

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Marjorie Sandor

The six stories in this collection center around an extended Jewish family in the New York Metropolitan area and the curse its members relentlessly wish upon themselves. The protagonist in four of the six stories is Daniel Brickman, younger brother in a very ordinary and chaotic household in suburban New Jersey. As both a young boy and a young man, Daniel struggles between his terror of becoming an outcast and his desire for self-imposed exile. In each subsequent story, the voice and character of Daniel has evolved considerably, and I hope they will continue to do so the more I write about him. At this point in the process, I am concerned less with inconsistencies from one story to another than in making each story as complete and honest as possible on its own terms.

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Hannah of Troy, and Other Stories

by

Scott Lewis Nadelson

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Approved:

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Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

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Scott Lewis Nadelson, Author

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This thesis is dedicated to my niece, Hannah Joy Nadelson, born on May 25, 1999, and to the memory of my grandfather, Morris Kaplan, 1911-1999.

Hannah of Troy, and Other Stories

Kosher

At the end of the summer before last, just after my twenty-third birthday, I found myself back in New Jersey. I had almost no money and owed two months' interest on my credit card. My parents took me in under the condition that I find a job by the end of the first week. Reluctantly, I accepted. They'd let me stay in my old room for free, but I had to pay for my food. While I'd been gone, they'd turned kosher, and the cost of their groceries was outrageous. On the way home from the airport, my mother complained relentlessly about having to drive all the way to West Orange to find a kosher butcher, and when she did, the meat was lean and dried out and had no smell. I was happy enough to buy my own food.

Just over a year earlier, I'd left New Jersey on what was supposed to be a two-week quickie-tour through Europe before starting a job with a marketing operation in Morristown. But once I'd crossed the ocean, the idea of traveling through sixteen countries in fourteen days no longer seemed right to me, and by the time the two weeks were up, I hadn't yet left Paris. I called the head of human resources at Immediate Marketing, Inc., and after explaining several times who I was, told him I was sorry to leave him hanging without notice. After a short, expensive stint in the Alps, I headed east, where my money would go further. In another month I had a job making beds and cleaning bathrooms in a Budapest hotel in exchange for free room and board. On the side, I tutored a Hungarian businessman to write letters and e-mail to his customers in England. My pay was absurd, but I learned to live on almost nothing; I ate canned meat and hunks of cheese, and snuck

beer back to my room rather than spend three times as much to sit in a bar. In six months, I'd managed to save up enough to travel for another three. This, I decided, was the perfect way to live. All I needed was what I could stuff into my backpack. Who would want any more? On a morning when my stomach was rumbling and I had nothing to eat but a stale heel of brown bread, I'd written in my journal, "My most precious possessions will be my experiences, my sensations, my memories." Afterward, every time I was hungry I reread this sentence and underlined it, until my pen tore clear through the page.

My parents were appalled. They'd worked their whole lives to acquire piles of things that needed to be dusted once a week. My older brother had recently begun to do the same, and I was certain he was miserable, despite his new car, his oak dining table, his silver candlesticks. When I showed my mother some of my photographs and talked about the things I'd learned, she shook her head and said, "Waste of a mind." It was dignified of her to talk about my mind, when I knew she was really thinking about the cost of my education. My father, on the other hand, simply called me "the money hole."

I tried to take their disappointment lightly. What did they know about living? My father worked at a pharmaceutical company, managing a group of lab technicians whose jobs he didn't understand. He shuffled papers for fifty hours a week, wishing he was still just a simple bench chemist in the days before computer modeling and bio-engineering. My mother taught at a private Jewish high school and spent much of her time and energy arguing with her students' parents about the grades she'd given their kids. She also exhausted herself trying to prove to the other teachers at her school that her recently found faith was genuine, despite her secular background. When I was a kid and my mother taught at public school, "kosher" was a word she used only to describe what should have been happening in the government. We'd always eaten bacon with our Saturday morning

pancakes. Now, she wouldn't even light the oven on Saturday. She and my father didn't miss a single Friday night service and had their names entered on a gold plaque at the synagogue in recognition of their large yearly contribution. Though they tried, the other teachers could find no flaw in her observance, and were forced to flash her broad, false smiles at kiddishes and Bar Mitzvahs. But now I'd ruined all that for her. How could she tell the teachers what her son was doing with his life? A smart Jewish boy who'd given up great opportunities to become a bum.

"An international bum, at least," my father said with a short laugh, but my mother only crossed her arms.

Kosher or not, I was convinced what my parents practiced had nothing at all to do with being Jewish. Just a month before, I'd walked three miles along the train tracks from Auschwitz to Birkenau and stood for an hour on the platform where screaming children and sobbing grandparents had been unloaded from cattle cars. I'd dipped my hand into the slimy pond overgrown with weeds where the ashes of fifty-thousand Jews had been dumped. I tried to tell my parents about it, but they didn't or couldn't understand why I'd go to Poland rather than the Swiss Alps or the Italian Riviera. "I wanted to share the suffering of my ancestors," I told them, though if you had suggested that's what I'd wanted while I stood on the platform picturing all sorts of horrors, I would have protested with my entire being. What I wanted now, for once in my life, was to have my parents congratulate me for doing something admirable and honest, for making them proud.

"Your ancestors were all in Minsk," my father said. "What Stalin did to them makes Auschwitz look like nothing." I turned away. He had no idea what it meant to suffer, I told myself. For my parents, the most difficult hardship was forgetting to buy salami and having to make an extra trip to the butcher in West Orange. For six months, I'd

slept every night on a cardboard-thin cushion with no sheets, no pillow, and only a sleeping bag to cover me. If they couldn't see the value in this, why should I care whether they were proud of me or not?

So I stopped trying to explain what I'd seen. I would put my head down, taking their comments and insults silently, and work for six months. My Chevy Nova, which had sat in the driveway since I left for Europe—untouched except for the scratches in the paint my father had made while shoveling snow from the hood and trunk—needed new brakes and back tires, and once I could afford them, I'd head off again. This time I'd go to Canada and take three months to make my way from Quebec to Vancouver. Then I'd work again, six months out West, until I'd have enough money to cross the Pacific and spend the next few years in Asia. And not once would I look back.

But first I had to score a job here in New Jersey, a place I swore I'd never come back to, except for the briefest visits. It was a miserable state, freezing in winter and brutally humid now in summer, with so many cars crowding the freeways it was impossible not to curse while driving. The spring before, when I'd left Budapest, I'd traveled briefly with a guy named Jeff from Gary, Indiana. I told him how much I hated New Jersey, and he said he'd been there, and it wasn't nearly as bad as Gary. He claimed to be from the worst city on earth, nothing but smokestacks and traffic, and a view across the lake to Chicago, which glittered like the Promised Land. But one day we ended up in a little town in Southern Bohemia famous for its brewery. The owner of the pension, an old woman who never stopped giggling and flashing her rows of silver molars, showed us to our room and took our passports. First she read Jeff's and sighed deeply, shutting her eyes. "In-di-ana!" she exclaimed, drawing out the last two syllables so the word sounded like the name of some beautiful Czech princess who'd died for the sake of forbidden love. It didn't

matter that Gary was cold and ugly and full of crime. When the woman read my passport she tried to sigh the same way, but I could see the effort it cost her. She glanced at me to see if I believed her and read slowly, "New Cher-sey." Jeff had to bite his lip to keep from laughing, and for the rest of the week we traveled together, he called me Chersey. Every time, that "ch" sound made me flinch. He might just as well have flicked my earlobe with his finger. By the time we parted in the Prague train station, I'd decided the only way I could keep from killing him was to promise myself never to come home.

And here I was. On my second day back, I found an old business card from Immediate Marketing, but the number had been disconnected. That afternoon when my mother came home from school, I argued that I'd made all the right decisions. "Look," I said. "They went out of business. I would have worked a year and then been back on the street."

My mother shook her head. "They probably made it big and moved to California."

"People move to California, Mom, not businesses."

"Oh? And what does a bum know about businesses?" I wanted to argue but could think of nothing to say. The one real business course I'd signed up for in college, I'd dropped after the first week. So instead, I offered to take out the trash. "There's a job for you," my mother said. "My son, the garbage collector."

For the next few days, I spent most of my time in my old room, lying on the bed, flipping through the classified pages, or through my pictures from Europe, and staring at the walls. None of the jobs advertised in the paper suited me; I was over-qualified for all the crappy ones and under-qualified for everything else. I answered one ad for a Cabinet Maker's Apprentice—a useful skill, I figured, one that might be in demand anywhere in the world. But when I showed up for the interview, a burly guy covered in sawdust asked

to see my skill with a table saw. I didn't know how to turn it on. "Isn't that what an apprenticeship is for?" I said. He laughed mysteriously and handed back my application.

The walls of my old room were more interesting than the classifieds. I hadn't changed the posters since high school, and each wall marked a stage in my life. Over the desk were the Mets and Knicks, Daryl Strawberry and Patrick Ewing. Between the windows stood a model in a blue string bikini with a poofy shell of blonde hair and long dangling earrings. And above my bed, it was all Led Zeppelin, the four ugliest men I've ever seen, grimacing and sweating beneath hazy stage lights. Sports, women, and rock and roll. Who had I been kidding? I only took one guitar lesson in seventh grade and didn't make it through half a season of Little League. Girls wouldn't come near me. The closest I'd come to a rock concert before college was sitting behind the cafeteria during my lunch hour, listening to headphones, closing my eyes, and pumping my fist in the air. Once, after I'd finished singing along with the final verse of "The Rain Song," I opened my eyes and saw a half-circle of boys with long hair and heavy metal T-shirts, girls in short skirts and fringed black boots, surrounding me, smoking cigarettes and laughing hysterically. I pulled off my headphones and stood to leave. One of the girls said, "Come on, we want an encore." A few of them waved lighters in the air, and two of the boys held me against the wall until I sang the opening of "Black Dog." Afterward, they made me smoke six cigarettes at the same time and I threw up on my Walkman. And now, staring at the poster of Jimmy Page embracing his ridiculous double-necked guitar, I wished for nothing else but to hop on a train to a town whose name I couldn't pronounce, where the only things that interested people were whether I could pay for my room in dollars and whether I had ever seen David Hasselhoff in person.

By the end of the week, I still didn't have the slightest prospect for a job. My parents wouldn't throw me out, of course, but I wouldn't have put it past them to wear mourning clothes, beat their chests, plead with God that they had done nothing wrong, and otherwise make my life so miserable that I would have to take a job at Burger King just to get out of the house. I scanned the classifieds one last time, resigned to a crappy job, assuring myself I could handle anything for six months. But the only ad that didn't immediately turn my stomach was one that read, "Telemarketer for charity org. Wage + comm." That plus sign kept my attention. All I'd have to do was call people and make them feel guilty for having more money than they needed. The better I got the more money I'd make, but even if I was lousy, I'd get paid something. I called the number, and the woman who answered cut me off mid-sentence and told me abruptly to come for an interview that afternoon. I was hesitant at first, picturing the burly cabinet maker with his table saw, but worse, I imagined my mother rending her sleeve and saying, "What kind of boy goes to college and then sits around all day with no job? Next, he'll start selling drugs." I hurried to my father's closet and searched for a pressed shirt and a tie.

The address the woman gave me was in Randolph, only the next town over, but when I got there I thought I must have taken down the wrong street number. I'd expected an office building, or at least a strip mall. But this was just a drab apartment complex. Not a slum, but one of those functional beehive-type places with thousands of units and little kids running around the parking lots. I drove around for nearly twenty minutes, rolling slowly over speed bumps, avoiding strollers, until I found number 1412 on the first floor of a building toward the rear, almost all the way back to the freeway. Beside the door was a wide window blocked by heavy white curtains. I knocked and stood with my hands together behind my back. After a moment, the door opened and I looked into a dim living

room with almost no furniture, only a velvety orange recliner in front of a TV on an overturned milk crate. It smelled like my grandmother's apartment in Queens, a mix of Lysol and something burning in the oven, though here there was another smell on top of those, either a dog or a couple of cats.

"You're Daniel," a voice said, beneath me.

I jumped back. A woman in a wheelchair was holding the door open. She was ancient, crouched over, her legs hanging useless in baggy blue sweatpants. She stared up at me from an angle that seemed painful. Her lips, almost white and cracked, moved steadily, working up and down over her teeth, though she wasn't speaking. Occasionally, her short, bluish tongue slipped out and ducked quickly away. She might have been sucking out bits of meat caught between her teeth. I tried to say something, but the only word I could manage was "Phone."

"Yes, we spoke," she said. "I'm Helen." Her voice was normal, even pleasant. I would have expected it to be garbled by the movement of her lips, or else throaty like most old women's voices, but it was clear and strong, the voice of a woman younger than my mother. It seemed unconnected to her body and made me uncomfortable. "Come on in," she said, turning her chair and leading me inside. I wanted to make sense of this, but couldn't bring myself to ask her any of the questions running through my mind: Was this supposed to be an office? Did she work here, or was she one of the organization's charity cases? I kept looking for dogs or cats as we went past the living room into a narrow kitchen, but didn't see any. Most of the space in the kitchen was taken up by a folding chair and a bridge table stacked with papers. In the middle of the table sat a simple black phone. My hands began to sweat. "Here's the script," Helen said. "Let's see what you've got."

“Don’t you want to interview me first?” I asked.

“This is the interview.”

I looked over the script, but couldn’t concentrate on the words. My mouth went dry. Here was the table saw all over again, but this was even worse. I’d always hated telemarketers. When I was in college, I’d never had any money, but whenever I got a call asking for donations, I couldn’t help but feel I was being judged, that someone was keeping account of my good deeds. No matter what the charity—whether for the homeless or for the police troopers’ dog fund—I pledged ten bucks I knew I would never send. But as soon as I hung up the phone, I felt as if someone had picked my pocket during a moment of confusion. I asked Helen, “Could I get a glass of water before I start?”

“If you’re wasting my time,” she said, “you might as well leave now.” Again, her voice startled me. It wasn’t a truly beautiful voice, the type you hear on soap opera stars or late-night deejays, but it was full of confidence. I didn’t see why she wasn’t doing the telemarketing herself. If I’d gotten a call from her during college, I wouldn’t have hesitated before making my ten dollar pledge. But I’d always been susceptible to attractive voices. Not too long before, I’d heard one so beautiful it made me tremble. It was announcing arrivals and departures in the train station in Poprad, Slovakia. I couldn’t understand a word the woman said and missed my train, which left from a different platform than the others heading north. But I didn’t mind the extra hour listening to the woman’s voice filling the busy waiting area. I even considered looking for the room where she was making the announcements, but then thought how ridiculous I would look, unshaven, carrying a battered backpack, smiling at someone I’d never be able to talk to, who would dismiss me after a first glance. And who knows what she looked like? She might also have been hunched in a wheelchair, her body mangled, paralyzed even, except for her mouth.

“Just follow the script,” Helen said. “You’ll do fine.” She handed me a list of phone numbers. The skin on her forearms was smooth and tight, her hands thin and muscled. I leaned far back in my chair, away from her, queasy. She wasn’t an old woman at all, despite the patches of white hair over her ears and the wrinkles on her slack cheeks. How sad was that, for a woman no older than my mother with such a nice voice to look like she did. I suddenly wanted to call everyone I knew and ask for donations to help her. My parents could afford to give plenty, but if the charity wasn’t Jewish they’d never even consider it. “How can I give to this person if I know somewhere there’s a Jewish child without enough to eat,” my mother would say. Not once did she invite one of these hungry children to our Shabbos meal. I took the list of numbers, picked up the phone, and dialed.

After the first ring, a woman’s voice answered, nearly out of breath, “Mike?”

“No, uh, I’m Daniel.”

“Daniel?”

“I’m calling for the, let’s see, the Robowski Fund for the Disabled.”

“This isn’t a good time,” the woman said.

I was botching it. Helen’s lips slowed, and she shook her head. I put aside the script. “I’ll only take a second of your time, ma’am.” I closed my eyes and pictured the woman on the other end of the line. She was in her late thirties, I guessed, with light brown hair pinned to the top of her head. She stood smoking a cigarette in her kitchen, wearing shorts and an oversized white T-shirt that read, “I’d Rather Be Gardening.” Her purse lay open on the counter. On the Budapest subway, I’d watched teenage gypsies pickpocket tourists and businessmen and had always sympathized when the police chased them through tiled stations into the dark tunnels. Now, I imagined myself in their ranks. I crept toward the woman’s purse and said, “We’ve just begun our annual fund raising campaign

to benefit people with physical and mental disabilities. Basically, we need lots of money to help people who can't take care of themselves." Helen coughed, and I cursed myself. Not only was I ruining the call, I was offending the person who would hire me. But when I opened my eyes and glanced at her she didn't seem angry. She even smiled, I think, though with her lips moving again it was difficult to tell.

The woman on the line said, "Well, I couldn't do much."

I stood beside her purse now, and while her back was turned, plunged my hand inside. "You know, that's OK," I said. "Because every little bit counts. You can't imagine how much a small donation of fifty dollars would help."

"Fifty, oh, that's too much, I think. I'll send twenty-five."

The woman gave me her address and slung her purse over her shoulder. Only later would she realize what I'd done. I thanked her and hung up. My heart was racing. This was the first time I'd ever stolen anything, and now I was handing it over to people who needed it. I'd be the Robin Hood of the phone lines. I beamed at Helen. "Good," she said. "You took the pity approach."

"What?"

"She felt sorry for you."

I felt my face go hot. "Hey, didn't I just get twenty-five bucks? How's this commission work?"

She gave me a choice. Five bucks an hour plus ten percent commission, or forty percent, no wage. Forty percent! Who needed wages? She shook my hand firmly, and I sat down to make more calls. She wheeled herself out of the kitchen, head thrust forward, arms pumping too fast for the speed she moved, and after a minute I heard voices from the TV in the living room. I spent the next two hours making calls, but got only one more

donor. It was a man who cut me off mid-script and said, "How much did I give last year?" He held open his pocket so that I might slip out his wallet more easily. I told him fifty bucks, and, he said, "Afraid I can't do more than that this year. Put me down for another fifty."

In two hours I raised seventy-five dollars—forty percent of that meant thirty bucks for me, fifteen an hour. That's as much as I would have made as a marketing assistant. Maybe I'd be able to leave here in less than six months, maybe even three if I worked full-time, six days a week. When I left the kitchen, Helen sat slumped in the orange recliner in front of the TV. I thought nothing of it then, though on my way home I wouldn't stop wondering how she'd gotten out of the wheelchair. I kept picturing her using those strong arms to swing like a gymnast on parallel bars from one chair to the other. But in the living room, I could only think about the money I'd made. Helen gave me the first day's pay in cash, in case, she said, I decided not to come back. After that, she'd give me a check at the end of every two weeks. I told her not to worry, I'd be back every day for six months. She shrugged and said, "It's better not to promise anything," and I hurried out to my car, whispering to the brakes and tires to hold out just a few more months. I rubbed the three worn ten-dollar bills between my fingers and drove to the nearest Burger King drive-through.

When I got back to the house, my parents were already sitting down to dinner. My mother looked up from her plate and said, "You got a job?" I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crumpled ten. For a moment, I considered throwing it onto the table, the way a rebellious and misunderstood son would do in the movies, but then thought better of it and stuck the bill back in the pocket.

"Who gets paid in cash?" my father said. "Drug dealers and beggars."

"And waiters," my mother said. "You're a waiter, right?" She waved at the bag in my hand. "Not at Burger King, I hope."

"There's no such thing as waiters at Burger King," my father said.

"I wouldn't go into one of those places if it was the last restaurant on earth," my mother said.

"I'm not a waiter," I said. "I'm working for a charity organization. I'm doing a mitzvah and getting paid for it."

"It's not a mitzvah if you get paid," my father said. "It's just a job."

"I'm helping people in wheelchairs," I said.

My mother pointed at the bag again. "You can't eat that garbage in here."

My heart sank, though I knew I shouldn't have been surprised. They don't get it, I told myself. They'll never get it. Their lives have been too easy. I went out to the back porch. It was still uncomfortably hot, even with the sun going down. In Budapest, I would walk along the river at this time of night, usually with a bottle of beer, when the air would start to cool no matter how hot the day had been. I'd find a bench and sit beside the Danube until each swallow of beer made me shiver. By the time I'd get back to the hotel, I'd be shaking and would have to wrap myself in my sleeping bag and blow into my hands. The cold wouldn't let me forget that I was alone in a country whose language I could never hope to learn, whose words I could barely pronounce. But it also shocked me into remembering that this was the way I had wanted it. I had no one to blame but myself.

And now as I ate my Whopper and fries, still sweating at dusk, I stared through the glass door of the porch at my parents sitting at the kitchen table and understood there had been something right, something necessary, in that cold summer wind. My father grimaced every time he took a bite of chicken. My mother waved her fork in the air as she talked,

shrugging and shaking her head. I'd been trying not to think about Helen since I'd gotten home, but now I could picture her, sitting between my parents, her head barely topping the table, her lips working uncontrollably as she aimed a forkful of chicken toward her mouth. She glanced from my mother to my father and said, "What are your problems? You walk every day of your lives." I finished my food and swore I would never be like them, promised myself I would never be lulled by comfort into forgetting what was most important in life. I would never spend even a moment fretting over how another person might criticize my lifestyle.

The sun finally set. Though I couldn't see it, I knew that beneath the orange glow on the horizon sat the freeway with its four lanes heading West, and I quickly pictured myself speeding along the miles and miles of pavement. And then, more clearly, I imagined Helen, years after I'd left, sitting in an electric wheelchair in a comfortable, well-furnished room, nodding and saying to my parents, "Daniel? Yes, I knew him. He did good for people. He changed my life." Then, my mother dictating with tears in her eyes, my father, unable to stop clearing his throat, writing the letter apologizing for all the times they'd judged me unfairly. And my letter, after months, maybe years of consideration, forgiving everything.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't naive. I knew Helen was running a scam. The invoices we sent to people who pledged money were printed with a black and white picture of Helen in the corner, above the words, "There are thousands of people like me who need your help." But the Robowski Fund for the Disabled benefited only two people, Helen Robowski and me. And why shouldn't she do it? She hadn't walked a step in her life. She lived in an empty apartment and couldn't get a job if she wanted one. The government

gave her enough money to keep alive, but what kind of life was that? Anyone would have done the same thing, no question.

Over the next two weeks, I worked at Helen's apartment every day, even Saturday, though my parents groaned when I got up from the breakfast table and headed for the car. "Cripples are still crippled on Shabbos," I told them. By the third day, Helen was leaving a key under the mat for me so I didn't have to knock. She would still be asleep in the bedroom with the door closed when I started making calls. The dog and cat smell was strongest in the morning, though I discovered quickly she didn't have any pets. I had no choice but to assume the smell came from Helen herself. For the first two or three calls of each day my stomach would stay tight, my mouth dry. But once the nervousness wore off, the job was pure boredom, duller even than making hotel beds and scrubbing bathrooms. I spent the entire day in the tiny kitchen whose walls, after a few hours, seemed to lean closer together, pressing into the bridge table and folding chair.

When you're in a room that small for hours at a stretch, with nothing to look at but phone lists and your fingernails, you can't help but notice things. The first thing that struck me as I rooted around the kitchen was that the cabinets above the counters and sink were all empty. This shouldn't have been a surprise—of course Helen couldn't have reached them—but still, it startled me. I'd never once considered how useless things like high cabinets would be to a cripple.

But something I noticed on my third or fourth day in that kitchen troubled me until my last: there was no dust in there, not a speck. Everything gleamed as if on display in Sears. Not only the counters and stove, which Helen might have reached with a stretch, but also the hood above the stove, the top of the refrigerator, the insides of the high cabinets. Nobody could have dusted those places from a sitting position. At first, I thought she must

have hired a cleaning service, though after glimpsing her government check on the counter, I didn't see how she could afford it, even with the money I was bringing in. But in two weeks, not a single person had come into the apartment during the day. And if a cleaning service came less frequently than every two weeks, then surely there would have been at least a trace of dust in the interval.

The point is, in two weeks, I hardly got to know this person, despite spending all day with her in a lonely apartment. After the first day, I'd imagined that the job would have two components, telemarketer and daytime companion. But Helen didn't seem terribly interested in either my companionship or in the donations I solicited. Every morning, she would roll out of the bedroom into the kitchen between ten thirty and eleven and wheel past my chair to the refrigerator. She always wore the same blue sweatsuit, which it appeared she also slept in. If I was on the phone, she'd nod to me, or if I was between calls, she'd say, "Morning, Daniel. Did you have a good night?" My nights were always the same: I'd sit on the floor of my bedroom, flipping through my pictures from Europe, while voices from two TVs—my mother's downstairs playing a nighttime soap, my father's at the far end of the hall tuned to a baseball game—competed outside my door. Occasionally, I'd leave the room to ask my father if the score of the game had changed or to grab a handful of my mother's microwave popcorn, which she shared willingly but usually burned. But I didn't want to tell Helen about this. Why should she know I didn't have a single friend within twenty miles of my hometown, or that when I left her apartment for the night I spoke no more than five sentences to anyone until I came back the next morning? So instead, I'd say, "Some old woman in Parsippany just pledged a hundred bucks." She'd answer as if she hadn't heard what I'd said, with a mumbled, "That's nice," or "Oh, really?" and continue taking things out of the refrigerator and cupboard—orange juice,

milk, coffee, cereal. She always ate at the counter, though I offered to clear part of the table for her. I would continue calling numbers on my list, trying to ignore the slurp of coffee and the crunch of cereal behind me, self-conscious as the line connected and I began my pitch. One morning, I asked Helen if she'd make an extra cup of coffee for me, and every morning after that, a steaming cup would appear on the table beside me as I worked.

After she finished breakfast, Helen wheeled herself into the living room, and the TV came on. If I got up to go to the bathroom a minute later, I'd see the wheelchair empty and Helen slumped in the orange recliner. I never saw how she moved from one chair to another, never even heard grunts or squeaking springs. She always timed her move to the living room when I'd be in the middle of a long or difficult call. And once the TV came on, she wouldn't move for the rest of the day, except occasionally to pick up the mail or some groceries at the corner store. Around twelve-thirty or one, I would take a break for lunch and walk down the road to a cluster of fast food places. They were always crowded, so I'd carry my to-go bag back to the apartment and drag the folding chair out of the kitchen into the living room where I could see the TV. Before leaving I'd always ask Helen if I could get her something, but each time she said, "I'm fine, thanks." On the day she first made me coffee, though, I decided to get an extra cheeseburger for her anyway. When I held it out to her, she took it without looking at me. She thanked me, but then let it sit in her lap until a commercial came on. When she finally unwrapped it, I could see that her lips had grown slick. Every day as I ate, her mouth must have been watering. After that, I brought her something each time I went out, and no matter what it was, fried chicken, pizza, burritos, she'd hold it in her lap until a commercial break and then eat it slowly, chewing each bite for so long before finally swallowing I thought she'd begun to chew the side of her mouth.

Helen wasn't like the daytime TV watchers I knew. My grandmother would watch the same programs day after day, comforted by the familiarity of soap opera characters and game show hosts. But every time I sat down to lunch with Helen, she'd be watching something different from the day before—black and white war movies, nature documentaries, cooking shows. She watched each with the same concentration, slumped forward slightly in the recliner, her lips moving slower and slower, until, just before the cut to commercial, they would seem on the verge of stopping altogether. When the commercial came on she'd snap out of her trance, lean back, and pick up whatever food I'd brought her, her lips working madly. During commercials I would try to engage her in conversation, though she focused mostly on unwrapping her food and chewing. Once, I asked her what she would do with all the money we were making. She shrugged and said, "I haven't thought much about it yet."

"What made you start this in the first place, then?"

"I could use a new TV," she said.

I glanced at the TV, which looked fine to me—it had a reasonably wide screen and a clear picture. Her wheelchair, on the other hand, was a wreck. Its treads were completely smooth, its seat cracked in places, exposing the dirty yellow foam inside. "A TV," I said. "Sure. And the rest you'll donate to charity."

She was silent for a moment, and then said, "OK. Ten percent of mine, ten percent of yours."

I didn't say anything, and she started laughing. I told her what I planned to do with the money, and she said, "That's nice. I never got to travel. My mother always talked about bringing me to Poland to show me where she was born. But we never got a chance. Who'd want to go to Poland anyway? Canada sounds nicer."

Poland! I'd been there for more than three weeks just before I came home. I told her all about the old town square in Cracow, about the night clubs in Warsaw, about the vast salt mines and the High Tatras mountains in the south, about the beaches and wild dunes along the Baltic Sea. Then, in a lower voice, I told her about the walk along the train tracks from Auschwitz to Birkenau, about the tiny pond full of ashes. I told her things my parents never gave me a chance to explain: that what disturbed me most about Auschwitz was the tourists with video cameras recording rooms full of shoes and human hair; that you could still see prisoners' drawings on the barracks walls in Birkenau, and almost always they were scenes of heavenly bliss; that even on the sunniest day the place was suffocating and gloomy and smelled evil. I even told her about a piece of ceramic tile I'd picked up beside one of the gas chambers and smeared with a bit of algae from the pond. I meant to carry it in my pocket wherever I went, as a reminder of what I'd seen, but when I reached for it on the train ride back to Prague, it was gone. I tore apart my backpack, spread my clothes all over the seat, nearly burst out crying, but no ceramic tile. "I think I left it in a youth hostel in Gdansk," I told Helen, almost out of breath. "Someone probably threw it away without ever knowing what it was."

For a moment I thought I could see tears forming in her pouched eyes, but then she shook her head. "That's why I wouldn't want to go back there. My mother left before all that happened," she said. "But she never liked Germans or Jews. She talked about them as if they were the same people."

Nothing I'd said had touched her. The TV commercial ended, and Helen returned her attention to an episode of *I Love Lucy*, leaning forward, absently crumpling the fast food wrapper in her hand. I wondered if she knew any Polish, which wasn't very different from Slovakian. I'd ask her to recite train schedules for me. She didn't care any more about

me than had the woman announcing arrivals and departures in the Poprad train station. She wouldn't think twice about me when I left. The next day she'd put another ad in the paper, and someone new would start making calls. I'd be halfway across Canada, and she'd be watching a new giant-screen TV. By the time I reached California, she might even have a satellite dish.

Only my parents would miss me. Only they would long for my presence when the house filled with my absence. When, during college, my older brother had moved in with his Catholic girlfriend, my mother slumped for weeks as if she'd had a fifty pound sack of flour draped over her shoulders. My father suddenly developed bad knees. Even after my brother graduated and married a Jewish girl, my parents didn't fully recover their former postures. That night, I watched them through the porch window, wondering what my abandonment might do to their bodies, hoping that neither would discover a tumor or rare blood disease the moment my car pulled out of the driveway. And just as that thought crossed my mind, my father began coughing and pounding his chest with his fist. My mother stood and went to him, hammered her open palm against his back. His face reddened, veins stood out on his neck. My mother leaned close to his ear. I stood and hurried into the kitchen, but when I reached the table, he stopped coughing and spit something into his fingers.

Things at home and at Helen's would have stayed the same way for a few months, if I hadn't struck gold on the second Sunday I worked. I was running through my pitch without much excitement to a man with a deep voice who kept saying, "Yes, I see," at the end of each of my sentences. In my mind, he was older than my father, but lean and fit, the relaxed, well-groomed type who could wear his bathrobe around the house all day and still

not look like a slob. When I finished, he said, "This sounds like a very worthy cause. Unfortunately, this is a slow month for me." I imagined myself rummaging through his sock drawers searching for loose change, and told him any little bit would go a long way toward buying new wheelchairs and walkers and whatnot. He replied, "Yes, I see. Well then, how's six thousand?"

I nearly dropped the phone. In the sock drawer sat a roll of bills I'd have to grab with both hands. I was almost afraid to touch it. It might be a trap, the man might have a cop hiding under the bed. "Did you say six thousand, sir? Six thousand dollars?" I was already doing the math in my head. Forty percent of six thousand meant twenty-four hundred for me. With that much, I'd be able to fix my car and leave New Jersey the next day. After the man hung up, I spent a few moments slowly tracing the three round zeros onto the pledge card and stared at the black and white photo of Helen in its corner. In the picture she was even more hunched than usual, and her hands were hidden in her lap. She looked like the neediest person in the world. I was already picturing myself telling her about the six thousand. She would take both of my hands in hers, squeeze them and say, "Daniel, you're wonderful. You saved my life." I would close my eyes and listen to the clear voice that could have belonged to a woman who walked on healthy legs and smiled with ordinary, stable lips.

Then, as I finished filling out the man's address, I read the words beneath Helen's picture, "There are thousands of people like me who need your help," and heard my father's words, "It's not a mitzvah, it's just a job." I imagined six thousand people in wheelchairs lined up before me, waiting for their cut of the man's donation. I'd hand each a dollar and none would be any better off than before. It made sense then that Helen should get three and a half thousand dollars that might actually make a difference in her life. It

made sense that the man's money should really help one cripple rather than tease six-thousand. But as I carried the pledge card into the living room, I couldn't stop hearing my mother's voice, "Next he'll start dealing drugs!"

Helen was leaning far forward in the recliner, watching a panel of political analysts bickering about foreign policy on the TV screen. I stood to the side until the show broke to commercial. "Helen, you're not going to believe this," I said, and held out the pledge card. She turned slowly. Her eyes were half-closed, her face puffy. She didn't seem to know who I was or what I could possibly want from her. "Sorry," I said. "Did I wake you?"

She took the card from me, glanced at it, and handed it back. "Wow," she said.

I didn't really expect a shout of joy but had hoped at least for some sign of relief or gratitude. The line of six thousand cripples stretched out before me, each clamoring for a dollar. "You can get that new TV," I said. "As soon as the check comes in."

"That's true," she said.

"What'll you do with the rest?"

"I'm not sure."

I had to breathe deeply to calm my anger. She didn't seem to care about the money one way or another. She couldn't care less how hard I worked or how successful I was. "Remember the other day, when I said something about charity?" I asked "You said ten percent of yours, ten percent of mine. Why don't we really do it with this one? Six thousand's a lot of money."

She turned back to the TV. On the screen, a man in a tuxedo was gliding across a bright lawn on a riding mower the size of a small car. Beneath him, a caption in white letters read, "Why settle for less than luxury?" Helen held up the remote control, and the image blinked off. She turned back to me and said, "Is that really what you want to do?"

"I told you what I'm going to do with the money," I said. "What do you need four thousand dollars for?"

She shook her head. Her lips were moving in their ordinary way, mechanically up and out, but now there seemed to be a heavier quivering at their corners. "What do you think a cripple does with her money?" she said. I shrugged. "Jesus, Daniel. Do you have any idea what my medical bills are like?"

"I hadn't thought of that," I said. But I had. I'd seen all her bills in the pile of mail on the kitchen counter. Phone bill, electric bill, cable bill. Not a single medical bill. In two weeks, I hadn't once seen her go to the doctor. Whenever she did leave the apartment, she always came back within half an hour with the mail and a carton of milk or a package of hot dogs. "They're pretty expensive, huh?"

She put a hand over her eyes. It was trembling. "For someone who's traveled all over," she said, "you don't notice much what's happening in front of you. Can't you see how sick I am? I'll be lucky to make it through the year."

It took an enormous effort for me not to say out loud, Bullshit! I'd noticed plenty. I'd noticed there was never any dust on top of the refrigerator. I'd noticed she'd never left the apartment long enough to go to a doctor. But I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know. Maybe you should keep the whole six-thousand."

She took her hand away from her face, which seemed calm again. "Don't be ridiculous. You did all the work. I just sit on my ass all day." She lifted the remote again, and the TV screen flashed on. The three analysts had continued bickering, now about U.S. policy in the Middle East. I went out of the living room. Helen called after me, "Thanks, Daniel."

In the kitchen, I doubted myself for a brief moment and shuffled through her mail again, but still no medical bills. She couldn't really have been dying. Not with such strong, healthy-looking arms and hands. If her arms showed even a hint of withering like her legs, I might have believed her. But now, glancing at the top of the refrigerator, spotless and shining, I couldn't believe anything. Maybe her legs weren't withered at all, just hidden in the loose sweatpants. After I left the apartment every afternoon, she might have pushed aside the wheelchair and danced through the kitchen, dusting and laughing and counting her money. Maybe she was just an ugly, greedy woman, and the only thing wrong with her was a pair of cracked lips that wouldn't stop moving.

For the rest of the afternoon, I was distracted and couldn't concentrate on my calls. I brought in only one new pledge for fifteen bucks. The sound of the dial tone was beginning to make me dizzy. I got up to leave an hour earlier than usual. In the living room, Helen was asleep in the recliner. I tried to walk past quietly, but she woke with a start before I could reach the front door. She turned to me, blinking. "I'm off," I said. "Have a good night."

She looked confused, and I paused by the door. After a moment, she grabbed her right arm with her left hand and squeezed. "My arm's asleep," she said. "I hate that."

"Rub it down like this." I showed her until the skin on my forearm grew hot. "It'll go away in a minute."

"My bladder's about to explode," she said. "Can you give me a hand into the wheelchair?" She stretched her arm and flexed her fingers. Even asleep her arm was stronger than mine would ever be. I went to the recliner and stood over her, not really sure what to do. "Hurry," she said. "Unless you want me to wet myself."

She lifted her arms, and I grabbed her around the middle. My nose was in her hair. I expected to be overwhelmed by the odor of dogs and cats, but instead the scent was clean and soft, no different than the hair of the few women I'd dated in college. No different at all. I lifted her cleanly over the arm of the recliner, but knocked her right leg against the side of the wheelchair. She settled back against the seat and said, "You don't carry women around often, do you?" I took a step back, and she said in a hurry, "Wait. I'm just kidding, Daniel. Thanks."

I wheeled her down the hall to the bathroom and set her beside the toilet. The mirror was fogged, and the dampness made the smell of her hair grow stronger. "I'd ask you to pull down my pants, but I can tell you're squeamish," she said. "Go on home."

I went back into the hall, and closed the door behind me. The smell of dogs and cats hit me again and I clenched my fists in a sudden rage. Helen wasn't dying at all. She was a healthy woman stealing money from people for no real reason. Like my parents, she thought I was just some loser who couldn't get a decent job. She'd use me for a while and quickly forget about me. I turned to leave but then stopped at the closed door to Helen's bedroom. It hadn't once been open since I'd worked here. What was she hiding? Something in there would show me whether or not she was telling the truth. I don't know why, but I was convinced that she had a tall, hairy man hidden in there, that the two of them lay in bed laughing at me the moment I left the apartment every afternoon. My hand shook as I turned the knob. With my shoulder, I pushed the door inward as quietly as possible.

The room might have been in an entirely different apartment from the living room or kitchen. A floral bedspread lay crumpled at the end of a narrow mattress, and clothes were scattered across the floor. The night table was stacked high with magazines. Above

the bed hung a painting of a dark city street glistening in spots with rain puddles. Guilt pinched my stomach. Not for doubting what Helen had told me—I still didn't believe she was sick or dying. But there was no question that she spent every night in this apartment all alone. No one waited down the hall for her to ask about the baseball scores or to share a bowl of burnt popcorn. The last thing she needed was my resentment. I eased the door closed and called toward the bathroom, "See you tomorrow. Have a good night."

"Tomorrow's payday," she called back. Payday. The word made me forget the lonely night that stretched before both of us. As I left the apartment, the wet street in the painting above Helen's bed slowly became the four westbound lanes of the freeway. By the time I got home I could think about nothing but the fields that would slide past my windows as I drove across the Canadian plains, the flashing neon signs of gas stations and motels, the phone booths from which I would occasionally call my parents to let them know I was still alive. Just inside the back door, my mother startled me. In a hurried voice, she offered to defrost an extra chicken breast for me for next Shabbos. "You don't have plans, do you?" she said.

I hesitated, scratched my chin. "Probably," I stammered. "I think I do, actually. Thanks, though." She blinked several times and quickly turned away.

The next day, I didn't get a single pledge. Helen stayed in bed until almost noon, and then wheeled directly into the living room without stopping off in the kitchen for breakfast. For lunch, I went to Kentucky Fried Chicken and ate in a greasy booth looking out toward the freeway overpass. For most of the afternoon, I ignored the phone list, instead dialing over and over the numbers for the time and the weather. Just before I got up to leave, Helen wheeled into the kitchen, holding out a check. When I took it, her arm

didn't drop immediately. It hung in the air and floated slowly to her lap. The check was made out for almost four thousand dollars, forty percent of every pledge I'd brought in for two weeks. Most of those pledges hadn't even been paid yet. The check felt heavy in my hand, the number in the box too large. I no longer imagined myself slipping discreet bills from an innocent woman's purse. Instead, I was beating her over the head with a crowbar and taking her entire wallet, credit cards, driver's license, and family photos included. I asked Helen whether she wanted me to wait before cashing the check, but she said, "Don't worry. It won't bounce. Happy traveling."

She knew before I did that I wouldn't be coming back. With this much money, there was no reason for me to stay. My parents were beginning to get used to my presence in the house. That morning at breakfast, my father had begun reading to me from the sports pages. He would have told me the score of every game in every sport in the whole world if I hadn't said I was going to be late and excused myself. If my mother offered another chicken breast, I didn't think I'd be able to refuse. I had to leave soon, or I'd never get away. But still, I said to Helen, putting a hand on her shoulder, "See you tomorrow."

She shrugged, and said, "If you say so." I hurried past her into the living room and out the front door, before she could ask me to help lift her into the recliner or wheel her to the bathroom.

In the morning, I didn't call to let Helen know I wouldn't be coming in. I went to the bank and cashed her check, and then had my brakes fixed, bought new back tires, and got an oil change. Helen had the number at my parents' house, but she didn't call either. For a few days I sat around my room, packing for the trip, flipping through my pictures from Europe, which now no longer satisfied me. Most of them were shots of architecture—steeples, columns, gargoyles, flying buttresses. I wished I'd taken more of people. Each

morning I woke up and told myself I should drive to Helen's and apologize for not coming back. I wanted to thank her for helping me on my way and tell her a proper goodbye. But as soon as I made up my mind to see her, I felt my heart racing and my face getting hot. I was afraid she'd lift her arms above her head, saying in that voice that belonged in a more beautiful body, "Can you help me into the wheelchair?" If I smelled her hair, I knew I'd go back to the kitchen and start making calls. Maybe after she hired somebody new, I'd be able to see her and leave. Every day I checked the classifieds to see if she'd put in another ad, but after three days there was nothing. Most likely, I told myself, the new ads wouldn't come out until the following Monday.

Finally, at the end of the week, I was ready to go. In the driveway, my mother kept wiping her eyes with her sleeve. I kissed her forehead and, for a moment, worried that her skin felt feverish. "Promise me you'll get a job in California," she said. "A real job."

My father wouldn't look at me. He patted the hood of the car and said, "Don't drive too fast. They have speed traps in Canada."

He put his arm around my mother's waist, and they watched as I loaded the trunk. They looked older than they should have, and small. I wanted to say, "Take care of each other," but all I could manage was, "I'll call every other day." I didn't turn around as I backed out and took off down the street. I knew they would stand waving until I was out of sight. If I had glanced once in the rearview mirror, maybe I would have stopped the car, stepped onto the street, and shouted for the whole neighborhood to hear, "Why can't you accept who I am?" Instead, I kept my eyes straight ahead, trying not to look at any of the things I wouldn't see again for a long, long time, the familiar houses and yards, the strip of woods where I'd first pretended to be an adventurer, climbing trees, sloshing through a creek, spying on neighbors in their gardens, chucking rocks at bird feeders. I managed to

keep from shaking until I passed my old high school. From the road, I could see the tennis courts, the football stadium, the parking lot where I'd spent so much time listening to Led Zeppelin on my headphones. The names and faces of a few kids I'd known forced their way into my mind, but I couldn't attach them to any specific memories. The only thing I could remember clearly was the clotted perfume and cigarette smell of the girls who would pass me in the halls without even a glance of disgust. Before I entirely realized what I was doing, I had turned the car toward Helen's apartment.

I wasn't thinking about saying goodbye or thank you, or making one last call for a donation. What I needed to see was that she'd bought herself an enormous new TV. Or even an electric wheelchair. I needed to see that the money we'd made had nothing to do with medical bills.

The apartment complex was wild with children, and my stomach tightened as I bounced too fast over the speed bumps. I'd only spend five minutes here, I promised myself, not a second more. I'd still make it to Montreal by early evening. From a distance, I could see that the curtains of number 1412 were open. Not once had Helen opened them while I'd worked there. At first I thought this was lucky for me, because I could look in the window and see the new TV without having to talk to her. Or even better, I could knock on the door and watch how she would swing from the recliner into the wheelchair. Part of me even hoped I'd catch her walking around on healthy legs when she thought no one could see.

But when I reached the window, my knees almost buckled. There was no new giant-screen TV. There was no TV at all, and no recliner. Dropcloths stained with white paint covered the carpets, and beneath the window sat a bucket and roller. I couldn't see any painters, but they might have been on their lunch break, or else painting in the

bedroom. At an angle I could barely see into the kitchen, but far enough to know that the table with the phone lists and pledge cards was gone as well.

My first and only thought then was that the police had taken her away. No one could run a scam like that for very long and not get caught, no matter how crippled she might look. I pictured two red-eyed, unshaven detectives carrying her from the apartment, wheelchair and all, and tossing her into a squad car in front of all her neighbors and their children. I backed away slowly, glancing in every direction, half-convinced somebody was hiding behind a car or hedge, watching me through binoculars. If the cops had caught Helen, maybe they knew about me, too. The vast map of Canada appeared before my eyes; I wouldn't simply be a traveler there, but a renegade. Women would flock to me, my scent of danger. I hurried to my car and tore out of the complex, my backpack rattling in the trunk as the new tires jumped over the speed bumps.

It wasn't until I'd driven a long stretch down the freeway, curving toward the Delaware Water Gap, on the verge of leaving New Jersey forever, that the possibility of Helen's death even entered my mind. And then, without warning, I was overtaken by a flood of possibilities: maybe she was in the hospital, maybe she took a new apartment to keep the scam running and evade the cops, maybe she moved in with a relative, maybe her new telemarketer scored a hundred-thousand dollar pledge, and she went to Florida to live in luxury, maybe she dropped dead all alone in front of the TV.

I nearly drove off the road. Not because I really believed she was dead, but because I could never know one way or the other.

Only when I crossed into Pennsylvania and stopped for lunch at a Burger King was I able to convince myself that Helen was fine. Right now, she'd be leaning forward in front of a TV somewhere, entranced by a how-to show on building your own deck and patio. I

pictured her arms and recalled the smell of her hair, and my breathing began to slow. Then, as I ate my fries, I forced myself to concentrate on the details of the trip, deciding how many miles I would drive each day, where I would stop for gas, how much I would pay for a motel room. For the first few hundred miles I couldn't stop glancing in the rearview mirror. But slowly, the expanse of road heading north and west stirred a thrill in my blood, and by the second day nothing could distract me from the flashing white lines.

I never made it to the West Coast, or even to the Rockies. Canada was so much more expensive than Eastern Europe that no matter how cheaply I tried to live, money poured out of my pockets. And after two weeks in my parents' house, I was no longer comfortable with the ascetic lifestyle I'd led in Budapest. I'd never realized how much I appreciated a firm mattress and soft pillow. My car broke down twice in Ontario, and by mid-October, I found myself in Detroit with almost no money. It's taken me another year to make my way around Lake Michigan, past the smokestack skyline of Gary, Indiana, to Chicago, where I've gratefully accepted a respectable entry-level position in the public relations department of a large advertising firm. My father doesn't think much of this. "Advertisers are the worst kind of criminals," he says, his voice far off, older. "I'd rather be robbed at gunpoint." I tell him I try to be as honest as possible. My mother just asks when I think I might get promoted.

In the evenings I walk along the lakeshore, where, even in summer, the wind blows cold against my face, colder than the wind off the Danube when I stand facing east. I try to remember the three-mile walk from Auschwitz to Birkenau, where I stopped halfway to snap a picture of the train tracks. That day I shot three rolls, savoring the electric buzz of my new camera, thinking not of the cattle cars packed with children rolling toward flaming ovens, but of my parents' expressions when I would show them the photos. They would

cup their hands around their eyes, nod, and say, "We always knew you'd do well. You're a good Jew. You're a good boy." I never showed those pictures to them or anyone else. They sat in a box under my bed in New Jersey, in Detroit, and somehow disappeared when I moved to Chicago. By the lakeshore, I try desperately to recall the bright, clear sky above the terrible tracks, but suddenly I'm back in Helen's kitchen, nearly choking on the smell of dogs and cats, the phone pinched between my shoulder and ear, a long list of numbers before me. Behind my chair I hear the smacking of Helen's lips, and though I can't see them, I know my mother and father flank her on either side, all three in rusted, worn-out wheelchairs. They watch carefully as I dial, cataloguing my deeds, good and not so good. After comparing notes, my mother's tears sputter softly, and my father offers Helen the chicken breast I refused.

Great Adventure

"Your time will come," his father said. But Daniel had heard this before. As soon as his time came for one thing, there was something else he wouldn't be able to do for years. He tried to explain how unfair this was to his father, who rustled the newspaper, and said, "You'll get used to it."

His brother had gone to Great Adventure for the day with the synagogue youth group. Daniel was jealous, he wouldn't deny it. He spent most of the day in his closet, digging with a rusty nail a small hole in the sheetrock behind his shirts. The shirts themselves he tossed in a corner with empty shoeboxes and a shiny black case hiding a trombone he would learn to play as soon as his arms grew long enough. The trombone had been his father's and then his brother's, but neither had played it more than a year or two. He was determined to make it all the way to the high school band.

The space where he knelt, digging steadily with swift forceful taps, was cramped, but the low shelf above his head shaded him from the bright bare bulb high on the ceiling. He needed the hole to hide his money. Last week, the Farisi's house at the end of the street had been robbed in the middle of the day, while everyone was away at school or work. Greg Farisi had come to school the next day, but wouldn't talk to anybody. They'd stolen his TV. On Monday, Daniel's parents were having extra locks put on the doors, but he decided to take his own precautions. "Better safe than sorry," his father often said.

But as he scraped the edges of the hole smooth, pausing every few seconds to blow away the buildup of plaster dust, he couldn't focus on his money or on robbers. All he could picture was his brother Jared holding a box of popcorn, watching the roller coaster cars tumble down slopes and whirl through loops, listening to the screams of those people

brave enough to raise their arms above their heads. Daniel had never been to Great Adventure, but he'd seen all the roller coasters on TV commercials. The Lightning went both forward and backward. The Great American Scream Machine had four corkscrew loops. The Joyride was the first roller coaster ever to strap you in standing rather than sitting.

Jared would never ride any of these. It didn't matter how many times the other kids might call him wimp or pussy. He'd stay on the ground, standing behind the fence, eating his popcorn. When Daniel was seven, he'd gone to Hershey Park, but then he'd been too short even to ride the bumper cars. Now that he was nine and topped forty-eight inches, he felt his rightful turn had come. Despite the fluttering that tickled his stomach even when he considered cresting the initial terrifying peak, there was no doubt in his mind that he'd be the first in line for every roller coaster, no matter if it went upside down, backward, or hurled him standing down the steepest slope or through the sharpest curve. Nobody would have the chance to call him wimp.

But even more than Great Adventure, Daniel couldn't stop thinking about the youth group. It was only for kids thirteen and older and met once a month at the community center. No parents were involved, and only one adult, a Group Leader. It seemed mysterious, a place where kids, for at least that one night a month, could become any age they chose. He imagined Jared leaning back in his chair, crossing his legs at the ankles the way their father did, nodding to one of the other kids across the meeting room and saying, "Good point. You've got an excellent point." This was so different from the way Daniel played most days in his backyard with a friend or two, while his mother watched from the kitchen window and called every half hour, "Play nice, boys." He had more fun when he went to his friends' houses. Especially Greg Farisi's, because Greg's parents worked all the

time. Greg would lead him through the narrow strip of woods between their houses and the tall sound barriers blocking the freeway, telling him to pretend they were spies. And often they became spies, sneaking into other backyards in the neighborhood, watching younger kids playing in sandboxes, mothers digging in gardens; when the yard was empty they might creep up to the house and peer in windows, hoping to catch someone going to the bathroom; or on especially boring days, they might tear up a flower bed or smash a bird feeder. Once, they'd come across a yard edged with neatly raked piles of leaves and immediately dove through, kicking and scattering them across the lawn. A woman yelled from an upstairs window, "Leslie, goddamnit! Are you playing in the leaves?" Daniel imagined a little girl getting spanked, could almost hear her crying, and wanted to shout a bad word at the woman so she would think it was just a couple of rough Junior High boys. But before he could speak, Greg threw a stone at the window. It bounced with a loud click against the shutter, and they both ran back into the woods.

He had fun with Greg, it was true; but the youth group was a real club that went on real excursions. It meant the end of pretending. Daniel could already imagine himself on his way to Great Adventure, sitting in the middle of the bus, close to the funniest boys and the girls who would giggle at their jokes, not even thinking about the amusement park rides, which, in the end, were only secondary to the long drive down the Turnpike. Jared, he knew, would be sitting close to the front of the bus, just behind the chaperones, not alone, but with Lauren, a boy with a girl's name, who carried a deck of playing cards in his back pocket and was always trying to teach Daniel how to shuffle.

But it would be four more years before Daniel could join the group, and he didn't want to think about this now. Jared would always be four years ahead of him in everything, and this frustrated him to the point of despair. He stopped digging. The hole in the wall

was finally wide enough, wider even than he'd anticipated, the width, maybe, of a Coke can. With two fingers, he slipped in the small plastic bag stuffed with fourteen one-dollar bills and a handful of change—most of which his grandfather had snuck into his pockets during family visits to the Queens apartment without anyone but the two of them knowing—and fastened it to the inside of the sheetrock with a thumbtack. Over the hole he tacked a white square of cardboard and then replaced his shirts on the rack. If his mother found the hole she'd grab his shoulder, look toward the ceiling, and say, "Does he ever use his head?" Better than Greg's mother who'd slapped her son four times across the jaw, forehand, backhand, forehand, backhand, after he'd thrown a dart through his bedroom window. Better in the short term, though Greg had come to school with his jaw bruised and swollen, and for a whole week everyone spoke to him tentatively, eyes wide with respect and awe, as if he'd survived a terrible car accident. But Daniel's mother would never find the hole, and neither would any robbers. Jared and his parents might have their money stolen, but Daniel couldn't afford to lose his. He was saving for something, though he didn't yet know what it would be. He envisioned something bulky and difficult to carry, something he would have to wrap in a blanket and sneak into the house without his parents finding out.

His knees were stiff from crouching so long, and his bedroom, after the comfortable cramped space of the closet, seemed cavernous. The single shaded lamp on his dresser made the walls dim and distant. A wide stretch of gold carpet, fiery in spots where the light hit, separated him from his bed propped against the far wall, its sheets creased and cold. His nightstand was cleared of the books that had been piled on it earlier this afternoon. His mother must have come in and cleaned even as he'd been digging in the closet. Had she heard the nail tapping? If she'd taken one peek to find out what he was

doing, he would have been punished, the rest of his weekend ruined, his stash of money confiscated. But incredibly, she hadn't even bothered to call his name or ask why he was in the closet. He thanked his lucky stars the way his father always told him to, and then thanked God, as his mother often did.

Before leaving the room, he paused for a moment by the window nearest the closet. Jared's beige cat, Misty, paced along the windowsill, looking toward the top of the high bookshelf, too far away for her to reach in a single jump. It was almost dinner time. Above the house across the street, the sky had darkened to the blue of faded ink, the color of the letters on his father's crossword puzzles after being left all week on the porch; in the other direction he knew the clouds would be pink. Within an hour Jared's bus would arrive at the community center, and another twenty minutes later, his carpool would drop him off at the bottom of the driveway. Daniel vowed he wouldn't act interested in anything his brother had to say about the trip. Unless Jared had ridden the roller coasters he didn't care anyway.

The cat perched on the edge of the sill and cried. He picked her up and hefted her onto the bookshelf. She sniffed the fish-shaped ceramic coin bank he'd made in art class—coins went in through the fin and could be retrieved through the gaping mouth—and then began pacing again, looking at the floor, crying. "Dumb cat," he said and lifted her from the shelf. She kicked at his chest with her back claws until he threw her on the bed. Her tail flicked right and left and she returned to the base of the bookshelf, pacing and crying. "You're the dumbest cat ever," he said. He put her back on the top shelf and hurried out of the room before she could finish sniffing the empty fish bank and begin crying again.

Downstairs, his father, still in the high-backed chair in the family room where he spent most of his Saturdays, had put aside the newspaper and moved on to a magazine. His mother called from the kitchen, "Daniel? Don't you want to come help me?"

He went to her and stood by her legs, his eyes just topping the counter scattered with flour and potato peels. Above the sink he could see through the window to the porch with its torn screen, and beyond to the strip of woods where he would have played with Greg today if not for the robbery. Through the trees, he could barely make out the light brown stone of the freeway's sound barriers, which Greg swore he'd once climbed. "Let's wash your hands," his mother said.

He stretched his fingers beneath the faucet as she scrubbed them with a sponge. "When's Jared coming home?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," his mother said. She smelled like bread. "I'm making enough for him to eat with us." She slid a bowl in front of him, said, "Dumplings," and moved to the stove where she stirred a wooden spoon through a large steaming pot. He reached over his head into the bowl and pulled out a handful of sticky dough. His mother said, "You can stand on a chair."

"I don't need a chair," he said. Up close, the dough smelled raw, like the dirt beneath the rocks he overturned looking for salamanders. He rolled each handful into a walnut-sized ball between his palms and lined them up on the counter, imagining they were oily snowballs he was preparing to throw at Jared the moment he stepped through the door. But as soon as he had five lined up, his mother took them, and he heard a splash and then the sizzle of broth spilled onto the burner.

Soon, his father came into the kitchen, still carrying the magazine. "Smells pretty good," he said.

"Danny's some cook," his mother said.

"I didn't do anything," Daniel said.

"Take credit when it's offered," his father said, scratching his beard.

For a moment, Daniel was certain this would start his father talking about his job, but he only sighed and sat down at the glass-topped kitchen table. He opened the magazine. Daniel wiped his hands on a towel and sat beside his father, looking through the table-top at his own fingers tinted green by the glass. "When's Jared coming home?" he asked.

"Soon, I'd guess," his father said. Then, his eyebrows bunching, added, "Why are you so concerned?"

"Will he be back in fifteen minutes?" Daniel asked. His father shrugged.

But Jared didn't come home until halfway through dinner. Daniel ate his soup and most of his meatloaf, but what he tasted were the French fries his father had gotten him at Hershey Park two years before, which he'd eaten out of a paper cup with a tiny wooden pitchfork. Soon, all that was left on his plate was the top crust of the meat and a mound of yellowish stringbeans. He began to think that Jared was prolonging his return on purpose, that he was standing in the backyard, watching through the ripped porch screen as Daniel tried not to squirm. But then, the back door opened, and from the laundry room came the double thump of Jared's shoes as he kicked them off. Daniel ate with deliberate slowness, stuffing into his mouth a huge forkful of beans, wet and soft against his tongue. The juices almost made him gag. Through the glass table, he stared at the holes in his socks, the greenish curve of his exposed toenails. His mother called, "Hi, Jared. Hope you're hungry."

"He's probably been eating all day," his father said.

For almost a whole minute, Jared didn't come out of the laundry room. Daniel chewed fiercely, his anger building. His brother, who must have seen and heard so much

today, was keeping him in painful suspense, forcing him to continue imagining the Great American Scream Machine as he'd seen it on the TV commercial, whirling through its corkscrew loops with himself in the front car, waving his arms above his head. His mother called again, "Jared? The soup's still hot."

Finally, the laundry room door opened, and Jared shuffled into the kitchen. He'd always been chubby, but now his face, which he kept lowered as he approached the table, seemed to have grown puffier during the day. Daniel mustered every reserve of self-control to keep from asking the first question. He glanced from his mother to his father. For a moment neither spoke. He was on the verge of exploding. To speak first would be an absolute victory for his brother. His parents must have known this and were conspiring with Jared against him. But then his mother said, "Did you have a good time, honey?"

Jared nodded slightly. With great relief, Daniel said in a rush, "Did you go on the Joyride?" ignoring his father's cough, waiting desperately for his brother to shake his head so he could say, "I would have."

But Jared didn't shake his head. He took a step toward the table, then stopped. He lifted his face, which quickly turned a dark, horrible red. The word tomato flashed through Daniel's mind along with its image, round and ripe, plucked from a neighbor's garden and crushed beneath Greg Farisi's heel. Tears flooded Jared's face and his mouth opened wide, though for a moment no sound came out. Something had gone terribly wrong on the trip. Someone had been killed, Daniel was certain. As if he'd watched it happen, he knew without a doubt that someone had died on a roller coaster. He saw himself whirling through a loop of the Scream Machine, his faulty strap coming unfastened, his body spiraling hundreds of feet downward to splatter on the tracks below. A whimper rose in his throat. His stomach turned with the sensation of falling. He would never go to another

amusement park, never even watch the commercials on TV. Jared took a huge breath and wailed, "I got mugged!"

Daniel sat stunned. He heard his brother's words, but couldn't erase the image of himself hanging limp above the ground on a roller coaster loop, his eyes open, his head lolling on his useless neck. Jared ran from the kitchen into the family room. His mother hurried after him. His father stood, glancing first toward the family room, then at Daniel, his hands gripping the edge of the table, his face sagging. It was the same expression Daniel had seen on his father's face a year before, when, just as they sat down to dinner, the phone rang, and they'd all—except for Jared who was eating dinner at Lauren's—jumped to their feet. Immediately, Daniel knew it was Aunt Sylvia calling, knew that his grandfather, who'd been too sick for the past four months to slip money into his pockets, had finally died, knew for certain that his father also knew. But no one moved toward the phone. His mother said, "Arthur," but his father only stood, glancing in one direction and then another, his face slack. Finally his mother made the ringing stop. "Yes," she said into the receiver, nodding, not to his father, Daniel felt, but to him. She meant it was time for him to cry, but he wouldn't, not yet, not until he could get to his closet. "OK, Sylvia," she said, then pressed for a dial tone and began calling other relatives. His father sat, his mouth hanging open, and took a bite of his pasta. Daniel hurried out of the kitchen.

But now, his father composed himself quickly and walked with confidence into the family room. Daniel followed, pausing in the doorway. His brother sat on the couch, his face in his hands. His mother sat beside him, stroking his hair, and soon his father approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. Daniel, almost crying himself, couldn't understand why they were paying so much attention to Jared. He was the one who'd fallen out of the roller coaster! He was the one who'd died. But now, between bouts of sobbing,

Jared's story was coming together: Until late in the afternoon, he'd been having a fine time. And then, while most of the group stood in line for a ride, he went in search of a corn dog. To avoid the crowds, he circled behind the long rows of game booths to a narrow grassy stretch scattered with Port-a-Johns. Someone pushed him from behind. He thought it was one of his friends from the group, but when he turned, smiling, he faced a tall kid with blonde hair to his shoulders and a black T-shirt that read, "We Sold Our Soul For Rock n' Roll," in slashing red letters. The kid pushed him again and said, "What did you say about my mamma? Gimme a buck." Startled, Jared said, "I didn't say anything about your mother," but the kid said, "How old are you?" Jared said, "Thirteen" And the kid, "I'm sixteen. My friend's eighteen. He's in the john over there. You don't give me a buck, he'll come out here and we'll both beat the shit out of you." "I don't even know your mother," Jared said, but the kid raised his fist. "If you talk about my mamma one more time, I'll kill you." Slowly, Jared reached for his wallet. The kid took the dollar, patted him on the head, and ran off.

Now, in the family room, Jared said, sniffing, "Lauren told me I should've run. But what if I tripped? What if they caught me?"

"You did the right thing," his mother said, tapping his knee with a long, pink fingernail.

After a moment, his father nodded and said, "Better safe than sorry."

By now, Daniel felt calmer and was glad he'd kept his initial fright to himself. He was still left with the vague image of a body falling through the air accompanied by Jared's wail, but these both might have happened years ago. He was more concerned now with the details of Jared's story, the long-haired kid with his raised fist. "Why'd he only take a dollar?" he asked.

Jared glared at him. "He was dumb."

His mother said, "You should know never to leave the group like that."

"A lesson," his father said. "Live and learn."

"I thought 'mugged' meant somebody hitting you over the head and taking your wallet," Daniel said.

"You're just a baby," Jared said. "You don't know anything."

His mother said, "Daniel, don't tease your brother."

"Let's finish dinner," his father said.

"I know a lot," Daniel said as they walked back to the kitchen. And it was true. It was Jared who didn't know anything, Jared who didn't understand what was happening around him. He'd seen it himself on a morning not long before, when they'd walked together to the bus stop. Daniel had joined the elementary school kids, and Jared crossed to the other side of the street where the Junior High bus came. There, three of the older boys were practicing karate, spinning, swinging their legs, grunting crazily. One of them crept up behind Jared and kicked him softly on the behind. Jared turned, laughing. Another boy kicked him from the other side. He turned again and the third boy kicked him. Soon, the boys had surrounded him, kicking him harder and harder as he whirled, waving his foot weakly at their shins.

The boys all laughed. So did the younger kids on Daniel's side of the street. But worst of all, Jared kept laughing the whole time, even when he grew too tired to spin and the boys began dancing around him, punching him now in the arms and shoulders, kicking his thighs and kidneys. His eyes were closed, but Daniel could see his teeth, the rows of metal braces which, from across the street, made it look as if he'd been eating dirt. Did he think they were including him in their game? Didn't he see they hated him? Daniel wanted

to cross the street and kick Jared himself until he understood they were making fun of him. He even took one step forward, but then paused, not wanting anyone to associate him with his brother. Jared kept on laughing, until one of the boys punched him in stomach, and he doubled over and fell to his knees. He's not my brother, Daniel swore and immediately felt sorry for himself, the lone child in his family. As he watched spit dripping from Jared's chin as his chest heaved, gasping for breath, Daniel laughed with the other kids, telling himself over and over, I will not be like him, I'll never be like him, I won't be, I won't.

And now, he knew for certain he'd never be like his brother. He always understood what was happening around him; he could never be so easily taken advantage of. After they'd cleared the dishes, he walked up the stairs just behind Jared, watching his brother's soft belly bulging out-the sides of his white T-shirt, and asked him, "How big was the kid?"

"Big," Jared said.

"Bigger than Dad?"

"Almost."

"What about his friend?" Daniel asked.

"I didn't see him."

"Right."

Jared stopped in middle of the staircase and turned around. His eyes were slits and he was breathing quickly. Daniel thought he might cry again, but instead he said, "You don't know anything"

"I would have run," Daniel said.

"You would have peed your pants."

"I would have run or called for help."

"You're just a little baby," Jared said, turning again and taking the rest of the stairs two at a time.

As they reached the second floor landing, Daniel said, "At least it was only a dollar. If it were me, I would have taken your wallet."

"You're an idiot," Jared said.

"You're a pussy."

"You don't even know what that means," Jared said and laughed. "You think it means 'fraidy cat.' Don't you?"

"No," Daniel said, and then quickly repeated, "At least it was only a dollar."

"You'll never grow up."

This wasn't a fair thing to say. Daniel thought of the trombone in his closet, the brass slide he could push out only halfway. Jared looked at him with his head cocked to the side. His lower lip trembled and his hands were squeezed into fists. Daniel had never seen him this angry. It was time to stop fooling around. "I've got two dollars," he said. "I'll give you one." No answer. "You can forget the whole thing ever happened."

Jared stood, silent, and Daniel ran down the hallway to his room. He could almost hear the pounding footsteps of sixteen and eighteen year-old hoodlums chasing close behind as he passed kiddie rides and carousels, cut through crowds and hopped fences. No one would have caught him. In his bedroom, the cat was still on top of the bookshelf, asleep, her tail curled alongside the fish bank. She opened her eyes when he stormed in, but didn't move. He ran past her into the closet, not bothering to turn on the overhead bulb, pushed aside the shirts, and untacked the cardboard square. The hole felt more irregular and jagged than it had looked. His mother really would kill him if she found it. He slipped two fingers in and ran them along the inside of the sheetrock. They touched nothing. No

bag, no thumbtack. His stomach turned. "No," he whispered. "Not fair." The whimper rose again to his throat. He pictured his brother's face glowing tomato red, though he knew his own was turning pale.

Robbers! They'd been watching him the whole time and snuck in while he was eating. They could find anything he ever hid; he had no way to protect himself.

But no, he knew it wasn't robbers, he couldn't even pretend, though the truth was so much worse. He'd put all his money into this stupid hole and now it had dropped and was stuck inside the wall. He didn't know how far it would have fallen, to the floor of the closet, or all the way down, past the family room into the basement wall, still falling maybe. Greg Farisi would tear out the whole panel of sheetrock to get the money and only later worry about the four slaps across the jaw. But Daniel wanted to forget that he'd ever had any money, forget that he'd ever caused himself so much trouble.

But, wait! Now his fingers touched something, a corner of plastic, the thumbtack, not where he'd remembered tacking it, but on the opposite side of the hole. He took out the bag and squeezed it with both hands, trembling, his heart racing. "Stupid hole," he said, replacing the cardboard forever. He left the closet and took a dollar from the bag. But then, for the first time actually picturing his brother standing alone beside the row of steaming Port-a-Johns, his scalp skin tingling from the kid's pat as he slowly returned the wallet to his back pocket, Daniel removed a second bill from the roll. He wanted to find a new place to hide the rest, but suddenly his bedroom seemed too large. There were too many possibilities. He tried to stuff the bag into the mouth of the fish tank, but the plastic bunched on the lip and only went in halfway. The cat flicked her tail but didn't lift her head.

His hand was sweating as he carried the crinkled bills, soft and warm between his fingers, into the hallway. The door to Jared's bedroom was closed. He reached for the knob, but even before he tried it, knew it wouldn't turn. He hoped, at least, that his brother's lip had stopped trembling. "Jared," he called. "It's me. I've got something for you." Behind the door he could hear faint footsteps and then the click of the radio, a brief electronic buzz, the blare of music. "Let me in," he called. He considered slipping the money under the door, but instead held the knob, which was cold against his sweating palm, cold enough to bristle the fine hairs on his arm, so cold he thought he could feel a shiver building in his lower back. He stood in the hallway, waiting for the shiver to shake him, dreading the moment he would have to return to his vast empty bedroom. He knocked on the door and called again, "Jared, please."

But his brother didn't answer. After a moment, he backed away from the door and hurried as fast as possible through his room, into the closet. Without turning on the light, he closed the door and sat, picking aimlessly at a twist of carpet. For just a minute he'd sit here; a minute or two, to let Jared calm down by himself. In a minute, he'd go back into the hall, knock on the door, and ask to be let in. If he had to, he'd apologize and say that their mother was right, giving up the dollar had been the best thing to do. He might even cry until his brother would have no choice but to open the door. It wouldn't matter if Jared called him a baby for the next week. With the light off, the closet no longer seemed small and comfortable. The walls might have been miles away. He felt as cold and exposed as if he was sitting in the middle of an open field. The muffled sound of traffic carried to him from the freeway, despite the high stone barriers at the edge of the woods. He reached out and grabbed the sleeve of a shirt with both hands. In just another minute, he'd try the freezing doorknob again and do whatever was necessary to win back his brother. But for

now, he'd sit and finger the button on the end of the sleeve, turning it in one direction and then the other, as far as the thread would allow.

When the cat pawed at the door, crying, half an hour later, he still sat, holding the sleeve. And an hour after that, when his father came upstairs to see if he'd gone to bed, he hadn't yet moved, still telling himself, one more minute just one more. For the next four years, he would tell himself the same thing every afternoon, as he sat on the high-backed chair in the family room, watching TV, listening to Jared kick off his shoes in the laundry room, stomp through the kitchen, stomp up the stairs, and slam his door. And he would still be repeating it—*just another minute, in one more minute, I'll do it*—when, fifteen years later, he sat across from his brother at the table of a hotel bar and tried to muster the courage to ask him for a job. They hadn't seen each other for three years, and Jared was getting married in the morning. Daniel's palm was sweating as he reached for his frosted beer glass. He imagined himself saying, "I'd take just about anything," waiting for his brother to laugh sharply and reply, *Are you kidding? Don't you realize I hate you?* The glass was colder than he expected. Fingers crept up his back and his shoulders shook. Foam spilled over the lip of the glass and dribbled slowly down one side. Jared didn't seem to notice. His eyes were focused on the candle flickering in a red globe between them as he talked about the new condo he'd just bought in Greenwich. His face was lean and barely shaded with stubble, his neck thick, his shoulders bulky from lifting weights since high school. No trace of chubbiness remained. Daniel put down his glass and heard about the two and a half bathrooms his brother and bride would soon enjoy, the size of the guest room, the indoor pool, the convenient parking, the short commute to work.

After Jared paid for the drinks, Daniel sat finishing his beer, watching his brother's wide, wide back drift out of the bar toward the elevators. When he was out of sight, Daniel

lit a cigarette with the candle. Tomorrow afternoon Jared would begin a family that had nothing at all to do with him. He stared at the flame through the red glass and briefly pictured the wedding, the uncomfortable tuxedo, the one dance he would have to give his mother, the relatives who would want to know what he'd been doing for the last six years. And then, more clearly, he saw his long drive home tomorrow night after the reception, the dark patches of freeway that might be wet or icy, the huge trucks that would scream past his car, or worse, those that would slow to a crawl in front of him, the ones he could never bring himself to pass.

Mr. Mervin

Early every spring, Daniel's mother pointed out filth on windows all over the house. Rain streaks, smudges from fingerprints, grime left by melting frost. Ordinarily she'd make a joke of it. "Don't you love living in a church?" she'd say. "All this stained glass!" But this year, she carried a bottle of Windex and a roll of paper towels into the family room, where his father was reading the sports pages. Daniel, eleven, sat on the hardwood floor at the edge of the carpet, arranging his model cars and trucks. He'd spent weeks gluing together minuscule pieces and could finally set up an elaborate freeway accident. His mother went to the wide windows that started at Daniel's chin and rose all the way to the ceiling. "What's the point of these," she said. "I can't see the backyard. I can't even see my garden." She pumped the trigger of the spray-bottle so fast it snorted, and, clutching a paper towel, shoved her hand between the screen and window frame.

"Why kill yourself?" his father said. "You know it's silly to bother now."

"I can't even see Daniel when he plays outside."

On the floor, seven cars were ready to collide when a dump truck slammed into the carpet and turned on its side. But Daniel forgot the freeway for a moment. "You don't need to see me," he said.

His mother kept scrubbing, and his father said, "It's silly. You know Mr. Mervin will call soon enough. Next week at the latest."

"You don't need to see me," Daniel said again, but softer. Mention of Mr. Mervin made bubbles the size of ping-pong balls rise to his throat, and he didn't want to breathe. He remembered only a hunched bulk perched high on a ladder, a slow voice, and heavy footsteps, but still he didn't want the windows cleaned, ever. Once, late at night, he'd

awoken for no reason, and it was Mr. Mervin's name he'd found himself whispering. Right away, he knew he'd never go back to sleep. He crept down the hall to his parents' bedroom, raised his hand to knock on their door, but then hesitated. There was no sound, no snoring or rustling of sheets. They were gone, he was sure. Something had taken them away or made them want to leave. Back in his bed, alone, he lay with his ear against the wall separating his room from his brother's. All night there was some noise from Jared, a cough, a snuffle, the squeak of a bed spring, and this was the only thing that kept him from crying. His eyes were still open when the first bars of sunlight appeared on his carpet and, down the hall, pipes hummed from his father's shower.

Now his mother pulled her arm inside and held up the paper towel, already black across the middle. "Mr. Mervin," she said. "That's exactly why I'm cleaning them myself."

"I thought we'd agreed on this," his father said.

"Is it so much to ask to have my windows cleaned properly?"

"It's a mitzvah. Didn't we agree it was?"

"It's not so much to ask," his mother said. "We can give to the UJA. We can buy seat cushions for the Center. This year I'd like to have clean windows."

"He needs our business."

"We can sponsor a starving African baby. I saw that girl—Archie Bunker's daughter. On TV. She was asking for our help."

"Be serious," his father said. "If you're really unhappy, I'll get someone else to come after Mervin."

"You want to throw away your children's money." She squeezed the spray-bottle trigger, and a blue mist bounced from the glass into her face. She winced, slammed the bottle on the end table, coughed. His father went to her, but she waved him off with the

paper towel. "Go on," she said. "Go empty Daniel's savings account and flush it down the toilet."

"Mr. Mervin's stupid," Daniel said and immediately felt better.

His father shook his head and dropped his gaze to the sports page. His mother stared at the ceiling and said, "Whose son is this?"

A mistake. He tried to go back the freeway. Two cars spun, women and children screamed, but it was too late. His mother's hand gripped his arm, quickly enough to make him flinch. She led him to the corner of the sofa farthest from the door, where he always had to admit he'd done something wrong. His legs dangled too far above the floor. No escape. She bent to one knee and tapped her fingers on his leg. "We don't say things like that about people. We've discussed this, haven't we? I know we have. It's not nice."

"He doesn't know how to wash windows," Daniel said. "You said so."

"He's not as fortunate as you are. You have to learn to be kind. Didn't we talk about what a mitzvah is?"

Daniel kicked his heel against the sofa's cushion until his mother grabbed his ankle. He pictured his father giving away his money to every window washer in the phone book. "I know how to wash windows," he said.

From the other side of the room, his father called, "Some people are just born brilliant."

"I don't want to hear you calling people names," his mother said, and let him up from the sofa. He hurried to his cars, slammed two head-on, hard. Both fenders cracked and a bullet-shaped headlight popped straight up, a foot in the air. His mother carried the Windex and paper towels back to the kitchen. The argument with his father was over. He'd made a bad mistake and knew how it would go: two weeks later, Mr. Mervin would call,

and when Daniel scanned his mother's calendar, he would find penciled into a square at the top of the page marked May, "Mervin—windows (ha!)."

But Mr. Mervin *was* stupid, no matter what his mother might say. His father had told him, on more than one occasion, he should never lie. He preferred the rule about lying to the one about being kind. Even listening from far away as his father gave thanks and handed over a check, he could tell Mr. Mervin was the stupidest man alive. He told this to his best friend, Greg Farisi, and had tried to tell it to Jared, who was in the basement, swinging black barbells from his thighs to his shoulders. Two years ago, Jared's cheeks had been bloated and red, and his stomach hung an inch over his belt. Now, his belly was nearly flat and slick with sweat. Veins stood out on his thin arms. "Your muscles are getting big," Daniel said, carefully. The basement was cold and damp, but he stayed despite an occasional shiver. He kept his toys here, and his mother wouldn't let Jared lock him out. "Washing windows is easy," he said. "Anybody could do it."

"If you don't shut up," Jared said, nearly out of breath. "I'm going to drop one of these on your foot."

Greg was different. He lived at the bottom of the street and was the toughest boy in the fifth grade. He was almost always mean, and everybody wanted to be his friend. "I hate stupid people," he said.

His father never called Mr. Mervin. If Mr. Mervin didn't call, his father would skip the mitzvah this year and hire a regular window washer. But every year, no matter how much Daniel might wish for all the telephone poles to be swept up in a sudden tornado, the phone rang one evening during the second week of April, just as his mother was laying dinner on the table. "Can't he at least remember when we eat?" she said last year, as his

father jumped from his seat and reached for the receiver, his paper napkin fluttering to the floor. His greeting was loud, excited. Whenever Daniel called him at work, his father answered with a stern, solemn, "Brickman speaking." No matter how many times he called, the tone always startled Daniel, and his throat tightened. This was the way his father would sound if he died in a plane crash in the middle of the ocean and his ghost, late at night, crept out of Daniel's closet or dresser drawers. "Melissa and Nicole talk about you behind your back," the ghost would say. "Mr. Pearl thinks you're too cocky to be a good ball player." But with Mr. Mervin on the line, his father laughed, and nearly shouted, "Yes, yes, I've been expecting your call." Then, after a long pause, "Well, our windows could certainly use your visit. This was an especially dirty winter, wasn't it? Let me put my wife on. She's the planner."

His mother shook the oven mitts from her hands, grabbed the phone from his father, and—glaring at him—said sharply, "Hello, Mr. Mervin." His father sat and stared at a magazine, but his eyes didn't move across the words. A short pause, and his mother touched her hair. "Thank you, I'm fine." Then a slight smile. "Yes, the boys are fine, too, thank you." She scanned the pages of her calendar, tapping a pen on the narrow wooden bookshelf stuffed full with phone lists and recipes. Somewhere in that mass of paper was the secret formula to Daniel's favorite meal. It had a Yiddish name, but he always called it meat-pie. Once a month, if he'd been good, she made it just for him. In the morning, he smelled the slight burn of onions, and when he came home from school, the kitchen was doughy. In between, during class, he imagined himself at the dinner table, a perfect steaming wedge before him. He would make a pile of the crumbled meat and slowly chew the crust. The crust was the true secret: outside it was yellow and flaky, but underneath it dripped with a heavy, dark-tasting juice. "The twenty-ninth?" his mother said. Daniel

tasted the juice on his tongue, though he knew tonight they were having baked chicken. He hated Mr. Mervin for making him think of meat-pie. He hadn't been good this month or last and didn't know if he'd ever eat it again. His mother scratched her pencil on the calendar and said, "Let's make it the third."

This year, after the first ring, Daniel bolted to the phone before his father could rise. In as low a voice as he could manage, he answered, "Brickman speaking." His mother held up one finger and tilted it to the side in warning. He smiled at his father, who lowered his head. From the phone came a slow, trembling, "Hello." The man might have been reading from a flash card held up by a teacher across an enormous auditorium. Every day, Daniel wished for a fiery end to all vocabulary flash cards. He knew the definitions, he always knew the definitions, but when a card jumped in front of his face and a teacher called his name, his mouth froze and the answer caught in the back of his throat. Greg said his tongue always stuck out, and he looked like a moron. The teacher, Mrs. Ringle, knew he was smart, knew it was only flash cards that turned him into an idiot, but called on him anyway, at least twice each lesson, flipping the cards relentlessly. Most of the girls in the class laughed, and a few of the boys, until Greg gave them a look or raised his fist. All afternoon, Daniel stared out the classroom window to the filmy green pond at the end of the playground and imagined Mrs. Ringle's car slowly sinking. And then, after school, or the next morning waiting for the bus, he'd have to do something to make everyone forget. He tipped garbage cans into the street, stole boxes of ice cream from the cooler behind the gym, took a For Sale sign from one neighbor's lawn and stuck it into another's. Once, during recess, he planned to scatter thumbtacks across the teachers' parking lot. Kids watched from the basketball court, far enough away that no one could see the only thing he dropped from his pocket was lint. For the rest of the day, tacks poked into his thigh, but

boys he'd never talked to clapped him on the back, and one girl drew a picture of him standing next to a car with a flat tire.

None of this should have happened. When his parents had time to help him practice, he had no trouble with the flash cards. But last week, when they'd gone out and Jared had locked himself in his room, he'd tried to practice by himself, holding each card first in front of the bathroom mirror and then the one in his parents' bedroom. What good were mirrors if they made everything backwards? He struggled for several minutes trying to read the word, "WOLAGNUB," in its proper order. His voice stuttered, as stupid sounding as the voice now on the phone. But he wasn't stupid, he knew he wasn't, and he hurled the stack of cards at the trash can. Most plunged right at his feet, though others lifted, turned quick loops, and settled on his parents' bed.

"This is Mr. Mervin," the voice said, "of the Pane Relief Window Washing—"

"I know who you are," Daniel said.

"May I speak to Mr. or Mrs.—"

"I know what you want," Daniel said, but by then his father was up from the table, a hand on Daniel's shoulder, the other cupped, waiting for the receiver. He handed it over, but before he could return to his seat, his mother took him by the arm. His father disappeared into the laundry room, the phone cord stretching over the dinner table. His mother pulled him from the kitchen. She was trying to lead him to the corner of the sofa, but in the hallway he broke free. She snatched his wrist before he could run upstairs.

"Do we have to talk about your phone manners? Do we have to do this again?" She spoke through clenched teeth. Her words made a sharp hushing sound. Daniel stared at his socks, long and floppy at the toes. After a moment he shook his head. "I want a real answer," she said. Her fingers pinched the skin of his wrist.

“No,” he said.

“No, what?”

Tears were leaking onto his nose. There was nothing he could do. “No, we don’t have to talk.”

“About?”

“No, we don’t have to talk about my stupid phone manners.”

“Okay.” She ran a thumb under his eyes. “Go up and wash your face. And tell your brother he should come eat with his family for a change.”

On a morning three weeks later, he sat on his bedroom floor, waiting out the half hour before he had to catch the bus to school. Downstairs, his mother’s slippered feet padded from the kitchen to the living room to the family room, dusting, he guessed, or watering the plants. Last night his father had left for a business trip to Switzerland and would be gone for two weeks. He’d tried to be good all day, had even promised to stay that way forever if his father didn’t leave, but none of his pleading had changed anything. “I wouldn’t go if I could help it,” his father said. “I’d retire tomorrow. But colleges aren’t cheap.” Already, Daniel missed him. He didn’t want to think about the plane floating high over the ocean; Mrs. Ringle could never explain how jets stayed in the air, though he asked nearly ever week. Instead, he thought about the chocolate his father would bring home, and the original sets of Lego. A Lego motorcycle with mufflers and wires and real rubber tires, a Lego helicopter with propellers that twirled, maybe even the Lego castle with four towers and a working drawbridge.

Through the wall, his brother’s stereo blasted the refrain, “Urgent, urgent, urgent, urgent emergency. It’s urgent.” In front of him on the floor was a box of baseball cards—

the brand new 1983 complete set in mint condition—and a pile of plastic pages, each sectioned by nine rectangular pockets. Careful to keep the set's order, he slipped each card into a pocket, and referenced its number to his Official Baseball Card Price Guide. Most cards were worth no more than fifteen cents, but several topped the dollar mark. And somewhere in the middle, a hidden treasure, the Wade Boggs rookie card: twelve dollars and forty-eight cents. The pockets were a tight fit; on occasion he frayed a card's corner on the plastic edge and had to stand, pace, breathe deeply, the way he'd seen his mother do after breaking a favorite flower pot. Sometimes this wasn't enough, and he had to pummel his fists into his pillow to keep from shouting.

He'd just slid number 228 of 792 from the box, when pounding footsteps reached the top of the stairs. At the end of the hall, an ogre, massive body on thin legs, rounded the banister. It carried a bucket and some sort of weapon, a T-shaped stick with a blade at one end. His door was wide open. Where to hide? The closet. But then, waiting in the dark, the door flinging open, the ogre's claws tearing through his clothes. To be eaten in his own closet! Toes first for trying to escape.

But not an ogre. Even before he reached the doorway, Daniel knew who it was, could see the blade of the weapon was made of rubber. Still, a sound squeaked through his nose when Mr. Mervin said, painfully slow, "Hello there." Daniel had never seen him so close. Usually, he didn't show up until after Daniel had gone to school, and by the time he came home, Mr. Mervin would have finished inside and would be high on a ladder in the front yard. Until he went away for good, Daniel would follow his mother from the laundry room to the kitchen, folding towels, fetching ingredients, setting the dinner table. "You're being very good today," his mother would say. "Did you get in trouble at school?" But now, Mr. Mervin stood right above him. The shape of his face was like a skeleton's. No

skin sagged under his chin or on his cheeks the way it had on Daniel's grandfather when Daniel kissed him goodbye in the hospital. His hair was greased back in three strokes, over the top and above each ear, leaving long strips of bluish skin from his eyebrows to the back of his head. Everything on his face was large and simple: drooping oval ears, a squashed triangle nose, perfectly round eyes opened so wide a ghost might have been following him around all day, whispering, "Boo!" when he least expected it. Daniel counted only five teeth in Mr. Mervin's mouth, and those were square and brown, belonging to a horse or a pack of giant rabbits. "Base-ball-cards," Mr. Mervin said, so slowly he might have been speaking three separate words in three separate sentences. "Mickey Mantle?"

"He's old," Daniel said. He gathered the plastic pages, put the loose number 228 back in the box and shut it. His hands were trembling. He had to be tough, he told himself. If Greg were here, he'd say something mean and wouldn't be afraid at all. "This is 1983."

Mr. Mervin nodded, smiling. "Mickey Mantle hits home runs." He strode to the nearest window. On the orange carpet, muddy footprints trailed backward to the door and into the hall. Daniel stood to leave, but Mr. Mervin pointed to a poster over the dresser. "Mickey Mantle?"

"That's Tom Seaver," Daniel said. "He's a *pitcher*. His rookie card's worth ninety-eight dollars." He knew all this and he was only eleven. Even Jared, who hated baseball, knew who Tom Seaver was. It wasn't right for someone so big to be so stupid. It wasn't right for him to come into the house when his father had to go away. To keep from crying, Daniel tried to imagine himself as the boss of a company. Mr. Mervin would work for him, and he would get to fire him. When his father had to fire someone the next day, he didn't sleep for a whole night; at the breakfast table his eyes were red and he kept shrugging for no reason. Daniel would sleep fine. He'd simply point his chin at his office door and say,

"Get lost." Now, he waved a hand at the poster and said, "Don't you know what a pitcher looks like?"

Mr. Mervin turned slowly, his smile gone, his mouth a hole. "I know things," he said.

"You don't know who Tom Seaver is," Daniel said.

"I know lots of things."

"You don't know what a pitcher looks like. You don't know how to wash windows."

"I know lots of things!" Mr. Mervin said, his voice rising just short of a wail. The bucket slipped from his fingers, and soapy water sloshed over its rim onto the carpet. He clutched the T-shaped stick to his chest, wringing the handle. "I know—"

Daniel ran. He went to his brother's door and tried the knob, his knees ready to buckle if it didn't turn. This time it opened. Jared jumped from his chair and scattered papers over his desk. "Jesus," he said. "I thought you were Mom. Can't you learn to knock?"

Daniel closed the door behind him and pointed at the wall separating their rooms. "In there," he shouted over the music, and then gasped. "In my room. Mr. Mervin. He's crazy. He wants to kill me. He thinks Mickey Mantle's a pitcher."

"Shut up and come here," Jared said. "You've got to look at this." Daniel went to the desk. Jared cleared the papers to reveal a magazine open to a wrinkled page, its top corner curled. A woman, naked, squatted. Streaks of white and blue paint marked her arms and shoulders and middle. She held a paintbrush, the wrong end forward, too far between her legs. "Can you believe this?" Jared said. "I can get as many of these as I want. Cheap." Between his braces stuck bits of soft, wet bread. His breath smelled like peanut butter. In

the black background beside the woman's head, a fingerprint, deep and clear, a perfect swirl. Jared's maybe? Daniel reached out a finger, but Jared slapped away his hand. "No touching. Only look and admire." The record ended, and the speakers hummed softly. He tried to peek between the woman's legs, but couldn't. Instead, he stared at the fingerprint, listening for his mother's footsteps approaching in the hall. The only sound came from his own room, the stuttering squeak of rubber against glass. He put a hand on Jared's shoulder, and Jared didn't shrug him off.

When he came home from school, Mr. Mervin's car was still in the driveway. Not a van or truck with the company's name stenciled on its side, but a station wagon with wood-colored doors, rusty fenders, and three antennas poking from its hood and roof. He saw the car from the street and immediately wanted to get back on the bus, but it was already pulling away from the curb. He wouldn't be able to follow his mother around the kitchen or family room. In the fall, she'd gone back to teaching for the first time in fifteen years and didn't come home until late in the afternoon. By now, his father's plane would have landed in Switzerland, or else crashed into the ocean or into the slope of a towering, snowy mountain.

Jared wouldn't be home either. Now that he was in high school, the barbells in the basement were no longer enough for him. Every day after school, he rode his bike down Rt. 10 to Market Street Monsters, a gym where men and women in brightly colored underwear posed before the large front window, their muscles oiled and jumping. On a day too cold for riding a bike, Daniel had gone there with his mother to bring Jared home. Even from the parking lot, with the car door closed, he could hear the terrible grunting, and was sickened by the smell of sweat. Jared slumped into the back seat without speaking,

breathing hard, rubbing his shoulders and neck. After dinner, Daniel glanced over the mantle to a picture of the whole family from three years ago. Jared was smiling and had an arm around Daniel's neck. He didn't seem to care at all about the dimpled flesh beneath his chin or about the way his T-shirt bulged around his waist. It wasn't Daniel's fault his brother spent every waking moment thinking about his body. He hadn't once—not ever—called Jared fat to his face.

But despite everything, he'd now be alone with Mr. Mervin, who might try to kill him or might set his baseball cards on fire. Carefully, peering first around the corners, he circled the house. The front yard was empty. In back, leaning beside Jared's window, a ladder, but no stupid ogre on top. Still inside. Maybe even in Daniel's room, waiting. He reached into his shirt for the key dangling on brown yarn. Without pulling it over his head, he leaned forward to unlock the back door. Immediately, from upstairs came the heavy thumping of clumsy boots. He crept through the laundry room into the kitchen, gently lifted the phone, and dialed. Greg answered, "Wha' chou want?"

"You've got to come over," Daniel said. "In the fort. Five minutes."

"Is it the magazine?" Greg said. "Did you get it?"

"Just come."

After three steps of flat lawn, the backyard rose steeply toward the strip of woods separating the neighborhood from the freeway. Daniel charged up the hill, weaving between the bushes his father had planted last year, most already brown and crumbling. Every weekend his father walked from one bush to another, pumping an enormous metal squirt gun that clogged after every three sprays. "Goddamn fungus!" he yelled, even when he knew Daniel was listening. Once, he'd lifted the gun above his head, hurled it behind the rotting woodpile, and disappeared into the garage. After a moment, Daniel followed

him. Behind the car, his father sat on a stack of yellowed newspapers, rubbing his fingers on his shirt. "Do you want me to spray?" Daniel said.

His father shook his head. "I'm going into town," he said. "Bring down your library books. They're due by five."

Now he hurried past the bushes, the first cluster of tall trees, and dropped into a patch of stomped earth cleared of dead leaves and protected by a semicircle of half-buried boulders. Among the rocks were the remains of Matchbox cars he'd once loved to polish and now loved to smash. This summer he and Greg were going to build a real fort. They'd steal wood from one of the fancy new houses being built at the top of the street and nail it high into a tree. Greg insisted they build it on his property, though there were almost no woods behind his house and anybody would be able to see it from the road.

This fort was hidden and had a view. From here he could stare unnoticed into the kitchen and family room. He could see both his own and his brother's windows, though Jared's blinds were lowered. His own were raised as high as they could go, and there, framed in one of the window's sectioned squares, was Mr. Mervin's face, his mouth a brown smear. His lips were moving, talking, maybe, to his rubber stick as it passed over the glass, followed by a grayish cloth. Daniel couldn't wait for him to be out of the house and on top of the ladder, where he could imagine for him a long and terrible fall. But this, he was sure, would be the last year Mr. Mervin came to wash the windows. After the phone call, he'd wandered through the house, pressing his thumb into the corners of every window he could reach. This afternoon, his mother would find smudges everywhere. "Mitzvah or no mitzvah," she'd say the moment his father came home. "I've had enough."

Soon, Greg leapt over the boulders into the fort. "What is it? I was watching *What's Happening*. Did you get the magazine?"

At lunch, Daniel had told Greg about Mr. Mervin and about the woman with the paintbrush, told him that without seeing it, he could never understand. For the rest of the afternoon, Greg had asked only about the magazine and wouldn't believe that Jared always kept his room locked. "That crazy retard," Daniel said. "I told you about him. He's in the house." He pointed to his window, but now it was empty.

"Check this out," Greg said. "I can walk like Rerun." He held his arms away from his body, thrust his head forward, and strutted two steps forward, two back.

"That's a chicken walk," Daniel said.

"You're a chicken. You're afraid of the window guy." Greg was smaller than Daniel, by an inch or two, and just as skinny, but he was dark and quick. He was Italian. "Italians are tougher than Jews," he'd said, more than once. "That's just the way it is." Daniel never argued with this. He'd seen Greg throw his eraser at Mrs. Ringle when she accused him of cheating. He'd seen him get punched in the eye by a sixth grader and stand up without a single tear. He knew Mr. Farisi kept a worn leather belt beside his bed and used it whenever he got the chance. Daniel only objected when Greg insisted Italian mothers were also better cooks than Jewish ones: "You've never had meat-pie." When Greg stayed for dinner and tried it, he said, "Well, Italians are still tougher."

Jared's window blinds rose. Mr. Mervin lifted the frame and unhooked the screen. "He's ugly," Greg said. "He's the ugliest person ever."

"His teeth are brown," Daniel said.

Greg picked up a rock. "I bet I can hit him from here." Nothing could stop Greg from breaking windows. He'd smashed his neighbor's with a baseball, the school's with the same eraser he'd thrown at Mrs. Ringle. Despite his father's belt, he'd twice shot holes in his own bedroom window with a BB gun. Daniel stood and grabbed Greg by the wrist.

On his own wrist he could feel his mother's fingers, pinching, pinching, if she came home to find shards of glass on Jared's floor. Greg pulled his arm away and threw the rock on the ground. "Don't touch me," he said.

"If you hit him, he'd know we're here," Daniel said. "Let's spy on him."

"Don't ever touch me."

"I bet he'll steal something."

Greg dropped to the dirt and watched. The rubber stick and the gray cloth passed over each of the window's sections. Mr. Mervin's lips moved slowly, the enormous teeth sliding into and out of view. "He's talking to his squeegee," Greg said.

"His what?" Mr. Mervin's face drifted away from the window into the room's darkness.

"He's crazy," Greg said. "We've got to go see what he stole. Your brother's records, probably. And your cards. You didn't leave the Seavers sitting around, did you?"

Of course not. This was a dumb question. He always kept them in a cigar box sealed with a lock he'd taken off one of his father's suitcases. The box was buried under piles of clothes in the back of his closet. He took it out only late at night with his shades drawn. Greg always asked where he hid them, but he would never tell. Still, he couldn't help picturing Mr. Mervin rummaging through the rest of the cards, bending the plastic pages to look for Mickey Mantle. "We've got to stop him."

Greg left the fort without a word. He ran skidding down the hill, leaving long streaks in the red mulch. He stomped in the center of a bush, and most of its branches snapped and hung to one side. Daniel stood, then hesitated. This wasn't what he'd wanted. He didn't want to go anywhere near the house or Mr. Mervin and wished, for once, that Greg would be scared. From the bottom of the hill, Greg waved him on, and he followed

carefully. He went for the back door, but Greg darted to the ladder. "This way." Daniel didn't move. "Come on," Greg said. "He left your brother's screen off."

"I have a key," Daniel said and reached into his shirt.

"We've got to get that magazine," Greg said. He bounced his hands against his sides. "Now's our chance."

"What about the retard? He's got my Seavers."

"You know where he keeps it? Under his pillow?"

"In his desk drawer."

"Go get it," Greg said. "I'll keep a lookout." Daniel glanced up the length of the ladder to the high window. Waist down, his skin tingled. He started for the back door.

- "Where you going?"

"Jared's room must be unlocked. Mr. Mervin was just in there."

"You want the retard to see you? And tell your mom? Go up this way."

"He won't see me," Daniel said. "He's too stupid."

"You're such a chickenshit. I always tell everyone you're not, but I guess it's true."

"You go."

"I bet you're even too chickenshit to be lookout," Greg said. "If someone comes, you'll run away and leave me up there." He put a hand on the ladder. Daniel pictured him snooping through his brother's room and then his own, digging in the closet until he found the box of Seavers, easy enough to break open without the key. "I always tell people you're the second toughest kid in the class. I always tell them you're not stupid when you can't do the flash cards," Greg said. "I always stick up for you."

Daniel knew he should punch Greg for this, but didn't dare. Not because Greg would beat him up, but because there would be nothing to stop the laughter during the next vocabulary lesson. He'd be completely on his own. "I'll go," he said.

Greg backed away from the ladder, smiling slightly. He turned his face when Daniel tried to look at him. "If anyone comes I'll whistle," he said.

The first step was the hardest. He had to stretch his leg to reach the rung, and something in his knee popped. The railing was cold against his hands. But with each new rung it became easier, more regular than climbing a tree, which never scared him until he was too high to jump down without breaking all his bones. He concentrated on each ridge of beige fiberglass siding, and soon he was at the top edge of the living room window, even with the roof of the porch. Wet leaves and pine needles clumped in the seam of the porch and the house. He glanced down, though he knew he shouldn't. But it didn't seem so terribly high, and he had no sensation of falling. Greg crouched beside a shrub and gave a thumbs-up sign, then shrugged.

By the time he reached Jared's window, the insides of his legs were sore, and his breath came fast. He reached out a hand to slide the glass open, but then stopped. There was movement in the room. Mr. Mervin, snooping or stealing. But not Mr. Mervin. Jared was home. He must have come back while Daniel and Greg were in the fort. Or else been here the whole time. He stood before the mirror, wearing sweatpants but no shirt. Against the wall leaned a magazine, propped open. Not a naked woman, but an enormous black man in bright blue underwear. He held up his arms on either side of his head, his muscles giant lumps, each larger around than Daniel's waist. His white smile gleamed. In the mirror, Jared imitated the man's pose, though instead of smiling, his lips were clamped, hiding his braces. His muscles—only bumps, but large enough, Daniel thought—gathered

and fell quickly. His mouth moved. Daniel couldn't hear through the window but could read the words clearly: "You're shit."

Jared took a step backward, shook out his arms. Then, a different pose, his arms in a circle, wrists crossing at his belly. His shoulders quivered, his face grew red, but nothing happened on his chest. He let out his breath and spoke again. "You're goddamn shit." He stomped in a circle, then sprang into another position. One arm curled behind his head, the other extended, fingers pointing to the joint of the wall and ceiling. He looked more like a rock and roll star than a body builder. The black man in the magazine seemed to be laughing, and Daniel wanted to join him. But then Jared threw his fists against his thighs and shouted loud enough for Daniel to hear through the glass, "You're fucking shit!" He went to the door and punched it with the heel of his hand, then kicked the desk, the chair, the dresser. Finally, he flung himself on the bed, and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

The ladder rattled against the house. Daniel was laughing now, trying not to make a sound. Nothing was funny, but he couldn't stop. His body shook, and an occasional snort escaped his nose. The ladder was shaking harder, and he knew he should be still. He wanted the black man to stop smiling. He wanted Jared to get up from the bed and pose again in front of the mirror. No. He wanted Jared to be fat again and happy. He was crying now and wished he was on the ground, in the fort or safe in his room with his cards spread around him.

From below came a long, wavering wail, "No! No-no!" To his right, far, far to the ground, Greg, a bug, burst from the shrub and scuttled around the side of the house. From the opposite direction ran Mr. Mervin with his bucket and T-shaped stick, half-hobbling or dancing, waving his arms above his head. The stick chopped up and down like an ax, and dark water spilled from the bucket onto Mr. Mervin's shoulder and back. His hair had

come unslicked and writhed in three wild clusters like fat worms cut in half. He shouted, "No, no, no, no!" and hopped from one side of the ladder to the other.

Daniel felt his legs going numb. He forced himself to climb one more rung so most of his body was even with the window. Now, on the other side of the glass stood Jared, staring at him. Jared glanced over his shoulder, at the mirror, the magazine, and shook his head. "Your muscles are big," Daniel said and reached a hand toward the window. Jared peered over the sill at the ground and laughed. Nothing was funny, nothing. "You're strong," Daniel said. "I'm sorry." Jared reached a hand toward his. But instead of lifting the window, he grabbed a string and yanked. The blind zipped to the ledge, replacing Jared with slats of light blue plastic.

He climbed another rung. The roof was only a few feet above the end of the ladder, but far out of reach. Beyond stretched the same blue color as the blinds, everywhere, forever. The blue where his father's plane could hang for hours, though nobody could tell him why. He wrapped both arms around a rung and watched the ground. A blur through his tears, Mr. Mervin dropped his bucket and stick, stomped and wailed, no longer forming words. Here was his parents' mitzvah. They'd started something terrible and then left it to him alone. If only he could make it off the ladder. If only, he pleaded. If he made it off the ladder, never, never in his life, he swore, would he do a good thing for anybody. Mr. Mervin, mouth open, horse's teeth gnashing, put both hands on the ladder's rails and took the first step toward him.

What Jill's Been Through

You can wish for a certain thing your whole life and wake up one morning to find yourself praying for the exact opposite. I'd been through enough craziness in my time. More than enough, and I determined, a year and a half ago, to set myself straight. Not six months later, I met Jill. I never doubted she'd had her own wild times. After all, that's what brought us together in the first place, the one thing we've always had in common. For the past year, she's stayed with me six nights out of seven, and would've moved in a long time ago if my apartment weren't too small to fit more than her hairbrush and a couple pair of panties. We wash the dishes together, trading off who rinses and who dries, and swap war stories like a couple of vets, laughing over how pathetically domestic we've become, reminding each other that being bored is better than being dead.

"This one time," Jill will say, and then she'll be off, telling me about when she got caught coming out of a Stop n' Shop. These two giant security guys threw her against a wall because she'd stuffed a tub of guacamole up her shirt. They kept shouting at her and fumbling with her buttons, and she slapped away their hands. Somehow, the tub burst open, and the guac soaked through around her waist. She pointed at the green splotch and cried out. "Look what you did to me! Look what these guys did!" Out of nowhere, a crowd gathered. She didn't know what those two rent-a-cops believed they'd done, or if they thought she was an alien or something, but both took off running. Not back in the store, either, but down the street. She went inside, walking casually, and tracked green goop from the front door through the produce aisle. "The second tub I took was even bigger," she said. "I didn't even bother putting it in my shirt, just walked out. Don't think I ever ate it, though. Got moldy before I had the chance."

I listened to her stories. I always listened. But no matter what she said, somewhere in the back of my brain a voice kept whispering, no way could she have survived anything worse than I had. Who could? In truth, I'd never really believed she could have survived even half of what I had. You can't blame me for thinking it either. Just take one look at her. A forty-two year old woman who on a first glance looks twenty-nine, always skinny no matter what she eats. Perfect skin, full head of hair, doesn't need glasses. And sharp as can be, never spaced out or anything like that. The only thing wrong with her is a mouth full of rotting teeth, but that could happen to anybody. My mother lost most of her teeth by the time she was thirty, and you certainly couldn't call life her a roller coaster of thrills and chills; the one moment of excitement in her week had been dragging me and my screaming sister to synagogue on Saturday morning. Me, I can't hide what I've done. It shows all over my face, my body, the way I talk. I'm only thirty-eight, but most of my hair's gone, and what's left is going gray. I eat a single piece of cheese and my belly grows an inch. My reflexes are so dull you could tap me on the shoulder and I might not respond until sometime next week.

The worst of it, though, is in my head. I can't concentrate, forget half of what I'm supposed to do every day. I can't even remember when I started forgetting things, though I bet it was either the last time I had the DTs or, more likely, when I got this knot on the back of my head. It's the size of a cue ball, only skinnier at the bottom. Maybe more like an egg. But I mean a big egg, Grade A, extra large. You grab it between your thumb and forefinger and squeeze, it feels like a spongy wad of putty stuck to my skull. The night I got it is one of the few things from those crazy years I remember clearly. Too clearly. I was in this club off Canal Street. Or it could've been East Village. It doesn't matter where the place was. What matters is it was one of those post-Sixties pseudo-hippie joints, ripped up

couches and bean bags all over the floors, three foot bong in the basement. Always some asshole playing an acoustic guitar and singing protest songs. Protest songs! In the middle of the Eighties! The only thing the guy had to protest was New Wave hairdos and Goth music.

But that wasn't the reason I went there. If the place was still around now you could just take one look inside the door. On every couch, every bean bag, all over the floors, lined up at the bar, everywhere you turn: women. Women with dreadlocks and long tie-dye skirts, hairy pits, no bras, the whole hippie scene. The few scattered guys floated around with big stoned smiles and hard-ons. It wasn't the type of place jealous meatheads hung around, and there were never any fights. I had plenty of hair back then and kept it long, halfway down my back. All I had to do was sit cross-legged on a bean bag, talk about how looking at the stars made me feel small and alone, or how the transient life of flowers would have depressed me if I didn't believe so strongly in reincarnation, and clap when the guitar player finished his ridiculous song about peasant kids in Paraguay, and I swear, not a single night did I have to go home alone.

This night I'm talking about was the same as any other. And it was the last night I ever went there—two or three months later, by the time I'd recovered enough to go back, the cops had already closed it down. For the dope, I guess, which is absurd when you think about all the clubs in town where people are shooting up or snorting in the bathrooms, slashing each other with bottles and knives. I'd been to plenty of those places, too, but not once did I see a raid in a club that deserved it. Nevertheless, when I finally made my way back, the tiny sign marking the hippie joint was gone, and on the side of the building hung a huge plastic banner with pink lettering: PAMPERS. There were workers smoking by one of the loading bays, and I convinced them to let me take a peek inside. They'd knocked out

the walls and the upstairs floor and filled the place with boxes. It was a real Rip Van Winkle moment. Piles and piles of diapers covered the floor where a girl had once whispered in my ear that my spirit was a dark raging cloud, pursuing hers. "My spirit's a tree," she'd said. "A sapling. It has no power against the cloud." The sapling couldn't flee or stand up to the fierce wind, so would have to bend its head and accept the storm. All night I let the rain fall, but in the morning the girl told me to get the hell out of her apartment. When I asked her what had happened to the storm and the sapling, she just shrugged and said, "It's a sunny day."

Everything seemed the same that last night, a circle of hippies on the bean bags passing joints and bottles of wine. I had some money that week and kept the wine flowing. People gathered around me. Within ten minutes a woman was sharing my bean bag, practically lounging in my lap. She might have been a little older than most of the crowd, and one of her bottom teeth was missing, but still, I couldn't help being drawn in by her fidgeting, the way she stretched her legs in front of her and then, seconds later, curled them almost to her chest. She couldn't stop touching my shoulder and my thigh. Not for a minute did she stop jabbering, but do you think I cared? All I did was stare at the gap between her teeth, at her tongue, dark red from the wine, flickering in that empty space. By the time we finished the first bottle, she was already talking about free love and how she wished she hadn't missed out on the Sixties. I know, it sounds like the opening to a porno, but that's what the place was like.

She told me she lived in Brooklyn, Carol Gardens or something, and that was fine with me. I didn't mind spending a night across the bridge. But when we left the club, she said she couldn't wait to get all the way to Brooklyn. "I want us to be free," she said. "Right here. Right now." It was making her crazy even to think about it. She led me by the

hand across the street to a nearly empty Park & Lock. We slid into the shadow between a big van and a pickup, kissing sloppily, already groping. When she gasped for air, I glanced above the van's roof to the sky tinted orange by the million city lights, and after a few seconds, could make out two or three faint pinpricks. Fuck you, stars, I thought. I'm not alone at all.

The woman kissed me once more and then pulled away. Her eyes were focused beyond my shoulder, and her chin dipped in a slight nod. Right then, I knew what was going on. I didn't even look around for the guy about to jump me, just dropped to my knees. I faced the woman's bare toes poking out of her sandals, and you know what? They were the cleanest, softest toes I'd ever seen. No grime in the spaces between them or under the perfectly filed nails. No calluses or corns on the sides. Not a single hair poking up between the joints. These were no hippie's toes! I was outraged, not so much at the woman as at myself. How could I be so careless? How did I expect to survive in the world if I wouldn't even check out a woman's feet before I let her take me home? I deserved whatever was coming. My stomach churned with shame, and all the wine I'd drunk came streaming back up and out my mouth, cloudy, sticky red all over those sandals and spotless toes.

The guy hit me while I was still on my knees. I never even saw him, but he must have been in the club, because it was a wine bottle he hit me with, probably one of the bottles I'd paid for. When I woke it was still dark, but the van was gone, and a streetlamp was shining in my right eye, hazy, wavering, sometimes separating into two or three streetlamps. The other eye and half my face pressed flat against the pavement. I had bits of tar in my mouth, could feel blood drooling down my back, and the bottle, still intact, rested beside my head. After all the wine I'd bought I couldn't have had more than five or six

bucks left in my wallet, but they took it anyway, along with my shoes and my belt, which looked like snake-skin but was really just worthless junk-shop synthetic. As soon as I managed to sit up, I reached for the bottle, which—by a miracle, a genuine miracle—was still a quarter full. I drank the rest down in slow sips, holding each drop on my tongue until I could taste only bitterness. When the bottle was empty, I slumped back to the pavement and didn't move at all. Couldn't or didn't want to, and wouldn't have, would have sat there till the life drained out of me if someone hadn't shown up at dawn wanting to park in the spot I was bleeding all over.

They kept me in the hospital two weeks. It took that long for me to stop seeing double, and then for another month I was laid up on the couch in my mother's apartment in Queen's with a ringing in my ears—I was supposed to stay longer, but after a while I couldn't bear the sight of her beating her chest every time she passed through the living room, mumbling to the ceiling. "You can't blame me. There's no such thing as a bad mother. I never did anything but love him." As soon as I was able to stand without getting dizzy or nauseous, I went looking for that old club, and after discovering it drowning in diapers, began searching for a new one.

I know what you're thinking. This asshole gets the shit kicked out of him and not only doesn't he have the sense to stay away, he can't wait to come back for more. He hasn't got the brains of a dog. You think after all that happened I should have holed up in a monastery somewhere, or in some Arab country where they cut off your balls if your breath even smells like booze. But that's not the way it works. You've probably got a girlfriend, right? Or at least you call her your girlfriend for lack of a better word. But really you're just fucking her every third night, buying her dinner once a week. You could take it or leave it, leave it in a second if something better came along. She knows you're not

completely hooked and tries to give you room, but she can't help falling in love with you—how could she?—and, deep down, she believes that one day you'll feel the same for her. Sound familiar? Maybe not. This is just an example. This might not be you at all.

For me it's a girl named Mindy. I'm maybe twenty-two. After four months of girlfriend for lack of a better word, I'm sleeping with her every night, half my stuff's in her apartment, I haven't seen my roommate in weeks. I wake up one morning sucking on her shoulder, don't even have a hard-on, but glad to be in bed beside her anyway, can't wait till she wakes up and lays her head on my chest. That's when I realize there is no better word, never has been. That night I plan something for her, something special, candles and wine, some sort of Italian take-out I heat in her oven before she comes home from work, hoping she believes I cooked it. She's supposed to be home at six, but it's seven-thirty before the door opens. It doesn't matter that she's late, I'm still sweet to her, kiss her on both eyelids, take her coat and hang it up in the closet. But tonight she only smiles with her lips closed. She's polite during dinner, thanks me, asks me to pass her more wine, but there's no glow in her cheeks, no sign of relief or victory, though surely this is her dream come true. In bed, I get too excited too fast, and afterward she rolls to the far end of the mattress. The next morning she's in the shower before I wake up.

Soon, she starts complaining about all my stuff cluttering her apartment. Before I know what's going on, she's telling me she needs time, she doesn't want to be touched right now, things have moved too fast for her. I'm out on my ass, back in my old apartment with a roommate who won't talk to me anymore. Mindy doesn't return my calls, and I'm convinced she's got another guy. Every afternoon, I start going to this bar on the corner of 21st and Sixth Avenue because I know she's got to walk by there on her way home from work. I drink a couple beers, pull my stool up to the window, and watch the crowds

hauling ass around the corner. As it gets closer to five o'clock, my teeth are aching, but I can't stop clenching my jaw. If she's with a guy, I tell myself, then it's over, I can forget about it. I might follow them upstairs and take a crap outside her door, but that's it, I can move on from there. But when she rounds the corner by herself, all I can feel is relief—thank you, God, for letting her be alone, thank you—and I put my face right up against the window. Sometimes the crowds keep her close to the street, a yard or two away, and my view is blocked by other heads and bodies. I only glimpse the top of her head, her perfect ankles in black hose. But on other days, the crowd forces her to slide right past the window. It's dark in the bar, so she can't see me as I press my fingers against the glass, thrilled just at the sight of her face, still beautiful, but not too happy, I'm sure, definitely some slight tremble in the corners of her mouth. She can't hide the strain of missing me. Every day the smudge of my fingerprints spreads across the window, and each time she passes, I'm certain tomorrow she'll break down, tomorrow she'll come running back, and then I can decide how long I should let her suffer.

Mindy. If you asked me to describe her, I don't think I'd make it much beyond her stubby fingers and dark red nails. Her face, forget it. Long gone. But I can still hear her voice, as clear as if she were talking to me right now. High-pitched, but at the same time a little husky, especially when she says something like, "How come you never take me anywhere nice?" What the hell has Mindy got to do with anything? I was talking about the knot on the back of my head. I'm telling you, I'm messed up. Something in my brain's been knocked loose. If you could feel the knot, you'd understand.

But you know, I was lucky. Really. It could've been plenty worse. That bottle could've split my skull, easy. When I tended bar in this reggae joint over in Alphabet City I

saw things like that all the time. I know what you're thinking: who the hell would hire this drunk to work in a bar? But that's always the way. The point is, while I was working there, I saw a guy get really fucked up, made what happened to me look like nothing. He was a regular, there every Friday night, leaning his belly up against the same corner of the bar from five thirty to closing. He didn't fit in with the rest of the crowd, a heavy white guy in his late forties, always wearing a trucker's jacket and a Mets cap perched way up high on his head. He didn't even like reggae, I don't think, just came every Friday because he worked around the corner and was too tired or lazy or stupid to look for another bar. But he would buy me almost as many drinks as he bought himself, so I didn't care whether he fit in or not. I was lit most of the time anyway, but when this guy was around, forget it, I could barely keep on my feet.

This one night, around closing, after we were already supposed to have quit serving, I slipped him one extra drink and said, "On the house." I'm doing him a favor, right? But he just squinted at me and shook his head. He said something I didn't catch, so I just smiled and shrugged. I was so far gone I might have been looking at him underwater from twenty feet away. Not pool water, either, but the Hudson, all green and grimy, garbage floating around everywhere. He mumbled again, and this time I heard it: "To think I always trusted you." And before I knew what was happening, he was halfway over the bar with his hands around my neck. The bouncer was there in less than a second, a huge rasta with real dreadlocks, thick and long, not like those fake, white, ratty, hippie ones. Nicest guy you'd ever know, too, soft spoken and polite, never seemed comfortable walking around in such a big body. He grabbed the guy's feet and yanked until the fingers slipped away from my throat. I came around the bar and carried the guy's front end over my shoulder, and we hauled him out to the street. The whole time he kept shouting, "You

traitor! You fucking traitor! I trusted you. I trusted you with my goddamn life!" He pounded his fists against my back and kidneys and, when we got him to the sidewalk, bit into my armpit. Not just a nip either, but a real chomp, and I must have yelled out, because the rasta let go of the guy's feet. I jerked backwards. The buttons on the guy's shirt clicked past my ear, and a breeze chilled my face as his boots swung by my cheeks. The rasta's eyes went wide, and then behind me there was a crack against the pavement, like I'd dropped a melon.

But not really like a melon. Squishier, more like a grapefruit, but from the top of the Empire State Building. No, not like that either, because it had a real delicate quality to it, like it wouldn't have taken much to make that sound. Sort of like breaking an egg. I can hear it, you know, clear as if it just happened. I wish I could tell you what it sounded like. But even before I turned around, I knew that sound meant the guy's head had split open. And when I did look, I could see skull, brains, everything. This time, I didn't start puking until after the ambulance took him away. First, I knelt beside him, pleading, "It was a reflex, man, I didn't mean it. It was just a reflex. I'm sorry." Blood was coming out his ears and mouth, but he kept trying to talk. Mostly it was just a gurgling noise, but every once in a while I could make out words, "Trusted you, man." And maybe it was true. I never asked him to, but maybe he'd trusted me with his life, and here I go and break his head open on the pavement. When the ambulance came, I just sat on the sidewalk, crying and puking, rubbing the sore spot under my arm where I could feel teeth marks. The paramedics didn't notice me at all. They dumped him on a stretcher and passed me by. One of them stomped in a puddle, and brown water splashed all over my legs and crotch. This is it, I thought. I've killed a man, I've done everything bad you can do in a life. I can go to prison or I can die, either way it doesn't matter.

But you can't ever know how things will turn out. The rasta took off when it happened—I don't blame him; he was already on parole for assault—but when the cops came, my manager vouched for me, and they didn't take me in. And the next day I heard the guy had lived. He wasn't deaf or blind or brain damaged or anything. I thanked every god I'd ever heard of. About three weeks later, the guy showed up again on a Friday night with a big filthy bandage wrapped around his head. He'd come back to kill me, I was sure. I waited for him to pull a knife, my hands behind my back. I wasn't even going to put up a fight. I'd just let him cut me and hope someone would stop him before I was dead. But the guy just went to his regular corner, propped his belly on the bar, ordered a drink, and bought me one, too. It turned out, he couldn't remember anything from that night, didn't even realize I was the guy who'd dropped him. So I told him a long story about these four punk kids, how he took out two before the third got him with a crowbar. "I would have helped you," I said. "But one of them was holding a syringe to my throat."

He shook his head and laughed. "That's bullshit and you know it. I was wasted and tripped over my own floppy fucking feet."

By the end of the night we were both hammered, and I couldn't take my eyes off the bandage. "C'mon, unwrap it," I said. "It can't be that bad." He took a deep breath and lowered his eyes, but his hands were steady as he unwound the gauze. There was a strip of bubbled red meat pinched by giant staples from his temple all the way to the base of his neck. A motorcycle might have run right over his head. "No hair'll ever grow back there," he said. But he didn't sound upset about it. He said it with pride. We talked about which would look better, a hat or a wig, and the whole time I kept thinking, For the rest of his life, this guy's going to be a freak. But I'm telling you, I didn't pity him, not at all. More than anything, I was envious and stumbled home feeling sorry for myself. To my reflection

in the bathroom mirror, I blubbered, "Everyone's gonna know what happened to that guy. All you've got is a lousy, invisible knot on your head."

But hold on. I don't even think I had the knot at that point. I worked in the reggae bar in '84, most of the fall and part of the winter. That hippie joint closed in '86, I think. I don't even know where I left my keys ten minutes ago, how am I supposed to remember something more than ten years past? And that's the point I'm trying to make. That bottle to the back of my head fucked me up for good. Or if it wasn't the bottle, then it was the last time I had the DTs. That was about a year and a half ago, the most excruciating month of my life. I ended up in the cell of some pathetic uptown precinct jail. I'm not talking Washington Heights either, I mean ritzy uptown, East Side. What the hell was I doing up there? Who knows. I don't even know what they picked me up for. Probably pissing on somebody's fancy wrought-iron railing or taking a dump on a marble stoop. Couldn't have been much worse than that, because I'm pretty sure I never even went to court for it. All I know is I woke up on the hardest floor ever made. I opened my eyes slowly, wondering why they'd stretched me out over a slab of diamond, but I tasted concrete. This is good, I thought, I can still taste, I know where I am, I can even feel my toes when I wiggle them. I figured I was going to get off easy.

But then a voice whispered close to my ear, "Who are you?" and I realized how wrong I'd been. The one thing I knew for certain was that nobody should have been in there with me. Now, listen. I'm not saying there was somebody else in the cell. What I mean is, there was somebody else in *me*, in my body, my head. Look, I'm not bullshitting you. I know, some drunks, they down six bottles of Robitusson one night and see the Devil, the next morning they've found God. That's a bunch of crap. That's not what I'm talking about at all. What I'm telling you is there was another person with me in my body,

she had a woman's voice, she wasn't the Devil, and she certainly wasn't my guardian angel. She was just an ordinary girl from Massapequa Park, worked part time as a legal secretary on Madison and 48th and at night auditioned for bit parts in off-off Broadway plays. I don't know what she was doing there, and she sure as hell didn't know. But she blamed me for what was happening to her. For the first couple hours she kept whispering, "Who are you? Why are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to you?" I tried to explain it wasn't my fault, but then she started screaming, and that's when the pain kicked in. All I wanted to do was puke up everything I'd drunk in my entire life—I hoped it would fill up the cell and drown me, and it probably would have—but the girl wouldn't let anything out, wouldn't let me puke or shit or piss or even sweat, just kept everything there in my gut, boiling. I could feel my insides beginning to simmer, and she could feel it, too, kept screaming and kicking my legs against the cement walls until every one of my toes was broken.

After a while, I stopped trying to convince her I was innocent. "I'm sorry," I told her. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry. I never wanted to be this way." At first she shouted, "You're lying! You're a fucking liar," but I just whispered over and over, "Please, forgive me. Please," until she stopped thrashing my legs and started sobbing. I kept talking to her, anything that came to mind, about the knot on my head, about the guy I almost killed, about my mother in Queens who makes me swear everything wrong with me is my father's fault and not hers. When she managed to stop crying, she asked, "What *is* wrong with you? Why *are* you like this?" and I promised her, "I'm not anymore. This is it. This is the end." Then we lay there still and calm, despite the pain burning its way through my stomach and chest into my head—where it melted some important connections, I'm sure—and she told me all about herself. This is what I learned: Every summer of her childhood

she spent at the side of a pool in the Catskills, watching her mother, her aunts, her older cousins stretch out in the sun, burn, blister, peel, burn again, and occasionally tan. During her Bat Mitzvah party, her Uncle Teddy knocked over a candle which lit a tablecloth on fire and then sprayed so much foam from an extinguisher the whole room had to be evacuated before the cake was even cut. She had sex for the first time on a bathroom sink during her Junior prom, and when she went back to the dance floor, blood dripped down her stockings into her shoes; all her classmates thought she was having her period and laughed at her for not bringing tampons, all except the boy she'd been with, who didn't speak to her the rest of the night, or ever again. Since college, her parents had outwardly encouraged her acting career, but recently told her brother—who told her—it was only a matter of time before she grew up and moved on to something more serious.

Could this have been me? Was this all I'd been missing? I didn't know whether to hate my parents or to thank them for not moving out to Long Island when they'd had the chance. Tears were streaming down my cheeks, but I couldn't tell if they were mine or the girl's. I could feel her inside me, making my lungs breathe slightly faster than ordinary, pumping my heart with a faint murmur that had never been there before. And she must have felt me feeling her, because my back straightened slightly, and my arms hugged my chest against my will. She sighed, and I asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"You don't love me," she whispered. "Do you?"

When she said this, I knew the tears were mine, and they started coming faster, soaking my face. What I wanted to tell her was I'd never loved anybody before, not even myself. I wanted to tell her, If I can love you, I know I'll be saved from all this, I'll be able to start again. I wanted to tell her, Yes, yes, I do. But I said, "I don't deserve you," and then

she was gone. Back to Massapequa Park, or to the law office on Madison Avenue, I don't know. But gone for good.

And that's when whatever was holding me together fell apart. I started puking all over that cell, shitting and pissing my pants. If I moved at all, chills shot up and down my back, so I just lay as still as I could in my own steaming filth. Every time a guard came to bring me food, I begged him to kill me. "Make it look like an accident," I said. "Tell the judge I attacked you and you had to defend yourself." All I could think about was the girl, and all I wanted was to be dead. This time I didn't bother with any gods other than the one I'd grown up with. I called on the God I remembered from Hebrew school, who'd slaughtered entire armies and nations with plagues, famines, and floods. Surely He wouldn't mind killing one more loser with a simple brain hemorrhage or heart attack. For a week and a half I pleaded for a visit from the Angel of Death, but each day I was faced by the same gray walls, the same steel cot to which I couldn't even manage to crawl. Then, without warning, I opened my eyes and my body seemed to be cooling. I thought I could hear a faint hiss, like when water spills onto a hot stove, and though every part of me was trembling, I was able to move. At that moment, my mother appeared, cursing my father. She paid my bail and led me, hobbling on my shattered toes, back into the world of the living.

That's a year and a half ago, and since then I haven't had a drink, not a single drop. Who would have believed I could hold down a night job at a warehouse for over a year? I move boxes of party supplies—paper plates, cups, napkins, streamers, pointy hats, noisemakers—around an enormous floor that might once have been covered in couches and people like me reveling in their own ruin. In all that time I haven't once missed a rent

payment on my shoebox apartment in Greenpoint. Now, I live only three subway stops away from my mother, who makes unannounced visits at least twice every week. First, she sniffs my breath, and then, nodding, sighs. "Nobody could have saved you like I did," she says. "I only wish your father were alive to see it." I've never had the heart to tell her about the actress from Long Island.

But what I'm saying is, you can't ever know what's going to happen next. Not six months after I left that jail cell, I met Jill in the grocery on Greenpoint Avenue where the Puerto Rican boys gather to hit on a pair of chubby Polish girls, never in school, working the cash register all hours. I'd gone in there with the idea of making myself a meatloaf. Meatloaf had a nice sound to it, safe and healthy, nothing at all dangerous about it. But when I looked in the grocery's meat cooler, there were ten kinds of ground beef, each with a bright orange sticker claiming a slightly lower percentage of fat. What difference did it make? And then I realized that, after the meat, I had no idea what else went into a meatloaf. I'd never expected something my mother did so easily could be so complicated.

The only person in the place who looked like she might speak any English was a young woman standing before a rack of soup cans. I said, "Excuse me, miss," and she turned around holding a can of Campbell's chicken with stars, her eyes all scrunched up, puzzled. She wasn't as young as I'd first thought, or if she was young, she'd seen a lot for her age. I could tell by the way she held the soup can, not with just her fingers, but with her whole hand, a convenient weapon, ready if needed. Before I could speak, she said, "Do I add water to this, or something?" I held out my hand and, carefully, she passed me the can. I studied the red and white label, the gold lettering, but could make sense of nothing. "You've never cooked a thing in your life," she said and smiled. "I bet you make a mean Jack and Coke."

That night she came up to my place for dinner. The meatloaf turned out to be a pile of tasteless ground beef crumbles, and the soup was thick and far too salty to eat. So, instead of eating, we sat on my couch and smoked half a carton of cigarettes. "Life was easier when I was too high to worry about food," Jill said and put her feet up on my knee. I knew then that our meeting wasn't by chance. Or if it was by chance, then it was certainly a lucky chance. After that, Jill spent most of her time in my apartment, and we learned to live like ordinary people. Only we weren't ordinary, because we never had to wonder what else might be out there waiting for us. We hadn't missed out on anything. And knowing this, the smallest, the most forgettable things made us laugh. Once, I bent over to sweep some crumbs off the floor, and Jill just snorted and rolled to her side, laughing so hard she started coughing. When she finally caught her breath, she said, "You were showing an inch of ass crack. A real blue collar man. You looked just like my father."

For the whole last year, I'm thinking, Man, it took you thirty-eight years to grow up, but now you've made it. Only partially damaged. All that craziness is long gone, it's smooth sailing from here on out. The minute that last thought entered my mind, I should have known something wasn't right. But I went on thinking it for a while, until about a month ago, when I was carrying an overstuffed trash bag down to the dumpster in the alley between my apartment building and the next. I heaved the bag over the side, and my foot kicked something. From underneath the dumpster stuck a leg, bent at the knee, too thin in new, baggy jeans. The foot was bare and greenish. I went around the side, and there was the head sticking out, staring at the tiny piece of sky over the alley. A white kid, fifteen or sixteen—maybe the brother of the Polish girls at the grocery—his face also turning green, his lips already open and stiff. I couldn't tell what had killed him, a bullet or a knife, a bottle to the back of the head. He didn't smell at all. The smell of the garbage was

overpowering, but even when I bent close there was no stink coming off the kid. I stared at him a long while, wondering how, in all those crazy years, I could have managed never, not once, to have glimpsed a dead body. I didn't feel sick. For maybe three full minutes I stayed there, calm as an undertaker, thinking, Man, I'd rather be him than ever go through the DTs again.

But by the time I got back into the apartment, my hands were shaking. I couldn't stop myself from pacing the kitchen, which wasn't built at all for pacing, two steps, turn, two steps, turn. This wasn't right. This wasn't supposed to happen now. The rest of my days were supposed to have been simple and mundane. Jill was at work, and I couldn't wait for her to get back, to tell her what I'd seen. The newness of it was exciting, but at the same time it terrified me, and I needed her to share that terror. But as I paced, I began to feel it wouldn't be enough for her to simply hear about it from me. She needed to see it and experience it for herself. So I started cooking, cracked a dozen eggs, peeled potatoes and carrots, made a huge mess in the kitchen, trying to fill a trash bag. When Jill came in, I said, "Baby, I'm making you the meal of a lifetime. You mind taking out this trash for me?"

"It's not even half full," she said.

"Yeah, but it's gonna stink. There's eggshells and stuff in it."

"You know, you can dump that stuff down the disposal. That's what it's for. Don't you remember?" She went to the wall and flipped a switch. The sink roared. "Pretty cool, isn't it?" She turned the switch on and off, smiling, revving the disposal like the engine of a stolen car primed for a joyride.

"I forgot. I'll use it," I promised. "Next time."

"All right," she said, taking the bag. She patted my behind and left the kitchen. The second the door closed behind her, I hated myself. You chickenshit scum, I thought. You just sent this sweet woman out there with no warning, no protection. What kind of a man are you? You don't deserve a flake from her scalp. The food I was cooking began to smell the way I'd imagined the dead kid should have smelled, and my mouth tasted sour. I had to grab the counter with both hands to keep from punching myself.

After a few minutes the front door opened again. I couldn't even bring myself to turn around and look her in the face, just kept stirring the vegetables and added some sausage. I listened to her footsteps heading toward me and prepared myself to get slapped. But her arms slid around my waist, and her lips pressed against my neck. "Smells so good," she said. "You know, there's a dead kid under the dumpster." Just like that. No more than a brief pause between each statement. I was so confused, I couldn't be sure which she thought smelled good, the food or the dead kid. Then she started telling this story from her crazy days, when she watched some girl get shot seven times in the back. "Seven bullets, and she kept running," she said. "Ran a block and a half before she fell. And then not another twitch. I had to help carry her up five flights of stairs. Took more than an hour. I like lots of pepper in my eggs."

"Why didn't you ever tell me that story before?" I asked. She shrugged and picked at her gums with a fingernail. I poured the eggs into the pan and took a step back to stare at her, this innocent-looking woman, who all this time I'd been telling myself could never have lived through what I had. She might just as well have come out and told me, In thirty-eight years, you've never really seen a goddamn thing. I finished cooking dinner and watched amazed as she chewed her omelet—gingerly because of her bad teeth—not even

slightly bothered by the sight of that dead kid's face turning green. My heart pounded and my chest ached with jealousy.

I still pay my rent on time. My mother still visits twice a week, and I don't yet have to turn away when she tries to smell my breath. I still go to my job every night from six until two, though now something pulls me out of Brooklyn an hour earlier than usual, and some nights I don't come home until after four. Only once so far has Jill stopped me on my way out and asked why I was leaving so early. "Trains are slow on Tuesdays," I said, not even trying to make up something believable. She only nodded. If she suspected anything, I guess she assumed it was another woman. Which isn't so far from the truth. In the afternoons, I stand for an hour outside a mid-town bar, just around the corner from Madison Avenue, staring through my reflection at the row of gold and white beer taps, at the bottles glinting like jewels on mirrored shelves, at the happy-hour drinkers loosening their ties, unbuttoning the sleeves of their blouses. "Where are you?" I mutter. "I need your help." Every day, I know my actress must walk right past me on her way to Grand Central, where she catches her train to Massapequa Park. I may have seen her twenty, thirty times, but I'll never recognize her unless she whispers in my ear.

After work I wander downtown, listening for music and laughter from unmarked buildings where private after-hours clubs serve until dawn. Sometimes, even after I've taken the subway back under the East River, I don't get off at Greenpoint Avenue, but ride on to Bed Stuy or Crown Heights, places I don't belong. Mostly, I don't want anything to happen. I want to come home with peace in my heart, crawl into bed beside Jill, and snore like a content man entering middle age. But part of me needs to come stumbling up the stairs of my building, throw open the bedroom door, shake Jill until her eyes flutter open,

and shout, "You'll never believe what just went down. Like nothing you've ever seen!"

Last night, I lay awake for over an hour watching her beautiful sleep, untroubled by dreams, her only twitches as slight as shrugs. "Help me," I whispered, hoping, somehow, my voice would carry down the length of Long Island. But no one answered. Already I knew, in only a matter of months or weeks or days, I'd find myself again on a warm, cushioned stool in front of a sticky, wooden bar. I could already picture the bald man in a stained apron waiting to fill an empty glass. And all I could do was keep praying that, when the time comes, an angel is sent to stay my hand.

Model Rockets

Benny's father-in-law, Leo Brickman, had a habit of lifting himself on his toes with the rise at the end of his sentences. As the only blond Jew growing up on East Broadway, he'd been taunted constantly by neighbors who would call out from third story windows, "little goy," or "Swede bastard." So, from a young age, he'd learned to act tougher than he first appeared, and this, he often told Benny, was what had allowed him to climb from a printer's assistant in a newspaper sweatshop to the owner of the second-most successful screenprinting business in Manhattan.

But even on his toes, Leo didn't top the bulge of Benny's shoulder. As long as they both stood, Benny could always be sure of looking down onto the old man's shiny reddish scalp ringed by the wispy white hair that had already begun to fall out by the time Benny married Leo's daughter, more than twenty years ago. This was a comfort when they spoke together on the printing floor in front of the production crew, when Leo was forced to shout above the hiss of compressed air if Benny didn't lower his head. Though Leo might be boss, on the floor, surrounded by the whirling arms of the automatic presses, the crew could see it was Benny who was in control. He often walked among the presses, a finger in each ear—he was convinced the noise would eventually deafen him—and imagined that each T-shirt was being printed for his profit alone.

But now, in Leo's sound-proof, mezzanine office, the old man looked down on him from behind his high wooden desk polished to a greasy shine. Benny would have preferred to stand, but Leo motioned twice to a low, cushioned chair in front. From this angle, Leo's gray eyes were shadowed by his brow, so that his pupils, ordinarily pinholes, widened into dark pits. On the wall behind the desk, in gaudy silver frames, hung two enlarged

photographs, the first a color shot of Leo with Benny's son, Steven, riding on his shoulders, laughing and still innocent at age six. The other was a black and white of the Brickman clan, Leo and his five brothers, all blond and smiling, their arms around each others' shoulders, except for one, Morty, who sat apart with a hat pulled low on his head. Morty had been production manager at the press until Leo fired him to make room for his new son-in-law. Whenever Benny looked at either photograph, he felt he was being accused.

The old man pointed to a bowl filled with candies wrapped in yellow cellophane. Benny shook his head, and Leo leaned forward. "Merna says you can't keep the boy out of trouble," he said.

Benny stood, placed a hand on the desk, and quickly took it away, leaving a smudge. Leo's eyes followed him and their pupils narrowed in the light. "Who's home with him all day?" Benny asked. "He's suspended, and she knows he's not supposed to leave his room. But she can't keep herself from going shopping."

"Sit, sit. This isn't a trial. What good does it do Steven when you defend yourself? Your fault, Merna's fault, it doesn't matter."

Benny sat slowly, watching pinholes widen to pits. "The boy's rotten."

"A fine thing for a father to say."

"It's a father's business what he says about his son. What is it you want, Leo? I have orders coming in and a schedule to write."

Leo reached two fingers into the candy bowl and swirled them until they brought up a small disk in a brown wrapper. "Coffee," he said. "I always keep two or three at the bottom. You sure you don't care for one?"

Benny knew the old man was about to propose something he wouldn't like. Leo could be direct when it suited him, when he didn't risk being contradicted. But last month, he'd spent nearly twenty minutes making small talk before telling Benny to fire a printer who'd been with them for eight years but was too slow to keep up with the new automatic presses. "What is it you're after?" he said.

Leo unwrapped the candy and held it for a moment between his teeth before sucking it into the pocket of his cheek. "You're a good manager, Benny. And I'm not saying you're not a good father. But you're a dedicated manager, and you work long hours, and you probably don't have enough time to spend with Steven. Not the kind of time you'd need to keep him out of trouble."

Benny was about to stand again but instead gripped the sides of the chair. "I'd give him my arm if it would do any good."

"Of course you would."

"I'd cut off my arm tomorrow."

"I know you would," Leo said.

"What am I supposed to do, stay home from work and take care of him?"

"Of course not," Leo said.

"His mother doesn't work. Can't she stay home from shopping one day?"

Leo made a long slurping noise, and Benny could see the bulge of the candy move from one cheek to the other. "Be reasonable, now. What can a woman do?"

Benny realized he'd been holding his breath and let out a long sigh. "You want me to take a vacation?"

"No, no!" Leo said and began to cough. For a moment, Benny thought the candy had lodged in the old man's throat. It would be a difficult and welcome decision whether to

let him choke to death and take over the business or to put the old man forever in his debt with a pump of his fists beneath the ribcage. He could imagine Leo having to declare him a hero in front of the entire staff, could almost picture himself with his feet on the wooden desk of the mezzanine office he would finally be given overlooking the production floor. But before he could move, the old man hit his chest twice with the flat of one hand and spat the candy into the fingers of the other. The hand with the candy disappeared beneath the desk and returned a moment later, clenched. "Goddamn things. They've got that soft chocolate in the middle, I always forget. No, I don't want you to take a vacation. What would I do without you here? And Merna, she'd never forgive me if I let you stay home a week. Bring the boy here. Let him spend his days with me. Until he can go back to school."

Benny glanced at the photograph of Steven gripping the collar of Leo's suit jacket, swinging his heels against the old man's chest, and tried to think of all the reasons he hated this idea. It was difficult to recall the last time he'd seen his son laugh so genuinely, with such absolute trust. But when the picture was taken, Steven had been at an age when the future still seemed open to every possibility. Since then, the boy had embarked on a direct and undivertable course toward a tragic life. Though he knew it was hopeless, Benny had no choice but to try every means available to save his son. Still, Leo could only do more harm than good. He stared at the photograph, shot in a park during some family reunion or other, and tried to remember where he'd been and what he'd been doing while his son sat laughing on Leo's shoulders. Probably, he'd been commiserating with the husbands of other Brickman daughters, or else getting a hot dog for Merna. Or maybe he'd claimed to be swamped with work and had stayed behind at the press.

Quickly, he turned to the other picture. Unlike the family reunion, the day he'd replaced Morty as production manager had never left him. That entire morning, he'd kept himself out of the way in a corner of the production floor—so much quieter in the days of manual printing—watching his wife's uncle lug a battered cardboard box from the office, his hat under his arm, and call "So long" to several of the printers, who'd replied, "Good luck, Morty." Benny had told himself this had nothing to do with him. It was Leo's business if he wanted to throw his own brother out on the street. Maybe the old man's obligation was greater toward his daughter, whose husband had been slaving for peanuts on the shipping docks. Or maybe Morty was just a lousy manager. A few feet from him, Morty stopped, placed the box on the floor, and, without glancing at Benny, pushed his hat down on his head until it touched the tops of his ears. After a moment, he picked up the box, straightened, and headed for the exit with his head held high. Until now, Benny had felt pity, but at this he fumed. It wasn't his fault the man had lost his job. If Morty needed to be haughty with anyone, it should be with Leo. His anger building, Benny went into the office and on the desk found the stub of a pencil with a ring of teeth-marks in its yellow paint. He took it and ran outside. He would show who deserved to be haughty. Morty was almost at the entrance to the subway. "You forgot something," Benny said, dropping the pencil into the box and crossing his arms. Morty blinked twice, swallowed, and let the box fall to the sidewalk as if it suddenly weighed ten thousand pounds. One corner of the cardboard burst and several paper clips skidded across the sidewalk. "Good luck, Benny," Morty said and hurried down the stairs to his train. Benny carried the box back to his office, pinching closed the ripped corner, and emptied its supplies into his new desk.

Leo cleared his throat. "So? What do you say?"

The only words Benny could manage were, "I don't want him to see me at work."

Leo paused for a moment, moved his hand toward the candy bowl, and then shaking his head, drew it back. "What's to see? He won't even notice you. He'll be up here with me. It'll be good for him, trust me. I have a way with children."

"Funny, Merna never mentioned that."

Leo frowned. "With boys. Daughters belong with their mothers."

"He's not a child anymore. He's almost sixteen. What'll you do with him here? You won't get any work done."

"I'll teach him the business."

"He's supposed to be punished," Benny pleaded. "He should stay at home."

Leo stood and turned his back. "You'll bring him tomorrow."

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This time, Benny's son had brought a knife to school. And not only brought it to school, but showed it to another boy in History class, clicking the blade in and out to the rhythm of the teacher's chalk beating against the green board. But Steven had no sense of rhythm—it was stifled by Brickman blood—and the teacher soon turned, saw the knife and began shouting about the police and juvenile court. Benny could imagine his son, a tall boy for his age, bulky, with a round formless face and closely shaved blond hair that gave his head the appearance of having no boundaries, dropping the knife to the floor, pointing to the other boy, and saying, "It was his! He told me to hold it." If there was anything Benny had tried to teach him, especially as he got deeper into trouble, it was to take responsibility for his own actions. But Steven had inherited from his mother the habit of blaming someone or something outside of himself for each of his own problems.

It was Merna, of course, who first heard from the principal and immediately called Benny at work, crying. "Your son's a gangster," she said. "He probably threatens other children into giving their lunch money. Did you teach him about knives?"

"You're blaming me for this?" Benny said. He'd told the boy stories about growing up in Crown Heights, about the Hasids and the shvartzas moving in, when ordinary Jews had to carry knives to keep from being run out of their own neighborhood. But that was in Brooklyn, and now they lived in the middle of suburban New Jersey. Nobody needed a knife here. "Calm down, Merna," he said. "It must be those hoodlums from the lake. The ones he plays hockey with."

He came home from work too late that night to talk to the boy, but he made sure to wake Merna and tell her that Steven's suspension was to be a punishment and not a vacation. But the next day, just after lunch, he received another hysterical phone call: Merna had stepped out, just for a minute, just to pick up some onions for the roast, and when she came back, Steven was gone. An hour later, the police arrested him and another boy in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven for hassling a customer into buying them a pack of cigarettes. This was too much for Benny. It would be their third trip to juvenile court in two years. Though he almost never left work before seven, today he packed into the five-o'clock train from Grand Central, sitting for an hour and half beside a man in a three-piece suit who reeked of the same sourness his own father had always brought home from a day of installing kitchen cabinets and doorframes. He tried to imagine how his father would have handled the boy. What would have happened if Benny had been arrested at fifteen? But he couldn't picture the hairy, stooped man doing anything except sitting on a worn leather chair beside their sixth floor window in Crown Heights, staring down on a street constantly roaring with traffic, and saying, "Who needs this? I should retire already and

move to Florida.” His father was no help at all and never had been. He’d learned absolutely nothing from the man. This made Benny too angry to form his thoughts into sentences, and he grew angrier still because he would have nothing prepared to shout when he got home.

The house was quiet except for the sound of Merna sobbing in the kitchen. The door to Steven’s bedroom was locked. Benny told himself he wouldn’t kick the door down, he wouldn’t, but he stood outside it, holding a box of cigars, shouting, “You like tobacco! I’ve got some for you. Come out here, Steven, and have a smoke with your old man.” He could picture the way the boy’s eyes would widen—dark eyes like Benny’s, the one part of him that did not look Brickman—when he would stuff a cigar between his lips and wedge it past his teeth, down his throat.

He kicked the door once and took a step back to kick it harder. But then Merna touched his arm and said, “Please, Benny, you’re scaring him.”

“He better be scared.”

“You’ll make him act out again.”

“You’re blaming me?” He stared at his wife’s red, fleshy face, Leo’s face, only with extra fat in the cheeks and below the chin, framed by a silly squarish fluff of blond hair that always tilted to the side at the end of the day. She dabbed at her lower eyelashes with a tissue. He walked past her into the kitchen and said, “You can’t stay home one single goddamn day?”

“Onions—” she began.

“I know, onions.” He opened the refrigerator and rooted through the vegetable drawer. There were onions everywhere, white ones, red ones, giant yellow ones, and the long green ones Merna always called scallions. “Who needs this many onions?” he said, and though he didn’t know which she’d bought today, picked up a red one the size of a

baseball and threw it across the room. It bounced with a loud clang against the oven door, behind which the roast was browning, and rolled beneath the table where he'd later have to strain his knees to pick it up. "You're worried about onions, and my son's becoming a gangster."

But he didn't blame Merna for Steven's behavior. No, it wasn't her fault, not directly. It was these suburbs, with nothing for the kids to do. His brother and sister-in-law lived only two exits away, and their daughter Stacey, who'd always been a relatively smart girl and was now in college upstate, had often come home late from dates with her dress rumpled, slurring her speech, laughing at her mother who would stamp her feet in the kitchen, screeching and pulling her own hair.

"In the city you didn't go looking for trouble," he told his wife now, as she lifted a slice of pink meat onto his plate. "There were always things to keep you busy, weren't there?"

"That was a different time," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "A different city."

He would have liked to have raised Steven in the city, but when the old neighborhood went to rot, Merna insisted they move to Jersey. He'd agreed at the time, because too many cars got stolen in Queens, and unless he borrowed money from Leo he couldn't afford uptown or Long Island. And he would quickly admit, for the first few years, while Steven was an infant, he'd felt more comfortable than he'd ever imagined, sitting in a plastic chair in his backyard without grimy buildings towering over him, without an upstairs neighbor in a black hat who would lean out his window and curse him in Yiddish for driving on Saturday.

And as the boy grew up, it wasn't as if Benny didn't try to find things for him to be interested in. He'd enrolled him in every sports league the township offered, paid for his uniforms and equipment, and driven him to games on the Saturday mornings he didn't work. But even though Steven turned out to be a reasonable soccer player—he was slow but, though he never learned to pass, had a powerful kick that would occasionally score a goal—he quit after two seasons. Benny tried to interest him in hobbies, chemistry sets, coin collections, jigsaw puzzles, but the only time the boy would sit still for more than five minutes was when he lay prone on the couch watching TV.

But then, about a year ago, Benny discovered a new hobby, one that he'd never heard of before. It was a suburban hobby unsuitable for the city. On Sundays, in the grassy lot at the end of their block, several of the neighborhood kids launched model rockets they'd built from cardboard tubes and balsa wood. A number of parents stood by the road and cheered. This was the perfect hobby for Steven, for it combined the conscientious attention that would keep him out of trouble with the excitement of flames and loud explosions. It was both dangerous and approved.

And for several months, Benny actually believed that model rockets would save his family. Steven seemed indifferent until he saw the first rocket scream from the wire launcher and rise black against a backdrop of white clouds. After the plastic capsule burst from its tube, Benny noticed Steven's pudgy red hands pressed together at his waist as the rocket glided to the ground beneath its cellophane parachute. Then, for the first time, the boy asked to go to the hobby store to buy cardboard, wood, paint, and gunpowder boosters. Benny and his son worked side by side on the ping-pong table in their basement, cutting wings, painting tubes, and tying improvised napkin parachutes with dental floss. Every

week they would launch a larger and more elaborate rocket to the cheers of the neighborhood parents.

Once, Benny even consented to help Steven build a rocket that dropped a soft-boiled egg when its capsule popped hundreds of feet in the air. As the egg fell out of sight behind a row of trees, he watched his son's soft hands wringing together and decided they didn't have to be a laborer's hands, the hands of a factory worker; the boy was slow, but he might still have a chance to make use of his hands, as a cabinet maker, maybe, or even, if Benny pushed him hard enough, a dentist. Not the type of dentist who charged outrageous prices and didn't remember his patients' names, either, but like the ones Benny remembered in Crown Heights, who always wore thick mustaches and would pat him on the shoulder, giving regards to his mother, before he left the office. Several times while they worked together in the basement, Benny bared his teeth and asked Steven if he could see anything caught between them. But Steven was always more interested in gluing wings on straight or painting bloodshot eyes on his nose cone than in staring into his father's mouth.

And who could blame him? There would be time for teeth later. Benny was enjoying the hobby so much he even started a rocket club at the printing press; at the annual picnic on Long Island, the production crew, the art department, and the sales team competed for the highest flight, the most elaborate design, and the loudest explosion. Despite the pain it caused him, Benny found himself savoring the sharp roar of the launch and never once covered his ears.

But then, one day, Steven refused to let Benny use a square of balsa wood to make extra tail fins for the production crew's rocket, which he'd designed to look like a shark. The boy carried all of his materials to the far end of the ping-pong table and worked in

silence. Benny mumbled, "And who taught you to be so generous?" but said nothing more as he left for the hobby store. And two days later, when Benny broke the blade of their X-acto knife cutting the shark's last dorsal fin, Steven threw a box of boosters onto the floor. Benny shouted, "What's wrong with you," but then calmed himself and said, "We'll go get a new one."

"I want my own," Steven said.

"We'll share."

They drove together to the hardware store. Benny picked out a new knife, showed it to Steven who shrugged, and went to look for some glue. Steven said he would wait in the parking lot, by the car. As Benny began reading the instructions on a small tube of rubber cement, he heard a loud ruckus by the front door and felt something in his chest grow heavy and sink. He dropped the knife and glue, ran outside, and saw his son face down on the sidewalk. A fat bearded man wearing a Yankees jacket knelt on the boy's back. A few feet away, another X-acto knife, larger than the one Benny had chosen, lay on the concrete, torn from its packaging, glinting in the sunlight. Steven was flailing beneath the man, crying, "I did it! I want to go peacefully."

Benny approached slowly, not willing to believe what was happening, until he saw the man's handcuffs and laminated badge that read SECURITY. "Get off my boy," he said. "This must be a mistake."

The fat man said, "No mistake, pal. Your son's a thief." He managed to get one of Steven's wrists into the cuffs, but the boy was lying with all his weight on his other arm. "Quit squirming," the guard said, and then shouted, "Someone call 911."

Steven cried, "No handcuffs! I want to go peacefully." He kicked his heels at the guard's back.

Benny came closer and bent down to Steven's face, which was scraped above the left eye. Spittle dripped from the boy's mouth, but his eyes were focused on the knife. His face was red, and his cheeks were puffed with air, seeming to swell far beyond the limits of ordinary skin. Benny barely recognized him. "Did you steal that?" Benny asked.

"I did it!" the boy cried. "No handcuffs!"

Benny pulled his son up by the shoulder and wrenched his other arm from beneath his body. Steven went limp as his father held his free wrist for the guard to cuff. The boy's plump hands, a criminal's hands, were pinched tight in the metal rings, and Benny worried for a moment that the circulation would be cut off. But then he sat on the curb and waited for the police to arrive, telling himself he had done nothing wrong, that almost every father had to watch his child taken to jail once in his life, and at least now it would be over with.

But tonight, at dinner with Merna and later in the dark of their bedroom, after Steven's third arrest in two years, he began for the first time to imagine the possibility of his child's violent death. With his eyes closed, he pictured a steel table in a sterilized room, and on it a stiff bundle covered by a white sheet. Quickly, he pressed his face into the pillow. But before he could sleep, the image of his own father rose to his mind. In the vision, Benny was only a boy, and he and his brother sat at the dinner table as his mother took away their soup bowls and served plates heaped with meat and boiled vegetables. Their father stood by the window, looking down at the street. He glanced once over his shoulder and said, "The way you people eat, I'll never afford to go to Florida." Now, in the dark, Benny cursed his father for denying his duty, and then, briefly, wondered whether he had the courage to do the same.

When Benny was his son's age, he'd spent much of his time after school leaning against a brick building at the corner of Crown Street and Utica Avenue, staring. He was too old by then to join the punchball game in the vacant lot behind his apartment building and had no money to sit at the soda fountain, or even to sneak into a pool hall. And he wouldn't even consider staying at home—to save on electric bills, he wasn't allowed to turn on any lights before dark, though on the brightest day the sun barely slanted between the neighboring buildings to graze their windows. But worse, his father kept the TV locked in a closet and took it out only after dinner to watch the evening news.

The neighborhood was still Jewish then, no shvartzas, but the flow of Hasidim had widened from a trickle to a stream. Each day, the mix of people turning the corner from Crown to Utica became denser with black hats and long black coats. One of them, young-looking despite the paizes to his shoulders and the beard halfway to his navel, owned a delivery service in a shallow storefront on the corner opposite Benny's. All afternoon, Hasid boys would rush out of the store carrying parcels in one hand and holding their yarmulkes to their heads with the other. It was a job Benny could imagine himself enjoying, hurrying from one end of the neighborhood to the other, knocking on the doors of neighbors and strangers, peering into dim apartments to catch a glimpse of a young wife or daughter still in a nightgown or bathrobe. But of course, the Hasid would never hire him. He would call him a name in Yiddish, something that meant "heathen," or "traitor to the Law," and send him out of the store.

He watched the delivery boys with envy, trying to determine from the way they walked or ran, how large the roll of bills in their pockets. At night, he dreamed the store was merely a facade, not a real business at all. Behind the front office stretched a vast auditorium like the one where his father's union met, with rows of folding chairs and an

unstained wooden podium. This was where all the black hats in Crown Heights gathered, discussing plans to buy up the remaining apartments and houses in the neighborhood and force the regular Jews to move to Queens and Long Island. Though he didn't really believe it, the dream stayed with him during the day, and a bitter taste rose from his throat to his teeth. Whenever one of the boys left with a parcel, he spit. And if the boy ever came close enough to his corner, he swore he would step out quickly, hooking a leg with his foot, and send him and the parcel sprawling onto the sidewalk.

But then, during some minor holiday—Tisha B'av or Tu B'Shvat, some holiday with a strange name that none of Benny's family or friends ever celebrated—the store shut for a day during the middle of the week. On his way home from school, he pressed his face against the glass, able to make out in the darkness only a desk and chair and a row of file cabinets. And just inside the door, he could see a pile of thin parcels slipped in through the mail slot. Elated, he hurried down the street to the stationer's and bought a small bottle of ink. In the middle of the night, he snuck out of his apartment and crept through the vacant lot, avoiding streetlamps. He had to hold the bottle with both hands to keep it from rattling in the mail slot as he watched black splash over the parcels and seep into the carpet. The young Hasid would return to the store after the holiday, discover his threatened business, and clutch his beard in fear. The delivery boys would clamor at his legs, weeping. That night, Benny dreamed of the auditorium behind the store, where hundreds of black hats would tear their shirtsleeves, beat their chests, and agree to abandon this inhospitable neighborhood to invade elsewhere. Crown Heights would return once more into the hands of Jews who couldn't care less about Tu B'Shvat, and Benny's father would never mention Florida again.

This is what Benny thought about the morning after his meeting with Leo, as he paced his glass-walled office in the corner of the production floor, ignoring the pile of order slips on his aluminum desk, the boxes of unprinted shirts stacked beside one of the automatic presses. More than anything else, he thought of ink—black ink splashing over Leo's polished furniture, dribbling over important papers, spilling into the candy bowl. It was a childish daydream, he would admit, but he had no other way to keep himself from picturing Leo and Steven together in the office, laughing and chatting like father and son.

Because he left for work before six o'clock this morning, he hadn't taken the boy with him. Merna would bring him on the eight o'clock train. Every few minutes he glanced up toward the mezzanine balcony, to the closed door of Leo's office. Any minute his son would arrive and step behind that door. The night before, Steven had quickly, even eagerly, agreed to spend the day at the press with Leo. Immediately, Benny had wanted to take the offer back. It didn't make sense that the boy was so fond of his grandfather. Merna had never had anything good to say about Leo as a parent. He'd worked almost constantly, rarely spending more than one evening a week at home with his family, but had so terrified Merna's mother with his stern glances and reproves that from dawn till dark she drifted from one room of the apartment to another waving a feather duster or pushing a vacuum, shrieking at the sight of mud dragged in on her daughter's shoes. But with Steven, Leo seemed to become an entirely different person. He no longer rose on his toes or puffed out his chest. He lowered his head, nodding, listening with a soft grin. He looked like an actual grandfather. And Steven was another boy altogether. When Benny had seen them together at last year's company picnic, the boy had momentarily forgotten his sour, vacant expression and become almost cheerful, describing to Leo one of the rockets he'd made. He was so excited and spoke in such a hurry that he had to gasp for breath between his

sentences. He'd certainly never been like that with Benny's father; the one time they'd visited the steaming Ft. Lauderdale condo, the boy had spent the entire afternoon stretched on a couch in front of the TV with his chin in his hand.

But then again, maybe Steven's agreeing to come to the press had nothing at all to do with Leo. It was possible that he simply felt guilty for getting into trouble again, and wanted to appease his father. But Benny feared otherwise. More likely, the boy would try to humiliate him in front of his crew, by stealing a box of specially printed pens or smearing a T-shirt before it could run through the dryer. Benny paced even more frantically now, tapping the desk, the chair, the file cabinet with the end of a pencil.

Soon, his office door opened a crack, and he felt a sharp pain in his stomach. One of the printers stuck in his head and asked about the artwork for a job that should have been finished last Friday. "Do I look like the fucking art department!" he shouted. "Can't you people do anything for yourselves?" The printer's head vanished and the door closed gently. Benny stopped pacing and sat at the desk, wringing his hands. Finally, he left the office to post the job schedule.

On all sides of him the automatic presses hissed and whirred, and printers scurried from one side of the floor to another. Instantly, his ears began to sting. The first of ten thousand T-shirts for a computer company, with the slogan, "Let Our Icons Guide You!" was sliding on a conveyor belt through an electric dryer. He would have to stay late tonight to make sure all the shirts were properly packaged and ready to ship; Merna would spend the day shopping in the city and take Steven home on the five-o'clock train. Benny would be able to eat his dinner alone in the office and work on the new rocket for this year's picnic, which he'd started last month and kept stashed behind his file cabinet. This calmed

him slightly, though his stomach still grumbled nervously. He'd be thankful to be away from home when Merna questioned the boy about his day with Leo.

And that was when he saw them: Merna, Leo, and Steven, standing together on the balcony, staring down at him. He waved. Merna waved back, and Leo nodded. The boy, leaning against the rail, stared. Steven was taller than his grandfather, but the way he crouched forward with his elbows splayed to the sides made him look short and fat. Even from far away, his face was dark and pinched with anger. Benny felt sweat forming on his forehead as he watched his son and the old man turn and walk into the office. What would they do in there? Eat coffee candies and talk about business? Steven wouldn't sit still for five minutes. As if she were thinking the same thought, Merna shrugged. Benny motioned for her to come down to the production floor, but she waved him off and headed for the exit.

He tried to go about his business. But once he'd sorted the new orders—most of which still needed Leo's approval—and sent them to the art department, there wasn't much for him to do. He couldn't work on the new rocket while Steven was here. What if the boy came into his office and saw him tracing wing designs? Steven would think that this was all his father did at work, the only reason he spent six days of every week away from home. So instead, he walked from one press to the next, inspecting the alignment of the prints, testing the cure of the ink, watching the printers hurrying to keep up with the machines' twirling arms. He wanted desperately to talk to somebody, not about anything in particular, but simply for a distraction, to keep himself from glancing up toward the balcony. But the crew were all too busy, and anyway, to have a conversation meant straining above the noise of the presses. The ringing in his ears was growing unbearable.

Someday soon, he would have to buy earplugs, no matter how much they might make him look like a feeble old man.

Before returning to his office, he stopped at the desk of the production secretary, a young black woman with a Jewish name—Zipporah—who was reading a paperback and twirling a pen in one hand. In Crown Heights, he would have called her shvartza, but now that he lived in Jersey he could admire her full lips and large white teeth and refer to her as a young black woman. She had a son, three or four years old, and because she lived in Brooklyn and must have already envisioned her boy hauled away to prison or murdered by gangs, Benny felt they had something in common. “How's the boy?” he asked.

She looked up at him, moving only her eyes. The pen kept twirling between her slender fingers. “I know,” she said, “but I don't have any work to do.”

“What?”

She held up the book. “Didn't you tell me not to read on company time?”

“Your boy,” he said. “Your son. I asked about your son. What's his name?”

She shifted in her chair and observed him sideways. “Isaiah. He's fine, thanks.”

“My boy's here today. With Leo. That's why I'm asking.”

She smiled with her lips closed and pointed to the balcony. “That him?”

He swiveled. Leo held his clipboard, scanning the floor and making notes. The boy leaned against the rail, gaping at Benny. Benny waved again. Behind him, so close it made him jump, the secretary said, “He doesn't look like you.”

Steven's face seemed to lighten, even smile, and it suddenly occurred to Benny that Merna had arranged this. She had called Leo and asked him to let the boy spy on his father. And now she would hear about his flirting with a shvartza. He could already imagine her shouting, “Bad enough it's another woman, but a colored one!” She'd always wanted to

believe he had affairs, had once accused him when, for a whole week, he came home every night after eleven o'clock. With tears rolling along the sides of her nose, she'd said, "Tell me who it is." He'd laughed it off, told her not to be silly, asked her how they were supposed to eat if he didn't work, but she said, "Don't tell me it's work. Tell me it's a woman. I can handle being second to another woman. Don't tell me I'm second to T-shirts." He kissed her and blamed Leo for keeping him late, cursed the old man until she nodded, sniffing, and said, "He took my mother from me and now he takes my husband."

But now Benny could see the boy wasn't looking at him at all, but was staring over his head toward his office. He turned and saw hanging above the door the huge grayish-blue rocket, winner of last year's competition for original design, with its three detachable stages, its asymmetrical arrangement of fins, its rounded nose painted along the sides with shark's teeth. He'd forgotten it was there. Before he could stop it, a swell of pride in his creation buoyed him, but this was quickly toppled by a wave of guilt. A sudden desperation seized him, and he knew he needed to find a better hiding place for the new rocket. If Steven came down to his office and saw it, the boy would never speak to him again. He'd shove it into a file cabinet drawer and sneak it out only when everyone else had left for the night. But before he could move, Zipporah said, "I think Leo's calling for you."

From the balcony, Leo was beckoning him toward the stairs with a wide sweep of an arm. Steven was disappearing into the office. Benny knew what was coming now. He'd sit in front of Leo's desk and listen to the old man propose a scheme to take his boy away from him. As he climbed the stairs to the mezzanine, he tried to calm his anger into prepared sentences. Something like, "Leo, he's my son and I love him no matter what he does." Or, "I'm his father and I'll be responsible for the way he behaves." When he walked into the office, both Leo and Steven were standing behind the desk, the photo of Leo's

brothers positioned between them. Steven stood directly before the picture from the family reunion, his head where Leo's would be, so the six-year-old Steven seemed to be riding on the fifteen-year-old's shoulders. Benny's ears felt numb, throbbing with the dull sound of his pulse. The old man pointed to one of the low cushioned chairs. Benny sat and took a deep breath. "You aren't going to sit?" he said. His own voice sounded distant. He worried that he wouldn't be able to hear what Leo was going to try to put over on him.

"How's the 'Icon' job coming," Leo said, rising to his toes and slowly descending.

The old man's voice was louder than Benny expected, and clear enough. "Almost finished," he lied. Leo wasn't really interested in his answer, but still, Benny wouldn't give away the upper hand so easily. The job would be late, but he needed more time to figure out who was to blame.

"Your son and I have been talking," Leo said. Steven was swaying, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"What else would you be doing?"

Leo leaned forward and placed his hands flat on the shiny surface of the desk. He didn't seem to care if he smudged it. And why should he when someone was going to polish it again after he left for the night? Benny stared into the old man's pitted gray eyes. "He's almost sixteen, isn't he?" Leo said.

"In twenty-two days," Steven said

"Sixteen in twenty-two days," Leo repeated, nodding absurdly, as if he'd never heard of such a thing.

"Hard to believe," Benny said. "Where's the time go?" He was trying to stall long enough to remember one of the sentences he'd prepared, but none seemed to fit what Leo was saying. The noise on the production floor must have numbed his mind as well as his

ears. Or if not the noise, then the fumes from the ink and chemical stencil. And at that moment, something which had never occurred to him before entered his mind with certainty: he might or might not go deaf, but without a doubt, those fumes would eventually kill him.

"In twenty-two days, Steven can work," Leo said. "He can drop out of school."

Benny stood and glared at the boy. "Did they expel you? Tell me."

"School's a waste of time," Steven said, lowering his eyes.

"They expelled you! I'll kill him," Benny said, stepping forward.

"Listen to what you're saying, Benny," Leo said, waving his arms. "They already suspended, how can they expel him? Schools have to have reasons for punishing. I'm talking dropping out on his own."

"They hate me there," Steven said, still looking at his shoes.

"My son won't be an idiot," Benny shouted. He stared down at Leo's red scalp and thin white hair, but the pinholes of the old man's upturned pupils now seemed fiercer than the pits, the gray irises vast and dominating.

"Of course he won't be an idiot. He'll work for you. You'll teach him everything you know."

"You want him to work here?" Benny felt weights dragging him to the low chair. He sat and reached for a yellow-wrapped candy, staring at the photo of the Brickman brothers. He remembered Morty shaking his head, saying, "Good luck, Benny," and for the first time, wondered how a man would spend the rest of his day after being fired by his own brother. From the stories he'd heard, he guessed Morty would have gone to a bar—but had he drunk in mourning or in celebration?

"Doesn't matter what I want," Leo said. "It's what he wants."

The boy's eyes were wide now, his lips slightly parted. For the first time since he'd lain face down on the sidewalk outside the hardware store, Steven's expression was not one of anger or hatred. His hands wrung together at his waist the way they had the first time he'd seen a plastic capsule burst from the tube of a model rocket.

"He wants to work for me," Benny whispered. The candy was heavy in his hand. He considered unwrapping it, but felt anchored in the chair, unable to move.

"You'll start him washing screens," Leo said. "In a year, he'll be a printer. And of course, when I go, the two of you will run the place together. He's my heir, after all."

Father and son. Partners. They'd take the train together in the morning and come home together at night. They'd launch rockets together at the company picnic. They'd share this mezzanine office and its wooden desk when Leo was stiff in a box. Benny would never have the chance to run the business by himself. One day, he might even be fired by his own son. He wanted to ask whether Merna knew about this, but stopped himself. If they told him she'd suggested it, he was afraid of what he might say. Steven stepped forward from the wall and touched the edge of the desk with a soft, pudgy hand that would soon pluck T-shirts from an automatic screen press, a hand that could so easily be crushed between the whirling, mechanical arms. The boy opened his mouth—a mouth which would soon breathe toxic fumes from printing ink and chemical stencil—but before he could speak, Benny heard the words of his own father. They were spoken soon after Benny's twelfth birthday, when, during a punchball game in the vacant lot, he'd stepped on a two-by-four hiding a nail that went deep into his heel. One of the other boys had fetched Benny's father, who carried him into the apartment, swabbed his wound with wads of cotton, and said in a soft, trembling voice, "This is crazy. Who needs a goddamn family?"

Hannah of Troy

November, 1965. My mother, twenty-one and married a month, was giving up. She'd go home to her mother and father, would walk all the way from Troy to New Haven if she had to. She'd get the first divorce in the history of her family, certainly in the history of her high school, maybe even her college. Hannah, formerly Collins (from her father, formerly Kollachelnik), now Brickman, would be Hannah Collins once again.

Of course, she wouldn't have to walk. Troy had a bus depot. From there she could ride to Albany, fifteen minutes at most, though who knew how frequently the service ran. From Albany to Manhattan in a straight shot, and then it was only a matter of puzzling out which subway line would take her to Grand Central, which train would follow the Connecticut shoreline. All she had to do now was hurry from the apartment—where Arthur, my father, would soon be struggling into his coat to chase after her—into the center of town and inquire about buses and the location of the depot. These things she could do on her own.

"Everything now," my mother said, more than thirty years later. "It's all so much easier." This was at the kitchen table of the house I'd grown up in. We were sitting close together, my mother sipping from a steaming cup of herbal tea so clear it couldn't possibly have had any flavor. I was clutching a bottle of beer. Across the hall, in the family room, my father sat reading the newspaper, and every minute or so I could hear a faint rustling as he turned a page. My mother's smile was tight and teacherly, and each time she made a point, she tapped on the glass table with her fingernail. "Really," she said. "You're lucky."

I didn't feel lucky, though I should have. I was engaged to Julie, a woman I was sure I loved deeply. "We complement each other perfectly," I told everyone I knew. She couldn't have been more of a change from my family, or from the girls I'd dated in college. She had a heavy North Carolina mountain accent, but swore it was a mistake, or else a cruel joke. The South, with its reserve and polite indirectness, made no sense to her. She was convinced she should have been raised at least north of Delaware. The next best thing, I gathered later, was to marry a guy from New Jersey, especially a Jewish one. Somehow, my Jewishness lifted me several degrees in latitude. Julie was thrillingly, maddeningly carefree. She'd ask me to ride with her down the road to the 7-11—"I gotta get a Dr. Pepper right now, Danny. I never needed anything so bad."—and halfway there, she'd decide she needed to go to Atlanta. She'd tell me, "You worry too much," and then go skidding off into heavy traffic. Most people, including me, felt compelled to look after her, though she claimed protection was the last thing she wanted. Occasionally, I was able to match her with brief bursts of impulse—midnight drives to the beach when we both had to work at eight the next morning, skinny dipping in our apartment complex's overly chlorinated, very public pool—but mostly she appreciated me as an anchor, or as she put it, "the person who reminds me not everybody's as happy as I am."

Not once during our first two years together did I question the depth of my love. Even now, when an unexpected memory takes me back to that time, the feeling I had for Julie fills me completely; I find myself sinking low in my chair trying not to breathe, and I swear, the hair stands straight up on my arms. Marriage for us was, more than anything, a formality. For two years we'd been living together in Raleigh—Julie disliked the South but couldn't bring herself to move far from her family; and anyway, I never could stand the cold—as committed, we felt, as any couple who'd exchanged rings before the justice of the

peace. The only reason for a ceremony was to please both our families, to rake in a haul of gifts, and to let me leech onto her company's generous health plan. In no significant way was it supposed to change our lives. But two months before the wedding date, I stopped sleeping. I'd never been a good sleeper, but this was miserable, hours and hours of staring at the dark ceiling, the first dreams of the night interrupted by the morning alarm. For the first time, I really began to notice Julie's presence in the bed. The bristling of two-day stubble against my shin suddenly became an offense. The slightest hiss of her breath produced in me an almost physical revulsion. I was disgusted by her coughing, the smacking of her lips, the unconscious gurgling of her stomach. Late most nights, propped on an elbow, I stared in near horror at this strange creature I'd invited to share my bed for the rest of my life.

I told myself she was pulling away from me. There were times we'd be sitting together on the couch, reading or watching TV, and I could see in her face that she wanted something, that she was waiting for me to tell her exactly what she needed to hear. I'd lean forward, brush my lips across her ear, and say, "I love you so much it scares me. You know that, don't you?" She would nod, but still her eyes were stuck on my mouth, waiting. What else was there to say? After a while she'd yawn and get up to go to bed. I'd ask if she wanted me to join her. She'd hesitate a moment, and then say, "No. I'm pretty sleepy. You come in when you're ready." If there was some desperate need burning inside her, why couldn't she just tell me? In another hour I'd drag myself to the bedroom, knowing I wouldn't sleep. This was punishment, I felt sure, for some shortcoming in the love, which, until now, I'd been convinced was all-encompassing and complete.

Still, I never seriously considered calling off the wedding. Even to think it brought on immediate, crippling headaches. When Julie was away from the apartment, running

errands or seeing friends, I paced, terrified of answering the phone. I imagined her calling from Tennessee, telling me in her soft, southern voice that she was heading west with a mountain-biker named Andreas who could make her feel loved in three different languages; or worse, some state trooper calling to tell me a tanker full of nuclear waste had jackknifed on I-40 and sizzled my fiancée from the face of the earth.

Three weeks before the scheduled ceremony, on a whim, I told Julie I was driving up to my parents' house, just for the weekend. Just to pick up some things we could use in the kitchen, I told her, and to talk to the old man about some possible investments. She always laughed when I called my father "old man"—it sounded wonderfully northern to her, urban and somehow tough—and didn't question me any further. Neither did my mother when I called, though she knew I hated the drive and never came home without a good reason. For half an hour I let my father read to me from the stock pages, and then took my mother aside as she finished brewing her tea. I explained as much as I could. She didn't show any surprise. She threw away her tea bag, went to the fridge and handed me a beer. I was sure she'd set me straight. She liked Julie, I thought, and had mostly gotten over her not being Jewish. "Religion is personal," I'd argued over the last two years. "How could Julie's possibly affect mine?" It helped that Julie hadn't been to church since she was eleven. We both ignored the fact that I hadn't been anywhere near a synagogue since high school. "I worry, that's all," my mother would say. "You're both so different." But now that she'd resigned herself to having a shiksa for a daughter-in-law, I expected her to tell me everyone had jitters like mine before a wedding, that I just needed to ride out the next three weeks and everything would be fine.

She lowered her voice and glanced toward the family room. Her smile disappeared. She seemed almost startled, as if she'd never before spoken—or even thought of—the

things she was now telling me. The bottle was cold in my hands, but I couldn't let it go.

"You and Julie, you've got such an advantage. Two years. I envy you. Two years you've had to figure everything out. Can you stand to be around each other every day? If so, good, get married. Your father and I. You think we got to be friends first? One day I woke up next to a stranger. My God, that first year." She shook her head and took a long sip of tea, and I began to pick at the label on my beer bottle. Then, in barely more than a whisper, she said, "You've never heard the story. No one has. Once, I walked out. I walked right out on him."

My father, completing research for his Ph.D. in Chemistry, spent every weeknight in his lab at Rensselaer, the polytech university. Whenever my mother asked, he told her he'd be finished in six months, no more than seven, and then he'd start writing the dissertation. "That's not such a long time, is it?" he'd say. The spring before, my mother had graduated from the local women's college and now taught French at the overcrowded high school on the river. Her classes were packed full with the idiot children of waitresses and truck drivers. Whether she spoke French or English, they stared at her blankly; sometimes, when boys nodded to each other across the room, she was gripped by brief bouts of fear, convinced they were planning to attack her, though none ever did. The children of professors and businessmen all went to the school near the university, which never hired teachers straight out of college.

Every afternoon she rushed home from work to meet my father in their cramped apartment on the second floor of what once must have been a comfortable one-family townhouse. The apartment had only two rooms, a combined kitchen-dining room and bedroom. The bedroom was a constant mess, no matter how often she tried to clean.

Everywhere my father piled his books and records, and ridiculous things he never used but wouldn't let her throw away: tennis rackets, golf clubs, bulky, woolen army blankets given to him by an uncle who'd been a fighter pilot and had supposedly lived through Pearl Harbor. Without complaining, she set up her wardrobe in a corner of the dining room and stuffed an empty kitchen cupboard with bras and underwear and sweat socks.

Of course, my mother didn't tell me what went on when she met my father in the afternoons. I can only imagine they must have spent an hour or two in bed, taking all the necessary precautions—my older brother wasn't born for another four years. Then she cooked his dinner, kissed him wildly until he laughed and pried her fingers from around his neck, and stood on the street waving as he trudged uphill toward the drab brick building, which, instead of having ordinary windows, received its meager sunlight through a grid of thick, smoky glass squares. Often she begged him to stay at home. Not because she so desperately needed him there—she had papers to grade, a lesson to plan, a book to help her fall asleep—but because it seemed a new bride *should* beg her husband to stay at home, should wish for him to spend every possible moment by her side. No, she didn't need him there, though as a young girl, when she'd dreamed of marriage, never did her fantasies include such long, solitary nights.

This afternoon, once they'd crawled from bed and dressed, she searched through the refrigerator and pantry, but could find nothing interesting to make for dinner. The truth was, she didn't want to make dinner. She'd felt cold all day today, and more tired than usual. For hours, a pressure had been threatening in her temples and now began to throb. Half the kids in her classes coughed and sneezed their way through recitation, but these Troy parents didn't have the sense to keep their sick children home. They lined up at her desk with red eyes and running noses and—purposely, she was sure—let soggy

handkerchiefs slip from their pockets and brush against her arm. She would have liked nothing more than to lie in bed propped on pillows and have hot food placed in her lap. Her mother, my grandmother, would have scolded her for being lazy, for neglecting her wifely privilege. "Nothing tastes so good as what you stir with your own spoon," she would say, though everything my mother had stirred so far was bland and pasty. Besides, my grandmother couldn't even sit still in restaurants. She'd once excused herself to go to the ladies room, only to sneak into the kitchen, peering over shoulders and criticizing—"I was only giving advice," she said later—until the chef stormed into the dining room and ordered my grandfather to take his family elsewhere.

My father stood by the sink, stuffing his thumb into the bowl of his curved wooden pipe. Only after their engagement had he begun smoking, and she'd made the mistake of telling him he looked sophisticated. By the time she discovered how the smoke clung to his hair and clothes, it was too late to object—it had become a part of him. Now he would puff and puff and when he finished would expect something to be boiling or baking. My mother wasn't my grandmother, and didn't intend to be. She would cook him dinner tonight. Because he'd be leaving for the lab in an hour she'd do what she had to, but she'd at least make clear her preference. She fiddled with his sleeve, rubbed her hand over his belly. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to spend the whole evening in bed? We could order Chinese and forget everything until morning."

She didn't expect him to say, "Why not? Let's." She only wanted him to agree it would be wonderful. But instead, he slipped the end of the pipe between his teeth and spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Stay home? You know I can't do that."

She stood on her toes, kissed his neck and ear. "It's just one night. The lab won't miss you."

He searched the kitchen drawers for a match, struck one, and sucked the end of the pipe with a snapping sound. The smoke drifted into his eyes and he had to shut them a moment. Then, squinting, he said, "You want me to get my degree, don't you? You don't want to support me forever."

The pressure in her temples was spreading to the back of her head, and she tried to calm a sudden surge of anger. She curled two fingers over the waist of his pants and said, "If you stay home tonight, I'll gladly support you forever. I promise."

He laughed and then coughed. Billows of bluish smoke hit her square in the face, tasted like wet wood. Why anyone would want the taste of wood between his teeth was beyond her. This was the first thing she would never understand about him. "Don't you think," he said. "Don't you think, maybe, you're being a bit childish?"

She pushed away. The kitchen lights grew brighter. She glanced at the refrigerator and pantry, picturing all the food she'd bought to cook for him tumbling and crashing to the floor at his feet. Childish! She was the one who'd graduated. She was the one who had a job, the one responsible for educating hundreds of hopeless teenagers. Every month she paid two-thirds of their apartment's rent. "You're just a student!" she cried, as surprised at her own words as my father seemed to be. The pipe drooped, only a pencil-line of smoke twisted toward the ceiling. She went for the hall closet, grabbed the first coat she could find, not the warmest. She thought he would stop her before she could open the door. Or else he'd stand there numb until its slam startled him, and he'd catch her arm before she was halfway to the bottom landing. But now the wooden stairs were passing quickly, and already here was the door to the street. She took a deep breath of the stairwell's musty air before pushing into the cold dusk and finding her way home.

I laughed uneasily. When I was a kid, my mother's anger had always seemed precise, controlled, frustratingly justified. No matter how strongly I might have believed I'd done something for the right reasons, a single hard look and long silence from my mother made me stoop and shuffle around the house with the weight of my wrong. A shout would drop me to my knees. Never could I bring myself to argue when she placed blame on my actions. But instead of trying to reform, or accepting this punishment as inevitable, I became a sneak. I adopted an expression of such absurd innocence that I still can't believe people didn't immediately see through to my deepest faults.

Once, when I was nine or ten, I'd crept with a friend into a neighbor's flower garden, where, among the beds, were scattered decorative pieces of driftwood, smooth logs with twisted silver roots. We lifted them over our heads and smashed them against large rocks. I held some grudge against the neighbor's kid, who later became my friend again and helped me destroy another neighbor's birdfeeder. As we were running away, the boy's mother came out of the house hollering after us. She may or may not have seen who we were. I came home prepared to cry at the sight of my mother's crossed arms and darkened face. She wouldn't yell or threaten to spank me. She'd simply say, "I just received a very, very disappointing phone call," and I'd burst into a hysterical fit of denial and repentance. But she only kissed me and asked about my day. I forced myself to breathe normally and made up some story about how my teacher said I was getting better at math. I set the table and helped make a salad, then went to my room and lay on the bed. My breathing slowed, the knocking in my chest began to fade, and I waited to feel the terrible guilt. But after a few minutes the feeling didn't come, and I went to the closet to shuffle through my baseball cards. If my mother wasn't angry, I'd done nothing wrong. I could be exactly as innocent as she believed me to be.

So now, hearing about her shouting at my father in a blind fury, I couldn't help but laugh. Still, a twitching in my stomach grew worse with each sip of beer, and my armpits were sticky. She was supposed to be telling me how fortunate Julie and I were. I wanted her to say, "For your father and me it was hard. For you it'll be easy." But what she said was, "It's not funny," and rested her hands in her lap. "I was serious. That was the worst thing he could have said to me."

"But you forgave him," I said. "You stayed with him for thirty years." She sat far back in her chair and said nothing. "Because you loved each other so much."

Now she laughed and shook her head. "You can't live with every person you love. Don't you think we had to work at it? You can't imagine the sacrifices. Mostly we were lucky."

I didn't want to hear the word luck again. It sounded too much like fate, in which Julie swore she believed. "Not in a flaky sort of way," she'd explain. "But if two people are really meant to be together—or not be together—there's nothing you can do to stop it."

Of course, I hated this idea. It left me and the strength of my love powerless. "What if it's our fate to end up hating each other?" I'd ask. "What if fate says our apartment's going to burn down? Should we chuck our smoke detector in the trash?"

She'd only shrug and say, "You've just got to enjoy what you have."

All this was an elaborate excuse for Julie to be reckless. If her fate was already sealed, why should she bother being safe? In a few hours she'd be going to sleep, kicking around in our big bed, hissing and gasping and snoring all she wanted without me to hear. But even alone in my childhood room, I knew I wouldn't sleep. Julie would forget to lock the door. She'd leave the blinds raised. Our neighborhood wasn't the safest in Raleigh. Any number of dangerous men could sneak into our bedroom unobserved. All night I

would stare at the ceiling, picturing knives and ropes and mysterious blunt objects, hating myself for coming here, where I'd have no control over what might happen.

My mother leaned forward again. "If I'd made it home, I might have left him for good," she said. "It was really just luck I didn't get to the bus depot."

An instant on the street and her neck was freezing. Poor circulation, a doctor had once told her. She had to wear gloves to take a tub of ice cream from the freezer, but now she'd left them behind. Also her scarf, her hat, her boots. All my father's fault, and again her anger flared. It was getting late and would soon be dark. The sky was already the same soiled gray as snow lingering on the sidewalk from a storm three days earlier. In spots slush had turned to uneven ridges of ice.

I'd been to Troy once, when I was sixteen and visiting college campuses. It was a shabby city built on a hill, the university at its peak, the city center at its base along the Hudson. My parents pointed out their first apartment on a street as steep as those I've seen in films set in San Francisco. At the time, of course, I couldn't have pictured my mother storming out the front door. But now it was easy to see her there, bracing against the cold, staring down the long slope. Below was her college, the school where she taught, and, somewhere, the bus depot. Whenever she'd left town before it had been in her father's car, or in my father's. She could call her father now. Across the street was a drugstore and lunch counter, inside a payphone. She could reverse the charges and listen to her father, my grandfather, curse first in Yiddish, then in Russian, and finally groping for the right language, whisper, "Chachkala, he slapped you? Don't lie to me. What I'll do to him. My own hands." I'm assuming there were payphones in 1965, and collect calls. This part my mother didn't tell me, but I'm certain she must have imagined my grandfather charging

over the ice, getting lost in Pennsylvania or New Jersey, but eventually finding her and bringing her safely home. He'd come without question, no matter how early he had to work in the morning.

But she wouldn't call her father. Arthur had called her a child, but she was an adult, she could find her own way home. She waited a moment, maybe two or three, for my father to reach the sidewalk. She'd let him come all the way to her, let him put his hand on her shoulder, and then she'd shake it off and make him watch as she walked away. She waited, but no shoes clunked down the stairs, no fingers fumbled with the doorknob. Up the hill a car sped through an intersection, and from around the corner came the jumbled laughter of college boys hurrying somewhere—joking, probably, about a girl. Even now the light was fading, but the streetlamps hadn't yet come on. Her shoes were flat, no heels, but no treads either. She took one step and immediately slid, the shock a fist against her chest. She slid three feet and kept from falling only by grabbing for a telephone pole and hugging it in both arms. Across the street, in the drugstore window, an old man sat staring. His face, round and yellowed, hovered above a steaming cup of coffee. A newspaper was spread on the counter before him, but he was looking right at her, had watched her, she was certain, but made not the slightest move to help. She didn't dare glance up toward her own window. What if Arthur had seen as well? What if he was laughing at the way his wife's arms flailed above her head and grasped desperately for the telephone pole?

The cold cut through her stockings. Her feet and ankles were bricks, her hands cramping in pain. The throb she'd felt earlier was a full headache now, worsened by a ripple of chills. The old man in the drugstore took a sip from his cup but didn't look away. His eyes were too small for his face, his nose and ears drooped. He was the trouble. He, my mother decided, was what had gone wrong with everything. Not only because he didn't

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come to her aid, but because he, too, was surely married, and at this very moment his wife was bent over a hot stove preparing his dinner. She could picture this woman, stout and cheerful. Cheerful except occasionally, when she remembered—had she been twenty? twenty-one?—the day she'd decided to walk out on the husband who didn't appreciate her and then changed her mind. More than anything, my mother would have liked to talk to this old man's wife. To ask how she could have given her life to another person. Given everything she had and only then discovered that he answered every question with a question, that he didn't know how to replace a burnt fuse, that he'd leave her willingly every night to work in a gloomy, cluttered lab.

She pushed away from the pole and took two steps on crunchy snow. Not far away, the sidewalk had been shoveled and seemed clear for the next block. She hopped gingerly, and only when her toe touched did she see the ice, transparent, no more than a glossy film. This time there was nothing to grab onto, and she swept past one townhouse and half another. A wind gathered in her face. When the speed became frightening the only thing she could do was drop to her backside. The impact rattled from her spine to her teeth, and her head pounded. Between two parked cars, she could see the old man, moon-faced and empty, not concerned, not laughing, not anything but staring and sipping his coffee. To be fair, I don't believe the man saw my mother. It was dark on the street, light inside the drugstore. Probably, he was grimacing at his own reflection. I understand that now, though I didn't listening at the kitchen table. Thirty years later, there was still a pressing bitterness in my mother's voice when she mentioned him, which was really only in passing: "There was an old guy in the drugstore across the street. He saw me fall and wouldn't help me. Wouldn't even check to see if I was okay." In just three sentences I could tell she hated him, even then, and I hated him, too, blamed him for everything. But hating him on the

street, she momentarily forgot my father. Not until she rolled to her belly and pushed up onto her hands and knees. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement up the hill, near her apartment, but when she looked directly it was gone. The light in the kitchen was still burning, the window empty. My father would simply let her leave. This was what he'd wanted all along. Her head pounded, and tears began to freeze on her cheeks.

She scrambled to her feet, slipped, fell hard on her knees. And she was sliding again, down, down toward the city and river. The apartment was drifting away. All anger and pain crystallized as panic. With her elbows, her wrists, her fingers, frantically, she flailed for a grip. Ice flaked under her fingernails. She pictured my father, still standing in the kitchen, stunned, the pipe, nearly the size of his entire face, bobbing from his lips. He was no more than a boy. The pipe was a lollipop, a pacifier. She'd promised to spend eternity with a twenty-four year old boy. How was she supposed to take care of him? She couldn't even find her own way to the bus depot. She swiveled her body sideways, and slid toward the street. Her leg caught the tire of a parked car. She lay hanging over the edge of the curb, her hands and legs numb. Tears blurred her view as she stared up the hill, at the length of the slope she'd survived so far. Even if she wanted to, she didn't see how she could ever make it back.

"After I fell, you know the first thing I thought of? Our honeymoon," my mother said. Her voice had taken on a solemn, almost mystical hush. With my thumb, I scraped at the label on my beer bottle, and when it was gone, flaked away the brittle glue. From the next room I no longer heard the rustle of newspaper. Was my father was straining to listen? "You remember that story, don't you? You've heard part of it, at least."

I knew they'd gone to Bermuda. On the second day there, they rode a catamaran across a bright blue bay. The sun and wind burned my mother's face, arms, belly, and thighs redder than coral. She spent the rest of the week in bed, howling at the slightest breeze from the air conditioner.

But now all I could think about was the honeymoon Julie and I had taken when we'd first moved in together. We weren't married, but why shouldn't we take a honeymoon? Neither of us could afford a cruise or a flight to the Bahamas, so we packed her car full of camping gear, drove up to the Blue Ridge, and wandered until we found a secluded spot. I propped the tent on a slab of granite jutting out a thousand feet above a narrow gorge streaked with mist. It seems absurd now, but if you had asked me at the time what I pictured when I closed my eyes and imagined the life Julie and I would have together, this was it: breathtaking and strangely serene. I would have been perfectly happy to spend all day sitting on the rocks, staring out over the hills in the distance, or walking the steep trails winding into the gorge, but Julie couldn't focus on anything other than the sheer, crumbling cliffs. She lay with her head hanging over the rim and said, "There's plenty to hang onto. It's only about thirty feet down to the next ledge. I bet we could make it easy."

I knew, by then, not to tell her there was something she couldn't do. The minute I said, "That's dangerous," or "You're nuts," she'd be halfway down the cliff. So I said, "I'm not saying you couldn't do it. But you know me. I'm so clumsy I'd probably drop with the first step. You'd have to carry me up on your shoulders."

"You're right," she said. "You're right." But still her head hung over the edge, judging possible finger grips in the rock's slight crevices and cracks, picturing her feet

dangling in the air beside a hawk's nest, already telling me in her mind, "I told you I could do it. I told you."

For an hour we walked safely in the woods and then went back to the tent to make love. We slept, and I woke sweating. The sun had come out, and the tent's thin nylon was a cone of blue flame. Julie was gone, as I knew she would be, but I didn't move. She wasn't far away, somewhere on the cliff just outside the tent—I could hear her grunts, the trickle of dislodged pebbles, a brief, startled cry of "Oh, shit!" Her first call was tentative, apologetic. "Danny? Are you awake? Can you come help me?" But soon she was shouting, "Daniel! Help!" I tried to raise myself, I swear, but the strength went out of my arms. They weren't simply asleep, but utterly useless. I closed my eyes and tried to convince myself I hadn't yet awoken, breathing heavily, even feigning a snore. I knew what she wanted. She'd ask me to grab onto a root and swing myself into the abyss. "I'll just hang onto your ankle," she'd say. "You can pull us both up." The root would break and I'd topple head first onto the next ledge. Only thirty feet down, but I'd be just unlucky enough to land on my neck and suffer terribly, lingering for days before fading off into a world of blind pain. Somehow, Julie would manage to clamber to the top, would stare down at my twisted body, shake her head, and say, "Fate."

She called once more, "Daniel! I need your help." Then, the only sound was the rustling of a tree branch and a frantic scraping. Sweat was dripping over my eyelids, but I couldn't open them. Any second I expected the echoing scream. I told her not to do it, I muttered to myself. I told her not to. Later, when a policeman or ranger appeared at the scene of the tragedy, I'd explain, "She was always unpredictable, officer. I never knew what she'd do next."

In a few minutes, she unzipped the tent flap and dropped beside me. I let my eyes flutter open and stretched my arms. "Didn't you hear me?" she said. "I was calling you." In an excited voice, she told me about how the lower ledge was narrower than she'd first thought, how she'd had to stand with her chest to the cliff and still her heels hung over the rim. "The only way I could get back up was by grabbing onto this little tree branch. It was barely more than a twig. If that had snapped, I'd be gone."

My strength came back in a rush, and I sprang up. All the disgust I felt for myself exploded in anger. "That was a fucking stupid thing to do," I said. "What the hell would I have done if you fell? Did you think about me at all?"

She rubbed at her fingers caked with dirt. "You're right," she said. "It was selfish. This is our honeymoon. I'm sorry."

She hugged me, and I mumbled into the soft skin of her neck, "If I lost you it would kill me." To myself I kept whispering, I told her not to, I told her. If she even suspected I'd been awake, I would have been torn apart by guilt. But she kept her head lowered, and between clumps of her hair I could see tears collecting on her chin.

"I know it would," she said and hid her face in her hands.

At the kitchen table, I felt suddenly lightheaded and drained. My mother didn't seem to notice if my face went pale or flushed. I don't know which it was. She was saying, "I was freezing under that car, but all I could think about was sunburn. The feeling wasn't so different, really. But this is the part you've probably never heard. You know your father. He kept pacing in that tiny hotel room, asking every five minutes, 'Is there anything I can do? Is there anything that would make you feel better?'"

She snapped at him, "I don't know. Just do something!"

In the lobby store he found a tube of ointment and brought it back to the room, smiling. "Look what I've got," he said and held it up, triumphant, as if it were the first thing he'd ever bought on his own. He squirted a white blob onto two fingers and touched it to her shoulder. The cream went through her skin, through bone, to the center of all pain. She cried out, tore at the sheets, bounced her heels against the mattress.

"It was supposed to hurt like that," she told me and shuddered visibly as she lifted the teacup to her lips. "You know what your grandfather would have said. 'It don't hurt, it don't work.' I knew it was true, I only needed to hear it from your father. But he just apologized and capped the tube. When he started pacing again, I told him he was stirring a breeze and sent him out of the room. The rest of the afternoon, I listened to him pacing in the hallway. The housekeepers must have thought he was crazy. So now, why should he come after me? I was sure I'd driven him away. I'd gotten exactly what I'd asked for."

Not thirty seconds after she grabbed the tire, my mother heard the rumble of a car engine and a heavy crunching of snow. My father's car, enormous, maroon, a Chrysler from late in the last decade, backed from their driveway onto the street. If he turned uphill, towards the lab, their marriage was over for sure. But only the bulbous trunk rose up the slope. The headlights shone directly at her. For a moment, she could see the passenger door, crumpled in an accident a year before they'd met. My father had used the insurance money to buy a record player. "Who needs four doors?" he'd said, when, on their first date, my mother had had to climb in on the driver's side and crawl across the worn leather bench. She hadn't been offended. Here was a Jewish boy unlike any she'd ever gone out with before. Not bohemian exactly, but with his own set of expectations, oblivious to those of others. He spoke to her in an immediately familiar way, as if she were a cousin, or even

a sister. But again, she wasn't troubled. She was careful to lift the hem of her dress as she slid into the seat, and, glancing behind, was pleased to see my father watching, not glancing politely away. It was a thrill she felt, a sense of adventure.

Now the car—its door still damaged—rolled only a few feet down the hill before twisting sideways. It didn't stop or even slow as it neared her. She pulled herself to her knees and watched it pass, backwards now, my father tiny behind the high ridge of the dashboard. The trunk of the next parked car blocked her view of the drugstore, but she knew the old man was staring at this new disaster in silence. Her husband, a little boy in a giant Chrysler, was sliding all the way to the base of the hill, would drop straight into the Hudson. Her tears came faster now, grieving for my father, whom she'd driven to his death, for herself, a widow at twenty-one.

She forgot her headache, her numb hands and feet. None of it, nothing about herself mattered at all. She ran after the car, no longer worried about falling, her smooth-soled shoes slapping the ice in challenge. When she did fall, it was face forward only a few feet from where my father's car had backed into a telephone pole, cushioned by a high bank of snow. Her arms were stretched straight above her head, her cheek pressed against pavement, but nothing hurt. Still, she groaned as my father knelt over her, asking, "God, Hannah. Are you all right? Can you move?" She lifted her head, nodded, tasted tears. He helped her up, led her around the Chrysler's long hood and into the driver's door. "Warm up," he said. "Your hands must be ice. I'll get us out of here." She was sobbing, embarrassed by her wet cheeks but unable to wipe them. Part of her still believed my father's car was sinking into the river, and that she was alone forever. From the vents on the dashboard, hot air spilled onto her lap, and she heard my father open the trunk. She

tried to clench her hands, but couldn't. This was pain, real pain, vibrating from her elbows to her fingertips and back.

My father stood in front of the car now, holding a brown sack under one arm. He stuck a hand inside and shook sand under the tires and along the road for half a block. When he dropped behind the steering wheel and slammed the door, she forced herself to stop crying and asked, "Since when do you keep sand in the trunk?"

"Always," he said. "You never know. Give me your hands." He rubbed her fingers between his gloves until she cried out, then dropped them, bright red now, back to her lap. "Next time you run out, make sure you dress properly, please?"

She wanted to smile but feared her lips would betray her, breaking again into sobs. "I will," she said. "I promise." Chills splashed over her back and neck in waves. Out the window, the row of parked cars stretched the length of each block, but she had no idea which had sheltered her.

The engine whined high before the car jerked forward. My father stroked the steering wheel as if it were a dog or a pony, and they climbed slowly. Soon, they were passing the drugstore. There was the old man, still in the window, now puffing an enormous cigar. They came to the driveway, but my father didn't pull in. "You're coming with me to the lab," he said before she could ask.

My father wasn't trying to listen from the family room. He was snoring now, softly. The newspaper would have slumped to his lap, his chin quivering against his chest. Over the next fifteen minutes, his snoring would grow louder, then sputter, and eventually choke off altogether. He'd wake with a start, gasping for breath. When I was five or six years old, I used to sit in the family room while my father read the paper, running my toy

cars along the hardwood floor at the edge of the carpet. I'd watch him fall asleep, listen for the stages of his breathing, and make a loud noise just as the air stopped passing through his nose. It was my job, I believed, to keep my father from dying in his sleep. Once, I played in my bedroom longer than usual. When I came downstairs my father's head was already hanging. The newspaper had fallen to the floor. I approached slowly and heard no noise, no snoring or wheezing. I'd been lecturing to a crowd of stuffed animals and had let my father slip away. My wailing brought my mother running from the kitchen. My father stood up so fast he knocked the chair over backward. It hit the wall and cracked one of the wood-colored panels hiding the sheetrock. In my mother's arms I moaned, and nothing she or my father said could make me tell what was wrong.

Now, my mother swept her hand along the table, collecting crumbs into a small pile. "I must already have been pretty sick by the time I got in the car," she said. "I ended up in bed for the next four days. You know how it is when you've got a fever. Everything is hazy and a hundred confused thoughts go through your head, but you believe every one of them."

She'd pressed against the passenger door, as far away from my father as possible. His face was smooth though she hadn't seen him shave in a week. When the tires began to spin, he bit his lower lip, and she saw something very clearly. It wasn't a premonition so much as a certainty. Of its cause she couldn't yet be sure—illness, maybe, troubled children, financial worries, there were so many possibilities. But this was what she knew without a doubt: one day, without warning, my father would take her hand and hold it to his lowered forehead. Maybe it was the face of the old man in the drugstore she pictured, hanging defeated. In a soft, wavering voice, he would say, "Hannah, I have no idea what to

do.” He spoke from far off, across the limits of despair. “Hannah, please. What should I do?”

“It’s ridiculous,” my mother said and laughed. “To think this was the big turning point in my life? I was convinced. I thought I had to decide right then what to do. I had to know whether I could trust myself to answer him when the time came. By then it would be too late to run away. As soon as I was well enough I went into town and found the bus depot. I did all the research into prices and times and connections.”

“But you stayed,” I said. This was what I’d been waiting to hear. She’d tell me how everything worked out in the end. I held my breath, ready for that long exhale of relief.

“I stayed.”

“So, what was it?”

“What was what?”

“The big crisis,” I said. “The thing you had to answer.”

She crossed her arms, hugging herself tightly. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m still waiting. Every day.”

Inside my father’s lab, a sour stinging smell filled her nose and mouth. The warmth here was even more startling than inside the car. Her hands had loosened enough for her to clench them into fists. My father led her into a room crossed with wires and packed with elaborate instruments and glass containers of various shapes. He set her on a stool before a high counter, held a match over a stout metal tube until it spouted a blue flame. Over it he placed a three-legged stand and a glass cylinder full of water. “You’ll drink some tea?” he said.

She nodded. "Why did you take the car? To follow me. Why didn't you just run?"

He rubbed his chin, confused, or maybe hurt. "I didn't know which way you'd go," he said. Then, after a pause, "I don't really know."

"It took you long enough. I could've been halfway to town."

He shrugged and stared at the floor. "I couldn't find the keys."

"I didn't think you were coming at all," she said. "I thought you'd just let me go."

His smile was slight and painful. He lifted her hand gently from the counter. "I'm your husband. You should have faith in me."

Faith. She repeated the word silently, several times, until it sounded senseless. "I know," she said. "I know."

She let him put his arms around her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't come faster."

When her tea was ready, my father slipped into a long white coat and draped over his ears a pair of comical plastic goggles, far too big for his face. "I didn't make you dinner," my mother said.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Neither am I. I'll get us some take-out later. Are you warm enough?"

She nodded and took another sip of tea. The cold was leaving her hands, but it was taking something with it. Her very center was weakening. My father clicked on a radio, and the lab filled with steel drums and Calypso voices, occasionally scratched by bursts of unexpected static. He shuffled between two arrangements of metal clamps, yellow rubber tubes, and glass bottles filled with colored and clear liquids, making marks in a notebook. Sometimes he leaned into a small alcove with a fan that sucked away dangerous fumes. He

called it a "hood," and she immediately smelled motor oil and pictured a car engine. She would quickly concede, her husband understood the workings of certain secrets in the world. But he was so blind to the obvious. Already, he believed everything that had happened tonight was resolved. He was swinging his hips to the wrong rhythm, occasionally glancing at her over his shoulder, smiling. Why couldn't she so easily put it all behind her? She still pictured herself on the bus from Troy to Albany, the train to New Haven, arriving weary into the arms of her mother and father. It wasn't so difficult to imagine herself teaching in the high school she graduated from, growing plump on her mother's cooking. But her parents were already getting old. Soon enough they would need to be cared for. Some day, her father would forget all his old advice, and her mother's arthritis would keep her from stirring soup. My mother would have to drive to doctors' - offices and hospitals. She'd have to sort through complicated medical bills. There was nowhere she could go to simply worry about herself, nowhere would her life become suddenly simpler.

My father bent close to a scale, trying to balance a bottle with tiny brass weights. "This is never going to work," he said. "I just hope they'll give me a degree for it."

High on the walls were the grids of thick glass. When I visited Troy the summer I was researching colleges, my father took me into the dark lab where he'd spent half of his twenties. Gradually, I came to understand what these windows were for—in an explosion ordinary windows would shatter and maim, but these would hold firm. Sitting there drinking her tea, with a fever rushing on, did my mother suddenly grasp this? Or maybe she knew it already, but only now allowed herself to realize what it really meant. In those glass bottles my father examined and adjusted a pressure might be lurking, ready to force its way out one night while she was home quietly grading papers or reading a book. The

tanks full of gas—the same gas feeding the tube that heated her tea—could ignite and singe all life from the building. My father might one day be found face down inside his hood, strangled by the fumes of his research.

He snapped shut his notebook and came to her. “Another cup?” he said. “Hannah, what is it?”

As soon as he stepped within reach, she lunged. One fist cracked against his chest, the other sunk into the soft flesh of his side. “I’m not a child!” she cried. “Tell me I’m not a child.” She closed her eyes and punched blindly. Her knuckles struck skin, hair, cloth, and once, the plastic of his goggles. She couldn’t stop her arms from swinging, driving him backward, worried most that her fists would soon find nothing in front of her. She opened her eyes and swung again, but now grabbed onto the collar of his lab coat. “Say I’m an adult.”

His arms went around her neck. She breathed the wooden smell of his pipe. “You’re wonderful,” he said. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.” His lips pressed against her forehead. “My God. You’re on fire.”

“I feel like I’m dying.” Her own father would have been quick with instructions and remedies. “You feel bad now, sure,” he’d say. “A week, you won’t even remember.” Arthur wasn’t her father. He would have nothing to tell her. But she knew these things for herself. “Do we have any aspirin at home?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “If not, I’ll get some.”

“I’ll have to call in sick tomorrow.”

“I’ll call for you. You can stay in bed.”

“You’ll stay with me, won’t you?” she said. “You don’t need to be here tomorrow, do you?”

He pulled her close, pressed her cheek to his chest, and held her more firmly than he ever had before. She slipped the button of his coat between her teeth and bit hard. "Of course I will," he said. "Of course."

My father walked into the kitchen, yawning. I took a long swallow of warm beer. My mother leaned back in her chair, holding the empty teacup in her lap. He opened the refrigerator door, bent low, rustled something wrapped in cellophane. Without glancing at us, he said, "So. What are we going to be eating at this wedding?"

If I'd known then how little all this was going to matter, I would have made something up. If I could have said for certain there would be a wedding in three weeks. As it turns out, there was. The caterers served some sort of chicken in a creamy sauce, but I was too drunk to taste it. My father never mentioned it, but since he didn't complain, I assume it wasn't bad. My mother danced with me stiffly, reminding me to take plenty of sun-tan lotion on our honeymoon to St. Thomas. "Don't forget you're still a Jewish boy," she said, sniffing. Three weeks after I sat in the kitchen listening to her story, I was legally bound to Julie, the woman I loved. For the next two years I slept no more than four hours a night. Julie's thrashing in bed grew almost violent, and occasionally I awoke with bruises. In the mornings, she complained of a sudden claustrophobia. We divorced. If I'd had even the faintest notion of how much I still had to learn, I would have told my father, "Shrimp scampi."

But at the time, his question pinned me to my chair and nearly brought me to tears. My mother covered my hand with hers and squeezed. "I don't know," I said. "I have absolutely no idea."

My father shrugged and said, “The hors-d’oeuvres are usually good. People always fill up on those. We have any pears?”

“Bottom drawer,” my mother said.

He picked up a brown pear, turned it around in his fingers, and put it back. I imagined Julie dancing across a crowded freeway, begging me to make her stop. What about me? I wanted to call from the guard rail, but couldn’t. Who’ll take care of me? My father closed the refrigerator door and said, “Any bananas?”

“On the counter. I’m not sure if they’re ripe yet.”

He lifted a banana, still somewhat green, and dropped it back into the basket. Then, quietly, he popped the lid from a tin of cookies, stuck one in his mouth, two or three more in his pocket, and strolled into the hallway. My mother stared after him, somewhat mystified, I think, and I glanced from one to the other, nearly choking with envy.