

Disenchanted: Tall Tales of Growing Up

By

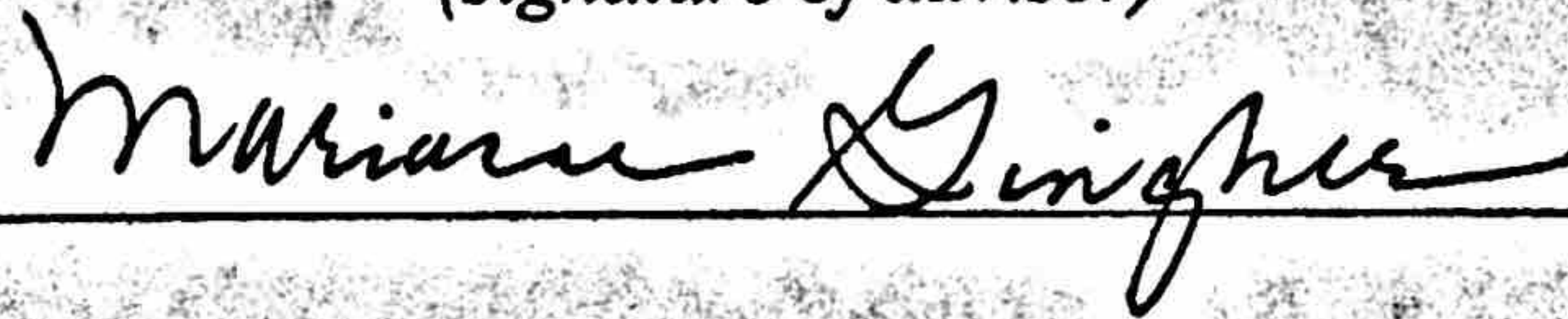
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For my mom, my sister,
and the other women whose advice I should've listened to more carefully.

Disenchanted

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Getting Back to Boston

Throughout the fall of their sophomore year of college, Marisa Franklin – a fierce blonde soccer player who could have modeled in her free time – snapped at her boyfriend, Davis Morin – a well-meaning motor-mouth with a big heart who was a bit too big of an ass for his own good – for calling her too often, calling her too rarely, or for asking about her day the wrong way.

She dared Davis to break up but wanted to be the victim; Davis avoided the bait until Thanksgiving, when he booked a flight to stay with Marisa at her family's million dollar apartment in Boston only to have her cancel minutes before boarding. They didn't split that night, but they ignored each other for days after a shouting match over the phone. Two weeks later, Marisa suggested they spend winter break apart, a hint that flew over Davis' head as he agonized over saving his wounded love affair. Davis thought if they met up, he could stop the bleeding.

He ignored Marisa and planned to trek north without telling her – they were barely texting anyways. He could only afford a one way plane ticket, so on a frigid Thursday after exams in December, Davis arranged a ride with a junior named Elise Wilkins from D.C., where he and Elise were enrolled at American University, to Boston.

Elise arrived at Davis' apartment in a grey Volkswagen Jetta; she popped out of the car in a black coat, matching leggings, and white Adidas sneakers. She had thick, Brunette curls that bounced when she walked, and when she shook Davis' hand and smiled, he forgot who he planned to visit in Boston for a moment.

“You must be David,” she said. “I'm Elise. You're welcome for the ride.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Elise, but it’s actually Davis,” he said to her back. Elise turned, flashed another toothy grin from the other side of the Jetta, and said, “Whatever floats your boat, Dave,” before crouching into the driver’s seat.

After Davis stowed his duffel bag, Elise guided the Jetta through sluggish midday D.C. traffic and onto I-95 while playing NPR at full volume. They exchanged majors and hometowns – Elise explained that she was born and raised a single child in South Boston.

A few miles before they reached Baltimore around 1:15, Elise asked who or what was dragging Davis to Beantown in December with a foot of snow forecasted that Saturday.

“Well, I have a twin sister who lives in Chestnut Hill,” Davis started.

“No kidding. She goes to Boston College, I assume?” Elise said.

“No, she’s just always been a big fan of chestnuts,” Davis said. Always impressed by his own wit, he nodded at himself in the rearview mirror and continued, “But this weekend I’m going to visit my girlfrie--” before Elise jerked the steering wheel, whipping Davis’ head into the window and setting off sirens in his ears. She never took her eyes off the road. Davis rubbed his right temple and Elise smiled; before Davis protested, she said, “Pothole. Watch that sass, Davey boy.” He decided to select his words more judiciously when he turned around and saw nothing but smooth, paved road.

Despite the window incident, the two bonded over a struggle with punctuality and distaste for Bostonian accents. As the Jetta snaked around Philadelphia’s skyscrapers and sports stadiums on I-95, Davis felt the raised, red patch of skin where his forehead hit the window and laughed to himself because bruises considered, a road trip with Elise was less painful than one with Marisa (who liked to screech One Direction songs while driving). Elise hummed to a mariachi band on K97.5 and listed her favorite movies – “Memento, the second Godfather, and anything with Madea”

– and Davis laughed, but he stifled a pang of guilt he felt for preferring Elise to Marisa, even in just this situation. But it wasn't only Elise's pop culture tastes that Davis admired – it was the way she listened to him, with her eyes on the road but her attention on every syllable he spoke. When she howled with laughter at Davis' story about falling asleep in a lecture hall and waking up alone with a pissed off professor and a visible erection, Davis felt compelled to tell Elise every thought, worry, and concern he'd ever had, even those about Marisa.

Although he knew Marisa would hate him discussing their relationship with another girl, Davis wanted to divulge how after he suffered through middle school with one friend (his twin, Danielle), a growth spurt stretched him out and made him look less like a young Danny DeVito. He started jogging to keep his fifteen-year-old baby fat off, found confidence in a dresser full of jeans now three sizes too large, and had a handful of close friends by the end of his sophomore year.

But the peak of Davis' adolescence began when he asked Marisa to the John Quincy Adams senior prom in Lexington, Massachusetts.

After prom led to a pair of dates, Davis, overcompensating for a lifetime lived single, showered Marisa with compliments and memorized what made her tick. He knew that she only bought cannoli from Mike's Pastry, and that when she was upset she watched planes land at Logan International from across the harbor. By comparison, Marisa's ex – Alex Faneuil, frat boy in training – forgot her birthday twice. Marisa thought dating a nice guy couldn't hurt, so she showed Davis the way around the silk sheets of her bed, but found herself trying not to get attached when he picked her red roses from the Kelleher Botanical Garden as they walked the dirt pathways on Sunday afternoons. The more of Davis' puns that she heard, the less Marisa had to force laughter. She replaced that instinct with a reminder that she repeated to herself often: *High school boyfriends never last.*

Freed of his virginity, falling into love, and enrolled in the fall at American, Davis had no doubt that he and Marisa could survive long distance dating – despite his parents moving to North Carolina and his girlfriend staying in Boston to attend BU.

Four hundred miles didn't seem too far freshman year when Davis and Marisa talked on the phone every third night and visited each other once a month. When her studies kept her busy, Marisa enjoyed her doting, low-maintenance boyfriend, who'd turned into a pretty good lay. They made it to summer on decent terms, but by the August before their sophomore year, after a year of long-distance, Marisa got bored.

As if Elise could sense the thoughts floating through Davis' head, she stirred him from his daydream as New York City's skyline stretched out along the horizon.

“So where does your girlfriend – Marisa, right? – live in Boston? Is she in the suburbs?”

“She used to be,” Davis said. “We met in Lexington. Her family moved downtown when--”

The Jetta's frame quaked as the back left wheel hit a real pothole, interrupting Davis and eliciting a *POP* and *hissssss* that accompanied several warning logos lighting up and a forceful, “Oh, for fuck's sake” from Elise, who moved to the shoulder, shut off the engine, and stepped out. Davis cursed himself for letting Marisa fall out of focus; Elise was outside for six minutes.

“The good news is that I have AAA. They sent a tow truck that'll be here in half an hour,” Elise said after she settled in the driver's seat. She rubbed her hands together and exhaled.

“The rest is mostly bad. The truck will take us to Newark, but my tire's ruined and they can't get us driving again until tomorrow afternoon,” she said. Davis looked like he'd seen a ghost.

“Stay with me, Dave, breathe,” Elise said. He faked a smile and nodded nervously.

“No, good, Newark, fantastic,” he said. “I always wanted to die on a Thursday.”

Elise talked Davis off the ledge while waiting for their ride. They’d drive to the mechanic, walk to Newark Penn Station, and catch a bus into New York to stay with Elise’s cousin, Andrea, at NYU. Elise petted Davis’ head like a dog in a thunderstorm in the back of the tow truck while the driver hummed Garth Brooks; the Jetta dragged behind them for fourteen miles as the sun set.

Elise noted the mechanic’s address and Davis followed her into a BP next door. She bought Camel Blues and lit one outside, then offered a cigarette to Davis, whose eyes were darting around like the shadows might materialize and mug him if he didn’t stay vigilant. He squealed each time a car door closed or a horn sounded. Davis was somewhat of a wuss, but Newark’s murder rate was a reasonable concern. He thought, *Marisa, Marisa, Marisa*, but looked to Elise for comfort.

“This may not help, but it can’t hurt,” Elise said, giving Davis a lighter. “Let’s get walking.”

He’d never touched a cigarette but muttered, “Fuck it,” sparked the Camel, and choked. After a few drags, his hands stopped shaking. Davis celebrated his first cigarette with a second and third during the eleven block walk to the station; much to Elise’s amusement, he enjoyed his fourth and fifth between whooping coughs while waiting for the bus.

They arrived at Andrea’s studio apartment at 8:04 and went to sleep soon after dinner. Andrea said her patchy, floral-printed couch pulled out into a bed and handed a blanket to Elise, who hugged her cousin and thanked her for the hospitality. Davis echoed appreciation from the mattress where he was trying to get comfortable; Elise threw the blanket over his head. He started to pull it away but stopped and rolled over when he saw Elise slipping off her leggings. Davis was silent as she crawled under the covers; his heart was beating twice as fast as it should. Caught between thoughts of his day with the girl lying next to him and his future with Marisa, Davis fell asleep focused on getting back to Massachusetts.

He woke up on Friday morning with Elise latched onto him like a koala on a eucalyptus tree. A wave of glee gave way to guilt; he slipped out of her grasp to check his phone and considered texting Marisa but paused when he heard Elise stirring. She checked the time and yawned.

“Early bird gets the worm, Dave. Might as well get moving,” Elise said, and after breakfast with Andrea, Davis fronted for an Uber despite Elise’s preference for the bus.

The mechanic cost her three hundred and fifty-seven dollars and they didn’t leave Newark until 2:15. When they hit the Massachusetts state line and Davis hadn’t mustered the nerve to tell Marisa he was hours away, he began tapping his toes and tried his sister in Chestnut Hill. Danielle had a flight to Raleigh the next morning but suggested they get drinks; Elise didn’t need convincing.

“Hell, I’ll spend a night at BC,” she said. “Beats being home with my parents in Southie.”

They got to Danielle around 6:45 and she ushered her brother and Elise out of the cold. Danielle explained that her roommate went home so Elise could take the bed and Davis could have the couch; Davis pretended not to be disappointed. He and Elise retold their misadventure over wine and a pepperoni-ham pizza – by 10:00, they were slurring their words and spilling sauvignon. Noticing how Davis and Elise lingered when they looked at each other, Danielle asked about Marisa.

“So is Ms. Franklin busy tonight or just avoiding you, Dave?” she said, getting Elise to snort.

“You know how she is,” he said after a mock *ha-ha*. “She flits around. I’m staying with her this weekend to patch some things up before I fly home on Monday.” Elise and Danielle leaned in.

“Trouble in paradise?” Danielle said. “I hope there’s a Plan B.”

There wasn’t and there rarely was for Davis. He laughed off the question, but when they left for the Standard minutes later, Davis texted Marisa, “In Boston,” filled his fifth glass of the night and chugged the wine before following the girls outside.

The Standard boasted Top 40 hits, gaudy retro décor, and three-dollar Long Island Ice Teas, begging Davis to question what standard the bar was upholding. Nevertheless, he went drink for drink with the girls until his sister mentioned his middle school magnet collection and Davis excused himself to the bathroom. As twins and drinkers often do, Danielle felt the same urge.

Davis washed his hands and staggered back to the table; a husky guy in a red Polo towered over Elise, who held her handbag and a dagger-sharp stare. She introduced Davis as he walked up.

“Davis! This is Shrek,” Elise said, venom on her lips. “He was just leaving.” He didn’t move.

“All I’m asking is for one drink with me,” ‘Shrek’ slurred. “I swear you’ll have a good--”

“She told you to leave, so walk away,” Davis said, puffing out his chest. The ogre could eat Davis alive, but based on Elise’s expression, Shrek thought he might get stabbed, so he sulked off.

“I had that under control,” Elise said to Davis, her eyes burrowing holes in Shrek’s back.

“I know you did,” Davis said. “And I know you’d kick my ass and his with one broken hand, but some guys,” he said, then qualified, “a lot of guys spend their lives refusing to listen to women.”

Elise couldn’t argue with that. She confided to Davis that she’d sunk freshman and sophomore year into a handful of those kinds of guys.

“Some frat stars with the great hair and the BMW – you know the stereotype,” she said.

She toasted lopsided relationships and Davis paused for a moment before polishing off another whisky and Coke. Danielle returned moments later in time for Elise to excuse herself.

“I’m grabbing another drink,” Elise said to the female twin, then to Davis, “Wanna dance?”

Davis nodded then locked eyes with Danielle, who smirked while her brother followed Elise to the bar and then to the dance floor. He had no rhythm and drew cackles from Elise by making an

ass out of himself – he twerked to Usher’s “Yeah” – before the DJ slowed the tempo and Elise pulled Davis closer. She guided his hips and laughed each time he stepped on her toes.

Danielle ran into friends, so Elise and Davis returned to an empty table and ordered another round. Davis’ head was spinning while he chatted with Elise, who touched his wrist while giggling about the trip’s misfortunes. The voice that whispered, *Marisa*, in Newark held its tongue.

“I swear I’m barely functional,” Elise said with a wide smile. “Either that or you are.”

“I’m guilty,” Davis said. “You have your shit a lot straighter than I do.”

“That’s not saying much.”

“That’s fair,” Davis said through a chuckle. “I’m saying you’re a great person to be around when things go wrong. Kind, but tough,” he said. “Like a good father.”

“That compliment was a train-wreck, Dave,” Elise said, but she still smiled. She looked at Davis’ lips and found him looking at hers. They met each other’s stare and Elise leaned in, shutting her eyes and drawing closer until Davis’s phone lit up and rattled the table, distracting Davis, who bit his tongue when he read Marisa’s name. He stuttered an apology to Elise and dashed for the exit. Danielle, sitting a few tables away, watched from a distance before returning.

“I didn’t peg you for a home-wrecker, Elise” she said, then continued, “I’m messing with you,” before smiling and sitting down. “And for the record, I’m all for it.” Elise had been studying the ice in her glass but looked up.

“He seems pretty dedicated to this relationship,” Elise said. “You’re not a fan of Marisa?”

“By now I’m sure you’ve figured out that my brother is an idiot,” Danielle said after a sigh.

“Davis is sweet,” Elise said. “He tries hard and he means well, at least.”

“That’s true, but he’s still a god damn idiot,” Danielle said. “And he’s probably the only person in Boston who doesn’t know Marisa is cheating on him.”

Elise perked up. Danielle summarized a semester of reliable rumors she’d heard at Boston College and detailed the several times Davis shut her down for questioning Marisa’s intentions.

“He put her so high on a pedestal that he’s lost sight of her,” Danielle said. “And he’d think Marisa was faithful if she told him so while she had another dude’s dick in her mouth.”

Elise spat out some of her drink laughing then turned toward the Standard’s storefront windows, where, outside, Davis was being berated over the phone by Marisa.

“What part of ‘time alone’ was unclear to you, Davis?” she hissed. “Do you ever listen?”

Davis implored her for another chance – at least the opportunity to talk in person – but Marisa was dug into her trench.

“I can’t do this anymore, Davis,” she said. “I think we should take a break for a while.”

Marisa hung up and sent Davis’ follow-up calls to voicemail; with his chin glued to his chest, Davis walked inside, met his sister and Elise, and had one more drink before going home.

The next morning, Danielle caught a cab to board a 9:20 to Raleigh-Durham International. She left a spare key for Davis and Elise to lock up.

Elise had trouble sleeping and made breakfast before Davis woke up hungover, but they were driving to Marisa’s by 11:15. Davis was silent while walking to the car. He recited Marisa’s address and Elise typed it into her GPS.

Snow fell on Beacon Street as Davis looked out his window; Elise strangled the steering wheel and Davis sat like a statue until they were three miles away.

“Hey, I wanted to say thanks for the ride,” Davis said. “That, when you almost gave me a concussion, plus the Camels, and last night,” he continued. “I had a blast is what I’m trying to say.”

“Shut up, Dave,” Elise said with a reluctant smile inspired by Davis’ grin.

“I’m being serious,” he said. “This trip was a shit show, but I couldn’t tell you the last time I had this much fun. Please, take the thank you.” They were two miles away.

“You’re more than welcome, but let me pivot here,” Elise said. “What exactly is your plan if things go south when we show up?”

“Like if her dad pulls out a shotgun?”

“Cut the shit,” Elise said, her knuckles white. “You said you’ve been fighting, and I saw your face after you two talked on the phone last night,” she continued. “What did Marisa say to you?”

“That’s none of your business,” Davis said, but Elise pressed him, and he elaborated, “She mentioned us taking a break, but I just need to see her to expl--”

“Can you hear yourself?” Elise said. “I talked to your sister last night and--”

“Oh good, glad you two could powwow about my love life,” Davis said, his tone sharpening.

“Shut up and listen,” Elise said – her voice cracked on the last syllable. “I don’t think Marisa is as honest as you want her to be, and I know that going over there today won’t end well.”

“Well I don’t think you know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Davis said, his voice shaking. “Our relationship isn’t perfect, but you have no right to judge me trying to fix it because you’d rather sleep your way through every house on Greek Row while--”

Elise didn’t need to hear him finish. She skidded onto the shoulder and slammed on the brakes, sending Davis’ head into the dash, drawing blood and a chorus of honks.

“Are you alright?” Elise said, looking like a lioness sizing up an injured gazelle.

“Christ, I’m alive, so I guess I’m oka--” Davis said before Elise smacked his right cheek.

“I wish you weren’t, ass-hat” Elise said. “Now get out of my car.” She pointed toward Davis’ door. “It’s only another mile and you know the way. Grab your things and get the hell out.”

Davis took his bag from the back while apologizing and praying for mercy; Elise ignored him until she rolled down her window and said, “Stay warm, Dave, you and Marisa deserve each other,” before driving off. Davis watched the Jetta disappear and tapped his pockets before leaving for Marisa’s; he didn’t have his phone. Davis thought, “I *do* deserve this,” exhaled, watched his breath appear and fade, and started walking.

He was in front of Marisa’s door thirty-two minutes later with blood on his forehead and snowflakes in his hair. Davis knocked twice and heard footsteps inside, but no one answered. When he knocked again, Mr. Franklin cracked the door open and looked Davis over like an alien.

“Hey Mr. Franklin, long time no see,” Davis said with a smile. “I know I look like shit, but I really need to talk with Marisa, can I come in?” Mr. Franklin fidgeted and looked toward the kitchen.

“Now isn’t a good time, Davis,” he said. “Marisa is helping Nancy with something – she isn’t here right now. I think you should go.” A knot was tightening in Davis’ gut.

“That’s weird,” he said. “Marisa said she’d be home from her grandparents’ house by now.”

Mr. Franklin looked puzzled by the alibi that Davis was manufacturing on Marisa’s behalf.

“Was she with your folks in Quincy?” Davis said.

“Uh, Quincy, yeah,” Mr. Franklin said, taking the bait. “She...came back but left again.”

“There’s a blizzard coming, Richard,” Davis said with his eyes interrogating Mr. Franklin’s. “And I know your parents live in Lowell. Can I at least come inside while we talk?”

Mr. Franklin sighed, shrugged, and let Davis in. He stepped out of the snow as the bathroom door opened; Marisa’s “ex,” Alex Faneuil, stepped out, locking eyes with Davis.

“You gotta be kidding me,” he said to Mr. Franklin as if Marisa’s dad was cheating.

“It’s time for you to leave,” Mr. Franklin said, reaching for Davis, who swatted him away.

“Ease off, Dick, I’m not going anywhere yet,” he said. Davis held Alex’s stare and bared his teeth. “I just came by to let Marisa know I have a raging case of chlamydia and that her parents are absolute pricks, but I guess she’s too much of a coward to show her face.”

Davis got what he asked for. Shouts erupted from Alex and Mr. Franklin, who grabbed Davis by his coat as Marisa emerged from the kitchen shouting, “I told you not to fucking come,” while Mrs. Franklin, in new Gucci flats, yoga pants, and pearl earrings, slid across the hardwood floors with her hands on Marisa’s waist, trying to hold her daughter back, but Davis fanned the flames, pointing spastically at Marisa and calling her a “filthy, heartless liar.” Alex stood between Davis and Marisa, looking for an excuse to throw a punch, but after a minute that felt like an hour, Mr. Franklin pushed Davis outside under threat of calling the police.

Davis was carried out on a wave of curses that crashed into a sea of snow; his heart felt like it had caught flame and he considered lying face down in the powder or walking into traffic. But before he could be melodramatic, he had to be practical, or spend a winter night sleeping on grates. He walked a few feet but stopped when he saw the headlights of a Volkswagen pulling toward him; Elise stepped out with Davis’ phone raised above her head. She couldn’t help smirking.

“You better understand I only came back because I knew you’d die tonight without this or a roof,” she said, shaking the iPhone. “You’re not worth that stress.” Davis moved toward the Jetta.

“Look, Elise, I was way out of line and so damn stupid and I’m even more sorry and--”

“I know you are, dumbass,” Elise said. “Hop in, you’re gonna freeze.”

They drove four miles to Elise’s house lost in different thoughts; they parked, unpacked, and made shallow tracks in the snow on the driveway. Davis trailed Elise, fascinated by how her curls bounced despite the snow. She turned to face him at the top of the steps with her key in the lock.

“My parents are both professors,” Elise said, placing a hand on Davis’ chest. “Try not to say anything too stupid.” She grinned and met Davis’ gaze; he looked from her eyes to her lips and back, then leaned in until Elise blinked twice and cut him off.

“Davis, you’ve been single for ten minutes,” she whispered. “Get in the god damn house.”

She unlocked the door and held it open for Davis, who shook his head, muttered, “Right, sorry,” and slipped by Elise and inside. With a bright smile and her hands tucked in her back pockets, Elise followed Davis down the hall thinking he might be worth a second chance, and that he’d actually make a pretty good boyfriend if he just learned when to keep his mouth shut.

Crossing Paths

Wake Forest, to many families, is one of the most sought-after somewhat-tiny towns in North Carolina. The historic downtown was plucked out of a Jimmy Stewart flick, the 35,000 residents chatted like they lived in Mayberry, and the rolling farmland hills outside town reminded everyone living life in the “big city” that the real North Carolina was right next door.

To Nate Hemminger, a 24-year-old Wake Forestite, Wake Tech graduate, and the only normal kid from his graduating class who still hadn't left home, his hometown was a special kind of soul-sucking.

Sure, he'd moved out of his parents' house after earning a sports science certificate in community college, but he still only lived a mile away, in one of the 40 apartment complexes that had sprung up over the last several years. The town's best attractions were its breweries, but after Nate knocked out the tours at each, drinking alone started to seem pretty sad. He brought his parents once, but wouldn't consider any of his coworkers at the Kerr Family YMCA to be his friends, per se, and so he started leaning heavily into his Netflix catalogue almost every night.

Although he wouldn't admit it, Nate resented his parents for not kicking him out of the house sooner. He resented his teachers for letting him coast in high school and his friends for leaving. Because he knew none of them could actually be blamed for his situation, Nate mostly resented his \$11/hour job, his hometown, and himself. He had a girlfriend of about three months, a beautiful, albeit 13-years-older woman named Christine Rosenquest, but Nate couldn't help resenting her some days too, and again himself for being with her. He didn't talk to his parents about Christine very often, in any case. Things between her and Nate were...complicated. Nate considered ending the relationship, but while things weren't great, they were more put together than most of the other pieces of Nate's life.

One Tuesday, Nate was distracted en route to a lunch date outside town when he rammed his hand-me-down Volvo sedan into the bumper of a black Beemer stopped at a red light in Wake Forest.

He followed the BMW from the light and parked beside a Shell station. Nate had been thinking about the buffalo fried chicken sandwich at Sam's Riverside Diner, a mom-and-pop shop three miles outside town limits, where he and his girlfriend, Christine Rosenquest, were meeting for lunch. They'd eaten together at Sam's every Wednesday for the last two and a half months. It was well out of his way, and hers too, but the shrimp and grits were to die for. Every meal was, if you asked Nate and Christine.

With his eyes on his watch, Nate stepped out of the car. He was impatient, and hungry, and now, worried about the damage. He hadn't been moving quickly, but still, all he could think about was chicken and the money about to leave his checking account.

But when the BMW's owner moved from the front seat to the August heat, Nate clutched his stomach like he'd been sucker-punched.

He recognized the driver, although he was certain they'd never met. The man's face looked like one Nate had seen in a nightmare. His bulging, brown eyes and an inch-long scar stemming downward from his lips were unmistakable. Nate struggled to attach the features to a name.

The man was at least 6'2" and built like a linebacker. He was probably 45 and had hairy, vascular forearms that looked like small footballs, inflated nearly to bursting. He smiled like a teenage boy who lost his virginity, fender bender and all. It made Nate's toes squirm.

The meathead was stuffed into a blue polyester collared shirt with *Rosenquest Private Security* printed in white, block font on the left breast.

Rosenquest.

Three steps away from the man, Nate's legs revolted and shut down. His heart considered striking in solidarity. His brain contained a bonfire; in the flames were fear and epiphany.

Rosenquest, Nate repeated aloud in his head.

In an instant, he recognized where he'd seen the man before: in a picture taken on a dock in Wilmington, from maybe a decade ago, on Christine's Facebook.

Nate remembered the photo because it was Christine's profile picture, the only public picture of her on the internet. He would've looked at the ones for "Friends" only, but he and Christine agreed to avoid each other on social media after they fucked for the first time in the Volvo's backseat after a Zumba class at the Y.

Nate had been a physical therapy assistant there since leaving Wake Tech, a holdover job that he never left. The day they met, Nate stretched Christine out after she pulled a hamstring. When she insisted he continue up her thigh and he blushed, she wrapped her lips around her ring finger and the two bands on it, then slipped them off with her teeth. Twenty minutes later, they were in the Volvo. Nate had never cheated or been an accessory to adultery before that day, and he went home feeling like a monster. But the more he heard about Christine's capsizing marriage and how it was all Mr. Rosenquest's fault, Nate's guilt started to slide away. Eventually, he started to relish in the poetic justice he was helping fulfill. He wanted Mr. Rosenquest to be miserable, maybe even Christine too, since they were all confined to the same prison, as Nate saw it.

Stepping toward a blank-faced Nate, Christine's husband extended his hand and introduced himself as "Elliott, Elliott Rosenquest." Nate's palms were beyond soggy. Elliott never stopped smiling.

“Confuse the gas and brakes there, son?” Elliott said. He put his hand on the BMW’s bumper and looked at a patch of paint scratched off, about four inches wide.

“The missus,” he said, twisting the silver band on his left ring finger with his right hand, “Isn’t going to be happy with either one of us.”

You aren’t kidding, Nate thought. He apologized for the wreck but was taken aback by how well Elliott was handling it. He yapped and grinned about insurance and repairs like he was on a sitcom, which was off-putting in and of itself, but it seemed even more troubling because of the legitimate reasons Elliott had to be angry with Nate (or at least the one Elliott knew about it).

Christine once told Nate that her husband habitually came home from work around 9:00 p.m. with Jack Daniels’ taste unmistakable on his breath. She said Elliott would scream or throw a plate if she so much as looked at him the wrong way. Christine avoided talking about her husband, but she said more of the same on the rare occasions she vented about life at home. When Nate envisioned Elliott, he imagined a sadistic ogre of a workaholic. Standing before him was an oversized teddy bear.

They exchanged information; Elliott forced small talk. Nate wrote down Elliott’s number but swapped a 4 for a 9 when he offered his own. The less Elliott knew the better, he figured.

Nate was still queasy, but ready to leave when he saw again the *Rosenquest Private Security* logo on Elliott’s shirt. He paused. Christine said her husband was a contractor.

“What exactly do you do, Elliott?” Nate said. He thought it was too blunt. “I, uh, have a friend who wants to go into security.” Elliott lit up.

“What *don't* we do is the question. Event security, private details for celebrities or politicians, even a bit of P.I. work when I have the time,” Elliott said. “I’m beyond my days in the field, though, so I work mostly from home, which keeps my wife happy.” Nate’s stomach lurched.

“The field?”

“Richmond P.D., 25 years on the force, yes sir,” Elliott said in a rush, like he’d been waiting for someone to ask.

Nate had heard enough. He told Elliott he’d call that night and scampered back to his sedan. He texted Christine that he’d be late to lunch and sped toward Sam’s, thinking of what Christine told him the second time they slept together.

“Our marriage has been falling apart for years now,” she would say. “It’ll be just another month, Nate, but it might as well be over. He’ll never know a thing.”

She’d whisper in his ear that Elliott was never home, that he was always at work, or that he probably cheated himself. She’d say *plenty* of people cheat, that it’s fun to sneak around, that she and Nate should go back to his apartment, close the blinds, and lock the doors. By the fourth or fifth time they fucked, Nate was convinced Christine’s affair was the just thing to do.

Then he met Elliott. When he did, he wondered, *What the hell does she need me for?*

“Had to be thinking with your dick, didn’t you? Now you’re on the ex-detective’s radar, yeah, great plan Nate, you dumb fuck,” Nate said to his dashboard as he pulled into the gravel parking lot at Sam’s. The restaurant was further away from the service road Nate pulled off, at the end of a path situated under shady oak trees by a thin creek’s banks.

Nate stepped inside and saw Christine seated at a two-top in the far corner underneath faded yellow wallpaper patterned with crisscrossed string beans. She’d already eaten half of her Cobb salad

and scowled at the remaining greens. Nate knew she'd have to leave in twenty minutes or so – she was a middle school principal with just an hour and fifteen for lunch – and decided not to mention Elliott. He wanted to catch Christine in a lie. She noticed him crossing the room, dropped her fork on her plate, crossed her legs, and smacked her lips.

“How kind of you to finally stop by,” Christine said, then softened. “You look like you’re about to puke, are you alright?”

“Great, fine – well, I got into an accident, but it was good,” Nate said. He could tell how fake the smile he was wearing looked. “But *I’m* good, I mean.”

“You poor thing,” Christine said, her tone the polar opposite from a moment ago. She traced a heart with her finger on the back of Nate’s hand. “I wish I could doctor you up myself.”

Nate smiled and tried to relax, but he felt stiff, like a bad actor forced to debut on Broadway. For the most part, he was silent as Christine complained quietly about issues at school while lyric-less country ballads hummed over the PA. When she checked her watch at 12:30 and readied herself to go, Nate sprung his trap.

“I know we don’t usually talk about this, but how are things at home?” Nate said. “I worry about you sometimes, you two being together still.” Christine put her hand on his cheek.

“Thank you for thinking of me, Nate,” she said. Her expression drifted from one of appreciation to somber recollection. “Elliott is...Elliott. He’s been working on a bridge contract in Gaston County, so he’s been traveling a lot lately. He’s been a monster when he’s around.”

In Nate’s throat were scalding coals stoked by the blatant lie that he realized was the latest in a long series, and the first he’d caught before zipping over his head. He tried to engineer a more genuine smile than his previous effort.

“Everything will be alright. I’ll be here for you through it all,” Nate said.

They didn’t hug or kiss when they left each other at Sam’s. They never did in public, only alone in Nate’s studio. Their goodbyes were comprised of plans to see each other again – texting was out of the question – and two waves “goodbye.” That day, when Christine left for Warren Hunt Middle, Nate followed her car from about a hundred feet behind.

In the Volvo, Nate was convinced he had to cut ties with Christine. He couldn’t believe how much of her story he’d believed without questioning a thing. He kept his eyes glued to the back of her Camry and tailed her for five or six miles to a small, brick middle school. Christine parked, greeted a few kids playing basketball. Beaming, she stopped to bend her knee and speak with one kid, who smiled, but shook in his shoes like his principal might pop the ball and walk inside. She eventually left, and after waiting a few minutes, Nate followed, once again with sweaty palms.

His head darting around on a swivel as he approached the basketball court, Nate must’ve looked deranged as he approached because the kids who noticed him stopped and stared. Nate forced a smile, which probably looked worse, and stood at the chain link fence behind the basket.

“Kid, yeah you, with the basketball,” he said as the boy who’d just spoken to Christine pointed at his chest. “My brother goes here, his name’s Zach Carter, do you know where he’s at?”

The middle schooler and his friends looked at each other nervously, but before they could call out for a teacher, Nate flashed a five dollar bill, grabbing the first kid’s attention. He took the bill suspiciously but didn’t say anything.

“Kid, Zach Carter, you know him?”

The boy wasn’t buying it. Nate sighed and looked around, noting a teacher chaperoning a game of soccer on the field across the parking lot.

“Look, I want to find out more about Mrs. Rosenquest.”

The kid looked like his cover had blown, like the netting around the rim might have been bugged. His friends started shaking their heads vigorously in protests, and almost immediately one started running toward a teacher. Nate started to sweat and rattled the fence.

“C’mon kid, tell me about your damn principal, for Christ’s sake,” he said, just as a middle-aged man in a striped tie started a brisk jog toward Nate, his hand waving in the air at the kids.

Nate muttered *forget it* and ran back to his car, jumping into the front seat and almost giving himself whiplash as he sped out of the lot, the teacher hot on his tale. He didn’t look back, instead routing toward the nearest Handy Hugo’s. He went inside, got a pack of Camel Blue’s, and for the first time since quitting in high school – a tobacco town tradition – had a nice, long smoke.

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Over the next several hours, Nate felt his mind unravel. He’d convinced himself that he was a good thing for Christine, a deserved punishment for her neglectful husband – but now what? He smoked one cigarette in his car, then two, coughing up a lung as he cruised around Wake Forest, glaring at the identical strip malls that the city planners couldn’t seem to get enough of.

When it was almost 4 p.m., Nate went back to Christine’s middle school, this time keeping his distance outside the teacher’s lot until he saw her pull out and drive off. After months of avoiding her house like the plague, Nate was determined to find the lion’s den.

Christine lived in a cookie cutter suburb, but what her house lacked in originality, it made up for in size. The stone house had white Corinthian pillars and huge, glass windows; a few minutes after Christine, Nate parked in their driveway, shaped like a rainbow. He was shocked Christine and

Elliott needed all this space. Elliott wasn't home, but Nate figured he couldn't be far – it was Wake Forest, after all.

He stepped up to the front porch and then inside without knocking. Christine was in the kitchen, open to the doorway, and nearly dropped her glass of wine she saw Nate in the doorway, his heart beating like a war drum.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Nate?” Christine said under her breath after springing across the foyer to lock the door behind Nate. She stood beside him, their noses an inch apart. “Do you realize how hard it is to explain why the P.T. boy from the Y needed to make a house call during the middle of the afternoon?”

“Yeah, I thought about that,” Nate said. He stared straight forward, like Christine wasn't right next to him. “I've also been thinking a lot about your husband.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, Elliott?” Nate said. He looked into Christine's eyes. “The monster, I think you called him. I ran into him today, literally, just before lunch.” The color in Christine's face drained. “If you wanted to trick me into an affair, you could've just told me you own a BMW. That'll be a big bargaining chip during the divorce.”

“I didn't trick you into anything, Nate, now cut the shit,” Christine said, grabbing his wrist. “What did you say to my husband?”

“That I'm screwing his wife, what do you think?” Nate said. “It's not what I said that's important, but what he told me.”

Nate explained what he knew: that Elliott wasn't a contractor or a workaholic, that he didn't even seem capable of anger, let alone abuse. That he was an ex-detective and built like a Dodge

Ram. Nate stood and paced the room, releasing his frustration in bursts of accusation until he wondered aloud, “What are you even getting out of this?”

“What do you want me to say?” Christine said. “He’s a big buwwy, Nate, I need a *nice* man to make it all better.” She released her hair from a bun and twiddled her fingers like a smoker without a cigarette. “Don’t play the conscience card on me. If you really had an issue with sleeping with someone married, a few sob stories wouldn’t have changed your mind.”

Nate stood with an open mouth. He couldn’t believe she’d already admitted to lying, and didn’t seem bothered by being caught. She continued when he didn’t respond.

“Look, fifteen years in, Elliott got *boring*, and he *does* have a temper,” Christine said, cracking a smile. “What’s important is how fun it is sneaking behind his big, dumb back.” Nate backed away.

“We have to stay away from each other, Christine,” he said. “This...is too crazy for me. And honestly, I think you should tell your husband. He seemed like he’d understand.”

She moved toward him and started to protest but Nate shook his head and reached for the door handle. He avoided her eyes.

“Can we at least...” Christine trailed off, then nodded at her extended arms. Nate exhaled and accepted a prolonged hug.

“You’ll regret this, Nate,” Christine said in his ear. She was smiling like a ragdoll in a horror movie. “But if your mind is made, let me run upstairs before you leave. I have something of yours.”

Nate knew it was a bad idea, but he waited, glancing at his watch. His goal was to be out of the house in less than three minutes, but he followed her upstairs to her bedroom.

Christine pushed the door, already ajar, fully open, and Nate looked into the bedroom, at the life Christine was willing to jeopardize for...what? A dash of excitement? Christine went to look in the bathroom for his belongings while Nate searched for a sufficient explanation beside Christine's immaculate white linens. He was breathing heavily, starting to feel sick as the moments dragged by, when Christine opened the bathroom door and stepped into her bedroom in black lingerie.

"Are you sure I couldn't convince you to visit a few minutes longer?" she said. She crossed the room and had her hand on Nate's chest before he moved an inch. "Can't we do this one more time?"

She pushed her hips against his until Nate's back was against the dresser, then she ran her tongue from the base of Nate's neck to his ear. She begged him to stay, but he pushed her away, only to have her force herself back against him. He was grabbing for Christine's left hand, which wrestled with his belt buckle, when he noticed a family picture on the dresser to his left.

Featured in the photo, clockwise from top left, were Elliott, Christine, and college-aged blonde girls with Christine's smile and Elliott's bulging, brown eyes.

"Jesus fuck, what have I done?" Nate said. He moved Christine aside and pointed at the picture. "You have goddamn *kids* and you didn't tell me? What else don't I know?"

Christine had on the same, sick smile she wore downstairs. It made Nate feel like retching, like watching someone giggle at a dead body.

"Well," she said seductively. "I doubt you know that I told Elliott to be home as soon as he could," she said, her smile growing wider. "That some fucking creep had followed me home."

Nate's eyes doubled in size and he started toward the bedroom door only to hear the front door swing open. Elliott Rosenquest stomped inside, finally seeming like the ogre Nate imagined.

“Remember what I said about his temper?” Christine whispered, her hand on Nate’s back. “I knew you’d regret this, sweetie.” She pulled away, still smiling wickedly, then washed her expression clean and replaced it with one of horror.

“ELLIOTT,” she screamed, her voice breaking. “Get up here, he broke into our bedroom!”

Just A Few Pages

On Mondays and Wednesdays, after class lets out from Cardinal Gibbons at 2:55, I go to Crabtree Valley Mall to people-watch.

The Raleighites at the mall are no less dull than anywhere else in the City of Oaks, but you can basically get a free meal from the food court if you aren't proud. I'm not.

I walk back and forth between Mandarin Express and Sarku Japan sampling orange chicken from one, teriyaki from the other like a kid playing his divorced parents for Christmas presents. My record is 12 samples before they cut me off.

So my after school snack is free. Better than that, I can sit there for hours and nobody will say a thing. No one's paying me any mind; I can work in peace.

One afternoon I finished a handful of sesame chicken chunks and sat down at a two-seater next to a bank of massage chairs. I licked my fingers, looked around, and pulled my journal from my pocket. I grabbed my pen, resting between the sheets at the next fresh page, uncapped it, and waited for someone to pay for a massage.

I like the noise cover because, well, it's embarrassing, but I sort of whimper when I write or draw, like I'm exhaling hard, but some prick always thinks I'm moaning, like I'm some kind of freak. I can't help it. So I wait to hear muffled vibrations, scan the room again and put my pen down.

I'm transfixed by how quickly the hibachi chefs at Sarku whip their knives around their heads, clanking the blades off the grill and slicing steak like butter. Without taking my eyes off the chef, I sketch him performing his dance from across the food court, knives slicing through meat while he smiles. I'm breathing heavily when I finish and look down to see how I captured him.

He turned out more menacing than intended. I'd meant to capture him elated, but his jubilant smile couldn't mask the fury I put in his eyes while he diced pork, steak, then reached into the reserve cooler behind him, marked "FRESH" in bold red on Styrofoam speckled with brown

clumps. Blood leaked over the letters when he pulled out an arm, severed at the shoulder, and brought it to his cooking station to dissect the bicep.

I'm imagining myself at a private table, blood licking my cheeks as the chef flips a chunk of flesh into his hat, when these two little shits playing tag inside run right by my table, nearly tripping over my leg.

"Would've been my fault, that kid trips, for fuck's sake," I say to myself, searching for their mother. She isn't there.

I shake my head and jot a note about the vermin running around the mall, but before I can muster a sentence, the tag-ee darts beside my table again and knocks my complimentary water across the table and onto my lap, soaking the fresh ink. All of a sudden the mother, a big woman, is front and center and apologizing profusely, fake-wringing her sons' wrists but smiling like it's nothing. I move my phone out of my pocket and swiftly put my journal away. I'm fuming – I can't even hear her. I'm looking directly at the older of the two kids, the one who bumped into me, still smiling like his mom, like he's taunting me. But I keep composed.

"Ma'am, it's really alright," I say with my family picture smile. "Boys will be boys."

The mom's face morphs from joke-mode to fake Southern hospitable.

"Well aren't you just too sweet. Your mama did well."

Still smiling, I excuse myself to the bathroom to dry myself off. I need to leave before I spit on this lady or her stupid kids, but she sends Josiah after me to do the same. He's already sucking on a Dum-Dum without a care in the world.

I still have my soggy journal in hand, the pages fanned to help them dry. I rush in and put it under the automatic dryer. I look in the mirror. I'm sweating, my face nearly plum. The water-stain on my pants looks like I got punched in my bladder. I need to go home. Then Josiah walks in after me. I glance at him in the mirror as he walks behind me to the opposite dryer.

“What flavor it that?” I ask while stepping into the entrance of the bathroom. Josiah’s mom is with his brother getting frozen yogurt a couple stores over.

“Brown,” he responds, pulling the lollipop from his mouth like a smart ass. I’m towering over him a moment later and I smack the candy out of his hands.

“If we were alone I’d skin you alive, you little chicken-shit,” I say to this 10-year-old. “I’d mail your fucking heart to your mom an,”

I hear snickers and sympathetic sighs from strangers when I get onto the CAT bus with a soaked crotch – even after blow-drying – and my journal in my back pocket. My ears are still ringing and my forehead feels like a helium balloon being filled beyond its limit. So I tune the people out. I find an empty pair of seats in the back of the bus, whip out my journal, trash the unsalvageable scraps and start to write like I’m taking a timed test. I don’t even bother to check if people are watching, listening, judging.

For a page then two, I let loose on this woman in for her audacity, for the miniature devils she brought into this world. The bus hits potholes that shake me from my sketching and kvetching for a moment, that remind me I’m not alone, but then I think of her face, cheap makeup plastered on her cheeks, and her beady little rat’s eyes, and then I’m scribbling frantically again.

I’ve been ignoring the PA on the bus, so when I’m done venting, I notice I’ve missed my stop and the one after.

“Typical, dumbass,” I say to myself, capping my pen and putting the journal in my back pocket to avoid being ruined further by my still-wet jeans. I yank the dangling cord to call for a stop and get out at the corner of Millbrook and Dawkins.

I’ve lived in Raleigh almost my entire life, but nonetheless, miss a couple bus stops and I’m pretty screwed. I put my address into Google Maps – only about two miles, not so bad.

Naturally, my phone dies moments later.

It takes me a little more than three hours of backtracking and asking gas station attendants for help, but I eventually stumble into my neighborhood just as it starts raining. At least I don't have to explain the whole "accident" to my parents.

They're fine people. I've said much worse about them in my journals when they've pissed me off, but they're fine people. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to them, at least.

My mom won't let me keep my Xbox in my room so I walk inside and go right to the living room couch. Dad's still at work when I get home; Mom's in the kitchen. She sings a "hello" and I mutter one back so she'll leave me alone. She gives me my space when I'm upset.

She brings me Pizza Rolls after I start blowing up hospitals on Grand Theft Auto V. She kisses my cheek when she puts them down, making the sign of the cross on my forehead. She hates this game so she doesn't look at the screen. I'm not supposed to play M-rated games, but she caved on GTA when I threatened to run away from home.

"How was your day, sweetie?" she asks, then, knowing full well things aren't okay, says, "Is everything alright?"

I don't look up from the screen, but I give her a half-smile and mutter that I'm fine. She smiles and leaves me alone. She knows I hate it when she lingers.

About an hour later, my dad gets home so mom calls me to dinner. I get up from the couch and pat my pocket. My heart stops beating – the journal isn't there.

Practically panting, I rip the sofa cushions from the couch and toss them across the room, then jam my fingers between the gaps in the metal frame. I throw myself onto the ground and shine my phone's flashlight underneath the couch, but it's just lint balls. It's not here.

Mom's getting impatient so I go sit silently through dinner, my mind frantic. What if it's lost forever? What if someone else has it? What if they're reading everything I've written and drawn, everything I've thought? The idea makes me nauseous and I have to excuse myself to the bathroom.

I retch twice and try to retrace my steps. I had it on the bus, I don't have it now, but where the fuck am I supposed to look? I barely know which way I came from. I glance at the mirror – my eyes are welling up.

Exiting the bathroom in a hurry, I jog back through dinner, grabbing my mom's keys off the hook and darting for the front door.

“Mom, god, I'm so dumb, I left my chemistry at school, my book, I gotta go to school to get it, I'll be right back,” I say, and I'm out the door before my parents can tell me to sit my ass down.

It's silent in the car aside from my dry-heaving. I don't know what I'm looking for – it's still raining, and darker now, I can't see a thing – but I haul ass down Falls until I find the BP I stopped at for directions.

I park and sprint inside to the register.

“Hey man, you might remember me, I was in here a bit ago for directions,” I say, but he obviously doesn't have any recollection of our conversation. “Anyways, did you happen to see a small brown journal in here, about the size of a passport?”

The saggy-eyed clerk peers down the aisles of his convenience store then back at me.

“Yeah man, I haven't seen any passports,” he says.

I tap my knuckles on the counter and return to my car to go home, crushing the attendant between my thumb and forefinger in my head. Before I know it I'm crying at a red light, my stomach still in knots. When I get home, I ignore my mom's questions about my chemistry homework and go right to bed.

I can't sleep and know that I won't be able to tonight. I order a pack of three hand journals on Amazon and hope a stranger will find my misplaced prize, track me down, and return it. At the same time, I'd prefer the journal be lost forever. But the idea of my mind, in black and white, in someone else's hands – I had to stop thinking about it.

I'm less tense over the next few days when I realize no one is looking at me differently, like they know I have less-than-pleasant opinions about them, like they know who I'm thinking about when I play with myself. I try to act like nothing is bothering me, like nothing's changed.

Still, the idea of my soul laid bare for any prying eye to see chews at the ankles of my subconscious. It's not enough to warrant a response – what can I do about it at this point? – but enough to get my attention. A recurring dream, in which an exposé on my inability to get laid is printed on the front page of the New York Times, shakes me awake in my sheets and leaves me simultaneously sweating and shivering. I drink a glass of water and try to go back to sleep.

Sometimes it works.

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About two months later, I scribble a note about rescheduling my dentist appointment in my newest journal, close it, and put it in my pocket. This one has pronounced wrinkles where the front cover bends and less than ten pages remaining. I open my phone to kill a few minutes before catching the bus home from work.

On Facebook, I watch an instructional cooking video for deep fried pizza bites. I didn't eat lunch but I close the video when I see a message from David Munroe.

My stomach flips when I read it, unsure of whether to be terrified or thrilled. He has my journal. Even better, he can meet whenever, today, right now even.

He lives right by my house, actually, which I guess makes sense. It's a short walk from the bus stop beyond mine. "1210 Old Coach Road – red house on the corner ☺," David had written.

The bus comes in seven minutes and thirty-eight seconds – I count every one. It starts raining, just like the day I lost the journal. The bus is nearly silent, everyone looking down at their laps, phones, or books. It feels oddly like a dream.

I'm soaked when I get to David's doorstep. I hopped off the bus, walked two blocks into a neighborhood without streetlights, and found Old Coach Road. I skipped up the brick steps at 1210, yanked my headphones from my ears, and knocked the way my mom does:

Knock knock knock-knock knock, knock knock.

David opens the door before my hand rests at my side. He's about 40, blonde, tall, and smiling. I'm not surprised he answered so quickly – he was waiting for me – just a bit startled. When David greets me, he looks nervous, looking over my shoulder to see if I'm alone.

“Ryan Larkin, in the flesh,” he says. His voice cracks. He keeps smiling nervously and gestures toward his living room, which is littered with stacks of stray papers and books. “The journal is right inside, come in a moment.”

The hairs on my arms stand at attention. I decline the invite, trying to avoid a conversation, but David insists. He retreats inside, muttering about the tea he has steeping, beckoning me to close the door. I don't have much of a choice, so I step inside as David disappears into the kitchen.

He clearly lives alone. There are pizza boxes scattered across the room, an original Star Wars: A New Hope poster hanging on the wall beside the TV, and an Xbox One, just like mine, sitting on the ground. The case for Grand Theft Auto V is open next to the console.

“Oh, nice, I love GTA,” I say, hoping he'll hear me and come back with my journal.

David peeks his head into the room but doesn't return.

“I'll bet you do,” he says, his eyebrows raised. “Great game.”

He's making a ton of noise in the kitchen, like he's digging up the floorboards to find the journal. Didn't he know I was coming?

A few minutes later and he's back with tea, but not the journal. He's opening his mouth to keep up the small talk when I cut him off.

“Look, I’d love to stay, but I’m supposed to be home soon for dinner,” I say. “I appreciate the tea, but could I just get my journal please?”

David purses his lips and nods like he’s just remembered why I’m there. He moves slowly to his desk, glimpses out the window, and grabs my journal from the top drawer. My knees wobble. I feel like I’m gonna faint.

“Some state I found this in,” he says. “And luckily your name’s in it, otherwise I wouldn’t have known what to do with it.”

He chuckles the fakest chuckle I’ve ever heard and extends the journal. I grab for it but he doesn’t let go, his face suddenly like stone. I feel myself starting to sweat.

“If I were you, I’d take better care of this,” he says, eyeing me the way I’m sure God judges His sinners. I whisper a thank you and turn on my heel, lunging for the door too late to escape David saying, “You know, those are *some* drawings you have in there.”

I turn around slowly. He’s scowling now.

“You know which ones I’m talking about,” he says. “The bodies, the blood, all that violence. The kids.” He looks me from heel to head. “The girls.”

My fake laugh is much worse than his.

“Oh, yeah, I’m trying to draw this comic book series,” I say. “I’m not much of an artist.”

“Comics, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Kids stuff.”

He nods his head in contemplation, his arms now crossed, then peeks out the window again.

“Well it seems like you got the dialogue down pat, Ryan.”

Sweating bullets with a boulder lodged in my throat, I try to sell a smile before turning around, my shaky hand grabbing for the handle just as three raps come on the door.

I look at David. He looks disappointed, either in me or himself. Pushing me aside, he opens the door.

“Are you Mr. Munroe?” the bigger of two police officers asks. “We got a call about someone communicating threats.”

David steps aside, opening the door to reveal me and my slack jaw, then grabs my journal and hands it to the officers. They open to the front of the book, and when their faces scrunch up in disgust, I know they’ve stumbled on my trips to the girls’ locker room, or worse.

Before I can blink, hurl, or apologize, I’m in the backseat of their patrol car, tears staining my cheeks, wondering how I’m going to explain to my parents who I really am.

The Inevitable

Paula Barasso and I never stood a chance, but when I was 18, I hardly considered the possibility of us ever breaking up. By my 19th birthday, it seemed unavoidable.

She was perfect for me when we got together a few days after Valentine’s during my senior year at St. David’s in Raleigh. We had just enough in common – we had cars, virginity, and plans to study at Chapel Hill in the fall.

As I’d done with my girlfriend at 14 and have tried to avoid doing since, I fell hard and immediately promised Paula the stars. My blinding horniness had me convinced she was immaculate, the One even, before the end of spring. Sex, as it does, made the fever worse.

That was summer: humid afternoons making up for inexperience and lost time at her house or mine. Her parents loved me, loved us, loved taking the two of us and Paula’s younger sister,

Katherine, on weekend trips to the Outer Banks or Grandfather Mountain. We couldn't have gotten into a fight if we wanted to.

We asked to go to Busch Gardens in June, and Paula's parents gave us not only the keys to the Escalade, but a hotel room in Williamsburg for ourselves. They were *that* rich and *those* kinds of parents.

I didn't tell my parents – Church Catholics – about the solo hotel rooms until a year or two later, joking about it, for fear they might smite me. And I'm no apostle, but I'll admit it was a bit weird how supportive Mr. and Mrs. Barasso were of me sleeping with their daughter on their dime.

But at the time, I would've sworn I was in love.

College wasn't as simple as high school, but even in November, I would've bet the over on our relationship lasting beyond graduation. All of a sudden, though, in December, everything fell apart.

We were in Paula's bed studying for our first round of finals around 12:30 a.m. on the 2nd or 3rd when her suitemate came whimpering through the door and plopped onto the foot of the bed. Sabrina's platinum hair was tough to distinguish from Paula's white down comforter, which she burrowed into. Paula mouthed to me that she'd be gone in a minute and started to stroke her hair.

Sabrina typically had a mix of school and boy-related woes; that night, she had both. She missed a biology lab that was due at midnight because this cute blonde guy named Michael was supposed to help her out with the conversion tables but he had to be at the house for pledging and now she won't be able to get into med school and, basically, all is lost. Paula rubs her shoulders and coos.

Just after 1 a.m., Sabrina starts calling Michael. After being sent to voicemail four times, she nearly gave up.

“God almighty, where is this nigga?” she said, drawing out the last syllable in a whine.

I nearly choked on some Gatorade, then whipped my head at her, then Paula, who looked back at me like a toddler had repeated a curse word. Paula was silent while the toddler kept cursing.

“Do you mind not saying that, maybe?” I said, thinking I was making a reasonable request.

“Oh, it’s fine, I don’t mean it like that,” Sabrina said, seeming confused at first about which word I was referencing. “I’m from Fayetteville.”

Paula would’ve loved things to end there, but I stood my ground until Michael showed up in a backwards cap around 1:30, escorting Sabrina out of a room with more than one elephant. As soon as the door closed, Paula and I started fuming.

“Where do you get off telling someone how to speak in my room, Jacob?” she said.

“How is that what you’re upset about?”

“It’s just incredibly rude is all,” Paula said, looking at me angrily between scribbling notecards. “Would you call out your parents if they said something you thought was racist?”

“Obviously, wouldn’t you?”

“At their dinner table?” she asked, incredulous that I valued human decency more than dining etiquette. “I guess we were just raised in different houses.”

Reluctant to die on that hill, at least right then, I thought about that last point as the fight died down, we made up, and tried to get some sleep.

We were all smiles at the Barasso's Christmas get-together in Raleigh about a week later, after exams, but Paula's relatives kept me thinking about our fight in Granville Towers. *Different houses.*

The whole clan had migrated south from Connecticut and New York for the holiday – Mrs. Barasso's parents and her dad's second wife, Mr. Barasso's divorced sister, and her two daughters, one of whom brought her Parisian boyfriend, Benjamin. They were louder and meaner than geese.

Paula held my hand while I fielded questions from her wine-slurping relatives until Grandpa Montminy, who'd polished off a bottle of merlot already, flicked off the TV when he saw an WRAL broadcast of civil rights protests at Carolina. He scrunched up his nose like he'd smelled shit, and spoke directly to me for the first time since trying to break my wrist with his handshake.

“So, Jack, you bringing some conservative thought to the bastion of liberalism out there in Moscow West?”

I laughed before I realized he wasn't kidding. Paula dug her fingernails into my forearm.

“Oh, I thought,” I started in no direction, and thankfully, Mrs. Barasso called us to dinner, sparing me from a spit-soaked rant.

The drinking didn't stop at dinner. The night didn't get better.

Drunken grandpa was a big football guy, so we started off talking sports, a safe topic. But rich white Republicans can only drink together for so long before saying something out of the 1800's.

Benjamin, unfamiliar with the ins and outs of American football, sat silently until Mr. Barasso leaned toward him, flashed a shit-eating grin to the table, and teased, “Hey Benny, what percentage of a football team has to be composed by black players?” The baby boomers chuckled.

“I don’t know,” Benjamin started, his accent thick on his tongue. “Maybe 30, 40 percent?”

“There’s no set limit or anything,” I said, ignoring the snickers. “Some positions are typically filled by black players, whereas white guys are more often punters or quarterbacks.”

“That’s because the blacks aren’t smart enough,” Paula’s aunt offered, eliciting nothing more than a few pairs of bulging eyes around the dinner table before Mr. Barasso grabbed a nearly-empty wine bottle and joked through that same smirk, “That’s enough of that for tonight.”

I looked at Paula with my mouth open, shocked no one felt even a bit uncomfortable. She met my gaze and said nothing, but was perfectly clear: *not now*.

We didn’t say much to each other for the rest of the night, locked in a silent fight that had already been decided. I was mad at her for not being upset with her family, and she was angry with me for being mad at her for something her family had done. Our differences were starting to figure more prominently than our similarities, but our mutual stubbornness never faded from view. Eventually, being angry didn’t seem like a productive use of time, so we walked ourselves back from the ledge, apologized in hushed tones, had sex in her childhood bedroom, and started to fall asleep.

It was the first time I’d been back in Paula’s room since leaving for college; it felt like the world had kept moving for six months everywhere but there, in that space, where we’d first opened up to each other completely, promised we loved each other. Without a second thought, we said the same thing that night.

Before I could fake sleep, Paula said, “Do you still see us together in five years?”

“I hope so,” I said. It was a lie, and anything other than “no” would’ve been a lie, but I was young, tired, and not ready to give up yet, so for that moment, I was satisfied.

I spent the next week bouncing between Paula, my friends and family, but always mentally testing the foundations of my relationship. For all I tried to think of the good times, though, I could only seem to remember what had happened that December.

Paula and I took a weekend trip to D.C. around the middle of the month, hoping some time away from home, in one of my favorite cities, would do us some good. For what it's worth, during our three days in a suite at the JW Marriott on Pennsylvania Avenue, we hardly fought. But I couldn't shirk my concerns and found myself speeding down I-95 on Sunday, dying to get back to my friends for the premiere of the Hobbit in theaters. I didn't give two shits about the movie, but without me even noticing it, time spent with Paula was becoming less and less bearable.

In retrospect, I could've saved us both a lot of pain by walking away the moment I started having doubts, but I refused to believe I'd fallen out of love. At the very least, I thought I'd give it some time for things to get better.

Paula let me have some space leading up to my 19th birthday on the 30th, knowing we'd be spending New Year's with her family in Orlando. In October, that plan sounded amazing, but as alarms started going off in my head, the Barasso family vacation started to seem like a trap.

After a modest birthday party with my high school buddies, Paula and I piled into the Escalade with her parents and sister on the last day of 2014 and headed toward Disney World.

We hadn't spent more than a couple minutes together as a group since the football conversation. The thumping in my temple returned almost the instant I settled into the middle row of the SUV.

Zippering past swamps, rest stops, and indistinguishable flatland throughout South Carolina, we played the alphabet game to pass the time. Typically unable to shut up, I remember being

brooding and silent, raising my voice only to vindictively point out on passing highway signs, “bridge ices before ROAD, R,” and to vehemently oppose the usage of a KFC sign for Paula’s “F.” She wasn’t happy that I didn’t take her side, and was even more upset when her mom joined me in support.

Of course, I had no reason to be in a bad mood, other than that I wanted to be with my friends in Raleigh instead of a metal container with my girlfriend and her family, our relationship hanging by a thread. But once I was pissed, I just let myself get more pissed.

My melancholy dipped toward outright anger when, after bragging about her brand-new Tile GPS locator for the better part of three hours, Mrs. Barasso got to use it. When we stopped for lunch at a Chick-fil-A outside Savannah, she left her latest Christmas present, a Gucci handbag, in our booth. She noticed about half an hour from the Florida border, saying to the car, “THANK GOD, they have it, I told them we’ll be back in about two hours.”

And so we turned around.

I bought some NyQuil at an Exxon and tried to sedate myself for the rest of the ride, falling asleep on Paula’s shoulder in the middle of the car.

When I woke up outside Orlando, it was dark and chilly in the Escalade, and Mrs. Barasso gave me the lowdown. We’d be there soon, then we’d check in and grab some dinner. The girls were planning to change, but Mrs. Barasso said the joint was “like Moe’s,” so I stayed in my t-shirt and joggers.

Paula didn’t say much as we checked into our room – as always, separate from the Barasso’s master bedroom – and I stood out on the balcony while she changed. I couldn’t help but feel like everything around me was plastic, from the pools and golf carts at the base of our resort to the

buildings and people and palm trees. I kept playing the moody teenager on the elevator down to the hotel lobby with Paula and Katherine.

“You all look good,” Mrs. Barasso said in the lobby, but her eyes lingered on my outfit. Unlike the girls, I hadn’t gotten dolled up for a Tex-Mex joint.

I should’ve asked her to clarify “like Moe’s,” because while El Dorado served burritos and queso, they only seemed to do so for people in collared shirts. The wait staff didn’t mind, but the Barasso’s acted like they were dining with a leper, the girls sneaking glances at my exposed wrists and shaking their heads over servings of rice and beans.

Mr. Barasso just nodded when I thanked him for dinner, so I sensed he wasn’t pleased by my outfit, either. I decided, then, to just shut up and try to get through the trip without pissing them off further.

We left the restaurant full and silent, retreating back to the hotel for a couple hours of TV before checking out the resort’s New Year’s Eve party. Despite an actual outfit change and a festive hat, in every one of my pictures from that night, I look internally tortured, like I’m constipated or at the very least, extremely uncomfortable.

“Let’s take another, Jacob’s smile is weird,” Mrs. Barasso said once, twice, then 30 more times that evening.

Throughout the night, as we sipped watered down champagne and listened to off-key cover bands, Paula wondered aloud, “Are you sure you’re alright? Nothing’s wrong?” Somehow thinking lying was doing her more good than the truth, I insisted I was fine, faking a smile when she pressed me. She pursed her lips and let it go.

We watched the ball drop from her parents' bedroom, sharing a peck on the lips before I excused myself to go to sleep, blaming the long car ride for my lethargy. I could feel four sets of Barasso eyes on my back as I headed back toward our room.

I fell asleep thinking of home, of telling my friends about the latest, dumbest shit that Paula and her out-of-touch parents had come up with. I woke up about half an hour later to find Paula sitting up in bed with the lamp on. She looked harsh in the dimmed light, her nose casting shadows across her face as I looked up from the sheets.

“What’s going on?” I said, then looked for my phone. “What time is it?”

“Just listen,” Paula said, seeming exhausted, like I’d been talking over her for an hour. “Just shut up and listen.”

I propped myself up and prepared as she took a deep breath.

“It’s obvious to me that you don’t want to be here, and after your whole bit at dinner, I think it’s pretty clear to my parents, too.” In my head, I rolled my eyes, again thinking of her mom’s “like Moe’s” comment.

“And, well,” Paula said, inhaling like an actress before her biggest line. “If you don’t want to be here, I don’t want you to be here, and my parents definitely don’t want to pay for you to be here.” She paused, looking away from me to deal the final blow. “If that’s the case, they want to buy you a flight home tomorrow morning.”

My first instinct was to fight for us, to grovel and apologize and take back my bad attitude and swear to enjoy every moment of Space Mountain for the next week. I took one look at her eyes, and I knew that was what she wanted. I knew she was bluffing, and that she wanted me to stay but just to give a damn, but for the life of me I couldn’t figure out why that was getting harder to do

with every passing minute. I kept staring back, silent, until I admitted to her that I wasn't 100 percent committed to her the way I once was. That had been clear for at least a month, but I'd finally stopped running from it.

"Look, I'm so sorry for everything," I said, eyeing my duffel bag in the corner, still fully packed. "I've been a dick this trip, and you deserve better from me."

I pulled in a shallow breath. Keep lying, or tell the truth.

"But I can't be better," I said, honestly. "Or maybe it's that I won't be, not right now at least, and I...I don't know."

Paula's eyes started to well up, but she didn't move. I slipped off the bed, went and stood by my bag, and turned back to her, taking a moment to make up my mind without doubt.

"I think I should take that flight, Paula," I said to the floor, then looked back to her. "Tell your parents I'll be sleeping in the lobby."

Grabbing my bag and turning to the door before Paula could respond, I rushed out of the suite and into the hallway, my eyes trained on the elevator doors. I figured the Barasso's couldn't back out of their offer now, and grew giddy all of a sudden imagining my plane taking off and my friends picking up the phone in disbelief to the news that my vacation was ending early.

I waited for my shuttle to the ground floor and admired the last of the night's fireworks over downtown Orlando, wondering why it took a 13-hour road trip to realize something had gone seriously wrong with my relationship, but ultimately glad that it'd be my last pretending Paula Barasso and I were happy.

Underneath Napoli

On nights when their mom worked the graveyard shift in the ICU, Gio Caputi tried to get his sister tucked in before the 9:37 subway rattled the linoleum floor of their studio apartment in the West Bronx. Five nights a week, he clocked in at the Shell on Tremont Avenue at a quarter past 10. The gas station was a short walk from the apartment, but Nicoletta took time to get settled – she rarely slept without a story. Most times Gio put her to bed, she asked the same question.

“Wait, Gio, before you go,” Nicoletta would say. She’d sit up on the wiry pullout mattress, a couch-bed the siblings shared, and glance at the spare single across the room like their mom might be hiding under the covers. “Will you tell me more about Napoli?”

Gio didn’t remember much. He was five when he moved to New York with his pregnant mother, a full-time RN and part-time saint who’d deserted southern Italy and her husband, a local soccer star with the ego of a world champion. The only English word she knew was “cheeseburger,” but Maria Caputi left her hometown, enrolled in ESL classes in the city, and chose a new life for herself and her children. She subjected herself to 60 hours of vomit, sweat, and shit every week for 11 years for the opportunity, as she saw it, to raise her kids in the same bed.

In Gio's fuzzy memories of Italy, his mother often cries. He understood why his mom was reluctant to talk about life in Napoli, why she wouldn't let Gio hang posters of his dad when they came to the States. Mostly so Nicoletta would sleep at night, Gio embellished his limited recollections and paraphrased passages from the city's Wikipedia page to flesh out the details. His most vivid memory was brief but potent.

"Mama, dad and me, after Mass, we'd walk to the waterfront and eat cannoli by the sailboats bobbing in the bay," Gio said. "A woman sat there on a little stone wall, begging and singing beside an upturned hat every Sunday." After several retellings, he developed a pregnant pause at that point in the story. "All I remember about'er is she sounded heartbroken."

The Caputi siblings had their usual conversation the night of June 23rd, 2015, before Nicoletta dreamed of the Amalfi Coast while her brother almost jogged, head on a swivel, from his apartment to the Shell. The tense commute was about half of Gio's exercise regiment, supplemented by at least an hour a day with the punching bag at Uncle Pavone's gym, where he'd been a regular since coming home with one too many black eyes in middle school.

That night, set to a soundtrack of muggings and catcalling, was normal.

The next morning, two NYPD officers knocked on the front door of the Caputi family's West Bronx studio, apologized, and said Maria Caputi died on shift from a freak brain aneurysm. The officers peered inside at Nicoletta sleeping in the bed opposite her mother's – still made, still empty – braced Gio on the shoulder, and left him trying to stifle tears in the hallway.

Drawing from what he'd seen on TV, Gio hoped the days following would be a numbing blur. The opposite was true. Beyond the emotional grief of death was the monetary one – Gio saw himself, to some degree, as Nicoletta's second parent, and now her only one. So while his sister mourned silently, looking for answers from her ceiling, Gio took calls from financial planners and

organized a funeral for his mother, pausing to weep every third or so mention of her name. A week later, with only a handful of friends present, plus other nurses from Mount Sinai, Gio and Nicoletta buried their mother in the cheapest plot in the cheapest cemetery in New Rochelle. Gio thought about the price tag on his mom's discount veneer casket as it was lowered into the ground and instantly resented himself for doing so.

Then, like nothing had happened, everything and everyone moved on. Nicoletta stayed in her room, accepting her brother's hugs, but, for the first time, shutting him out. Her friends brought casseroles, cakes, and condolences from their mothers. Gio's closest friends from Bronx Haven High, Marcos and PJ, came to the apartment most afternoons, trying to get Gio to drink, smoke, laugh, talk, anything. When Gio drank a few beers, he wished he hadn't. When he abstained, he wished he was drunk.

One such day, after Marcos and PJ had taken the 1 Train toward Central Park, a man dressed in a black pinstripe suit knocked on the door and asked for Gio, "or the head of the household."

"I'm Marvin Morris, Mr. Caputi, if you were wondering," the man said. "The executor of your mother's estate. I've called once or twice."

Gio glanced at the landline, a modern relic his mother had insisted on keeping. She only used it to call her senile parents in Firenze, Italy, who'd left Napoli for a less turbulent lifestyle even before Maria's marriage collapsed. Gio hadn't checked the voicemail since his mother died.

"Gio, Giovanni Caputi," he said. He dialed up his Italo-New Yorker accent, a slight intimidation trick he employed often at the Shell. "Must'a missed your call, been busy."

Morris said he understood, and he didn't mince words. Before Gio could invite him inside, the estate executor was already seated at the kitchen table with a manila folder open.

"Now, if you don't mind, let's talk some business," Morris said.

If nothing else, Morris was frank. He explained that insurance covered burial costs and gave Gio and Nic some financial flexibility, but that custody was their most immediate concern. Not expecting to be one of the 200,000 Americans whose brains implode yearly, Maria hadn't drafted a will.

"The good news is that means everything," he said, waving at the room, including a napping Nicoletta, "That was your mother's is now yours. Everything except for you."

Gio listened with a slack jaw as the stranger in his kitchen explained that since they were minors, Nic and Gio required a new guardian. Without aunts and uncles nearby, with Italian grandparents who didn't even return their kin's calls, Gio and Nicoletta were alone. The government, Morris said, wasn't having it. The siblings were destined for child protective services.

"There is one more possibility," Morris said. "When did you last speak to your father?"

Gio hadn't said a word to his namesake since leaving Italy. From what he understood, his parents were high school sweethearts, a science-obsessed stunner and a flashy soccer player whose stock kept rising while Maria trained to be an RN. By the time they married in their early 20's, Giovanni diPaolo was a bona fide star, one of the youngest starting forwards in Napoli's rich history of Italian football. It went to his head. Success made Giovanni popular in the clubs, and by the time Gio Jr. came along, he had a rotating roster of mistresses, if Maria's marriage horror stories were to be believed. Giovanni was still convinced he loved Maria. She saw through her husband, and although her traditional parents told her real Italian women toughed it out, Maria eventually declared

her relationship irreparable. An ACL injury got Giovanni benched, then demoted to an inferior league. When their son was five, Maria came home early from a shift one night to find her husband entangled with another woman. She snapped pictures, dragged Giovanni through court, took back her surname and an alimony check, then ditched the continent.

That night, after Morris left and Gio swallowed some bitter liquid courage, he phoned his dad, a stranger for more than a decade, begging for help.

To Gio's surprise, his father recognized his voice immediately. Even more shocking was his immediate willingness to work with the consulate in Napoli and find the kids a new home.

Two weeks after Mr. Morris visited the West Bronx, Gio scrolled through the mental biography of his father on an airbus bound for Rome. Nicoletta slept in the next seat. She couldn't have said more than 50 words to her brother since their mom died. When Gio asked if she'd rather return to their father in Napoli than get a foster parent, Nicoletta nodded, but didn't seem to process the decision. Regardless, Gio squared away his mother's assets, listed the apartment with a couple realtors, and phoned the American consulate in Napoli. In no time at all, the consulate assured him, they'd have a family again.

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Napoli was much dirtier than Gio remembered, his recollections glossed to shining by childhood ignorance. He and Nicoletta had a connecting flight from Rome, then took an AC-less shuttle, chartered by the consulate, into Napoli proper from the airport outside the city. The ride into town was plucked from a movie. Verdant mountaintops towered over the highway to Gio's left, while on his right, rolling hills, some topped with entire villages of clay-roofed churches and homes, flattened and gave way to a clump of high rises built like a border to the city's entrance.

As they got closer, Nicoletta noticed many of the skyscrapers' windows were boarded up, seemingly abandoned. And even compared to the Bronx, where he'd tried his hand at tagging, Gio thought Napoli had gone overboard with the graffiti. Nearly every wall was covered with some indecipherable mural. Far worse, Gio thought, were the streaks of red paint spelling things like *Rivoluzione* on the faces and pedestals of 12th century statues, eroded testaments to forgotten Italian generals, unaware of the desecration of their visages.

The shuttle dropped Gio, Nic, and their suitcases, stuffed with clothing and essentials, in 98 degree heat in downtown Napoli, outside a café called Bar Pericoloso. The stone building had large storefront windows and a black rectangular sign with a white *T* printed above the word *Tabacchi*. Inside were a few patrons smoking, talking more with their hands than their mouths, and waving neglected newspapers while an opera, drenched in static, droned over a pair of creaking ceiling fans. Already dripping when he stepped out of the van, Gio wondered how none of the men, all wearing slacks and chinos, were sweating. One man noticed the Caputi kids staring and scowled at Gio's shorts, then Nicoletta's spandex leggings.

"*Posso aiutarti?*" he said. The siblings locked eyes. Gio shrugged and shook his head. He offered one of the select Italian phrases he could remember.

"Uh, *non parlo italiano*," Gio said. "I don't understand, I'm sorry." The man glanced at his friends, who guffawed and resumed their debate.

Nicoletta found the building's intercom, traced the listed names with her finger, and stopped on a placard marked *G. diPaolo*. Gio smiled, proud of his savvy sister. He pressed the doorbell and heard a shrill buzz. Moments later, the green oak door's lock clicked open, Nicoletta grabbed the handle, and they hauled their bags inside. Their father lived on the fourth floor.

They found the door cracked but knocked anyways. From inside, a gruff voice shouted, “*Entrate.*” Gio understood the command by tone alone. Before stepping inside, he shivered like he’d heard nails on a chalkboard, ones he recognized.

Giovanni wasn’t in the living room, which was attached to an impressive kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. The blinds were drawn but light broke through, hitting smoke that twisted out of a lit cigarette sitting in an ashtray in the middle of the room. On the same table were folded soccer magazines, bills, and assorted prescription bottles on their sides. Shirts, shoes, and empty wine bottles littered the floor, and it smelled like the trash had lingered for at least a week. On the wall was a poster of Giovanni, at 23, on the soccer field, beaming in Napoli’s sky blue uniform. Gio, with wide eyes, tried to remain optimistic until Giovanni, shirtless and stumbling, stepped into the room. He kept his distance like an antelope spotted by lions.

“*Dio mio, bambini,*” Giovanni said. He smiled, but looked uncomfortable doing so, like he’d forgotten the skill. “It’s been...I haven’t seen you in years.” He was either drunk or too Italian for his children to easily understand. He looked at Nic and the smile slid into a frown. “*Piacere,* Nicoletta, I suppose we’ve never met.” A tear fell down his cheek. “You look just like her.”

“You don’t get to talk about mom,” Nicoletta said, her voice sturdy. It was her most complete vocalized thought since the funeral. “You don’t ever get to talk about my mom.”

Giovanni nodded, glanced at his feet, and settled on the couch.

“This is painful for me too, you know,” Giovanni said. “I know it’s impossible to understand, but I did love her, even then.”

“We did too,” Gio said, a hand on Nicoletta’s back.

Giovanni looked at his son, then Nic, then back at his feet.

He stood by the couch, opened a bottle of wine, overturned on the floor, and took a swig, finding some revelation in it. “Gio, you’ll be on the couch. Nic, the bedroom,” he said.

Giovanni opened one of the prescription bottles and took two pills, then pulled the couch out into a lumpy mattress.

“For my back,” Giovanni said, nodding at the bottle. Judging by the army of orange bottles, some full, some discarded, Gio figured his dad’s back must be in miserable shape.

Giovanni explained what he’d found out about where his kids would start the twelfth and fifth grades, then listed a few ground rules: don’t walk home alone – especially at night – don’t speak to street peddlers, don’t ask too many questions. He finished the lecture and found a shirt.

“Gio, follow me downstairs. I need a drink, and you need a job,” Giovanni said. “You speak Italian, *si?*?”

The men left Nicoletta to get settled. Giovanni couldn’t believe Maria didn’t teach their children Italian, but knew better than to press the issue. He belched in disapproval when Gio said they spoke some at home, but mostly practiced English as a family when they moved to New York.

The men at the bar greeted Giovanni with kisses on both cheeks when he walked downstairs, standing and embracing like he’d been missing for a week.

“*Come state ragazzi, bene?*” Giovanni said. “Piero, this is my son,” he said, pointing to Gio.

The man who questioned Gio earlier gave an exaggerated, “Ahh,” stood, and embraced Gio, repeated, “Piero,” then laughed again at his bare legs. Gio and Nicoletta might have looked Italian, but their clothes and accents screamed, “American.”

Piero returned to Giovanni's side and the two started a heated debate that Gio knew was about him. Piero wasn't keen on the idea of an employee who didn't speak Italian, but after five minutes of bickering, the men pecked cheeks again and Giovanni walked away, saying, "*Buonasera.*"

"*Allora*, you have a job, Gio. You start cleaning tables on Monday," Giovanni said. "You should practice your Italian."

"I can't believe he agreed so quickly," Gio said, peeking back at the bar as they walked out.

"He didn't have much of a choice. My tab covers Pericoloso's rent in a week."

Nicoletta was collecting battles for the trash when her brother and father returned. Giovanni, for the first time, looked guilty. It was like he finally noticed he lived in a pigsty.

"I'll get that, *bambina*," he said. "I'll clean, get some rest. It's been a long day."

Nicoletta nodded and stepped toward the bathroom, then turned on her heel and wrapped her father's waist in a hug. She buried her face into his wrinkled shirt and cried. Holding his arms above Nicoletta's head, Giovanni looked at Gio, who nodded. He petted Nic's head, shaking her from the moment. She withdrew and stepped toward the couch, pulling it out into a full bed.

"Goodnight, Giovanni," she said, dismissing her dad. Gio was surprised he took the hint. Their father retreated to his room with a somber nod; Gio sat beside Nicoletta. She really did look just like their mom.

"Don't sleep yet, Gio," she said. "Tell me about life in New York when I was young?"

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That night, Gio told his sister a story she hadn't heard, from when she was four or five. A few neighborhood kids teased a preteen Gio about his lack of a father until one day, he pushed back.

The boys beat Gio bloody and sent him home crying to his mother, who demanded the kids' names, walked outside herself, and smacked the fat off the lead bully's cheek. It was far from Gio's last fight, which happened so frequently in high school that sparring could've been considered his hobby, but he never looked at an opponent the same way after that. If his 105 pound mom could make someone cry, Gio sure as shit could do the same. Two days later, he joined started boxing at Uncle Pavone's.

The first weekend they spent in Italy, the Caputi siblings saw their dad all of three times. While they explored the city's open markets and parks, the bay, with Vesuvius in one direction and the tree-lined cliffs of Capri in the other, and a choice few pizza shops, their father drank.

On Monday afternoon, Gio went to Pericoloso for his shift while Nicoletta read upstairs. An olive skinned bartender with pitch black hair and sea green eyes greeted Gio when he walked inside.

"Ciao bella, ragazzo," she said. Gio could've sworn she was singing. Instantly, he fell in love with the girl, easily five years his senior. "You must be the boy who doesn't speak Italian."

"Gio," he said. His mind was a blank slate. He blurted again, "Gio. From upstairs."

"Allora, Gio from upstairs, sono Michelangela," she said and extended her hand.

Michelangela had Gio clean tables while she handled a pair of customers. Between instructions of how to avoid pissing off Piero, she fielded Gio's questions about his father. She covered his rise to fame, his repeated knee injuries and the prescription dependencies that followed, the collapse of his career and how he ended up here, living above a bar that he spends more time in than his own home. When he wasn't fighting sobriety, Giovanni smoked and gambled on soccer. He usually did them all at the same time. Before Maria died, Michelangela said, Giovanni had never

mentioned his children. That thought turned Gio's stomach, but he couldn't explain why.

Michelangelo noticed and poured two glasses of wine, telling Gio to stop cleaning a moment.

"People here can be tough," she said. "There isn't the money there used to be, and tourists crowd the streets acting like this is Mickey Mouse Land." Gio thought of correcting her but didn't. "Neapolitans get nervous around outsiders. They think we don't understand this place."

"We?"

"Sì, we," Michelangelo said. "I'm Sicilian. I've been here for a decade and most people still won't give me a break."

They clinked glasses, toasting ostracism, and sipped silently for a few moments before Michelangelo stood to serve more drinks.

"The least you could do is learn some *real Italiano*, Gio," she said. "I can help with that."

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A few weeks after settling into their new routines – Nicoletta as maid, Gio as bar-hand, Giovanni as drunken landlord – Gio and Nic started school. In separate institutions, Nicoletta quickly made new friends and excelled in her beginners Italian course. Meanwhile, Gio drowned in his class. Listening to Michelangelo speak to customers helped, as did the miniature private lessons that filled their shifts, but Nicoletta still knew far more than her brother by October.

Gio walked home from school one day, through the tented market in the city's central square, a haven for mostly fake goods sold to tourists at exorbitant prices. Locals were either too smart to bother or more interested in the seedier market for fake shit, down an alley near the Napoli Centrale train station, where hooded merchants peddled obviously stolen iPhones and Ray-Bans. The risk yielded the best prices.

Gio was smiling when he got back to the bar, a grin that disappeared when he came upon Michelangela, standing with her back against the wall outside Pericoloso and peering inside like a hungry bear was after her. When he approached, she motioned for him to stay quiet.

Inside, a pair of sandy-haired men, dressed like businessmen but hovering like predators, stood in front of Piero and the register speaking heatedly in Italian. Piero shrugged like they were asking questions he simply didn't have the answer for.

"Who is --," Gio started, but Michelangela forced her hand over his mouth.

"They're Castaldo," she whispered. "The mafia."

Gio's eyes widened again, and he looked inside as Piero sheepishly handed over two stacks or Euros to the broad-shouldered men, who thanked him – Gio understood the universal language of sarcasm – and stepped out the back door, taking a cup of espresso for the road. Gio had a feeling they didn't pay for it.

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When Michelangela wouldn't spill her guts, and the men continued to return weekly, Gio started conducting his own research. He searched "Castaldo" and "Napoli" on the Internet at school and kept his ears perked for mention of the family in passing.

One Monday in September, answers fell into his lap. Valentino, another sandy-haired boy who sat next to Gio in an Italian history course, finally introduced himself one day when he needed a pencil. His last name was Castaldo.

Gio went pale for a moment, then grinned.

"*Piacere*, I'm Gio," he said. "What do your parents do?"

Valentino turned grim, looked back at his friends, and didn't say another word. Then, after class, he motioned for Gio to walk with him to the school's courtyard. On a mission, Gio followed.

"You must know who my family is, then," Valentino said once they were outside.

It wasn't much of a secret. Gio saw the Castaldo men at Pericoloso once a week, and figured Piero wasn't an outlier. In actuality, Neapolitan police and politicians didn't have the power or capital to stand up to the Castaldo family, and even if they did, there were few that'd be brave enough to testify. Napoli was a town run by criminals masquerading as stand-up citizens, literal wolves in sheeps' clothing. Their crimes were well known: drug dealing and high stakes gambling were Castaldo calling cards, but they dabbled in all things criminal, including, as Gio discovered, a lucrative underground street fighting circuit housed somewhere called *La Palestra*.

"What kind of fights?" Gio said.

Valentino looked Gio up and down, shook his head, and pulled out a piece of paper. He scrawled an address, adding "*Il Palio*" beneath the street number.

"If you want to find out, it's your funeral, *Americano*," he said. "If you're ready, go to *Il Palio* and repeat this carefully: '*Sono pronto a morire*.' They'll let you in." Gio nodded, accepted the slip of paper, and walked away. He recognized the key phrase's first construction and guessed at the end, then repeated it to himself the entire walk home.

"*Sono pronto a morire*," Gio said to himself. "I am ready to die."

.....

Nicoletta shaved her sleeping father's beard the following Friday night and whispered, so he couldn't say no, that she was sleeping over at a friend's house the next night. Gio's heart swelled watching his sister adapt to a new life with grace, but after several public protests against the

rampant culture of sexual violence in the city, Gio started getting nervous every time his sister left the house. Her being home with Giovanni didn't make things that much better.

Gio kissed Nic's forehead and tucked her into bed, pleased to see a smile crack her lips as she started to snore. Still, he focused on *La Palestra* and the promise of prize money, imagining a simpler, safer life for himself and his sister back in the United States. Really, he imagined anywhere but Napoli. He dressed in all black and left the building near midnight after bussing tables at the bar.

Taxis zipped up and down the street while beggars hassled Gio on his way to *Il Palio*. For once, he was grateful to know so little of the language. When he arrived at a hotel with a glass chandelier hanging in the center of the room and a suited concierge, Gio thought he might have taken a wrong turn. The address was right, though, and so was the name.

"*Buonasera, signore,*" the attendant said. "How can I--"

"Uh, *sono pronto a morire,*" Gio said. The man looked confused. Gio repeated, "*Sono pronto a--*"

"I heard you, *imbecile americano,*" the concierge said, looking around. "Follow me."

The concierge led Gio through three sets of double doors, around a few corners, and down a long flight of stairs. As they descended, Gio started to hear shouting. He could barely see the concierge's back until the man produced a key, opened a final set of doors, and bathed the corridor in light before pushing Gio into the room. He locked the door behind him.

The room was smoky and chaotic, enough so that no one seemed to notice Gio. On one wall, there was a cluster of desks manned by two older gentlemen receiving and dispensing Euros at a breakneck pace. At the center of the otherwise bare warehouse was a target painted on the ground, overwritten in block lettering by the words *La Palestra*. Feet away, surrounded by a circle of shouting bettors, two boys, about Gio's age, pummeled each other like gladiators. Neither looked all that

threatening, but what they lacked in size they compensated for in ferocity. The bout couldn't be called boxing or marital arts; there were stray fists and feet flying in every direction, there was spitting and cursing and elbowing. Gio couldn't resist a smile. This was a street fight.

He walked to the business end of the room and fumbled his way through an Italian greeting. The bookies quickly lost patience with Gio's speaking abilities and directed him to a list of rules that he managed to decipher.

To enter, 100 Euros. Minimum bet, 200 Euros. A victory meant 500. At the bottom of the sheet, there was a space for participants to verify that they were aged between 18 and 21, able-bodied, and prepared to die in the ring solely liable for the damages. Gio signed, figuring if he died, he wouldn't be concerned about the Castaldo family facing charges. He forked over 100 Euros.

"Perfetto, amico, perfetto," the bookie said. "You fight soon, 15 minutes."

The rest of the night was hazy. Gio stripped down to black shorts and sneakers and stepped into the ring when his name was called. He could barely hear the crowd. Instead, he thought back to the punching bag at Uncle Pavone's, the life and the casket he left in New York. He squared off against a boy with a round face and heaving breasts that almost served as armor, absorbing Gio's first two jabs when the fight started. The boy grunted and swatted Gio away, wrapping him in a headlock like a child. Turning purple from the meaty forearm pressing his esophagus, Gio stomped his heel down on the ogre's toes, feeling at least one crack before launching an elbow into his opponent's gut. The boy yelped and doubled over, exposing his core to Gio, who thrust his shin into the boy's ribs, tumbling him to the ground like a boulder. Without hesitation, Gio saddled on the boy's chest, pinning his arms, and punching the kid square in his nose, adding one for Valentino Castaldo, one for his dead mother, another for the man his father should've been, until, blind to his own actions, Gio was pulled off by spectators fearing for the kid's life. Gio's knuckles were caked in

blood. The boy's nose was much worse. He barely breathed. Gio stared at the blood for a moment, then at the shocked crowd, who burst into cheers after the dust settled. He turned back toward the betting corner, strode over, took the 500 Euros extended by an openmouthed bookie, and walked out of the basement with the money in hand.

Walking home, Gio listened to the city's symphony. No one bothered him – he was covered in blood – and he made it home in great time, finding Nicoletta asleep on the bed and Giovanni passed out on the floor beside her. There was a bottle inches away. Gio stuffed his winnings in his pillow and tried to get some sleep, dreaming of making enough money to get the hell out of Napoli.

.....

Gio kept his Friday night routine a secret for three weeks, covering bruises with clothes and excuses, until one night when he worked with Michelangela. She patted his shoulder, congratulating him for remembering his conjugation rules, when Gio recoiled like her fingers were on fire.

“What was that?” Michelangela said, frowning. Gio tried to deflect, but she tapped the same spot and he grimaced. She moved the shirt off his shoulder, revealing a discolored bruise the size of a pancake. She knew the answer before she asked, “You’ve been going to *La Palestra*, haven’t you?”

Gio searched for a response but came up stuttering.

“*Idiota*,” Michelangela said, disgust clear on her face. “After I specifically warned you?”

She stormed out of the bar, dropping a full bottle of beer on the way out. She walked until she could see the bay on the horizon. Gio followed her, preparing to apologize. He was surprised to find her crying and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Michelangela, please, I didn--”

“You don’t know anything about these people,” she said. “You don’t know anything about this city, Gio.” She pointed down the street toward the glistening water and the boats floating in it. “There, across the bay, on Mount Vesuvius.” Gio followed her finger. “Five years ago, the mayor tried to stand up to the Castaldo family. For a month, they took cats and dogs off the streets and from families in Napoli and Pompeii. When the city reached a boiling point, the Castaldo family set the pets free.” She paused, her eyes still on the mountain in the distance. “They tied rags, doused in oil, to hundreds of animals’ tails, then let them loose on the mountain, spreading a wildfire fueled by panic.” Gio felt sick to his stomach. “People died, 25 of them, plus the pets,” Michelangela said, pausing once more. “My brother was hiking the day they set Vesuvius ablaze.”

Gio waited for a minute then hugged Michelangela, whispering repeated apologies as she returned his embrace and gave up on stifling tears.

“If you weren’t Italian, I’d try to stop you. But I know you’ll end up doing whatever you want anyways,” she said. “You better know what you’re doing.”

.....

Gio thought about that conversation after his fifth win at *La Palestra*, where he’d started to make a name for himself as a scrappy takedown expert. If he had more of an ego, he would’ve considered entering the circuit’s main event, an upcoming 21-and-up showcase with a 10,000 Euro purse. He was already fighting illegally as a 17-year-old and didn’t want to try his luck, though.

Coming home around 1:30 a.m. one Friday, Gio found Michelangela holding Nicoletta in a fully lit bar. His sister was sobbing and Gio started to panic. He rushed over to help, but Michelangela shooed him away with a word: “Giovanni.”

Gio took two stairs at a time up to the apartment; the door was wide open. In the center of the room sat Giovanni, his head in his hands, surrounded by a ransacked apartment reminiscent of the Caputi siblings' first day in Napoli. He looked up when Gio entered the room.

“Gio, *mio figlio*, I'm so sorry,” he said, looking at the pillowcase where Gio hid his winnings, thrown halfway across the room. “I shouldn't have bet, son, I'm sorry.” He was drunker than usual, his syllables clumsily slipping out of his mouth. “It was a sure thing, Gio, but they took it all.”

Gio didn't need to ask, “Who?” The Castaldo family controlled Napoli's betting scene, Giovanni's favorite activity, and the city's drug supply, a close runner-up.

“How much, Giovanni?” he said. “How much do you owe them?”

“Everything,” Giovanni said. “Twenty thousand Euros, and they want it next week.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gio said. His mind was racing. At once, he was furious at his father for betting away his winnings, and at himself for not being more careful about hiding the money. But he was scared, too, for the shell of his father quivering on the floor, and for Nicoletta, who'd lost one parent already. Gio couldn't imagine getting a half-operational replacement only to have it die in a few months' time. It was a pathetic sight – a former soccer star, addicted to pills and gambling, bawling on the floor of his own ruined apartment. The emotion that prevailed was pity, a reaction that would've made Gio's mother proud. He thought, in that moment, that his father truly wanted to love his kids. He simply didn't know how to.

“Pick yourself up, dad,” Gio said, indulging the title for the bleak occasion. “Go and comfort Nicoletta. I know a way get the money back.”

.....

When Gio entered *La Palestra* for the final time a few days later, his father followed him and the concierge downstairs. They didn't speak until they emerged in the warehouse.

The atmosphere was different that night, almost more cordial. There were shouts, but only from fighters, not the crowd. Now a regular, Gio moved toward the betting booth, where both bookies greeted his father with familiarity. Assured Gio was 21 years old, the bookies accepted his entrance fee. For the first fight, Giovanni scraped together all the cash he could muster. He bet 1,200 on Gio, one of two tournament newcomers, then joined the other bettors around the ring.

The opening round was a breeze for Gio, who landed a punch to his opponent's temple 30 seconds into the fight that left the stubbly, dark-skinned man unconscious on the concrete.

Giovanni doubled down on his son for the second bout, a matchup against a stocky man that threw erratic kicks at Gio when he got close. Baiting his opponent, Gio caught one of the kicks aimed at his ribs and lifted the man up and backwards. He collapsed to the ground with Gio already at his throat. When the unofficial referee called the fight in his son's favor, Giovanni couldn't help blurting, "*Fantastico!*" and pumping his fist at the edge of the ring.

Gio's third opponent wasn't much taller than him, but he was significantly wider, and surprisingly nimble. He had a head of sandy blonde hair and Valentino Castaldo's smile. The goon lunged at Gio and hit him twice in the gut before he could retreat. He recoiled and danced around the ring, looking for an opening. He dodged one jab and returned another to the man's chin, which barely moved. Stunned for only a second, the brute wrestled Gio to the ground and pinned him on his back, feeding off the crowd's heightening shouts. Whispering, the man said, "This is from the Castaldo's," and slammed his right elbow down on Gio's wrist, which both men felt break. Biting his lip until it bled and seizing his opponent's split second of showboating, Gio kneed upward at the man's groin, sending him rolling onto his back, moaning. His left hand dangling at his side, Gio

stood, wound up like a punter, and kicked his opponent straight in the teeth, eliciting howls from the audience as he limped out of the ring toward his father.

“How bad is it?” Giovanni said, holding his son’s wrist and looking at the bookies’ booth. “Forget that question.” He looked deadly serious. “You have to pretend nothing happened.”

Gio didn’t understand. As Giovanni walked away, his son prepared himself anyways for the night’s final fight, the championship bout against tournament favorite “*Il Barbaro*.” With what felt like boiling iron shooting through his wrist, Gio thought of his mother, of Nicoletta, of their old life. They didn’t have much, but at least they weren’t hopeless, Gio thought. Wishing that feeling would return to his fingers, he stepped toward the ring, glancing at his father before entering.

“*Amici*, everything I’ve won on *Il Barbaro*,” Giovanni said to the bookies as his son stared, unaware that his father was risking the first three fights’ combined winnings on the final round. That had been the plan all along, except Giovanni was supposed to wager on his son. At the last minute, drawing raised eyebrows from the bookies, he changed his bet. They told him to stay put.

The Barbarian lived up to his name. A bearded man, just shy of seven feet tall, he looked like Goliath. Gio felt like David wielding a broken slingshot, but he came out swinging. The man dodged Gio’s first punch then caught the second like a firefly, cupping the fist for a moment before pushing his opponent away. Gio retreated as the giant laughed, then tried a kick that the Barbarian absorbed in his tremendous side. Giovanni started to sweat for his son, but felt good about his bet.

That was until about two minutes into the fight, when a man dressed entirely in black walked into the warehouse, a cap atop his receding, sandy blond hair. They’d never met, but Giovanni would never mistake Vito Castaldo, Don of the family. A bowling ball settled in Giovanni’s throat as Castaldo approached, but he kept his eyes on the ring, where his son was struggling.

The Barbarian toyed with Gio, wearing him out punch by punch, forcing the smaller fighter to miss, stumble, and curse around the ring. The monstrous man didn't throw a punch until Castaldo entered the room. Then, like someone flipped a switch, he went on attack, backhand-slapping Gio across the cheek, following that strike with a boot to his chest. The referee glanced at the bookies' corner, then backed away from the scrum. Giovanni noticed, and with his faced contorted in horrified understanding, he turned to Castaldo. He was staring back.

"Don Castaldo, *per favore*, the boy is hurt," Giovanni said.

"*Sì, lo vedo*, but your son is a good fighter," Castaldo said as the Barbarian pinned Gio. "Your first three bets suggest you agree."

"He doesn't know I changed the wager, please, let him go," Giovanni said, tears pooling in his eyes. The crowd's screams were intensifying, and Giovanni's eyes darted back and forth between the wall of men shielding his son from sight and the man letting him die. "Don Castaldo, take me instead." His voice cracked and he reached for Castaldo's wrist. "*Signore, per favore*, kill me."

Forced onto his back on the cold cement, Gio hovered within inches of death. He heard the names of his loved ones echoing around his skull with every blow: *Nicoletta, THUD. Mama, THUD. Michelangela, THUD.* He heard his mother calling him down to the waterfront to look at the boats in the bay. Gio was ready to take that step when Castaldo waved his hand and the ref intervened, ripping the Barbarian off Gio's bloodied body.

"I'm doing just that," Castaldo said. "We can't have you running up a debt like this again, Giovanni. Not good for business." A bookie handed Castaldo a stack of cash. "Practice really does make perfect, eh, diPaolo? You turned out alright today."

He thumbed through nearly 18,000 Euros, Giovanni's gambling earnings alone, combined with the first three fight's winnings and the runner-up prize. Castaldo smacked his lips.

"*Allora, è un peccato.* By the time you settle up with me, you'll have..." Castaldo pretended to do math in the air with his fingers. "Not a fucking thing." He smiled widely, enjoying himself. "I hope you have insurance, Giovanni. And you better hope we never meet again."

Castaldo turned and walked out of the warehouse, the cash in hand, three goons at his heel. Giovanni rushed to his son's side, abandoned in the ring by the referee, the Barbarian, and his supporters. Falling to his knees, Giovanni tried to keep tears from splashing on his son's face. He lifted Gio's head and cradled it in his lap, weeping as his son struggled to breathe.

"I'm so sorry, *mio figlio*, I'm so sorry for everything," Giovanni repeated in the basement, then again as he carried a limp Gio up the stairs, and still as an ambulance sped away in the dark of night with his son in the back strapped to a stretcher.

In Gio's head, he was five years old again, sitting by the waterfront, and eating cannoli while the heartbroken beggar sang for her soul. He listened to the reverie for a moment, envisioning a world where the woman was content. When Gio turned back to his mom, he found only the scent of her lavender perfume. Looking out at the bay, with Vesuvius towering on the opposite side, Gio saw his mother walk a couple hundred feet out onto the water. She paused in the middle of the bay and turned toward dry land, then shed a tear and fell through the surface, disappearing without a splash.