then sixty. Around the time one of the cottage parents started pitching in you realized you didn’t even have to make bets for them. Half the time you could keep their money and tell them you lost; the occasions you gave them something back were enough to keep them going. They just wanted to be involved enough to feel the vicarious kick from a safe distance. The same way people watch movies about criminals living lives they’d never live themselves, and yet get so invested they trick their adrenal glands into giving them a comped squirt or two. You began to think of yourself as providing a service. You were a charitable window through which the meek absorbed indirect rays of defiance.

You had not yet heard the term bookie, though you’d later apply the same logic.

Benny stops to stare at the menu on a concession stand, his arms now at his sides, the steady pump of the heaters working him over. He won't find any chile con queso or enchiladas, you think. "Hey," you say, and he starts to follow again. Maybe if you told him about how everything came to an end, how when the cottage home management learned about your trips they confiscated everyone's money and made them sign for what they needed to buy things, how the cottage parent who'd been involved got fired and had to leave, how it changed the way everyone there looked at and treated you, in this place that was forever a knee-jerk away from violence. Maybe then Benny would be interested, because you've noticed in the last months that the only kinds of stories that hold his attention are sad ones. As if he's finished believing in all others.

The first race is five minutes to post and you walk faster, telling Benny to keep up, and when you look back to check on him you see him watching everyone he passes as if he's looking for someone he knows. You stop again, aware of the heaters, the smell like burned hair in a blow-dryer. No one here's going to comment on how tall he's getting, no one knows his name, or yours. 'Pay attention,' you want to tell him. 'These people will walk through you if you get in their way.'

You moved to New York for two reasons. One is that Bobby, your oldest 'friend,' is waiting to introduce you to a man named Jackie, a bookie with a business so big—"I mean like entire office floor big," Bobby told you—that it's gotten out of control.

So you drive to Brooklyn to meet Bobby for coffee at a deli in Bensonhurst. He looks bad, like a vegetable someone forgot to refrigerate.

"This is your thing, Benjamin, this is what you do," Bobby tells you. Since introducing Benny you haven't had much to say, and Bobby is starting to ramble. "You overhaul. You build up operations. I told Jackie he needs someone like you." He waits. He goes on. "Remember the trucking company? How you took it and built it up?"

"I was a kid then. And that was legal," you say, watching Benny play with the two action figures he brought from home—something to do with cats, he'd said. Lightning cats maybe, though neither look like any cat you've ever seen, and you can't imagine what they have to do with lightning. You can't even tell which is the good cat and which is the bad.

"Only by coincidence," Bobby says. "Not by requirement."

He's trying to sell you on this. People like him can sense hesitation like a wife can sense when a husband's lying. They smell it a mile away. You never thought you'd be one of those—the type of person who carries his nerves on his sleeve.

"I have a son now," you say.

Bobby closes his eyes and breathes in audibly. His hair is as curly as it was the last time you saw him in Vegas over a decade prior. Even though the front half is missing. The same is true for yours, as well. Not the curls part, just the missing.

"Lot's of people have sons. Some have daughters, too," he says, and you think that you couldn't care less about his daughter. "This is what you came here to do, Benjamin. Let me introduce you to Jackie. You and him will get along. Just give it a chance."

You consider the person you were when you first knew Bobby. It was after the cottage home, when you lived briefly with your father, in Brooklyn, while finishing high school. This time taking bets from students and teachers. This time not getting caught. Living was effortless and you walked with a margin of air between you and the ground. The world on a platter. As you

entered adult life—riding in subways or sitting in the back of taxis, a young man with a bankroll—you felt like you'd unlocked an obvious secret most people were either too vapid or dumb or skitish to capitalize on. You couldn't understand how a human being could spend thirty or forty years going to the same buildings and rooms, their limbs and tongues making the same movements, the strings attached to those limbs and tongues being pulled by hands they'd never see or understand. Wind-up toys bobbling back and forth, shucking out their days like dead weight. Just a kid, deciding the world was comprised of half-dead sacks of flesh that settled for laughing and crying as evidence of their existence, each one waiting for time to sweep them under the rug.

"Give me a few weeks to settle in. Let me get Benny in school and then we'll talk."

Bobby runs his hand over his milk-curd face and you wonder if you could have possibly rotted as much as him, only you can't remember yourself in the mirror this morning let alone a decade ago. Which is just as well—who wants to contemplate accelerated aging?

"I told Jackie you were coming *this* week. I told him that because that's what you told me. You told me you were on your way." He stops, leans back. You think how Bobby never was good at hiding his emotions. You don't ask, don't care, don't want to know.

"Bring Benny with you," he says. "Plenty of space for him to mess around."

You reach over and scramble your son's hair and he fakes anger and bats at your forearm. "Next week is the holidays, two weeks later school starts. We'll get into it then."

Bobby sucks air, nods his head, and pulls out a goodwill smile. "Sure. Then. What's the difference, right?"

Your older sister had her first daughter when she was eighteen and before the end of the year, because it seems like the right thing to do, you take Benny to meet his adult cousin, Claire, in Long Island, where she lives with her husband, Joel, and their two children: a son, Elton, who is Benny's age, and a daughter, Marissa, who they call Mari, and is halfway through her first year of high school.

At the dinner table—from which Joel is absent—among soup, gefilte fish, and carrot tsimmes, Benny asks why they don't have a Christmas tree.

"Because we're Jewish, silly," Mari says as she reaches across the table to pinch him. She's at an age in which she likes to pretend-mother anyone younger than her. "We celebrate Chanukah," she says.

From behind a fistful of bread roll, Elton asks, "Your dad is, too. Isn't he?"

You can feel your son's eyes, even though you don't look up from your plate.

Claire breaks the silence, saying, "Remember Uncle, when I was a teenager and you'd pick me up by my elbows?" She turns to her daughter. "I'd squirm and tell him to put me down. I hated being picked up like a little kid. I wanted to be treated like a woman."

"Imagine that," Mari says.

Claire ignores her. "And gifts! He always showed up with gifts. Coats, hats, sometimes jewelry even. Every visit was like a birthday." At the word 'coat' you and her make fleeting eye contact.

After dinner Claire disappears upstairs, and later, as you get ready to leave, she pulls a down jacket from a box of clothes she's

placed by the front door and helps Benny into it. "There's some thermals, some wools socks, a couple sweaters in there," she says. "Elton just got new winter clothes. He's not going to use these anymore."

The sleeves don't go all the way to Benny's wrists, but he's already zipping up. "I've been meaning to take him to a department store," you say. "Let me give you some money."

"Joel gets reduced rates. I would've just donated them, anyway." You almost say something about this being a donation if she won't take your money.

When Claire drops you off at the Ronkonkoma Station in her blue Honda hatchback, she says, "You know, retail isn't bad, Uncle. Joel doesn't mind it. He makes good money as a manager, gets paid vacations, health benefits, a retirement plan. The works."

Half your age, talking about retirement plans. "He ever make it home for dinner?"

"He's working overtime tonight. It's a busy time of year. And it's not mandatory."

"Overtime? That's good. Good for him."

She turns to the back seat. "Did my favorite cousin have a good time?"

Benny looks back blankly. The one time they met he was an infant, when you brought his mother to New York for the first and only time in her life.

"The fish was good," he says.

You lean over and kiss Claire on the forehead. "Tell Joel hello." You open the door and climb out, pulling the seat forward for Benny.

As the Long Island Rail train moves southwest toward Queens, Benny asks you about being Jewish.

"What do you want to know?" you say.

He looks at the ceiling and your eyes follow. It's thick with

marker and spray paint lines you can't come close to deciphering.

"Are we Jewish? I thought we were Catholic. Can we be both?"

You slide down in your seat, draping your forearms over your thighs and folding your hands together. "Your mother was Catholic. She took you to church because she wanted you to have religion." A small smile creeps into your face. "Sometimes she'd get worked up about me and her living in sin because we'd gotten married in Vegas."

Benny waits, but after the train passes through a tunnel of quiet he asks, "So then you're Jewish? And I'm Jewish too because I'm your son?"

"I never really considered myself a Jew," you say. "People are going to look at your name, Benjamin Natan, and assume you're Jewish, but it's not like we participate."

"Because we don't go to church?"

"Synagogue," you say. "It's called a synagogue."

He plays with the word in his mouth, pronouncing each syllable separately, and you think about a year prior when you took Benny to a synagogue in El Paso to ask the Rabbi for a loan. You told your son there was one thing you had to hand to the Jews: they took care of their own. The Catholics were all about sacrifice and the collection plate.

"So we're not really Jewish? Should I be Catholic then?"

You look at the veins on your hands that look bluer than they should. Or maybe the skin is just whiter. In the desert, the sun kept you brown even in the winter—especially the left arm, which you hung out the car window whenever you drove. Could your tan be fading already? You look at Benny's hands, small and soft, no lines or scars, but similar in shape to your own with protruding knuckles and long fingers. You think about how reserved Benny is, how careful he is with his words. Not at all like a child.

The thought that Benny is less impulsive than you floats into your mind.

"When I was a little older than you my father sent me to Hebrew lessons," you say. "I sat in a drafty talcum powder-smelling apartment with four other kids, all of us on wood chairs, while an old bearded guy with yarmulke and back bent from too many hours hunched over The Torah read in Hebrew. We were supposed to write what he read and recite it back. That lasted about a week before I started taking the money for the lessons to the movies—at the time, a dime got you into a double-feature. When my father found out he smacked me around pretty good. He was from the old school. *I was going to get Bar Mitzvah.*"

You stop talking but it's apparent he's waiting for more.

"You want to know what 'yarmulke' and 'Bar Mitzvah' mean," you say. He shakes his head. "You want to know what the point of the story is." He nods, and you look back to the ceiling, able to make out the word 'break' from the collision of letters.

"What I'm saying, buddy, is I'm not going to force you one way or the other." You look back at him and place your hand on his head, running your fingers through his hair. "I'm not going to try to tell you what to do." His eyebrows scrunch together, reminding you of the way he'd focus all his attention on the numbers in his racing program back in El Paso when you'd let him make two-dollar bets.

"But you got to tell me," he says. "If you don't who is? I'm not even a teenager yet."

Before you can answer him you realize you've missed the transfer at Jamaica. You get off at an unfamiliar station, go up some stairs, go left, down some other stairs, left again, and hop on another train. Only this one's going the wrong direction. You study the maps while you ride, trying to decipher a once memorized system that's now as foreign as Hebrew. It takes three hours to make

what should have been an hour and a half trip home, and by the time you walk through the front door Benny is asleep in your arms.

You look out your apartment window at the Van Wyck Expressway, the telephone held to your ear. "Why are you talking to your daughter about me?" you say to your sister, Shirley. Your over-a-thousand-miles-away sister who you brought to El Paso from New York but now lives in Florida.

"I don't know what you mean," she says.

"You don't know? Is that right? Then why's she trying to sell me on the virtues of retail?"

"Because Joel can get you a job, Sonny!" she says, and of course she's a little buzzed to have slipped that easily.

You take a deep breath and hold it in longer than you should as the semi-trucks roll by making the innards of the apartment building rattle with exhaust-spiked eighteen-wheel noise. Your sister knows the sound well, you think, having lived in similar buildings.

"Come on," she says when the rumbling stops. "This is family we're talking about."

"Forget it. Me and her already talked."

"Why can't you just give it a try? You're a natural salesman."

You consider starting the kind of fight that will keep her from calling for a while. By telling her what you think of her and her advice you've made her mad enough in the past to keep away for months. Years even.

"Sonny," she says.

"Next time you talk to Claire," you say, "tell her I'm doing fine. That's all she needs to know, that her uncle's fine."

The facts are facts, you think. Sometimes the horses don't do what they're supposed to, sometimes the jocks. Sometimes a long shot decides it's his day and alters the course of everyone involved. Such is life.

"When the front door's locked, you go in the back," you say to your library-quiet son as you drive him down 144th toward PS 82, Hammond Elementary.

It's mid-January and the mornings are filled with shovels, salt, and coffee that cools before it can be finished. In Central Park the homeless are dying nightly on their cardboard floors, their blood frozen. Under Benny's jacket he's dressed himself with every layer of clothing Claire gave him.

"Now that you're in school, I'm gonna get serious about that thing I've been going over with Bobby, see what I can put together for us." Benny looks ahead, maybe searching for school signs.

When you reach the four-story brick building, you pull into the cul-de-sac entrance, get out of the car, and go to open Benny's door. You reach into the back seat and grab his Rambo-decaled camouflaged backpack into which you've tossed a notebook and a pen.

Benny stares at the building. "This is a school?" he asks. "Where's the portables, the playground?"

Amidst the flow of children and occasional parents, you kneel in front of your son. "Would I leave you here if it wasn't?" you say, though he's still fixated on the bricks, his eyes wide and motionless, like a person receding into theirself.

"Hey, look at me," you say, needing to move his chin with your hand to get him to do so. "You go in there and knock 'em

dead, got it?" When he stares blankly at you, you cup his jaw and make him nod. When he starts to nod on his own you say, "Okay, buddy, give me a kiss." He looks away. "I know, I know, not in public. But just so *you* know, if I'd ever acted embarrassed to kiss my father I'd have gotten it good." You put your hands on his shoulders, turn him around, and give him the lightest of shoves. "Go get 'em."

Never have you seen something like this: an entire lung cancer room filled with men and women of all ages endlessly smoking and taking calls. Also, another room lined with a counter of coffee pots for the people who research and analyze odds by comparing betting lines in Vegas, Reno, and other places. Here they keep tabs on not just the latest statistics, but also on which players might have a hidden knee injury, or which manager might have just been left by his wife.

Unseen are the runners, a network of people on the streets collecting, making drops.

"And everyone involved is diluting the bankroll by skimming a percentage of their action," Jackie tells you. "A kid makes a hundred dollar pickup, he puts ten in his pocket." Jackie is a bald antique of a Jew with thick, black-framed glasses and who wears shorts that expose his pale blue-veined legs despite the freezing temperatures outside—"getting ready for retirement in Florida," he says when he catches you staring. "Maybe I'll introduce you to my sister," you think. He also, as Bobby mentions later, regularly breaks out in stress-related hives. "I'm handling five hundred grand a day and watching my accounts go the same direction as my sperm count," he says.

"So what do you want me to do?" you ask, sitting in front of Jackie's desk while the old man reclines in a massive leather chair

which tops out a foot above his head, kneading hands that look like they were carved from an oak tree and jutting out his mouth like a frustrated child. Bobby is to your right, beaming.

“Most of the cash either exists on paper or is being passed around on the streets,” he says. “So first, just work the books. Go over everything like you’re looking for your girlfriend’s missing birth control pill.” He narrows his eyes. “You married?”

“Widower,” you say. “You keep books?” you ask, picturing a mountain of ink-smearred paper inside a warehouse.

“Only for the preceding week, then we make them get lost.”

Jackie reminds you of an old man you almost worked for in Reno. The guy had recruited you from Vegas when you were living there in the early 70’s, flown you in and offered you big money to help with his sports book. But it’d been winter and you couldn’t handle the Reno snow. Snow was the reason you’d left New York.

“You ever been busted?” you ask.

“Gone bust or been busted?”

“Been,” you say.

Jackie stares at you, crosses his arms, and you understand he doesn’t like being asked questions. “What’s your point?” he asks.

But what can you say? That when you left Texas for New York you left a place where gambling’s a misdemeanor—pay a fine and go on about your day—for a place where gambling’s a felony? That you already have one felony in your past and that another would devastate your family? That every time your mind wanders back to the cottage home you lived in you picture your own son there?

“No point,” you say, because this job is a good thing. This job is what you need.

“Bobby said you know numbers like a Rabbi knows the Torah,” Jackie says. “Show me.”

"How'd your first day go?" you ask as you drive your son home.

Benny shrugs.

"What's that mean?"

"I went to the office like you said and told them my name. They asked where you were."

"And what'd you say?"

"That you said to go to the office and tell them my name and that they'd put me in a class."

"And did they?"

Benny nods.

"Good. What else?"

"The rooms smell like wood. And the ceilings are really high. The building's a lot bigger than it looks from outside. There's five floors, one's underground. I got lost going to the bathroom. I had to go back to the office and the same lady from the morning took me to class again."

"Well," you say. "That'll happen. How about the teacher?"

"She's got white hair and big glasses and she talks like she's trying to knock you down. She said I need school supplies."

"I gave you a notebook," you say.

"She says I need folders for all my subjects, a ruler, book covers, glue—"

"I get it. We'll go to the store. And the other kids?"

"There's a lot of white kids. I share a table with one named Sebastian. You ever heard that name?"

You nod and say you have.

"I had to stand in front of the class and tell them my name and where I was from. No one said anything about my last name.

But when I said I was from El Paso one girl asked if that was in Mexico.”

“And what’d you say?”

He shrugs again and you wonder if this is his new thing. “I told her ‘sort of.’”

Two months go by and the sky is clear and in Central Park the elms, maples, birches, and countless other types of trees are showing signs of sprouting leaves, of someday reasserting their shade over the walkways and grassy knolls.

Having dived into Jackie’s books and swam through more weekly cycles than you can remember, you come to the same conclusion again and again: the problem is in accountability. There’s nothing to stop a collector from pocketing a percentage and cutting in whoever took the bet to change the amount on paper. The solution is both simple and colossal: for every transaction there needs to be someone in between the people taking the bets and the people collecting. Also, there needs to be projections of what’s coming in and from whom, so a red flag goes up if the expected number doesn’t line up with the actual cash brought in. Which is fine. You understand. You know what to do.

Jackie’s gotten away with the honor system to a point—call it chivalry amongst thieves—but half these people don’t know him from the doorman. And worse, he doesn’t know them. Which is fine. Personal connections only beat back greed for so long, anyway. This is a problem with a solution. You’ve dived in and you’re swimming. You’re waking up those dusty muscles and quieting your red-alert mind. What purpose can do. All it’s going to take is restructuring—mammoth restructuring, but who knows about that better than you.

“Why’d you leave El Paso?” Claire asks you as you eat lunch together at Portofino’s on Ascan Avenue. You’ve got money in your pocket and that feels good and so you had the urge to take someone out to eat. She focuses on her linguini as she speaks, keeping her head close to her plate, blowing on and then slurping up the pasta.

The other reason you left El Paso is that you were a bankrupt bookie trying to scratch out a living when someone with money made an investment in restarting your business and the long and the short of it was that it didn’t work. Apparently, it wasn’t as easy as you told him it would be to build your client list back—the difference a small amount of time can make. You picked up a handful of weekend warriors, people who liked to put a few dollars on their favorite team to ‘make the game interesting,’ but you were mostly just a second option to people who had accounts elsewhere. Gamblers, who are always looking for the best betting lines they can get—why lay a favorite at plus eight when someone else has them at plus seven—like to have accounts with as many sport books as possible. This goes double when the book is small and doesn’t have a network of people studying factors and constantly moving the line. The only people with any real money who contacted you were people trying to hustle you by making large bets early in the morning before you could check Vegas and adjust your lines. You’d have been crazy to take their action.

After a handful of months of mediocre business with small accounts you decided to call it before you became desperate. Unable to repay what you’d lost and been living off of, you took the last of the investor’s money, bought a car, and left.

“Didn’t I tell you I had a business opportunity here?” you

say. You've been slowly eating a dish of eggplant, chewing each bite carefully.

Claire bobs her head, glances up at you. "Yeah, I know. I just thought there might be something else."

You lean back in your chair and look around at the racks of wine bottles and the dark walls, thinking about all the restaurants there are in this city and how you've often echoed your father's words that a good meal is one of life's fine pleasures, but how until recently every meal has been little more than an attempt at feigning hunger.

"What the hell did your mother tell you?" you say.

Claire shrugs. 'Shrugging is contagious in this city,' you think.

"She didn't tell me anything. I can just tell from talking to her. She calls me asking about you. As if I know what you're doing every minute of the day."

You wipe at your mouth with your cloth napkin and lean onto the table. "Look, we both know your mother. You just gotta baby her. You take her too serious and she'll drive you as crazy as she is."

Claire nods in agreement before slurping up more linguini. You place your hand on your fork. You also have a belief about finishing your food. As a child you'd been forced to, and as a result, in your early adulthood you always left a symbolic amount of food on your plate, both a gesture toward your immigrant father's will and a nod toward your feelings about life—an attitude that in recent broke years seems egotistical at best, ignorant at worst.

"Besides, what the hell was left for me in El Paso with Adela gone?" you say.

Claire brings her eyes up to look at you and you think how she has the same slender and sleek face your sister had before her lifetime of Marlboros and vodka.

"How's Benny dealing?" she asks.

You raise your eyebrows. "Benny's fine. Sometimes I think he doesn't remember too much about it, the cancer, the operations, the treatments. He's young enough to forget." You sip your water. "He asks me questions about her, trying to remember. He's a tough little guy."

At home, lying on the cutler recliner that's been doubling as your bed, the TV playing the opening theme song of *Cheers*—the part about going where everybody knows your name—your son hands you an envelope. "What's this?" you say, even though it's obviously from the school.

"My teacher wants you to read it," he says.

"I get that. What's it say?" you ask, thinking that if he shrugs, you might just lose it.

"I don't know. Something about my math."

You look at him and he looks away, sensing your frustration with his inability to be specific. You open the envelope and unfold the letter. You read. You read again and laugh.

"She thinks you're cheating at math but she doesn't know how?"

"She kept me in at recess and asked why I didn't show any of my work on our test. I told her I did it in my head and she didn't believe me."

"She didn't believe you." You lean back into the cushions and let your knees fall loosely away from each other, chagrined. "What'd you tell her?"

"That you taught me numbers already. She wrote some problems on the board, problems she said would be in the next grade. So I did them. She asked how, and I said you taught me. She asked what you taught me, and I said how to take out weird numbers—"

“Odd numbers,” you say.

“Odd numbers. Then add the easy ones, and put the others back. She didn’t get it.”

“Listening to you, I don’t get it either,” you say, feeling like father of the year.

Only now that you’ve begun the task of renovating the operation and micromanaging the droves of people making their butter through the cracks in the system, you find that the only person not against you is Bobby, who you realize owes Jackie money he can’t pay. For skimming or from betting, you don’t know.

The irony of being on the other side of the cheats isn’t lost on you. Nor have you forgotten how greed is a steroid that always keeps the cheats one scam ahead. And beyond that: you’re not an authority figure. Is it trite to say this is why you prefer to operate alone?

This is work, and you throw yourself into it. You channel your obsessive tendencies into the numbers. You forget they represent dollars and you live inside their world of paper, opting for the comfort of abstraction over the concrete goal of money. You even assign numbers to the employees so you can forget you’re dealing with real and angry people.

Which helps make this seem no more dangerous than a word jumble in a newspaper.

Except that you feel danger. Not in the looks employees give you, but in unseen danger. In your car, the subway, the apartment—every moment outside the numbers—this obsession wraps its arm around you, whispers in your ear, pokes its finger in your chest, its argument always the same: something this size doesn’t go on unobserved. This can’t last, it says.

You blame the thoughts on your recent track record. You’re gun-shy, you say, shell-shocked. Time and a splash of success is

all you need to wash away the neurosis. You shrug off the edges of panic. You clear your throat. You swallow Alka-Seltzer.

Still it whispers.

What does last? you argue back, but aren't surprised when the paranoia doesn't bother to answer. Do what then? you ask the silence.

"New York in 1988 is not New York in 1958," you say into the phone. Outside your building the clouds have left and the wind has ceased. The temperature is high for early April and although every afternoon a storm meanders in and rain falls, the sky always clears too quickly, leaving the nighttime air an oppressive blanket.

"You're not twenty anymore, either, Sonny," your sister says.

You open and close your mouth. When you moved her ten years prior she'd been mid-forties, not much younger than you are now—her previous twenty-something years spent cooking and cleaning, raising children and mixing drinks. You realize you're still standing, holding the receiver to your ear with one hand and the phone unit in the other, and you sit down on the edge of the cutler, lean forward and place your forearms on your knees, your gaze dropping to the dust-ridden hardwood floors.

You'd been standing in front of the window-mounted A/C when the phone rang and your first thought had been to not answer.

The only light in the flat comes from the muted ball game on the rabbit-eared television. The Mets are ahead by a single run in the bottom of the eighth. Winning, but not by enough to cover the run line you have a hundred dollars riding on. Darryl Strawberry—Benny's favorite player—is at bat, two outs and a runner on

second, the count against him.

You exhale before speaking, something you've been doing disproportionately lately. "Look, it was just money. If *I'd* worried about every time someone didn't pay a bet or come through with their debt, I'd have died of worry a long time ago."

"Five months away isn't long enough. You should wait another five," she says.

You lean back and look at the blue-lit ceiling. Five? It feels like an epoch has passed since those days on the open pavement. Remembering that drive feels like another life.

You hear the sound of ice being dropped in a glass on the other end of the line.

"What do you say, Sonny? Another five months and then maybe go back?"

You look at the futon in the corner where your son is sleeping after having been told a bedtime story about a jockey being paid off to pull a horse, causing the horse to be thought a cripple and later get placed in a lower grade race, an easy win with high-paying odds. Benny hadn't been interested in how much you'd made. He only wanted to know why the jock would risk his career, wanted to know what happened to him after.

Benny's a tangle of sheets, limbs, and a sprawl of brown hair that covers his ears and which you've never let grow so long before. You think about how it'd been in El Paso where you'd had a barber who was paying off an endless debt with scheduled haircuts for both you and Benny—how life is when you're owed.

On a shelf behind the bed are the action figures you never learned the names of.

"Another five and Benny's hair will be so long people will think he's a girl," you say.

"Look, are you crazy?" she says. "You're not thinking rationally here. There's times you gotta listen, Sonny. Listen to your

sister. I know what's what." Her voice rises and wavers from the spurring of emotion and from her vodka-soaked tongue.

You listen to the hum of the A/C in the window, feel the damp air pushing through, and you hang up.

You watch Strawberry strike out, thinking that you should know better than to take a run line on a Mets game.

Benny tells you about the math races they do on the board, how no one can beat him and how he has to switch teams regularly to keep things fair. You think how school is progressive—the tallest kid; the shortest; the fastest runner; the class clown. Now he's somebody too. He has a place. The teacher wants to put him in an advanced math class the following year and you think this is good but worry it might mark him as an outcast.

He already has one close friend, though: Sebastian, at whose apartment he spends nearly every afternoon after school. Sebastian's mother often invites Benny to stay for dinner, and on Fridays he spends the night. She's also started taking them to the local pool and is teaching Benny to swim. You wonder what it's like for him to have female hands holding him while he learns to tread water, to kick and make strokes.

Shortly before the semester ends you get a pre-coffee call from work. "Don't come in." You spend the next five hours with your hands clasped behind your back, sometimes walking the perimeter of the room, mostly looking out the window. Every ten minutes or so you tell yourself to relax, to sit down, to eat something, to go out for a newspaper, to maybe even head to Aqueduct

for the early races. Instead you carry on your self-imprisonment, your mind continually floating through time—which is apparently the next best coping mechanism to a shrug. When you were twenty or thirty this job would've been just another new-world-exploration. You would've been da Vinci in a fighter jet, with little interest in anything but the potential for how much you could accelerate without blowing off the track.

When you get a second call saying everything's okay, you go straight to Jackie.

"We heard another place got raided," he says from inside his chair, looking like a little kid in a grown up seat. "Usually they hit everyone at once, try and catch us holding our peckers. So we locked up for awhile. Can't be too safe, you know."

"Usually," you say. You're standing in front of him wanting to ask if his picture is hanging on some Fed's wall. Instead you walk out of his office and for the thousandth time say to yourself 'this isn't Texas.' You walk past your office, on to the elevator, thinking about risk and return, and suddenly, you can't imagine anything in your life that even remotely resembles a payoff. The excitement is gone, you understand, because excitement was the goal, not just a consequence of the means but the end in and of itself. The thrill was the payoff. And without that you feel nothing but risk. Even the elevator feels like a gamble as you plummet from floor to floor, and by the time you reach ground level, you've sunk to a squatted position, bracing yourself for the impact.

Looking out the blurred Plexiglas of the phone booth, you watch the pavement saunter, see the passing cars' exhaust visible in wavy patches. Your home phone is packed, the line disconnected.

"The weather's better in El Paso, anyway," you say to your

sister. "When we got here I thought the winter was gonna bury me. Now it's the humidity." You remember Benny asking you why the air was so thick—a novelty for a Southwest boy—while walking him home from his last day of school.

"C'mon, Sonny. You get used to the weather."

"A week ago I had the first asthma attack I've had in years. I had to go through boxes to find an inhaler."

"Then go somewhere else. Vegas is desert. Why don't you go back to Vegas? I used to love visiting you there."

You wave your hand in front of your face. "Vegas is no good. You gotta either be connected or work for the casinos. Or both. I'm out of the loop." You once again find yourself examining your aging hand. "El Paso's easy. I'll figure something out."

"And Benny? What about Benny?"

"Don't tell me about my son," you say. "I moved out here for my son, okay? Now I'm gonna move back for him." All she does is worry the same worries and all she says are the same damn things. Every day is like day one with her. You wonder your same wonder: if the booze has completely fried her brain. "Just don't think about it. Things will be fine."

From the corner vendor you buy a couple hot dogs and pretzels, food Benny's now addicted to. Upstairs, the two of you sit on the floor eating. Everything but the TV you're watching and Benny's action figures, which have been abandoned in a corner, has been loaded and locked into a small U-Haul trailer hitched to the LTD.

A rerun of *Taxi* is showing. Jim's come back to the dispatch with a kid asleep in the back of his cab and Danny DeVito is in hysterics. Elaine has taken the boy to the side and is trying to play with him, trying to make him laugh.

"How come you never play anymore?" you ask your son.

"Play what?"

"With your toys," you say, nodding toward the dumped pile. "You used to line 'em up and have 'em knock each other around."

Benny looks toward them and then back to the TV. "I don't know," he says.

You keep your eyes on your son, who, legs crossed, leaning over the half-eaten hot dog in his hands, seems oddly focused on the show. "You don't know? Then who knows?"

"I don't know," he says again, not turning his head.

The kid on the screen is a smart ass, and the conversation on the show has turned adult. What makes the scene funny is the kid doesn't belong in this adult conversation, even though he's the reason the conversation turned adult, him having gotten fed up with being talked down to. Now he's talking down to the adults, letting them know how it feels.

"I play at school," Benny says.

"Yeah, what do you play?"

He shrugs and you clench your jaw. "Baseball mostly." He gives you a quick glance, knowing this will make you happy because you played baseball as a kid; you even grew up dreaming of playing professionally.

"And I play Nintendo with Sebastian at his house while you're at work," he says, breaking the moment.

"But you don't play with toys anymore? You don't play made up games? Pretend to be Spiderman or Rambo?"

The knees of Benny's crossed legs bounce restlessly. "I guess I'm too old," he says.

"What do you mean you're too old? You're a little kid."

Finally he gives you his full attention, and you think how there's nothing childlike in his eyes or in his stare.

"First you want me to be an adult. Now you want me to be a kid," he says.

“Who told you to be an adult?”

“What am I supposed to do when you won’t tell me what to do?” He turns to his hot dog, but doesn’t take a bite. He looks as if he’s forgotten it’s there in his hand and for some reason this strikes you as tragic.

This is the closest your shy and reserved son has ever come to yelling at you and you don’t know how to react. You don’t know what to say or how to say it.

You don’t know how to be a parent to this child.

“You should finish your food,” you say.

He looks at you again and you want to pick him up and hide him in your arms, suddenly aware that you can’t remember the last time you lifted him off his feet and swung him above your head the way he used to love for you to do.

“Sebastian has a dinner time, dad. And a bath time and a bedtime. And he can’t play outside unless someone watches him. And he only watches shows his parents let him watch.” You feel the inside of your throat contract; you feel the squeezing of your lungs, as if you’re having an asthma attack.

“His mom and dad tell him what to do.”

You wish you were anywhere but this flea-box soul-trap of an apartment.

“He can’t spend the night here because they know you won’t tell us what to do.”

You wish your son understood how little you or anyone else controls.

“I know what a real family looks like,” he says.

As you load the TV but leave the toys, you think how Benny’s always preferred true stories over made up stories. Maybe it has

to do with him being an only child and being only around adults all through his first years. There was no hide-and-seek, no fantasy games. Even most of the movies he watched were for grown-ups. What's strange to you, though, is that he likes sad stories above all others.

Still, you—who often say life isn't all empty pockets and flat tires any more than it's all puppies and ice cream—don't mind telling him sad stories.

So when he asks for a story as you pass from Virginia into Tennessee on I-81, hours deep into the night, your stalled-in-the-past mind picks this:

"My father used to have a lot of different things going on, but mainly he worked in restaurants, usually as a maître d in some high-end joint. There was a time, though, when he had a luncheonette. He owned the place. And it did all right for a while. Al Capone even used to drop by when he was in town. Capone was from Brooklyn, like me. My old man said he was a friendly guy, even offered to help my dad out if he ever wanted to get ambitious. But that wasn't my father. Anyway, things eventually went downhill. There was a lot of debt and he was hurting bad.

"This was after I'd gotten out of the cottage home. I'd had it so good there I didn't want to leave, but when I turned sixteen they caught up with my old man and had him put me up till I finished high school.

"So me and him were living together in an apartment building, even though we hardly saw each other. I didn't know how bad things were getting until we got evicted." You pause here, nodding to yourself as if you are only now acknowledging this fact.

"Yep, we got evicted. I don't remember the details of everything, but I guess he just couldn't put together what he owed. What I do remember was how they came and put our furniture on the street. Right on the street they put it. Whatever department

that was.

“My father had to see about getting a truck, you know, to take it all to storage or whatever, and I was left to make sure no one stole anything. And that’s what I remember. Not so much what happened to the furniture, or where we ended up, but sitting on the couch that had been in our living room, only now it was on the sidewalk. And the people who left it there, they kind of placed it how it’d been in the house—not consciously I don’t think, it just had to do with the order it came out—so there was an end table next to me with a lamp on it. There was no electricity, but there was the streetlight, so in a strange way it almost felt the same.

“Of course there’d never been people walking back and forth across our living room the way they were now. But it wasn’t like I didn’t know them. I knew ‘em all, even though no one said a word to me as they came home from work or the bars or whatever and had to walk in-between the coffee table and the sofa I was sitting on to get to the stoop. There wasn’t anything they could do, I hadn’t been abandoned or anything. I just had to wait.

“That really struck me as something, how he let that happen.”

You drive in silence for a few minutes before looking down at your son, who’s fallen asleep. The nighttime shadows give his face depth and you think about the toys he left behind. Then you smile, remembering how after you’d gone through the Holland Tunnel and passed through New Jersey, Benny said while reading the ‘Welcome to Pennsylvania’ sign, “We’ll be lucky to get any decent food out here.” And how at the first fuel stop he’d asked how you were doing on mileage.

You wonder if he’s dreaming, and you slip into a kind of half-dream yourself. You’re on the road and leaving New York, like so many times before, and you find that old feeling down by your foot and the gas pedal, inside your grip on the wheel, beyond

the reach of your headlights and the faith of unseen highway. But somewhere between the truth of the road and truth of your life you are aware that the failure of New York isn't the failure of a sloppy sportsbook, or of a fractured family. It is your failure. The failure of the father.

You slip back again and start talking, about what you're not even sure. Fifteen years ago, thirty, a hundred years ago—what's the difference. When you look at your son his eyes are open and watching you.

"You gotta understand now," you say. "America back then was very much a 'love it or leave it' kind of place. And I've always felt both ways. I love it. But if I gotta walk a certain way or talk a certain way, forget it. Show me the door. But that's America, too, you see? There's always another door."

You give a shrug of your own, just one shoulder, and say the words, "Get up and go. Pack it together, rebuild." But how many starts does a single life allow?

"The open road, starting over. Venture and adventure and people looking, searching. You see what I'm saying?"

The horizon is becoming visible.

"Yep, get up and go."

The new sun of the approaching day lights the road and splay the LTD's shadow on the pavement. Flat pastures of green in all directions. You take off your seatbelt. You roll down the window and put your elbow out and wonder how many times in his life your son will have to get up and go.