

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **THE RAMPARTS SUBLIME: A NOVEL**

Heather Marlene Zadig
Master of Fine Arts
2012

Directed By: Professor Howard Norman
Department of English

The prevailing concerns throughout this work of fiction are the questions of *Who is family?* and *Where is home?* It is a narrative which explores questions of identity in the context of modern American cultural mobility, wherein the boundaries of identity have been variously blurred, blended, and occupied by the forces of modernity and globalization. The narrative seeks to examine the usefulness of such boundaries within individual human relationships and, in particular, explores the potential for the blues as an art form to foster human relationships that are familial in nature, not in spite of its historical context but rather because of it. That the narrator himself is uncomfortably self-conscious of his own narration is representative of the novel's preoccupation with the problems of white discourse on race and cultural identity and the limits of language in general in attempts to explore and transcend such issues.

THE RAMPARTS SUBLIME: A NOVEL

By

Heather Marlene Zadig

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2012

Advisory Committee:
Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Emily Mitchell

© Copyright by
Heather Marlene Zadig
2012

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Epigraph	1
Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	30
Chapter 4	40
Chapter 5	46
Chapter 6	60
Chapter 7	68
Chapter 8	78
Chapter 9	86
Chapter 10	102
Chapter 11	108
Chapter 12	124
Chapter 14	135
Chapter 15	138
Chapter 16	153
Chapter 17	166
Chapter 18	179
Chapter 19	183
Chapter 20	191
Chapter 21	206
Chapter 22	216
Chapter 23	219
Chapter 24	225

Chapter 25	233
Chapter 26	242
Chapter 27	258
Chapter 28	261
Chapter 29	268
Chapter 30	279
Chapter 31	307
Chapter 32	317
Chapter 33	322
Chapter 34	324
Chapter 35	331
Chapter 36	335
Chapter 37	337
Chapter 38	343
Chapter 39	350

Epigraph

*There are loved ones in the glory
Whose dear forms you often miss.
When you close your earthly story,
Will you join them in their bliss?*

*Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by?
Is a better home awaiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky?*

*You remember songs of heaven
Which you sang with childish voice.
Do you love the hymns they taught you,
Or are songs of earth your choice?*

*You can picture happy gath'rings
Round the fireside long ago,
And you think of tearful partings
When they left you here below.*

*One by one their seats were emptied.
One by one they went away.
Now the family is parted.
Will it be complete one day?*

from "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?", hymn by Ada R. Habershon, 1907

Chapter 1

Grams was dead, and the ghosts of long-dead redwoods were rising up from the forests to welcome her into the afterlife. At least, that's how it appeared to me as I made the drive up the 101 from SFO to the Lost Coast of California, the region of my birth and boyhood, to make it home for the wake and funeral. Admittedly, I was in a daze from the news and from waking up several hours before dawn to catch the first flight out of D.C. to get there, so my mind was suggestible at best due to the lack of sleep. I never could get any shut-eye on a plane, something too public about it I guess. I'd heard it had been an unusually dry spring out West, which was confirmed by the hillsides pocked with charred patches of forest from the smattering of recent early wildfires throughout the region. Though a brief shower had brought momentary relief overnight, it wasn't enough to put out all the fires, and now I was greeted on my journey home by the unlikely pairing of the swirling mists typical of mid spring and the seemingly similar and yet fundamentally disparate wisps of smoke undulating among the water vapor, so closely intertwined that they seemed to be in rapt conversation with one another, in a dance together, though they were anathema to each other's existence. These were the ghastly apparitions which welcomed me home for the first time in over a decade, and they gave me the feeling that I should expect a reckoning when I arrived.

What I found as I pulled up to the homestead, which, being a mile away from anybody, was in this case not a euphemism, was G-pa, bent over some old jalopy out by the barn as always, and the pup I had nursed from a bottle after finding it whimpering near its dead mother on the side of a road the last summer I'd been there years ago. Now a feeble old dog, she was white in the face and barking cautiously from the porch at my

approach as she would for any stranger. And who could blame the poor creature; I had been away for so long.

It had been almost as long that G-pa had had anything to say to me whenever I'd called and talked with Grams about how things were going back home, and how things were going with me out in the world. He'd never gotten over the fact that Mom had moved us to the Central Valley after my father's untimely death in a logging accident so that she could try to get a real job and I could go to a real high school. And later, during my last visit in the summer between my junior and senior years at college after Mom had died suddenly as well, he'd been just as upset that I'd made it clear I had no intention of coming back home after graduation.

I'd always naively assumed that I'd have more time to slowly patch things up with G-pa from a distance through our intermediary, Grams, before having to come face to face with the man. I figured I'd make it big somewhere doing something-or-other, and that would validate my reasons for leaving the middle of nowhere, and he would have to acknowledge that it had been for the best. But here I was in my early thirties, a bachelor living in the rented basement of a row house in one of the grittier neighborhoods of our nation's capital, and I had little to show for my time away. Though I'd at least become a seasoned world traveler, I'd been more of a wanderer than an adventurer, and until recently I had been biding my time working at a small bookstore, a profession lurching towards obsolescence in general, and was no closer to picking a permanent career than I was ten years ago. The store had unexpectedly (at least to me) closed just a few weeks earlier because of problems with the lease, but I planned on continuing under the pretense that I still had a job because what was the point, really, of getting into an argument about

my lack of future prospects at Grams' funeral. I'd never been much of a penny-pincher, though, and I was down to about three months' living expenses, give or take, but I'd thrown caution to the wind and bought the pricey last-minute plane ticket because that's what one does in these situations, and I wasn't about to try repairing our relationship by starting out with a request for a loan.

I was sure G-pa was aware of my myriad misadventures and false starts, as Grams had always been quite the talker whether you were a willing audience or not, just as I was sure he would keep this knowledge mostly to himself and make me tell it all over again to his face. As I parked the rental car and made my way to the barn – a structure which had only ever given shelter to the broken machinery of G-pa's customers rather than any livestock – that old dog on the porch whom I barely recognized from her days as a pup halted her warning mid bark, gave a little start and a brief whine out of what I can only assume was recognition of my long-lost role as her foster mother, and trotted over as fast as her aging hips would allow to offer me a proper welcome.

“Hey, G-pa,” I finally said after patting the pooch on the head, drawing out the “aw” in “pa” as I'd done since I was in diapers and had given him this nickname. When I'd grown old enough to master the word “grandpa” with regularity, he told me he liked the old name I'd given him better, so I never dropped it. I was and remain his only grandchild, and since my father passed, his only relative of any kind.

“Ranger,” he acknowledged with a subtle nod, though his head remained tucked under the hood of the busted Chevy and he didn't look up. The dog – Rusty, I'd named her, as children unimaginatively do, to reflect the clusters of copper coloring dusting her otherwise black and white coat – licked my hand and made a figure-eight between G-pa

and me, looking up at him and nudging his pant leg as if to say *Don't you see who it is?* G-pa paid her no mind and kept at his work. Whether he was replacing an alternator or fixing some worn out belts, I couldn't tell you; I'd never developed G-pa's affinity for mechanical things, preferring instead to run wild through the lonesome valley my family had called home for five generations or to bury my nose in a book, this latter pastime being somewhat of an enigma to not only G-pa, but to my father as well, neither of whom had learned to read much at all. Hence my given name, Ranger, which contrary to most people's assumptions about me is not a nickname but is written just so on my birth certificate. Though no one ever said as much, I eventually came to the realization that it was simply a name my father could reliably spell, given that he saw it emblazoned on the rear end of his truck day in and day out on his way to work in the woods as a lumberjack. He called himself a logger, but I always knew that was just less of a hick name for a lumberjack.

As I watched G-pa tinker with his gnarled fingers which were blackened almost permanently, it seemed, from grease, the tension I felt about the distance that had accumulated between him and me was suddenly and palpably obsolete, and I moved to put my hand firmly on his shoulder.

"She was a good woman," I said, not because that is what one says in these circumstances, but because it was true. "The very best kind of woman I've known."

"And what do you know about women?" he snorted in his crotchety-on-the-surface, but good-natured-underneath way. "I was married to your grandmother at less than half your age, and here you are a bachelor in your thirties. A mighty shame, if you ask me. But then, you don't, do ya."

I patted him hard on the back. “Some would say it’s unwise to marry before you’ve got any hair on your chest, but that’s just some people.” He harrumphed, wiped his hands on a rag that appeared to me more soiled than he was, and I knew right then that we were okay.

G-pa was 64 at this point, and I was 33, so anyone could do the math and figure that there were more than a few unchaperoned dates in between. I happened to think he was still somewhat resentful of the fact that he found himself a widower at the age of fifteen with a brand spanking new baby boy on his hands, and thus his opportunities for ever leaving the woods had pretty much vaporized. Usually at this point in the story, people start to wonder *who’s Grams?* if G-pa was a widower at fifteen. As it turns out, the unfortunate girl whom my grandfather allegedly knocked up at fourteen and hastily married and who was technically my “real” grandmother, had died from a hemorrhage shortly after giving birth to my father. He surely would have been sent to an orphanage in the City and I’d never have been born if it hadn’t been for another unfortunate girl a few towns over whose baby had been stillborn a couple of days prior.

There are only two things that spread swiftly between isolated mountain towns, and that’s wildfire and gossip. As the story goes, everyone around knew the scandal of this other girl being pregnant and the father being too cowardly to step forward and marry her, but when news of her latest misfortune sped south and met the news of G-pa’s tragic circumstances as it moved north, there was only one sensible thing to be done. Before G-pa could even be contacted (they were strictly off the grid in those days), folks had sent word for the girl to bring her and her milk down for G-pa’s baby boy who was now without a mother and was surviving solely on sugar water. When G-pa opened the door to

his mother's house (for he was too young and poor for a house of his own), he was astonished to find an older lady from church standing with an unfamiliar girl of eighteen who wore a ruffled shirtwaist dress with wooden buttons that struggled to contain the leaking, swollen bosom of a mother with no babe to take up her breast.

There was nothing that needed to be said. The girl moved assuredly to the sound of the famished newborn who wailed in its milk crate that had been converted into a cradle. Wasting no time on formalities, she opened her shirt right there in the sitting room in front of G-pa and his mother to nurse the baby. As the infant's cries slowly subsided and he finally caught his breath to take in the long awaited nourishment, the girl broke into soft sobs of relief, clutching the baby as if it were a life preserver and she'd spent days adrift at sea.

The girl's name was Beatrice, and she never did go home. Everyone could see it was the best thing for everybody, for each had got back something treasured that had been lost. Within a few days' time, G-pa and Beatrice had gotten married and had baptized my dad all in a single, humble ceremony down at the Presbyterian church. Eventually, as Grams liked to say, each was too grateful for the other to *not* fall in love.

Out of respect for her departed baby and for my dad's dead mother, Beatrice had Dad call her Bea instead of Momma, though she loved him just the same. I called her Grams.

G-pa tossed the oily rag back on the edge of the hood and turned back towards the house. "Well what're you waitin' for? Get your stuff and c'mon in."

I knew enough about G-pa to know that he'd probably eaten nothing but beans and weanies if anything at all since Grams had gone into the hospital for chest pains the

week before, as it usually took folks a few days to organize meal deliveries for grieving families, so I'd stopped off for some groceries and pulled pork sandwiches at the store on my way through "town" (which consists, namely, of the aforementioned general store, a post office, and a gas station all rolled into one). Once I got everything inside and made my way to the kitchen, I finally had an opportunity to look around, and it struck me as uncanny how little anything had changed. Everything was as it always had been, so much so that the muscle memory took over completely, and as I opened and shut cabinet doors, I instinctively avoided the splintered edge of the one above the dish drain as if I'd never left, but instead had merely awoken for a midnight snack.

I heard the toilet flush from down the hall and watched as G-pa came back in the kitchen and opened the fridge to pull out a can of MGD. I waited for him to offer me one, and when he didn't, I wondered if it was because I wasn't considered a guest and was expected to help myself or because it hadn't occurred to him that I drank beer, seeing as how the last time I was here I was barely old enough to do so legally and hadn't yet developed a taste for it.

"Mind if I join you there?"

"I suppose you are of age, now, as I'm told you've supposedly got hair on that chest of yours. Musta migrated from your head." He got out another cold one and tossed it over the kitchen island, gesturing with his own can to my visibly receding hairline. I didn't know when we were going to talk about Grams, if I should bring her up again or not, but I figured I needed to submit to a decent amount of wisecracks, and he needed to drink a few more of those MGDs before we got there.

Sure enough, I endured a barrage of questions about my whereabouts, plans, and circumstances, the answers to which I knew he already knew, but that he needed to hear from me. I told him about the bachelor and masters degrees in Anthropology, with honors, the attempts at making a life in archaeology as a shovel bum, the summers in Kenya, and how I grew tired of living out of a tent and forming only short-term relationships. I went on to chronicle my time at the Smithsonian, and explained my need to get out of the basement cataloguing artifacts and return to the land of the living. When I moved onto the bookstore, I omitted the fact that it had been merely a ploy to check out of life and read good books for a few years until I figured things out. I told him about my plans for business school and my hopes that the owner of the small, independent café and book shop on H Street called Milo's, which sold both new and used books, would take me under his wing and perhaps sell me the business when he eventually retired. What I also neglected to mention was that the store had just recently closed only a couple weeks before, and that I was suddenly out of a job.

But all of that was another whitewashed version of my true intentions for being where I was in life, which were more related to the fact that I felt more comfortable around the rough-around-the-edges Northeast side of the District of Columbia than I did among the well-to-do elites of the Northwest part of the city. That my time coming of age in what people used to call the inner city, the immigrant dumps hidden in forgotten corners of West Sacramento, forever barred me from fitting in with the upper-middle classes, despite my hard-won education and the privilege that was supposed to come with it.

“Welp, sounds like you’ve got it all figured out, don’t it?” he quipped once I’d brought him up to the present, which was his way of letting me know that he saw right through me and my bullshit. His eyes always had that look about them, cool, crystalline, and transparent as glacial lakes.

“Nah,” I shrugged, “but I keep workin’ on it.” There was a lull in the conversation as the topic came to a close, and like the mists and smoke in the valley that afternoon, Grams’ memory floated above us in the silence, hovering on the edges of our lips.

G-pa finished up his fourth can of beer with a slurp and crumpled the aluminum in his grip as was his habit. “She was in the middle of knitting me a goddamned sweater for my birthday. It was in the bag she’d packed in a hurry before we headed to the hospital – she hated to be idle. What in God’s name am I gonna do with a half-finished sweater? I can’t wear it, I can’t donate it. Do I unravel it and give away the yarn? Would that be indecent? Or do I have to keep it, always, just as it is, sitting there in a bag?” He fiddled with the tab on the can, back and forth, until it broke off and looked out the kitchen window over the sink as if he were expecting an answer to shine in through its dusty panes.

“I’m sure one of her friends would know what to do with it. Maybe they could finish it for her, or make something out of the yarn in her memory. You don’t have to worry about these things yet. She’s only just passed yesterday.” He just stood there, frozen, biting his bottom lip as he used to do in the early days of giving up chewing tobacco.

“I tell you what,” I said, suddenly feeling inspired. “Let’s get drunk and hunt for rabbits.” At the mention of this time-honored ritual among the men in my family, a faint

flicker of mischief gleamed in G-pa's eyes. It wasn't an altogether unreasonable suggestion on my part. Though it would seem like a non sequitur to an outsider, the term "hunting for rabbits" hardly described the havoc that we intended to wreak on the meadow surrounding the property whenever we used to perform the custom. We hadn't done it since my father was alive and I was an adolescent, but Grams had always barely contained her contempt for the practice on the best of occasions and often outright hollered at us for making sport out of something so ridiculous.

"You boys are gonna wind up dead in a ditch somewhere if you keep up this foolishness," she used to say, all the while knowing that this was the one thing her disapproval was powerless to prevent. Now that she, my mother, and my father were all dead, it seemed a fitting memorial to the collective memory of what used to be our family.

As the sun went down over the hills, highlighting the rims of the clouds in the tropical hues of birds of paradise, G-pa broke his gaze out the window and opened the refrigerator to reach for another pair of cold ones. He tossed yet another can over the kitchen island and opened his own with a *pfssst* before taking a long and noisy gulp and holding the can up in the air in honor of those who were no longer present.

"Now yer talkin'."

Chapter 2

Anyone who has ever driven on dirt roads frequented by jackrabbits knows that they are some seriously dumb critters. When you come upon one of them smack dab in the middle of the road at night when they're drenched in the gleam of the headlights, rather than bolt into the safety and security of the tall dark grasses lining the road, the little fools almost always scamper away, panic-stricken, while inexplicably remaining directly and stupidly in the vehicle's path. It makes no difference whether you give them a head start or inch right up on their tails, they never veer off course until they are so exhausted from attempting to outrun you that they start dashing every which way and eventually make it off the road by sheer accident. Herein lies the sport of hunting for rabbits.

There are awards for the fastest rabbit on the course, as approximated by the maximum speedometer reading on the chase, dumbest rabbit on the course, as determined by the longest amount of time it takes for a rabbit to dash off the road (a purely subjective title, as there is never use of a timepiece for official measurement), and an award for the driver who ends up with the most "dead rabbits" in a ride, these being merely large bumps in the road that when driven over at ample enough velocity briefly launch the vehicle into the air and allow the driver to claim jubilantly, "Got one!" as the rest of us hoot and holler in response.

It had always been us three men lined up in the front seat of G-pa's '75 F-150 with me in the middle, but this would be the first rabbit hunting trip without my father, and it made me uneasy knowing I would sit shotgun in his old spot.

By the time we were ready to head out to the “course,” a series of dirt roads around the property that were shortcuts to other properties and to town, G-pa and I had gone through a full case of beer over the course of the evening. When we got to the pickup, the same one we’d always used, G-pa paused at the threshold of the driver’s side door.

“Why don’t you c’mon over on this side and let an old man ride shotgun for a change.” He was hardly an old man, but I hadn’t been old enough to drive the last time we’d gone out together, so I’d never had the chance to take the wheel. G-pa tossed me the keys over the cab and teetered over to the passenger side, and I offered no argument.

“All right,” I said solemnly as I climbed into the cab. “Should we say a few words before we go?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged, suddenly feeling self-conscious at the suggestion.

“Like a tribute or something.”

G-pa shook his head. “Boy, you always knew how to spoil a good time. If your father were here, he’d smack you upside the head. How’s that for a tribute? Now let’s go! Them rabbits is *waitin’* fer us!” G-pa did not generally talk like this, but ever since Mom and I had left home so I could pursue an education, he tended to accentuate his inner country bumpkin for my benefit, as if to rub it in the face of my scholarship and to let me know that he knew I sought to escape my humble origins. It came out even more when he’d been drinking heavily, which actually wasn’t all that often. Regardless of his delivery, he was right. The ride was the tribute in and of itself, and any further delay for a

moment of silence or sniveling would break the magic. I turned the ignition and peeled out of the gravel driveway and onto the course.

Earlier, as I was making the suggestion that we get drunk first and *then* go out driving around like hooligans, I'd heard Grams' repeated warning in the back of my mind about winding up in a ditch somewhere and wondered if that wouldn't be an apt ending to our reunion. Running into another vehicle wouldn't be an issue, but driving up too steep an embankment and flipping over or slamming into a deer was not outside the realm of possibility. I tried to keep this warning in mind as I made a concerted effort to stay on the road, despite the fact that it was just about as overgrown as the surrounding brush.

It became clear to me early on in the chase that we'd sent ourselves on a fool's errand, not because of the nature of the outing, which was admittedly juvenile at best, but because the empty space between G-pa and me on that seat seemed to be a vast chasm, and there never would be a good time to call it a night and turn around for home, for there would be no one there waiting up for us, pretending she hadn't been, shaking her head in her bathrobe and tsk-ing all the racket we were making as we came in reliving our glory, and I believe now that that had always been the point of the thing anyway.

But we persisted, the beer buzz substituting for genuine enthusiasm, and as soon as we came upon that first rabbit twitching its ears in the road, it was easy enough to fall into the old rhythm of the chase. I had to admit that I enjoyed being in the driver's seat for once after all those years as a passive participant. My role had always been that of the onlooker to the videogame; no matter how much you went through the motions with an invisible controller, leaning to one side to avoid a pitfall, earnestly pushing buttons that weren't there to evade an assailant's shot, and shouting instructions and advice, you were

always just watching someone else have all the real fun. It felt selfishly good to rev the engine and depress the gas pedal just enough to inch the jackrabbit forward, to urge it on its futile quest to outrun a vehicle with a couple hundred horsepower, to physically feel the wheel in my grip as I swerved to miss a rabbit's misguided attempts to stand its ground in the vain hope that it would blend in with its surroundings. As ridiculous as it sounds given the childish nature of our little game, it made me feel like a grown man in the presence of G-pa in a way that I hadn't experienced before. Maybe he knew that, and that's why he'd handed me the reins. More than likely, though, he probably just knew he was too drunk to take the wheel.

As the grey, velvety dusk of our departure faded into the black curtain of a moonless night, I began to wonder how I could draw the outing to a close without attracting attention to the fact that Grams was still dead and we'd have to grieve about it eventually no matter how much we tried to piss the night away. I thought about this as we were chasing a downright obstinate rabbit that simply refused to give way and dart off the road into the brush despite my fiercest attempts to nudge her in that direction. She'd led us down a particularly abandoned looking stretch of road, which was really more of a wide path cluttered with tall, ferocious thistles, and she kept stopping every ten yards or so to turn sideways and look back at us, to stare, it seemed, before continuing on her way. It had to be a female, as she was bigger than any jackrabbit I'd ever seen, and the males are usually the smaller of the two sexes. We chased her around several bends in the road until it seemed like, rather than pursuing her, we were the ones being pursued, or rather drawn in, lured even, but for what purpose I couldn't fathom.

“Well, ain’t she feisty!” G-pa quipped after this had gone on for several minutes with no end in sight.

“You think she’s trying to draw us away from her babies?” I offered.

“Beats me,” he shrugged, as he rolled down the window letting in a chorus of crickets and the syrupy sweet smell of ceonothus blossoms.

We’d stopped trying to force this one off the road and were now merely following, creeping slowly, steadily behind her as she *hop hop hop*, turned, *hop hop hop*, turned, further and further onward. We were riveted to that little black tail bobbing in the dirt, so much so that as we climbed a small hill and descended around a sharp curve, we nearly failed to see the giant eucalyptus tree that had somehow grown undisturbed in the exact center of the road.

I slammed on the brakes, which, despite the fact that we were only going the speed of a jackrabbit in no hurry to get anywhere, made the two of us lurch surprisingly far forward in our seats. Rather than take the opportunity to keep going past the tree or to finally dash into the grass, the rabbit turned and faced us head on as if we’d pursued it into an alley where its posse was waiting as backup to ambush us. She sat there standing erect, staring not at us, but at some unknown point far off into the distance, like a statue. With her forelegs positioned together in front of her, her furry chest was puffed out in a downy pillow shaped like a heart, and I thought that whoever first invented the word “bosom” must have done so in the presence of such a creature.

“Been awhile since you’ve been out this way I guess,” I finally said, with my knack for stating the obvious when breaking a long silence.

“S’pose so,” was all G-pa said in reply.

It wasn't terribly surprising that such a tree had grown so large in only a decade or so, since that's what they'd been brought over here from Australia for in the first place – their extremely rapid growth (though they'd turned out to be worthless as lumber and now had taken over native habitat once reserved for oak trees). What had startled me about the tree was its placement; G-pa had always been diligent about the upkeep of the property, even down to filling the potholes, and that the tree had matured to such an extent meant that Grams' health wasn't the only thing that had been in decline around there.

“Well I guess that's it then,” I said, grateful now for the imperative to turn back. “She put up quite the chase.”

“The best kind.”

Defeated for the first time at our own game, we made our way back in the satisfied silence that comes from losing to a worthy opponent. Since the banks on that stretch of road were too steep to drive up to turn around, I had to go in reverse for a good half a mile until we reached the intersection of another path. That rabbit never did run away as long as we could see her until after we'd turned the corner to head for home.

* * * *

The next morning, I slept in despite being on Eastern time, probably to make up for my pre-dawn departure the morning before. I'd been essentially sober by the time we got back to the house, but the fatigue had made me loopy, so I told G-pa I was calling it a night and went upstairs to my old room, which was just as I had left it other than a

noticeable accumulation of dust. I awoke to an empty house; G-pa had undoubtedly gone out to the barn to immerse himself in some repair job, and I figured I'd leave him be until lunchtime before starting in about funeral arrangements and whatnot.

It was the kind of morning – crisp and cool as an apple fresh out of the fridge, but not a breeze or cloud in the sky – that required dressing in layers, because before you knew it, the dew would vaporize and you'd be stripping off your fleece and wishing you'd worn shorts as soon as the sun climbed overhead. Though there was much to be done, I could not resist the magnetic pull of the outdoors, pleading with me to explore my old territory.

It's not how most people think it is out on the Lost Coast, at least it wasn't for me. Usually they think of Eureka, which actually marks the end of being "lost," since it's where the highway starts back up again, or they imagine that I lived right above hidden coves made for killer surfing over the black sand beaches. The stuff of weekend-getaway pieces in travel magazines. But most of the region is just a jumble of isolated logging towns, ranches, and sawmills on land that's too rugged and too remote for the federal or state highway administrations to want to have anything to do with it. And by towns, I mean loose settlements of fifty to a couple hundred people living on fairly spread-out homesteads who all happen to go to the same general store. People think it's a bunch of hippie hideaways, but that's up near Eureka again where food co-ops and hemp clothing stores abound. Some of the little towns on the actual coast are nice, but most of the Lost Coast isn't even *on* the coast. I never even went to the beach till I was six. We were pretty much out in the backcountry, where folks were either laborers, ranchers,

survivalists, or forest rangers, and those for whom the term “Lost” was really an invitation to go ahead and lose themselves.

But hiking around the property that morning made me admit that the land, though unforgiving in her terrain, was certainly generous with her vistas. More than that, though, she was a mistress of nuance, with infinite variations in elevation and exposure to sunlight creating such a wealth of microclimates that the difference between lush fern-filled forest and grassy oak woodland was a simple matter of stepping over the next hillside. It’s a place where you can never really get turned around, never truly be lost, because you can tell the elevation and direction of a slope by the presence or absence of manzanita, or by how tall it grows, or whether there is a particular lichen growing on the rocks beneath it. It’s a place filled with equal parts beauty, ignorance, and perpetual loneliness, and I was fairly glad that I got out of there when I did.

You see, I have lived a life of death. That is, so many people and creatures who have been essential to my life have died, and I have been on the brink of death myself on so many occasions that its rituals and accompanying emotional states have become as familiar to me as catching a cold. You get through it by the grace of chemicals and distraction and then eventually it fades to nothing, to memory. And it becomes a blip, another nuisance in the course of a life. At least, that’s how it usually went for me.

At thirty-three years old, I no longer had any living ancestors or descendants except for G-pa. No surviving pets from childhood or adolescence. I myself was almost dead before I took my first breath. The doctor and nurses at the hospital in Fortuna had given up on me right away and declared me stillborn, but my mother refused to accept this and in her state of denial, she rubbed, stroked, and agitated my purple little body as I

rested on her swollen belly, still wet with blood and vernix, much as I've seen people do for the runt of a litter of puppies or kittens, until finally I let out the faintest mew of a cry and began to breathe on my own. She hadn't allowed them to sever the umbilical cord, which I suppose is what saved me in the end or I surely would've been brain damaged. Either way, it must have all happened remarkably quickly. Three weeks later, my great-grandmother on my father's side passed away from pneumonia, which everyone attributes to her time visiting the contagion-filled hospital to see her one and only great-grandchild. And I only met her the one time.

It wasn't to be the last of my near-death experiences, and I suppose that after each successive instance, the relief when I pulled through must have been less and less of a comfort to my mother and more of an indication that she should be prepared for my imminent departure from this earth. The combined inventory of these episodes would be comical, really, if it weren't so decidedly not. There were severe food allergies – dairy and soy in particular – that made me unable to tolerate my mother's breast milk, or rather those foods in her diet, as well as the infant formulas on the market in those days, and I survived mostly on bottled Gatorade until they could figure out which foods were causing the trouble and my mother stopped eating them, but by then I had dipped under five pounds, a pound and a half below my birth weight. It was my father who had come through with the Gatorade idea – ever the exercise enthusiast – after I began having seizures from the electrolyte imbalance, and it wouldn't be the last time he would save my life.

His next opportunity was while I sat bouncing on his knee when I was nearly six months old. We were dining at a community picnic under a sugar pine, which are rare in

our neck of the woods. The sugar pine, in addition to being alarmingly tall, is known for having the longest cones of any conifer. The one that careened down like a missile onto my father's knee was one of the largest anyone there had ever seen, nearly 25 inches long, longer than I was at the time if I were stretched out end to end. He was bouncing me to the beat of the live bluegrass music being played at the picnic, and several witnesses attested to the fact that he had only just moved me to his other knee during a particularly rousing crescendo when the colossal pine cone crashed into the knee from which I had just left. Though he had been wearing denim jeans at the time, the projectile cone left a gash on his leg that bled through his pants and a fist-sized purple welt over the knee which lasted for more than a month.

One would think that my parents would have become over-protective of me by then, but instead I suppose they let me run relatively wild out of a belief that if the universe truly had had it out for me, there would be nothing they could do to stop it from reclaiming me to my origins. Without getting into the specifics of all these brushes with mortality (because the list approaches the incredible, if not outright dubious), I will say that in addition to the aforementioned incidents, there were diseases, fires, mudslides, earthquakes, floods, and tidal waves which racked my youth with catastrophe after catastrophe until eventually, calamity was what I came to expect when I got up in the morning.

But if the universe indeed had it out for me, it chose to express its enmity by attacking those whom I loved in order to strike me where it mattered most. For my part, I chose to respond with, not exactly Stoicism, but more like a code of practiced acceptance. I saw death not as tragedy but as a way of life, death as the mundane. Though there

comes a point when such a life cannot continue because then there is no one left. And what does one do then? I know, how incredibly cheery of me.

I hadn't always been so unsentimental about the dead and dying, though, and as it was getting close to midday, I was reminded of this fact when I stumbled upon my old secret pet cemetery in a small clearing near the mangled trunk of a dead live oak (the irony of this particular tree's species name having not been lost on me when I was a boy). No one in my family would have permitted my insistence on fawning over animals by giving them what I considered to be a proper burial, so I'd picked this remote spot to lay to rest everything from pet grasshoppers to lizards to the occasional field mouse. These were unsanctioned pets, of course, the only allowed ones being dogs, so I had also kept them in secret while they were alive. The markers were still there, more or less – flat stones onto which I'd written names, the type of animal, and the dates of death with a Magic Marker. They'd mostly been knocked over and were covered with weeds, but when I brushed off the dirt, I could still make out most of the writing on a few of them:

Gimpy
beloved frog
3/16/90

Slurps
beloved lizard
7/2/89

Screwball
beloved dragonfly
8/25/92

As I recalled, I had actually adopted some of these deceased creatures posthumously out of a young boy's sentiment that the important thing about dying with dignity was that you should be missed. Which reminded me that it was getting time to head back to the house to help G-pa make arrangements for the service, so I paid my respects and went home.

But on my way back, I came across another grave of sorts, this time of an old sailing dinghy that G-pa had once accepted as payment for rebuilding the engine of a passing tourist's broken-down pickup truck. When the man's truck had died hauling the boat off the beach, G-pa had offered to tow it and fix it up in exchange for the sailing vessel, a Coronado 15, and the gentleman was in enough of a hurry to get home that he was willing to part with it.

I looked her over now and realized the hull was still intact, though significantly faded and blighted by rust. The sails were on deck nestled in their original drawstring bags, though buried under a thick sludge of mud and mildew, and the tiller was dotted all over with rotted-out termite holes, but you could still make out *The Wayfarer* in black lettering on the back. I recalled the times we used to take her out on the water; G-pa would sometimes drive just him and me up to Trinidad Bay, north of Eureka, on the occasional weekend when work was slow. We'd camp out on the beach, sleeping in the bed of the truck so we wouldn't get bit up by chiggers. He told me he learned to sail from one of his buddies who was in the Navy, and he knew the names of everything on board and showed me how to rig the sheets like he'd spent his whole life on the water himself.

The last time we went out was after my father had died and just before my mother had moved us to the Central Valley. I believe he took us out partly to escape the cloud of

grief hovering over the house and also to say goodbye to me in his own way. I understood his motives but was too morose and sullen to appreciate them at the time, which was compounded by the fact that I was feeling ill the afternoon of our departure.

It was an El Niño year and when we arrived at the shore, dark, menacing clouds were advancing from the west, but after the two hours' drive from Petrolia, G-pa was resolute about getting us on the water for a sail before sunset. The wind ripped fiercely across the surface and tilted us over so far that the sails were nearly parallel to the water. I was sure we would capsize, but G-pa looked cool as ever, calmly and capably taking over both the riggings and the tiller so that I could hold onto the edge of the hull with a death grip. But on the way back, lightning raced us back to the pier, and G-pa ordered me to lay low in the base of the hull, which was sloshing about with rain and seawater. He somehow found the strength to crouch towards the rear the whole way back, though the one time I glanced up, I could tell he was visibly in pain from the strain of it. By the time we got back to the pier, I was burning up with a fever, and without a word, G-pa drove us to the closest seaside inn so we could dry off and he could put me to bed. As far as I knew, that was the first and last time G-pa had ever sprung for a motel room, and I knew that it must have pained him to haven taken the extra expense, but also that he must have felt even more terribly for having persisted so doggedly with the miserable outing altogether.

My fever was fleeting and broke the next morning with a sunrise that betrayed not a hint of fog or clouds. We made instant oatmeal in the motel room and spent the day as tourists in nearby Arcata, eating candied apples and watching seagulls divebomb college students for their lunches. He never actually said goodbye, or really anything for that

matter, and we never told Grams or my mother about the storm, or the fever, or the motel. But I had never felt so cared for, so sheltered, as I had that weekend. To see *The Wayfarer* now as a skeleton, an artifact, was to lose a fragment of that feeling to memory.

When I finally got back to the house and talked things over with G-pa, I learned that Grams' church lady friends were taking care of the planning since, according to him, they were better at that sort of thing – flowers, music, details – than he was. She'd wanted a cremation, so there wasn't much to do with respect to putting together a funeral. The reception would be in the fellowship hall of the church because it was far more convenient than our remote property would be for mourners to access, so we didn't even have to spruce up the house to get it ready for guests.

G-pa and I passed much of the next few days in joint silence in the noticeable absence of the one person who always kept our conversations flowing like the gurgle of a spring-fed stream. We fell back into the old routines so easily it was as though I'd only been away on an extended vacation, G-pa puttering about in his barn, and I roaming about on long, rambling walks and reading in the hammock on the front porch. In the evenings, G-pa would further evade discussions by whipping out his guitar, an old greased-stained Stella, and I would sit beside him as he alternately picked and thrummed out blues and old-timey tunes that were as familiar to me as the grooves and rhythm of the porch swing on which I sat to listen to them. It was through this music that he most effectively communicated, and the notes that he sang out on those nights were raw and sharp as a jagged saw blade.

When it came time for the service, we still hadn't managed to talk things through, not about Grams, not about me leaving, and not about what would happen now that G-pa

was alone on the ranch (“ranch” being somewhat of a misnomer, but was nevertheless what we called the place). As we greeted mourners at the Fellowship Hall, I pinned my hopes on the ceremony acting as a catalyst for the conversations that needed to take place before I went back to D.C.

The ladies had done a marvelous job of putting things together. There was a local high school girl who sang “His Eye is on the Sparrow” so clearly and pitch-perfect, and with such gusto and earnestness as could only come from someone young and sheltered enough to have never experienced any true grief of her own, thus sparing us from watching a far more embarrassing performance riddled with sniffles, wavering high notes, and unfinished stanzas. Rosemary Perkins, a lifelong friend from the knitting circle, had made a draping, ornate doily for underneath the urn. The irises were silk, given the great distance to the nearest florist, but they were free of dust and cobwebs and were freshly primped and arranged, as much as they could be considering they weren’t real.

G-pa and I sat side by side, and he was well composed throughout the service, as was to be expected. I noticed, though, that he held onto the hymnal from his seat the whole time, turning to the correct pages at the proper moments even though the book would have been of no help to him and he’d had all the hymns memorized. But there must have been something about the solidness of a book, an actual thing with matter and heft, that was reassuring to him, and I found the behavior to be strangely comforting yet terrifically sad at the same time.

When the memorial service had ended and the chairs were folded and cleared for the reception, G-pa congregated with some of the men outside with a communal flask of

scotch whiskey while I fielded condolences from the ladies in the hall. Even under that cloud of grief, the busy-bodies could not resist grilling me on my whereabouts and accomplishments since I had last been in town, and I found myself feeling more as though I were at a graduation than a funeral.

The conversation was tedious and exhausting, and while discussing with Mrs. Willoughby, my old Sunday school teacher, the challenges of selling actual books in the dreaded days of the medium's predicted extinction (all the while struggling to resist the notes of bitterness and irony that were seeping into my voice at the fact that this job was, indeed, now extinct), my gaze wandered and I noticed behind her the gleam of a single strand of spider silk extending at an angle from the blade of an inert ceiling fan all the way down to the edge of an old pew that was being stored up against the wall. I could not recall having ever seen such a long thread of silk, which, judging from its location and tautness, must have been a recent creation, and I marveled at the degree of the angle which had made the strand appear to be the hypotenuse of an invisible right triangle. It made me wonder how the spider had propelled itself so far sideways on its descent from the fan in the absence of a breeze, and I suddenly had a great desire for the filament to be preserved just as it was: unbroken, taut, free of dust. It was hopeless, I know, but at that moment I wondered whom I might approach to discuss the possibility of never again turning on that fan or perhaps putting traffic cones around the pew so that passersby would never walk right through it accidentally and destroy it forever.

After what seemed like hours of nonstop conversation, finally it was just the two of us – or three, as it were, counting Grams' ashes. G-pa had to have been drunk off his gourd, but the only hint of this was a characteristic glossiness, a certain reflective quality,

to his usually transparent eyes that seemed to turn them into small, orb-shaped mirrors. I sat down on the steps of the stage area next to him and couldn't think of anything of value or significance to say. One never can in these moments, so I resisted the instinct to spew out clichés; G-pa more than anyone would have been insulted by a gesture as empty as a string of words anyway, which to a nearly illiterate man were about as useful as those silk irises were at lifting the burden of hurt. At least the whiskey had a tangible impact of some kind, if not necessarily the desired one.

“Shall I get her?” I asked after several moments had gone by, or maybe several minutes, I couldn't tell.

“Get who?” he snorted. “In case you haven't noticed, there's no one left in this dang hall but you and yours truly.”

He liked to make things difficult for me, especially conversation. I suppose it was his way of toughening me up, but it didn't seem to have done anything but widen the sprawling parking lot that had paved its way between us.

“Come on, it's time to go home,” I said.

“Home? I don't think you know anything about that, boy. It ain't where you think it is.”

“Well I'm sure Rusty could use some supper, so let's go back to the *house* and go to bed.”

“I'm comin' back with you.”

“I know. I'll go get the truck.”

“No, dag gummit, I'm goin' back to Washington with you.” He paused to let this sink in, because apparently he was serious. “And you can't say no, 'cause I already got

me a ticket. One-way. No refunds. It's all set." I wasn't sure what to say to this. I assumed it was partly the liquor talking and partly the grief, so I intended to placate him until it wore off and he forgot about it by morning.

"Well we can talk about this—"

"Don't need to talk about nothin', Ranger. Get the truck; it's time to pack up. I'm goin' home with you."

Chapter 3

Despite the fact that G-pa and I had barely said three words at a time to one another in the previous few days since I'd been in town, he talked my ear off on the way home that night. Not only was he dead serious and not at all bluffing about the nonrefundable ticket, he had already made arrangements for the house to be shuttered indefinitely, its nonessential contents to be auctioned off at an estate sale, and for Rusty to live out the rest of her days on his buddy Roger's ranch (an actual one, complete with cows and horses and cowboys). Roger Thompson and his wife Sharon had been Grams and G-pa's best friends since as long as I could remember and were as close to an aunt and uncle as I would ever get, so I am sure they didn't even blink when G-pa asked them to take in our old dog along with the four they already had.

Ostensibly, G-pa intended to come back with me to spread Grams' ashes at her father's grave in Arlington according to her wishes. "You think I'd trust you with a thing like this, Ranger?" he'd said. "You'd probably get caught and botch it all up." I tried to tell him that Arlington was a humongous cemetery, and I was sure I could sprinkle a few ashes without attracting the attention of any guards, but he liked to think of me as being forever the gawky adolescent who used to trip over the lip of the front door a couple times a week. Really, though, I could tell he just didn't want to be the last one left on that old plot of his 100 miles from nobody.

"I got the money to pay half the rent. I can sleep in the bathtub if you need me to, Lord knows I've slept in worse. Either way," he said, "I ain't gonna let you leave me to rot in that heap o' junk out in that barn till the coyotes come an' eat my carcass."

I had no argument to offer in response. Though I imagined he would loathe living in D.C., how could I tell a man who had helped raise me, a man who was now all alone in the world *except* for me, that he had to stay and die a hermit? I hadn't had the time to seriously think through the consequences, but it didn't matter; I didn't have it in me to say no.

It was surprisingly easy to prepare G-pa for leaving the only place he had ever known. We draped the furniture that was to stay in the house with drop cloths and tagged everything that was meant for the auction, and a longtime friend and customer of his who did this sort of thing took care of the details. We dropped off Rusty at Roger and Sharon's the day before we left, and I said my goodbyes with a game of tug-of-war, figuring she'd be dead and buried by the time I made it back. More than getting the place ready for us to leave, though, I was especially nervous about preparing G-pa for the trip across the country, his first plane ride ever, and moving into an urban neighborhood after spending his entire life out in the backcountry.

I should say a few words now about G-pa. The man was an anachronism almost as soon as he was born. His Canadian mother dressed him in the androgynous dresses of her Scottish ancestors until he was nearly the age of four (I know because I've seen the pictures). Later, he contracted polio after nearly everybody else had gotten the vaccine (again, because of his mother, who apparently passed on her suspicious nature to him). Though his case was relatively mild, it left him with weak old man legs throughout the prime of his youth. Even his tastes had always been old-fashioned, throw-backs to way before his time. Having never owned a television or even left the region, G-pa listened

exclusively to bluegrass, old-timey mountain music, and the blues – jazz, swing, and rock-and-roll had bypassed him entirely.

He had, of course, *seen* television, but mostly when he was a boy on occasional visits to an aunt who lived up north in Eureka, which he once told me was where he developed his love of machines. G-pa never cared too much for the programming on his old aunt's TV set, but he was enamored of the things that it advertised. This was back when new gizmos were called things like “Zenith Cobra-Matic Radio Phonograph” and “Vocatron Portable Plug-in Inter-com” and “Futurized Raytheon TV.” He would toil and tinker with any broken-down piece of junk that had moving parts, and he eventually grew up to be a miracle worker of sorts – he'd fix radios, engines, electric fans, you name it. It's how he made his living since his legs were too weak for logging and mill work. He was so good that people eventually brought the work to him, despite the fact that he lived way out in the boonies. The only thing that ever stumped him was the computer chip, which was practically space science as far as he was concerned. G-pa never made it over the digital divide, but then he never cared to.

Anyway, his legs were too weak for the army, and having to provide for a wife and baby from the age of fifteen meant he had to stay put, and though I am quite sure that the airplane had always loomed large in G-pa's mechanical fantasies, he'd simply never had the opportunity to board one.

On the day of the flight, I'd drilled G-pa on what he could and could not bring on the plane in his pockets or carryon luggage. He balked at having to pack away his canteen and pocketknife – items from which he'd never really been separated before – but he relented when I reminded him of the incidents that had necessitated these restrictions.

He'd be allowed to carry his precious Stella through the checkpoints, but would likely have to hand it over to someone at the gate, which I knew made him nervous. I went over and over the full range of security procedures so that G-pa wouldn't hold up the line out of confusion over when to take off his shoes or become alarmed if somebody rifled through his belongings.

"It's a delicate dance," I said when he tried to brush aside my concern. "They'll pull you over for extra screening if you get gruff with them, so don't get cranky and it'll all go smoothly."

He scoffed. "*Women* get cranky. You got nothin' to worry about there."

Thankfully, the tutorial seemed to help, and G-pa sailed through security by paying close attention to the folks around him. At least he was obedient when it mattered.

As we waited at the gate and watched the Boeing 777 roll up, his knee began to bounce automatically up and down as if controlled by its own runaway motor. "Boy, I would sure like to get my hands under the belly of that beast. Now that's a *machine*," he whistled.

I grinned to myself and decided I'd try to introduce him to the pilots when we boarded to get him a glimpse of the cockpit before they bolted the doors shut for the flight. After gingerly passing off his guitar to the gentleman at the bottom of the jetway ("You take care of her, now, ya hear?" he'd admonished), he patted the rivets on the hull of the plane and climbed aboard. Sure enough, the pilots were kind enough to let him in for a look, probably sensing the same eager thrill that they usually saw in the eyes of six-year-olds who built model planes and dreamt of becoming fighter pilots someday. I let

him explore gadget heaven in peace and told him I'd be back in our seats when he was done.

When he made his way back to our aisle, G-pa gave up his seat in the middle next to mine to let two lovebirds sit together who'd bought their tickets at the last minute. He moved to the seat right behind me on the right side of the plane and stared out the window over the silver wing just behind us. I was glad of the separation between us, to be honest. There would be plenty of time for talk when he settled into my apartment, which I was still trying to wrap my head around. As I said before, he'd always been like a father to me (my father having been more like an older brother), and the fact of the matter was that I loved him. But how this West Coast mountain man was ever going to adapt to living in an East Coast metropolis was beyond my comprehension.

The sky was clear when we took off, but we were flying into the east at sunset to a place and time where night had already arrived. Behind us, a blood-orange horizon blazed beneath the indigo ceiling, and I could sense G-pa buzzing as he sat craning his neck to capture the very moment the sun dipped around the edge of the earth. His raw enthusiasm made it impossible for me to ignore the view, and I found myself feeling the way a father must feel upon sharing his little one's first fireworks display on the Fourth of July.

The last distinct features on the ground were a series of low mountains that lurked beneath us and seemed to be the vertebrae of giant slumbering, long-extinct creatures lying in wait. Towards the nose of the plane and down below, the ground was obscured by a mist which blended straight ahead into a purple band of haze that crept up into the blank navy atmosphere. The lights on earth had not yet switched on, and the stars had not

yet come out. No clouds or shapes. Only color, and then the dark. We were flying into nothingness.

With my laptop battery dead, and having already read the in-flight magazine on the way out, I had nothing to do but stare out the window and steal an occasional glance back at G-pa to check on how he was doing. I didn't know how he'd take it, if he'd be a nervous flyer, or if he'd get airsick, or what. Thankfully, he seemed to take to it the way a child does, or I suppose more accurately, like a person out of time. I wondered what it must be like to fly across country on a triple-seven having never seen one on television or even in a newspaper.

G-pa poked me regularly on the shoulder to comment on the things he saw as if he were a kid at the World's Fair. "That one there looks like God puked down a bucket of gold," he joked in reference to the layout of a city we flew over about midway into the flight.

"That would be Omaha," I offered. He peeled his eyes away from the window a moment to look around the cabin.

"Why's nobody else looking out the windows, Ranger?"

"'Cause everyone's been on a plane before but you, G-pa."

It felt good being an authority on something to him for a change. I had become an instant expert on flying in the 21st Century, and I milked it for all it was worth.

When we hit clouds shortly after that, G-pa actually wept, turning further towards the window so the people next to him wouldn't see. "There's nothing out there no more," he murmured. He was right. We could have been flying over the arctic: a city beneath the clouds shimmered elusively the way the aurora borealis would look like if it could be

seen from above. Or like sailing the seven seas upside down. The clouds below and the black depths of the sea above. Everything was topsy-turvy.

“It’s probably just a short patch of them,” I reassured him. “We’ll be past it in no time.”

This seemed to cheer him up. He clearly trusted me in this matter, the way most people trust their local weather forecaster. When you haven’t the knowledge to figure it out yourself, you’ve just got to believe. “I guess this is what it must look like for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve,” he said, trying to look at it in a positive light. I knew he didn’t believe Santa Claus really existed, but he believed in him the way people believe in Paul Bunyan and George Washington and Elvis. Just because they don’t exist doesn’t mean they aren’t *real*.

This is where things started to go south, though. The clouds, formerly only beneath us, now enveloped the plane in all directions. G-pa started to panic. “How do the pilots know where to go? They could run us into a building or a mountain or another aeroplane for that matter!” He knew about compasses and altimeter readings and radar – he wasn’t stupid – but for all he knew, we were flying as blind as Amelia Earhart was when she was lost over the Pacific.

“No, they’re all connected, G-pa. It’s all connected, see. All the planes are being tracked and keep in touch with air traffic control. They won’t let that happen.” I found myself sheepishly at a loss to explain how exactly this was accomplished, but I’d seen enough action movies that involved tracking flights to know without a doubt that this was true. I decided against trying to describe the mechanics of it and went on with vague

platitudes. “They’re watching out for everyone. Everybody watches out for everyone else.”

He gripped the edge of his armrest and ordered a whiskey from the flight attendant. I handed her a ten and told her to make it two.

By that point, the engine and part of the wing were the only things visible out the window. The turbine was disturbingly motionless, like a black hole or vortex that appears on the surface to be benign but indiscriminately captures everything that dares to veer towards the event horizon. Though I knew that right inside the chamber there was a violent reaction taking place, from our vantage point, suspended in a blanket of clouds, the world and we stood utterly still.

Then just as suddenly as we had entered them, there were virtually no more clouds. Now, though, there was nothing but black on black. I told G-pa I guessed that we were soaring over some national forest in West Virginia because even cornfields in Iowa are dotted with lights from depots, silos, and truck stops. He seemed proud that the Land was still home to wilderness, even in the more civilized East, for though he may have been anti-government, G-pa was decidedly pro-America.

Sure enough, we’d passed West Virginia, and the pilot announced we were starting the initial descent into the Washington metropolitan area, and would we please fasten our seatbelts and all the usual landing instructions. Now if he’d just left it at that, we’d all have been fine, but he had to go ahead and tell the people on the *left* side of the plane that there was excellent visibility this evening and they’d get to see quite a show of the White House and the Capitol and all the monuments lit up in all their nighttime glory upon landing. Keep in mind that G-pa was a man who’d never even heard of the TSA and

who experienced all of 9/11 over the radio like it was some kind of extended, horrific fireside chat. So when he got up as we were on final approach even though I tried to explain what was the matter with it, he couldn't see why I or anybody else for that matter would mind if he just stepped into the aisle to peek through the little peephole of a window on the other side, why anyone would want to *prevent* him, a God-fearing red-blooded American *citizen*, from getting his first and last glimpse of the Washington Monument from above. He had come all this way, from the redwood forest, over purple mountains, and he was pretty damn well sure there had been some amber waves of grain down there somewhere, to Our Nation's Capital, and he'd be *darned* if anybody was going to stop him. This he said to the male flight attendant who tried first with words, then with force, to get him to go back to his seat. If he'd had an aisle seat, it would have been easier to shove him back down, but as it was, they would have had to lift him up over two people to get him to his window seat, and it was a full flight.

That's when some of the passengers got involved in the struggle – you know how touchy and heroic people are nowadays – but if one of them hadn't been Korean and another hadn't been Pakistani – which were nationalities he'd likely never even seen before – he probably wouldn't have thought that foreigners were trying to take over the plane, and he probably wouldn't have fought back and given one of them a black eye, and the cop wouldn't have had to get involved the way he did, and G-pa wouldn't have been arrested by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority when we arrived at Reagan National Airport.

This was how I'd explained it, anyway, to the officers questioning me while G-pa was being detained until they determined that he was in fact an ignorant, if well-meaning,

old fool rather than an actual threat. *So you see, I had told them, he hadn't meant any harm by it, and he wasn't being disruptive on purpose, and he is definitely not a terrorist. He was just being a patriot, and isn't that all this country has ever asked of any of us?*

Chapter 4

It was long after midnight before we got home to my basement apartment in Trinidad; I took a circuitous route so G-pa could see the White House, the Capitol, and the monuments bathed in light up close and personal to make up for the botched landing. We road together in my Subaru hatchback in silence, of course, for there was nothing else to say after a night like we'd just endured. The late arrival turned out to be both a blessing and a curse considering I hadn't had the chance to explain to G-pa what kind of a neighborhood he was about to move into. It was good in that it was no time for sightseeing, but it also meant that we had to drive through a police checkpoint to get to my place, which had been set up around an eight-block perimeter in the previous couple weeks in an effort to combat a spike in deadly shootings in the area. As one might guess, this made it difficult if not impossible to conceal the nature of the neighborhood, which, to someone like me who lived there by choice, had its charms, but to an outsider, was undoubtedly a blighted place.

I had also failed to mention in my descriptions of where I lived that my neighbors were almost exclusively black. I'd omitted this bit of information, not because I was concerned about G-pa's reaction, but because I knew he would have been insulted that I thought it warranted mentioning at all, for despite his lack of exposure to other cultures, G-pa had always been a fervent, if unlikely, supporter of the Civil Rights Movement. Still, having spent his life routinely around only a couple of hundred people, none of whom were African-American, G-pa was really just a supporter in theory at that point as far as I was concerned.

As I pulled up to the blocked road, I rolled down my window and handed my license to the policeman on duty, who was one of the ones I knew, Officer Poole, and I told G-pa to do the same.

“What’s this all about?” G-pa asked me, but in light of the events earlier in the evening, he gave me his ID without a fight.

“It’s just a safety measure. There’s been a lot of crime around here lately, and they’re just checking to make sure we’re not wanted for armed robbery or something. No big deal.” But it was a big deal. It had been all over the papers and local radio shows for weeks, and the residents were not at all pleased at being singled out for heightened scrutiny. Some called it racist, others, merely a sign that we were devolving into a surveillance state. I’d kept out of the debate for the most part, but when the cops started waving me through because I, and my white boy’s car, were so instantly recognizable and presumably not a threat, I’d insisted on stopping and handing them my ID anyway.

“Hey man, what’s happenin’? Who’s your friend here?” Officer Poole looked and talked like he could’ve been from LA – laid back, tan with blond hair – but his distinctive, if not quite place-able, accent from one of the more blue-collar Eastern cities, maybe Baltimore (I hated to say that they all sounded the same to me), betrayed his true origins.

“Hey, Officer. This is my grandfather, Dick James. He’s staying with me for awhile.”

“Right on, man. Good to see you,” he said as he handed me back my license.

“And welcome to the District of Columbia,” he added with a wink, handing G-pa his as

well. I rolled up the windows before G-pa could say anything back; I didn't want any more trouble before I'd had a solid night's rest.

"Hell of a welcoming committee," he muttered under his breath as we turned the corner and drove away.

It was just a couple blocks to my place and relatively quiet given that it was a Sunday night. By the time we unloaded the car and I'd made up the pull-out couch in the office, I was exhausted and feeling jumpy, so much so that brushing up against the fern in the living room made me start and bat at my arm as though I'd just discovered a house centipede crawling up my sleeve – the buggers were everywhere in the apartment, something about being in the basement, I guess.

When we'd said our goodnights, a good night's sleep was in fact what I desperately needed, but it just wasn't in the cards that night. The head of my bed was smack up against the wall adjacent to the sole bathroom in the apartment, and G-pa and his old man's prostate were up flushing the toilet all night long. With 90-year-old plumbing throughout the house and no insulation around the pipes, flushing the toilet at two in the morning sounded like a vortex opening up inside my brain.

I have never been very fond of having roommates, or even housemates for that matter. Even in college, I became an RA only so I could have my own room in the dormitory, and when I graduated, I always moved to the less expensive neighborhoods in part so I could avoid having to get a roommate to help pay the rent.

Aside from the practical fact that I could become seriously ill or worse from an allergic reaction if someone wasn't careful with their food or with cleaning the shared utensils, part of this aversion to living with other people stemmed from an almost British

fear of embarrassment that has plagued me throughout my entire life and which has manifested itself in myriad ways. For instance, I never could stand having to crap in shared bathrooms where other people could hear me, even going so far as to plug my own ears while on the toilet so I wouldn't know if I was making an offensive sound. I recoil at having to face people in the morning if I'd overheard them having sex the night before, or worse, they had overheard me. I was ashamed that I wasn't as neat as I would've liked to have been and felt my cheeks prickle with heat whenever someone was in the kitchen working around a pile of my dirty dishes. The same anxiety prevented me from confronting a roommate who was downright slovenly, or one who ate my food, or someone who always used all the toilet paper, soap, and detergent without buying more. I was shackled by the demands of propriety, and it was just plain easier for me to live alone.

All of this was compounded by the fact that G-pa and I had familial roles to perform, which would be difficult to reject even though I'd lived more than half of my life away from him. I realized I'd have to actively resist succumbing to old habits to avoid reverting back to that begrudgingly compliant 13-year-old who last shared a roof with this man. Would he still tell me I needed a hat or a jacket when I walked out the door, for instance, or make snide comments about the duration of my showers? Would I chafe at his suggestions – which at my age, is all they could reasonably expect to be – and return to my days of callow aloofness? These questions and others awaited me as I joined him at the breakfast table on our first morning together as roommates.

Somehow, he'd risen before me despite the time difference. The man never seemed to need more than half the sleep of a normal human being, regularly subsisting on

only four hours or less. I, on the other hand, needed sleep the way a child does, hitting the proverbial wall when tired and only feeling rested after a solid 8-9 hours.

He'd made eggs and bacon and toast, the delightfully comforting smell of which had ultimately dragged me out of bed. He'd even buttered the toast already and didn't seem to balk at the dairy-free, soy-free tub of margarine that was the only thing resembling butter that I had in the fridge.

"Sleep okay?" he asked, habitually echoing Grams' usual morning greeting as he dished out my breakfast.

"Not great, actually. How 'bout you? Sounds like you were up a lot last night."

"No more than usual. You know I'm not a young whipper-snapper like you anymore." He knew I hated when he used words like "whipper-snapper," and he generally only used them in my company. "Life has a way of comin' full circle, you know. You start out wakin' up all night long and eventually you end up that way. Pretty soon you'll be changin' my diapers, just you wait." I shuddered at the thought.

"What lovely breakfast conversation. Thanks for breakfast, by the way. You didn't need to do that."

"Gotta make myself useful."

"Well, thanks."

I was both grateful and nervous that I'd told G-pa that I had to go to work that morning, even though I really was only to go out *looking* for work; I was glad to get away but I worried about what he would do while I was gone, and heaven forbid he actually went looking for me and my bookstore out of curiosity. The plan was to find a new job as soon as possible and *then* explain about the store's sudden demise.

To prevent him from getting into trouble, I tried to impress upon G-pa that he could not, under any circumstances, leave the apartment steps without locking the door, and he couldn't lock the door because I hadn't yet made a spare key, so he'd just have to wait till I got back before going anywhere. I'd hoped that this arrangement would allow me to chaperone his first forays around town, and that I could delay the inevitable by dragging him to do the tourist thing before it sunk in what he'd gotten himself into by moving in with me. I don't know what my problem was; it wasn't even my idea for him to come. He hadn't even asked, for Christ's sake. But there I was, fretting like a new bride that he'd be disappointed when the reality of playing house finally hit home.

When I'd showered and gathered up my things to leave, I knocked on the door of the office to say bye to G-pa on my way out.

"Have a good day at work!" he called out. "Might want to bring an umbrella! Looks like rain."

Chapter 5

“I didn’t think I’d have to hunt you down.”

A half-hour after I’d arrived at the coffeehouse that I’d been using before I’d left as the base of operations for my three-week-old job hunt, Maria, the woman I’d been casually dating for the previous few months, walked in and approached me at my solitary table in the corner. She seemed to not realize that it was spring in the Mid Atlantic, either that or her tropical blood didn’t consider a temperate spring to be sufficiently warm enough to wear spring clothing, because she wore a peach cashmere sweater on top of her cream silk blouse, corduroy pencil skirt, and opaque tights. I was sweating just looking at her, unable to imagine wearing so many layers in such mild weather.

Before I’d left abruptly for California, Maria had left me a voicemail: *Come meet me for coffee soon. A great opportunity awaits you!* I felt I’d gotten to know Maria fairly well over the course of the several months that I’d known her through mutual friends, and I’d come to learn that her tendency to communicate in cheery fortune cookie snippets generally reflected a need to whitewash a problem, or “challenge,” as she liked to put it, that was more than likely going to require a lot of extra work for the recipient of the message. And the request, nay, *demand* that I see her, coming from this lovely woman with ink-black hair whose tumultuous, dark waves shined like the ocean at midnight, had made me tremble in a way that got me to rethink ordering my usual morning cup of coffee.

I’d met Maria months earlier at a potluck barbecue at a friend’s house in Barracks Row. We both were standing at the buffet table painstakingly scrutinizing the foods for signs of potential allergens – she was apparently deathly allergic to peanuts and had

trouble with wheat, while I still had to avoid dairy and soy like the plague – and we commiserated over the allergenic person’s plight of subsisting solely on fruit salad and alcohol at social gatherings. I was immediately attracted to her, but aside from the physical appeal, we were a natural fit in that one would not likely accidentally kill the other over a home-cooked romantic dinner (another minor near-death experience of mine once involved a former girlfriend proudly baking me special vegan soy-free brownies as a surprise, but neglecting to notice that there was soy lecithin in the ingredient list of the 100% canola oil non-stick spray – “It said 100%!” was her defense. Needless to say, that relationship hadn’t lasted much beyond the injection of the EpiPen.).

Maria was a social worker at the neighborhood high school and was from Trinidad, the country. She had the kind of enthusiasm for tackling hopeless cases usually reserved for people who were once hopeless cases themselves and have beaten the odds, like the rare neglected puppy who, once rescued from squalor and abuse, goes on to love everyone she meets rather than being wary, aggressive, and suspicious as might be expected of her. More important to the smooth running of the school than the principal, it seemed from her stories, Maria made sure that students who’d been spotted eating nothing but chips and soda every day were enrolled in the free lunch program, that parents with restraining orders were not allowed on campus, that grandmothers and aunts and uncles were kept apprised of a student’s progress when they were called upon to become temporary guardians, or that a student recently released from a juvenile detention facility made the transition back onto campus, for however long or brief that time might be, as smoothly and nonviolently as possible for both the students and the teachers. As far as I could tell, she was the engine oil, the lubricant, the antifreeze, and the washer fluid

combined that kept the old beast of a school running despite the driver's and occupants' best attempts, it seemed, to run it into the ground (or, at times, straight off a cliff).

I motioned for her to sit down at my table and closed my laptop. "Sorry, just got back late last night," I told her. "What's up?" I hesitated to seem warm and open in advance of her unknown request, lest I would be more of a pushover and be unable to refuse. She fiddled vigorously with the wrapper on an unopened straw on the table, which indicated to me that she was reluctant to ask for whatever it was she had in mind.

"How was the funeral?" she asked. I'd called and told her about Grams before I'd left, but we weren't at the point in our fledgling relationship of talking every day, or even every week, so she didn't know anything about G-pa coming back with me yet or that he didn't know that I was out of work.

"Good," I replied. "You know, as good as those things can be."

"Sure," she said, leaving it at that. I liked that she'd never said "I'm sorry" or anything of the sort when I'd let her know Grams had passed. It had always nauseated me that people apologized when someone died. A stupid reaction. She was thoughtful enough to spare me the usual dreck.

"Hey listen," she continued, winding up for whatever it was, "you know how you've been saying you really wish you had the chance to make a bigger impact on the world around you?"

"Uh-huh," I said, drawing out the last syllable in a futile attempt to delay the inevitable request for a favor. I vaguely recalled saying something of the sort after I'd had a few margaritas one recent happy hour, but it had been just one of those things that one says.

Apparently, she'd taken me seriously, for as she then proceeded to tell me, there was a kid in her school in the 11th grade honors track who was turning 18 the following week, which meant that he was about to age out of foster care. Of course, he had not a relative to his name, at least not one who could legally take him in, and he would have to either drop out of school and get a low-paying job to support himself or stay in school and become homeless. Unless . . .

"No. Absolutely not. I can't. I'm sorry, but I am most definitely not the man for the job." I finished my first cup of coffee and sipped at some ice water to try to keep from visibly sweating.

"You haven't even heard anything about the kid, how can you say no so easily? I wouldn't be asking you if I didn't think this was an exceptional case; you should know that."

"I really can't, though. Look, my grandfather came back with me unexpectedly and moved in with me temporarily. I don't know how long it'll last, but that's crazy enough as it is. I told you we hadn't spoken in years, and besides, now I don't have any more space." Which was all true, and I was glad I didn't have to make up excuses. It made it easier to say no to this than it would have been if she'd wanted me to help out some kid with his homework after school.

"You've got a living room," she shrugged, still focused on the straw rather than on me, fingering the corner of the wrapper until it ripped, rightfully assuming that it would not balk at her audacity as I would. "And if you're worried about expenses, he's got a part-time job after school and can buy his own food. And I didn't want to have to bring this up, but given the look on your face, you should also know that I've applied for

a grant that's reserved for kids who are in this grey area, and it would provide you with a small stipend to help close the gap. It's not much, not as much as real foster parents get, but it's better than nothing."

I couldn't tell from her tone whether or not she was alluding to the "nothing" I was earning at the moment, so I ignored her comment about the stipend entirely and simply addressed the ridiculousness of the proposition. "Come on, you're not really suggesting I let this kid sleep on my couch. Doesn't he have friends who have couches he can sleep on?" I hated to also remind her of the fact that I did not have a job in case it wasn't already on her mind, but my ability to continue paying the rent in several months' time if my savings ran out before I got another one was precarious at best. But I was loathe to draw attention to the weakness of my position, so I kept my mouth shut on that regard.

"As a matter of fact he does not. His friends' families are struggling with their own crises, or haven't you been paying attention to what it is that I do?"

"I'm sorry, I would love to help you, but this is a fantasy. People don't take stray teenagers or homeless people in to live with them. It's like taking in a time bomb. And anyway, I've just doubled the occupancy of my apartment in one night; I'm not about to triple it in two."

"Oh please, he's 18. This kid is real, Ranger."

I sighed as I palmed my now empty coffee cup and brought it forlornly to my lips in the hope of salvaging a few lingering drops. "Look, I'm just not one of those people."

"One of *what* people?" Her abruptly straightened posture reflected a sudden defensiveness in her tone. Her gaze locked with mine as I looked back up, and she

squinted in a way that reminded me of my mother when she used to scold me for talking back. We were sitting in a corner, my back to the shelves of roasted coffee beans on the wall, and in the cramped walkways of the tiny café, there was nowhere for me to evade her glare unless I physically got out of the way. I was beginning to feel like a fly in her web; my rear end was cemented in place and I couldn't bring myself to move.

“You know what I mean. That's just not what I'm about,” I argued. The thought of rescuing some poor soul out of the gutter gave me indigestion, or maybe it was the coffee, which was significantly stronger than I usually preferred.

“So you're worried about public opinion, that's what this is? You worried people will make assumptions? This ain't about you, Ranger; this is about a boy who needs a man, plain and simple, and you're the only man I know who's not burdened with kids of his own or who doesn't have bigger problems to deal with.” My mouth opened and shut in silence like a fish gaping at the bubbles in its tank. “Forget that,” she continued. “He don't even need a man. He's a boy who needs a couch. Can you handle that?” I still didn't say anything. My knees were outstretched and locked under the table, and the blood was beginning to drain from my head in a way that gave me the sensation of floating in a bathtub in which someone had pulled out the drain plug. “If it makes you feel better, I'll make sure everybody knows you're reluctant as a nasty ol' mule so they don't misinterpret your motives. C'mon, it's a favor for a friend. And he's a kid, not a cause.” Miraculously, despite all the steam being generated by the espresso machines and the generally warm ambient temperature, not a bead of sweat had broken out on her brow, though I was sponging mine dry with my sleeve. I realized then that I would cave.

“All right, look, he can stay with me for a week, but that’s it.” I knew even as I said this that it was futile to set a time limit once I had opened the door. “I’m serious. You need to actively find him a permanent solution because I am not equipped to be a home for lost boys.” I barely believed what was coming out of my own mouth. The situation was impossible. I couldn’t seem to turn her down, but I knew in my gut that it would be a disaster – I didn’t care if the kid was a prodigy or a saint, or however much this supposed stipend was worth. This could not work, and I felt I had just dug the grave for any potential improvement in my relations with G-pa.

Maria looked at me, closed her eyes, her mouth softening from fierce to friendly, and hummed a Hallelujah. “This is why you are the *man*.”

“I was not aware that I was the man.”

“Oh you the man, all right. You definitely the man.”

* * * *

When I returned home from the coffeehouse that day, no closer to a job than I was when I’d left, the door was open and G-pa was not in the apartment.

“Shit.” I dropped my messenger bag and ran back out to the street, suddenly feeling like the mother who’d lost her kid at the shopping center, trying to predict which way he would have ambled away. Though I craned my neck in all directions, I could not see any trace of him in the immediate vicinity. I cursed myself for rushing out without orienting him to the area and pictured him pissing off somebody high on PCP with that mouth of his and getting his ass kicked or worse. I ducked back into the apartment to see

if maybe he'd left a note or some other indication of where he was going, but when I checked his room, I found his shoes still next to the couch bed, so I assumed he must have wandered off in his socks, slippers, or bare feet. I pictured him dazed and disoriented like those old people you hear about with dementia who just walk out of their homes and into traffic, but then I reminded myself that he was only 64 and tried to think of where he might have gone.

Before I had a chance to decide whether to go out searching for him myself or call the police, I heard a familiar booming guffaw permeating through the ceiling and felt my jaw clench in irritation. Without bothering to calm myself down, I hurtled up the steps to the front porch of the main level of the house and knocked rather aggressively on the door. I couldn't think of a legitimate reason why G-pa would've needed to bother Miss Angela, the landlady, and I fumed at the possibility that he may have screwed up our whole arrangement by letting her know he'd moved in before I had cleared it with her first.

Another bout of laughter escaped through the bars on the screen door just as the main one – plain, wooden, and splintered – opened with Miss Angela beaming at the threshold.

“Ranger! Good to see you. Come on in for some iced tea.” Miss Angela was from India, or at least she was of Indian descent, and she was atypically big and tall for a woman of her ethnicity, with hair cropped at her shoulders in the style of Nancy Drew, and dressed simply as she always was, in a polo shirt, jeans, and Keds. She looked to be strong as a Clydesdale, was maybe in her fifties and a widow, I supposed. The old school pictures of her curly-haired two teenaged boys with milk chocolate skin crowded the

mantel in the front living room; I'd been able to piece together from neighbors that they'd both been killed about a decade ago in separate, unrelated incidents of street violence, so she lived alone in the upper stories of the house, and with the mortgage paid off, made most of her living off of the rent on the basement apartment, which wasn't very much. She was presently wiping her eyes as she welcomed me in.

“Your grandfather was just telling me about when you were a boy and tried to run away from home to avoid cleaning up after your dog that messed in the house. I'm sorry to be laughing at your expense, but that shit was hilarious. Come on in.” Though she still had traces of an Indian accent, Miss Angela's manner was categorically Western.

The story to which she was referring was true. I was and still am squeamish beyond belief, so much so that I still wear gloves to wash dishes just so I don't have to touch the slimy bits of congealed food left in pans and plates. When I finally got a dog of my own that I was responsible for when I was eight, I recoiled in horror when my folks told me it was my job to clean up the pile of barf it'd left on the living room rug. I ran out the front door when no one was in the room and planned to negotiate my return from a neighbor's house, insisting that I would only come home if the barf was gone when I got there. Little did I know that I'd given up my bargaining chip by revealing my location, and when they refused my demands as they had been relayed to them over the phone by the neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Milliken, I didn't have a plan B.

Now, this pile of puke was no bigger than a man's fist – it'd come from a puppy after all – but that didn't matter. When I got home, despite my uncontrollable sobs of protest, my father still insisted that I clean up the mess, so I put on Grams' gardening gloves and grabbed a trowel to scoop up the goop into a plastic bag so as to be as

physically far away from the mess as possible. And still, the process was excruciating, and I cried, howling in agony, the entire time.

Now the howling was of a different sort and was emanating from Miss Angela's kitchen table. Since moving in, I'd mostly kept to myself, conducting our relationship primarily from the bottom of Miss Angela's porch on my way in and out of the basement flat. But there was G-pa, sitting in the kitchen sipping iced tea like it'd just been waiting for him to show up and grace it with his presence.

I'd only been in the main part of the house once, when I first looked at the apartment and signed the lease. It was only now that I felt an inchoate sense of despair in the spotlessness of the surroundings; the lacquered floors were polished to an unnatural sheen which reflected a stillness that I suddenly found to be deeply unsettling. Even the narrow beams of light that managed to penetrate the gauzy curtains were devoid of dust particles, those tiny flecks of fuzz which typically echo with their whirling and tumbling the motion and thus the vivacity of a room's inhabitants. Here, the only movement was encapsulated behind the glass cover of a chestnut grandfather clock in the corner of the sitting room, whose pendulum diligently swung and swayed in its vacuum, marking the quarter-hours whether or not anyone cared to notice their passing.

"Ranger!" G-pa called out from his seat at the oak dinette in the kitchen. "Have yourself a glass of this stuff. She says it's iced tea, but it tastes like liquid oatmeal cookies. Whatever it is, *man* is it good!" G-pa had always been somewhat oblivious, or at least in denial, about my food allergies, and generally offered me a taste of anything he liked, even if it could kill me.

I hated chai tea, which was clearly what he was drinking, and anyway, I couldn't have it with milk the way it was usually prepared. I hated most sweetened beverages, for that matter – they always left a grimy film on my teeth – so I politely declined, barely containing my annoyance at G-pa making himself right at home in the landlady's kitchen. It wasn't his place to barge in there, presumably uninvited, acting like he was just trying to make new friends. It was a business relationship, and as such there was an appropriate distance to maintain. And did I have to remind him that his wife had just died only the week before? Still, I didn't want to bring any of this up in front of Miss Angela, so I forced a grin and turned to her to explain his presence.

“My grandpa's out for an impromptu visit, and he'll be staying with me for awhile if that's all right. I hope he didn't disturb you or anything.”

“Oh hush, hon'. He told me all about it. I was about to call the cops when I saw him messing under the hood of your car there while I was out on the porch this morning, but he introduced himself and we got to talking, and I suppose the afternoon just got away from us.”

“When was the last time you got an oil change, boy? It's a mess in there!”

“Been awhile, G-pa.” I didn't know what else to say now that I'd found him up there and he was seemingly fine and fancy free. I wanted to get him out of there, but there was no polite way I could think of to arrange it, so I just let him know I would be downstairs working on business school applications, though in reality I'd be applying for jobs, said goodbye to Miss Angela, and left.

Nearly two more hours had gone by before I heard the shuffle of G-pa's footfalls advancing towards the door. I hadn't gotten anywhere in the job search in that time, just

stalked the clock on the microwave like a cat watching a laser pointer, and tried to make sense out of the muffled hum reverberating through the ceiling. When he came in, he was whistling a sea shanty and still holding his glass of iced chai tea, freshly filled again to the brim.

“You forgot to leave your glass.”

“Oh, she said I could give it back tomorrow.”

“You could’ve waited until I’d had a chance to introduce you. You’re not supposed to add tenants without getting approval first, and if she hadn’t been so charmed by you, she could’ve thrown out the both of us for violating the terms of the lease.” I didn’t know how much he knew and understood about the way things were in the outside world, but I assumed it was next to nothing and treated him accordingly.

“Well excuse me for tryin’ to be neighborly, or did you expect me to just sit here twiddling my thumbs till you got back?” I suppose I was angry out of proportion to his conduct, but it just didn’t sit well with me that he’d gone off like that when I’d told him it was important to stay put.

“Nevermind,” I said. “I’ve just got a headache; it’s making me irritable.” He sat down on the futon couch next to me and put his gnarly bare feet up on my makeshift coffee table that was really just half of an old wine barrel that I’d salvaged and turned upside down.

“You know what would probably cure that headache lickety-split?”

“What’s that?” I asked hesitantly, instinctively leaning further away, figuring that he was about to give me a noogie like he used to do whenever I complained of a headache back when I was a kid.

“A nice tall glass of iced chai tea,” he replied, taking another big swig from his glass. “Mighty-fine.”

I did love a good iced tea, though not with even a pinch of sugar, and his glass was tantalizingly, if deceptively, refreshing looking. My mother used to make sun tea on our porch in giant mason jars from wild yerba buena that she gathered from the ravine near the house. We didn’t have the money for Kool-Aid or extra sugar, or dentistry for that matter, so we drank sun tea from April to November. Depending on what was around, she might put in some red clover blossoms for sweetness, or pop in a few wild blackberries, but never sugar. I’d sit there on the porch swing reading a Hardy Boys mystery from the mobile library, and the light shining on the jars would scatter in the amber liquid and spray a kaleidoscopic array of sundrops across the pages of my book, and I, being the superstitious youth that I was, would think that any word that was highlighted was supposed to be a divine clue to solving the mystery, and though I would almost invariably be wrong, it never stopped me from believing it to be true.

My mother was always doing things like that to save us money, making things seem more special than if she had bought them so I’d never know how poor we truly were. All her life since she was fourteen, she had worked as a washerwoman, which is how she met my father. Actually, she worked at the full-service Laundromat a couple towns over that got its business from all the transient, bachelor laborers around, but she preferred the relative dignity and humanity of the term “washerwoman” as opposed to “Laundromat employee.” It’s the same reason she eventually called herself a cleaning lady rather than a maid once we’d moved to West Sac after my father died and she’d found work in the homes of state lawmakers and lobbyists in Sacramento – it had more of

a ring of individuality to it, and who wouldn't want to be called some kind of a lady, as she liked to say. She wouldn't have done anything else with her time if she'd had it, even though I helped out by picking up whatever odd jobs I could. She would have just as soon kept scrubbing floors and toilets forever because, she said, it really was a satisfying thing to make a place clean again, and she could flush all of her troubles down a hundred drains a week.

She would have hated to know of the mess she made when she died on the job, same as my father did, years ago when I was towards the end of earning my degree in college. It was in one of those wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling marble bathrooms trendy among wealthy-ish suburbanites in the last decade. I suppose she hadn't noticed that the floor was soaked from the client's morning shower, the puddles of water having been obscured by all of the swirls and patterns in the marble. They said her spine snapped on the steps to the whirlpool tub but that the cause of death was loss of blood from the head injury she received from the perfect 90-degree edge of the tub's platform. Knowing her, if she'd been conscious at all as she lay there paralyzed and bleeding to death, she would have lamented the fact that she hadn't fallen directly into the tub, which would have been exponentially easier for whoever discovered her body to clean up than the floor would have been.

Chapter 6

The rest of that first week went by without much excitement. Miss Angela had given my grandpa a spare key to my apartment, so he came and went as he pleased and got to know the neighborhood a bit on his own. To my surprise, so far, he had no complaints, at least none that he would share openly.

I hadn't yet found an appropriate moment to inform him of our impending houseguest, but while coordinating the arrangements over the week with Maria, I'd found there was no way I could back out now. She'd told the kid almost immediately that I would take him in, probably knowing that if it was difficult for me to say no to her, it'd be next to impossible for me to refuse the orphan boy himself. I hoped to be able to explain things to G-pa while out in public so I'd have the buffer of strangers, and I figured there wouldn't be a better atmosphere to break the news than in the somber glow of the war memorials at dusk.

I wasn't sure whether the Army had had an exemption excusing illiterate men from the draft, but G-pa would've been disqualified anyway due to his post-polio chicken legs, which lacked sufficient muscle tone for any serious exertion. I knew he'd lost family in the World Wars and a friend in Vietnam, though I didn't know anything about the guy; I only knew of his existence through Grams – G-pa never spoke of him. Anyway, I suggested one evening after “work” that we head down to the national mall for hot dogs and then check out the memorials before dark. This way, I thought, he would be in a subdued and vulnerable state, hopefully making him more open to the idea of helping out a fellow citizen who was down on his luck.

We got our hot dogs at the Smithsonian Metro stop, and as we walked down towards the Washington Monument, G-pa was disappointed to learn that we would've had to get there as soon as it opened to get tickets; he'd envisioned watching the sunset from the top. I didn't tell him that I'd never been up myself – he didn't like it when people took things for granted – but I mentioned that we'd have a better chance on a weekday and that seemed to mollify him for the moment.

From there we stopped briefly at the World War II Memorial across the reflecting pool from President Lincoln's perch on the steps. G-pa gazed up at the pillars commemorating the Atlantic and Pacific campaigns and stood for awhile watching the water spouts spraying in the wide fountain pool, but I could tell he wasn't impressed. "Pretty," was all he could muster up to say about it, which was a judgment that seemed more appropriate to a display in an upscale hotel plaza. It took me by surprise, making me doubt the effectiveness of such an excursion on his mood.

We walked the length of the reflecting pool, where he then seemed more stirred by the chiseled visage of Mr. Lincoln brooding over his flock on the steps. "You see it all your life on the back of a penny, but it doesn't do it justice," he remarked, though he declined the opportunity to climb all those stairs to get a closer look.

Next was the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, and given G-pa's relative cultural isolation over his years of living without a TV and newspaper, I was guessing that he didn't know what to expect of the monument. I have vague memories of seeing the wall for the first time in various American History textbooks from high school, and while it had somewhat prepared me for seeing it in person, I felt that having a picture of it in my mind in no way diminished the power of the experience for me.

We stopped at the statue of three Vietnam Vets just outside of the wall area first, and he was confused. “This is it? A million people die and they put up a statue of three guys? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“It wasn’t a million people, by the way, but this isn’t the memorial. It’s just the entrance; the memorial’s that wall over there.”

This elicited an even more baffled expression than before. From a distance, and on a foggy day like this one was, the wall appeared to be merely an out of place retaining wall, a landscaping anomaly on an angular path to nowhere. As we got closer, however, and G-pa approached the expansive wall of names, his face became contorted in an expression I could not identify – grief? anger? disgust? – and he seemed suddenly stricken with a great and deep pain.

“What *is* this?” he gasped, his fists inexplicably clenched by his sides.

“It’s the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial – all the names of the servicemembers who died in the war. It’s—it’s just the memorial,” I faltered, my mouth turning dry as I choked out the pitiful explanation, seizing up at his distress.

“That’s a lot of names.”

“It was a lot of people.”

“Are they in any sort of order? How do you find someone you know? Do you have to go over every name to find them?” G-pa was beginning to be short of breath as he asked these questions in rapid fire without waiting for a reply in between. I wanted to reassure him, but I didn’t know the answers, and I hated to admit that I hadn’t been there before either.

“I don’t remember,” I fibbed. “Look, why don’t we head over to that sign to find out?” He followed me over to what looked like a covered stand for a phone book, though it suddenly occurred to me that he was depending on me to interpret the entire experience for him, and before I could help myself I felt a certain degree of pity for the man.

I actually didn’t know for sure to what extent he couldn’t read. He’d at least mastered signing his own name in a third grader’s cursive script, but I had no idea whether he could read other people’s names or even basic words; he could’ve been dyslexic for all I knew, and I felt woefully ill-equipped to help him.

“It seems the panels are numbered and you can look them up in here. They’re in order by casualty date, and within each date they’re arranged in alphabetical order. So yeah, assuming you know about when the person died you can find them fairly easily. You want to look for someone?” Honestly, he looked just about ready to be sick right there in front of me; I guessed that he hadn’t been prepared to face individuals, whoever it was that he had lost probably, and now he must have felt that he had no choice. I was kicking myself for bringing him here so soon after Grams’ funeral.

“Sure,” he said. “Sure, I suppose we could do that.” His breathing slowed, but with visible effort.

I asked him the guy’s name and if he knew when he had died, and he said Gilbert Johnston, October 4, 1965. The book said he was on panel 36E, so we navigated to that section of the wall, and he put his hand on the black granite, which in the fading light was a perfect dark mirror.

“Do you want me to help you find it?”

“Jesus, Ranger, I know the goddamned alphabet!”

“Right.” That answered that, at least.

After moving his fingers sideways over a string of names, G-pa’s left hand slid down to waist level and came to rest on the “G” in the name of this Gilbert Johnston.

He traced the indented name with his fingers, and I asked him if he wanted some paper to make a rubbing of the name. He nodded. I had a notebook of unlined paper in my messenger bag, so I tore out a sheet and handed him a pencil from the front pocket. There were a few retired docents walking around who were helping visitors find the names of loved ones and offering paper for rubbings and information about the wall, but G-pa was intensely private about these things, so I didn’t call his attention to their presence. Instead, I stood back a bit and pretended to contemplate the wall in its entirety to give him some space to make his copy.

From the occasional glimpses I took in the reflection offered by the polished surface of the wall, I could tell G-pa was intent on making a clean trace of the man’s name, making sure it was centered on the paper and parallel with the edges. From a few feet back, the lattice of names resembled an immense lace curtain, meticulously woven out of the finest silk, each row perfectly straight with its own unique pattern, and this made it look as though G-pa was pressed up against a great dark window. I was brimming with anticipation about who this man was to him, hoping the telling of it would open up a portal through which we could reopen our neglected relationship.

When he was finished, he didn’t linger at the face of the wall as one might expect but instead walked directly towards me, holding out the paper and pencil for me to take from his grasp. After thrusting them into my hands, G-pa kept walking, heading back the

way we'd come in towards the Lincoln Memorial, and without turning to face me, he said, "Say hello to your Grandpa Gil."

While G-pa marched off, I stood there looking quizzically at the paper, not yet comprehending its import, like some poor housewife who'd just been handed an eviction notice because unbeknownst to her, the husband had blown away all the rent money on the races. I initially thought maybe he'd meant "Grandpa" in the way that people often bestow honorific titles upon beloved family friends of no relation to simplify relationships to children. Then I wondered if perhaps this was a brother of my "real" grandmother who'd died giving birth to my father, momentarily confused and forgetting that such a figure would have actually been a great uncle, and anyway, her surname had been Aldridge. He couldn't have meant my mother's father, I knew, whose identity even her mother did not know (her mother having been, by all accounts, an actual prostitute). Besides, my mother was born north of Eureka, so G-pa wouldn't have known her people even if she had. In my dumbfounded stupor, I was unable to complete the leap in logic G-pa had intended for me to make.

Though he'd had a decent head start storming out of the memorial, he never could walk very fast even at his most determined clip, so I was able to catch up fairly easily as he was making his way towards the path leading to the tidal basin. Unable to contain my curiosity and continue on in silence while he worked up the nerve to talk to me, I had to ask: "What's this all about?" He didn't answer.

I looked around the mall, which was still bright green and full of flowering plants from the spring rains, but I was suddenly sad that he hadn't been out the month before when all the cherry blossoms had dusted the basin in their soothing down of soft, snowy

petals, though it likely would have been lost on him. Earlier that day, I had raved about the elaborate show put on each spring by the daffodils, tulips, pink magnolias, and cherry trees, but he'd only scoffed and responded, "Only an idiot needs to be smacked over the head with a frying pan to let them know a new season has arrived." Still, I was grateful that the evening was filled with the hushed beauty of a city in a perpetual state of mourning, and as his pace slowed, my spirits were momentarily buoyed as we passed a string of devoted goslings following their mother on their way to the Potomac.

G-pa sat down on a bench facing the river, so I sat down beside him, still holding the sheet of paper and pencil as if I were waiting for a guru to decipher a treasure map for me.

"Ranger, there are some things that aren't meant to be dug up, like time capsules, because they can only lead to disappointment when you do."

"I'm sorry, I should have known this wasn't the best time to visit old ghosts. You don't have to tell me about it." I said this, of course, hoping he would anyway.

"Ranger, that man right there was my best friend in all the world, Gil Johnston. He and I would hunt every goddamn day we could spare growin' up since we were old enough to stomp in the woods by ourselves and carry a BB gun. He was older than me, and able bodied, and so he left to join the army in the spring of '65. Now, before your true grandmother, your father's mother, Carol, agreed to marry me, she was Gil's girl. Gil died in October. We were married in November. Your father was born in December. When she died, I was still a—well she and I had never—. Well that's the way it was; you know the rest." I knew the basics of this story well, but this was the first I had heard of

anybody named Gil. I was beginning to feel like I do when I've had one too many cups of coffee on an empty stomach.

He continued, "As much as I've joked about it, I was really just a kid, just a boy. And here I was suddenly responsible for this newborn baby as far as everyone else knew, and then Bea came along and she needed a baby so badly that I didn't have the heart to tell her he wasn't mine to give. Truth is, she figured it out for her own when we couldn't have any between the two of us when we tried, but by then it was water under the bridge and always has been. But now with everyone dead and gone but you and me in all this, it seemed to make sense to tell you where it is you really come from. Your father never knew it, but the truth is, you come from Gil."

Luckily I was sitting down, because it was a sucker-punch of a revelation. Here, with G-pa having just moved across the country to move in with me, it felt like I was in the position of being on the verge of proposing and being told by my almost-fiancée that she had been cheating on me all along. I'd never put much weight on blood relationships, having been raised with no siblings in an extended family whose beloved matriarch was my step-grandmother. But now, this man who'd been a surrogate father and supposed grandfather to me my whole life and who was my only living relative on the planet as far as I knew was in fact no relative at all. He was a stand-in, a stunt double, one we'd all mistaken for being the real thing. I was beginning to feel as though I'd been had.

Chapter 7

Everyone who's ever grown up around television has some iconic image in their head of what constitutes the perfect family to them – the Cleavers, perhaps, the Brady's, or maybe the Huxtables. For me it was the entire cast of *Sesame Street*. In lieu of pre-school and daycare, I used to go to work with my mother at the Laundromat and spend my days in the folding room watching PBS children's programming on a grainy Sony TV while the ladies – girls, really – washed, folded, and pressed men's clothing. There was a small, rectangular cot in the corner made of green mesh that looked like a trampoline but was much more taut, and my mother used to put some blankets in one of the dryers for me with a used sheet of fabric softener so that I would take long naps on the cot in a pile of what smelled and felt like fresh laundry. While she warmed the blankets up for me, I'd watch a few shows, maybe *The Electric Company* or *3-2-1 Contact*, then fall asleep in my warm mound of covers to *Mister Rogers*, whom I wanted very much to watch, but whose voice was simply too soporific to endure. And then, who knows how many hours later, the blankets would be cool, and before I'd open my eyes I'd hear all those little children singing that beautiful, wonderful song: “*Sun-ny day, sweepin' the—clouds a-way / On my way to where the air is sweet / Can you tell me how to get / How to get to Sesame Street?*”

The details of this show are beyond fuzzy to me at this point. For example, I can no longer remember any of the non-puppet character's names or specific personas, but I seem to recall a smorgasbord of faces from across ethnic, socioeconomic, and professional spectrums. A male Latino engineer in a wheelchair might share the screen with Oscar the Grouch and a white female garbage collector, and they'd all sing songs in

Spanish and do the hokey-pokey on wheels in the middle of the street. And if anyone didn't understand that this was simply the way things were, it would be one of the more clueless puppets, Big Bird maybe, and the humans would enlighten him.

It never occurred to me until much later that this was a fantasy world, that the TV series was not in fact a fictional reflection of the way the world really was, like dispatches from America's urban utopias, but it was actually an instruction manual for some future generation's happy revolution. And thus, I entered society out from under my backcountry stone in the woods with the woefully ignorant, somewhat pathetic assumption that we as a people had already arrived.

I suspect I was not alone in this experience, though I have never confirmed this, but I suppose that was really the point all along. That it would raise millions of children with the image of the perfect and true America, and when we all grew up to find that the image was only a dream, we'd do whatever we could to get back there, even if it meant flaring up to reshape society altogether in that image. It would seem, however, that the masterminds behind the dream severely underestimated the extinguishing powers of disillusionment.

* * * *

It was only a few days before the kid was to arrive, and I still hadn't found a good time to break the news to G-pa. He and I had returned once again to speaking only enough to cover the necessities – “Mornin’,” “Hello,” and “Where's the coffee?” essentially summed up our range of communication. At nights, I'd see him leaving with

his guitar to go off and play who knows where, probably some session he'd heard about or an open mic night at a nearby watering hole. We were avoiding each other to put off dealing with this new truth about us, or I suppose it had always been true, but it was news to me.

The next Friday night, Maria and I had plans to have dinner and go see one of her coworkers play in his blues band down at the Zoo Bar. I didn't feel like explaining that I'd found out G-pa wasn't my real grandfather, not being in the mood for pity. The previous couple of weeks had been a low point in our relatively new romance, and I wanted things to only go up from that point on.

The plan was to meet up at a homey little Italian restaurant in Eastern Market near her place for dinner that had a separate gluten-free and vegan menu, and then take the Metro over to the bar together afterwards. G-pa was at home, but he'd made it clear he was going off on his own for the evening. When I arrived at the restaurant, Maria was at the bar with a bottle of Sangiovese opened with a full glass already in hand. Though it was a balmy evening in the high sixties, she was still wearing her double-breasted khaki trench coat tied shut over her dress, presumably because of the slight draft at the entryway. I wasn't sure what I would say that could steer the topic of conversation away from me and G-pa, but it turns out I didn't have to.

"It's nice to see a friendly face after the week I've had," she said as I walked up, pouring me a fresh glass of wine in the empty one she had next to hers. The hem of her plum-colored dress barely escaped out from under her coat revealing ample bare leg underneath, and her hair was done in a new way, tied up in the back with espresso ringlets bounding down her neck that were so thick and perfect they would've made

Shirley Temple beg for her secrets. I wanted very much to slide my fingertips into the depths of those curls and kiss her right there at the bar, but we were taking things fairly slowly and hadn't progressed to where I could greet her with such open affection. Instead, I told her, lamely, that she looked lovely, and we followed the waiter to a quiet table in the back.

She launched in with the details of her less than pleasant week, something about a parent threatening a teacher for failing a student and a PTA meeting gone awry – I found it hard to concentrate on what she was saying, to tell the truth, and wondered what G-pa was doing for dinner and if he'd be able to get around town all right on his own. By the time she brought up the ex-foster kid she was bringing over on Sunday, I'd barely had a chance to say anything at all, and the change in subject took me by surprise.

“So what did your grandfather think of you having another houseguest for awhile?”

“It's just for a week,” I reminded her.

“Sure, yeah,” she deflected, “but what did he say about it? Was he okay with it?”

“It doesn't really matter at this point, does it? It's not his call.”

“So he was upset, then?”

“I didn't say that.”

“Well, *what*, then?” I took a long sip from my glass, and the waiter came up to get our order. I was about to ask about one of the appetizers, but she never let me finish.

“I'm sorry,” she said to the waiter, “but could you give us a few more minutes?” She'd barely waited until he left when she said, “You didn't tell him, did you.”

I didn't know if I liked that she was so perceptive, but I guessed that if you worked with troubled teenagers, you're bound to develop a knack for decoding evasive comments. "Look, I meant to," I insisted, "but I told you we had some stuff to work out between us. It's been a challenge just to get through the day with him, not to mention bringing up this other variable."

"This better not be your way of backing out of this. 'Cause we can forget about dinner, and I can get the wine to go if that's what you're thinking."

"No, no, no. I'll tell him in the morning; it just hasn't been the right time yet."

"*Bullshit*, you'll tell him in the morning. It ain't ever gonna *be* the right time, Ranger. Let's go. Where's he at now?" She motioned to the waiter, who came over expecting to take our order. "Hi, I'm sorry," she told him. "I'm afraid something's come up and we're going to need to get the check, please, and a cork if you've got it."

"Sure thing," he shrugged, "I'll put that right in."

"Thanks."

"Maria, we really don't need to do this right now. I can handle this on my own. What about your friend's gig?"

"He plays every week; we'll catch him next time. No, we need to do this. I shouldn't have expected you to explain it to your grandfather anyway. This was a favor for me, and I should be the bad guy. Besides, I've been wanting to meet him since he moved in but you've kept him under lock and key, and this is as good of an excuse as any. You two sound like you're in need of a middle man anyway." I hated to tell her no. She was so decisive, so commanding, that she really didn't give me the option of doing so.

“I don’t even know where he is right now,” I fibbed. “He said he wanted to go off on his own for the evening.”

“Well it’s suppertime, right? In Trinidad? Where else could he be but the diner?”

She was right, of course. There was only one sit-down restaurant in Trinidad, a recently-opened converted dining car on the main drag through the neighborhood. It was the only place around with any decent grub, and G-pa had already become a regular. Old-fashioned and intimate, it was right up his alley. There was no doubt in my mind that he would be there.

The waiter came back with the check, and I threw down two twenties to make up for wasting his time. “All right,” I said, tossing back the remains of my glass of wine. “Let’s do this.”

* * * *

At that time of day, dinner on a Friday night, the crowd at the diner would be mostly locals, the hipsters still having the whole night ahead of them at the H Street bars before elbowing their way in and drunkenly commandeering the booths. This meant there was a mixture of nine-to-fivers and their families starting out the weekend, medical staffers and janitors filling up before the night shift, the usual crew of underemployed young men loitering outside, and now G-pa, who would be sitting alone at the counter, soaking up the scene.

Supposedly, the owners of the establishment had bought the silver dining car with red and white stripes at an auction, had it shipped to D.C., and plopped it down on a

platform of wet cement. It was as cramped of a restaurant as you could get – maybe six booths on one side of the car and a long counter on the other – but it was packed in a way that made you feel like you were a part of something, like you were a guest rather than a body. The counter was a toothpaste green, the very color of nostalgia, the seats were round, cushioned, and chrome, and the curved ceiling gave you the impression that you were in a tunnel headed directly into the past.

G-pa had his back to the entrance when we came in, but Maria could tell immediately who he was. Other than the guy behind the counter, G-pa was the only white person in the joint. By then it had begun to drizzle outside, and Maria’s still-perfect curls looked as though they had been bathed in a basin of tiny crushed diamonds. There was a stool open next to G-pa, and without even an introduction Maria approached him and asked, “Is this seat taken?”

G-pa looked up at Maria but didn’t seem to see me standing behind her when he responded, “Only for pretty little ladies such as yourself,” and motioned for her to take the seat.

“You must be Ranger’s grandfather; I’m Maria, a friend of his,” she said, holding out her hand. He gave a start at the recognition, so I cut in to explain.

“Hey G-pa, sorry to bust in on your night, but Maria was in the mood for a milkshake. Maria, this is my—” I paused almost imperceptibly to anyone listening, but long enough to exchange a glance with G-pa, “—grandfather, Dick James. G-pa, this is Maria.” He looked to me for elaboration – he knew I’d headed out on a date, but I hadn’t clarified our relationship status, and I wasn’t about to fall into the old trap of suggesting for the first time that we were an official couple in an introduction.

“Good to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand. The only other seat available was on the other side of Maria, so I had no choice but to let the two of them chew the fat unencumbered by any significant interruptions from me. Thus, I somehow managed to become a third wheel on my own date.

While listening to the ensuing conversation between the two of them, I almost forgot that the impetus for bringing her to the diner was more complicated than a simple introduction. I watched as she courted his favor masterfully, weaving in tales of her difficult upbringing as the oldest of seven children raised by her grandmother with stories of her work in the D.C. public school system. Over a plate of biscuits and gravy, G-pa soaked up her history and shared a bit of his own, and from my perch on the stool, I learned things about both of them that I had never known before. Like that Maria had become a social worker out of hatred for a system that had distributed her siblings like pieces of broken furniture among various relatives after her mother had abandoned them to pursue a passion for painkillers. Or that G-pa had had an uncle, who I supposed would’ve been my great, great uncle had G-pa and I actually been related, who had survived being gassed in the trenches during the Great War only to be done in by throat cancer from chain smoking. It was all simple stuff, really, but it troubled me that I wasn’t already privy to the tidbits of information. I wondered if maybe I hadn’t been asking the right questions, or if I was really just not paying attention.

As I sat there on the stool, I began to get the sense that I was shrinking, that the flecks of chapped skin adhering to my coffee cup and the eyelash I wiped off my cheek had suddenly ceased to replace themselves and that bit by bit I would eventually disappear altogether in a scattered heap of discarded cells. It occurred to me while

listening to them talk that if I let Maria tell G-pa about the foster kid due to arrive on our doorstep in a couple of days, my standing would be diminished in both of their eyes for not having had the nerve to bring it up, and though I dreaded G-pa's reaction to learning that he would soon be displaced by an outsider, I was the one currently feeling displaced. By the time we'd all finished eating supper and G-pa and Maria were still chatting away, I had decided to break in and take the reins.

“Hey listen, while I'd love to listen to you two jibber-jabbering away all night long, G-pa, we actually came so I could talk to you about something in particular.” Maria took the hint and leaned back so he and I could speak face to face over the counter.

“Oh?” His tone indicated that he was mildly annoyed that I'd derailed the conversation. I decided to just come right out with it and tell it to him straight, that this kid had nowhere else to go and needed our help until he could get on his feet and graduate high school. I dropped the pretense that he would only be there for a week until Maria found a more permanent situation for him – she and I had both known from the start that no one else was going to take in an essentially homeless teenager who was now technically an adult without any compensation from the government. I didn't tell him that I hadn't even met the kid yet and was basing my decision solely off of Maria's flattering portrayal, but judging from how well they'd hit it off, I assumed he'd appreciate her assessment over mine anyway.

When I was through with my spiel, which came out as more of a sales pitch than I'd intended, I rotated my coffee mug around and around absently as I waited for some sort of response. I honestly didn't know what to expect. Not outright anger, not with Maria right there between us. What he eventually said after taking a long look into his

water glass could not have come as more of a surprise to me and made me wonder if I really knew the man at all.

“Boy,” he said, taking a sip before finally looking in my direction, “You’da made your mother proud.”

Chapter 8

When I met Leonardo Pickett formally for the first time, it was a predictably swampy June day, and I'd spent most of it inside tidying up the apartment and arranging a makeshift living space in the now aptly-named living room for G-pa, who had refused to let me put the boy out in the open and had given up the pull-out couch in the office to set up his suitcase, guitar, and cedar chest in the front room. Given that my two-bedroom apartment in the basement of that narrow row house was already cramped with just two men, it required some creative finagling to arrange suitable privacy for the teen and G-pa while maintaining some semblance of livability for us all.

Thanks to a few bamboo screens from a salvage shop over the border in Maryland, the living room was transformed into an entryway and an extra bedroom, albeit a cozy one. I already had the futon couch in there, which would double as G-pa's bed, but now the only common area in the apartment was the comically tiny dinette adjacent to the similarly small kitchen at the back. In fact, if one entered now, it looked like all there was to the place was just a long hallway to the kitchen. But I'd lived in smaller quarters under far worse conditions – I suppose all of us had – so it didn't require too much adjustment with respect to space issues. The dynamic, on the other hand, was going to be another matter altogether.

By that afternoon, Maria had called to let me know they were on their way, and when she pulled up in her Ford Fiesta with Leo next to her, I approached the car just as they were parking and watched as he opened the passenger door and set down a trash bag prior to stepping out onto the curb. From what I could tell, all of his worldly possessions were either crammed into a backpack that he had grabbed from the back seat or stuffed

into that jumbo black garbage bag of his, the sturdy kind with built-in yellow handles that one usually finds at neighborhood picnics and in cafeterias.

“You must be Leonardo,” I said, holding out my hand, already feeling inadequate at the blandness of my greeting.

“Leo,” he corrected, one hand on the trash bag, the other on the shoulder strap of his backpack.

“That’s not a very common name.”

“Around here, you mean.”

I winced at the suggestion. “No, I meant in general. I’ve never met anyone named Leonardo. After the artist?” There was nothing I loathed more than someone who was trying too hard, but there I was breaking my cardinal rule of engagement. And who was I to remark on the strangeness of someone’s name?

“No, the Ninja Turtle,” he said. I thought for sure that he was being sarcastic, which I felt I deserved, but apparently he was serious because he then clarified with no hint of irony, “though I suppose since the turtle was named after the artist than I am too, though once removed. But that’s beside the point. Everybody calls me Leo.”

“Good to meet you, Leo. I’m Ranger James. And it’s my name, not my title.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ranger. I’m not a park ranger; it’s my name.” I was used to having to make this distinction, but in this case it fell flat as if I had been attempting a lame joke.

“Okay,” he shrugged, not seeming to care. He looked around intently at the surroundings to get his bearings. I had expected him to be sullen and aloof, but he wasn’t quite either of those. He seemed alert and sharp in his black polo shirt, cargo shorts, and

faded sneakers, and his hair was partially tied back, with tight dreadlocks draping down to his shoulder blades. After surveying the area, his eyes quickly darted back to mine.

“Look, could I talk to you for a second alone?” He looked at Maria with an implicit request that she step away.

“Oh, I see how it is. Fine, fine, I’ll just be minding my business over here,” she insisted, and when she’d walked down the block out of earshot, he turned back to me.

“All right, man, let’s cut the bullshit. I know you don’t want me here anymore than I wanna be here, and that you’re just doin’ this to get some pussy. And I just want you to know that I appreciate that. So in my mind, this a fair trade, and I don’t owe you nothin’. I wanna make sure we understand each other so you don’t go all Daddy Warbucks on my ass. We cool?” He said all of this in a way that in tone and body language was somehow non-confrontational but in a way that let me know he was in control of the situation, and despite his youth, I was impressed.

“Uh, yeah. We’re cool.”

“Good. Then everything’ll be all good.” He held out his hand to shake, this understanding obviously meaning more to him than our introduction, and his disposition suddenly became pleasant and cordial with no hint of lingering tension. On his part, anyway. I was still tense. There was still the introduction that I had been dreading ahead of us, so I waved Maria back from admiring someone’s roses down the block and tried to coax her inside with us, but she demurred.

“No, I’d just be in the way down there,” she claimed, “and besides, I’ve got a nail appointment. You boys go get to know each other over pizza and video games or whatever it is that you do. I’ll be around.” She made sure Leo had her number and

seemed all right with the situation before getting back in her car and heading out. For a moment, I considered the possibility that I would never see her again now that she'd fixed her problem and found the kid a temporary home, but I didn't let myself stray too far down that path because the thought depressed me.

Despite my best efforts to have G-pa out of the house when Leo arrived so he could settle in undisturbed, the man would hear none of it and insisted on being a part of the welcoming committee. I thought I'd gotten a reprieve because G-pa was napping when they drove up, but when the two of us came down the front steps, there he was at the door to greet us, clad in black socks, vertically striped shorts with suspenders, and an undershirt. If his attire wasn't off-putting enough, the three day's stubble and hair smashed in all directions would surely have given any potential roommate pause.

"So you're the stray they tell me about," G-pa said, still blocking the entrance and doing his best to come off as a grumpy old kook. I felt my ears burning at the edges as I forced myself to play it cool.

"Yes sir, fresh from the pound. Don't you worry, though, I got all my shots." Leo seemed genuinely and inexplicably amused by G-pa's demeanor.

"I ain't worried. Get in here, take a load off!" G-pa turned and went to pull back one of the folding screens to let Leo put down his loot, and I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. "Now, I squeezed some fresh lemonade this morning, and I know you'll be wantin' some."

"Don't know if I've ever had anything but the powdered stuff. Very kind of you, Mr. James."

“Never? Now that’s a crying shame, and we’re gonna fix it right this minute. And he and I can’t both be Mr. James, can we? Call me G-pa, it’s what I’m used to.” And off he went, scurrying to the kitchen to fetch the kid a glass of lemonade. I was beyond baffled, so much so that I couldn’t think of anything at all to say and just sat there watching Leo fix his shoelaces until G-pa came back with three full glasses of fresh-squeezed lemonade.

Here was another beverage whose taste I couldn’t stand, and not just because it was saturated with sugar. Lemonade, for all intents and purposes, is a quintessentially happy drink. That is, with its perfect blend of sweet-tart refreshment, it came close to approximating liquid sunshine. But there can be singular moments in one’s history with a substance that forever render it untouchable, effectively banishing it from the palate’s repertoire of acceptable things to ingest. In the past, it’s often been a food that has made me ill or has given me a reaction, or something I simply happened to have in the contents of my stomach when I became sick for another reason. With lemonade, it was none of these, but instead an inescapable association with a miserable point in time that has kept me from touching a glass of it for more than half my lifetime.

I was thirteen when my father died suddenly after the tree he had been cutting down at work crashed into another tree, knocking off some dead branches that then fell onto his head. It wasn’t a huge shock, to tell the truth. Logging was inherently dangerous work, and few men in the community had escaped work in the woods or at the mill with all digits, limbs, and skulls completely intact. And to be honest, he never was around much, always following the work up and down the coast, and when he *was* around, he acted more like the big brother I never had – he’d only been a teenager when I was born

and G-pa was the undisputed man of the house. Still, he *was* my father, so it was really like losing a father and a brother at the same time.

My father's wake was a much more tragic affair than Grams' service, considering he'd never even made it to thirty and had left behind a young widow and a son. All the loggers and their families came out for the funeral, and there was even a bagpipe player there from the union. I'd never seen so many drunk men in my life, and the singing, drinking, and eating went long into the night.

Though G-pa was still in charge of the homestead, it was made clear to me that night from all the somber handshakes, toasts, and firm pats on my shoulders that I, as my mother's only living male blood relative, was now to look after her and ensure that she was well taken care of. This newfound responsibility was unsettling to me, as I'd always been somewhat of a wild child roaming freely about the countryside without much intervention or direction.

Because all of the men were drinking heavily and toasting at every other mention of my father, I felt I, too, needed a drink in my hand. It never occurred to me to drink what the men were drinking, though I suppose now it would have been the natural thing under the circumstances. Instead, I drank liter after liter of lemonade, so much over the course of the night that more than once I needed to relieve myself in the bushes outside the union hall because there was a wait for the one and only restroom. But I kept drinking it anyway, for as long as I had that red plastic cup in my hands and there was something in it, I could participate as was now expected of me and raise a glass "to Stevie."

Lemonade should be banned from funerals. Sure, the kids need to drink something, but give them apple juice, or Coke. Lemonade will just confuse them,

especially if they are close relatives of the deceased. I wish I'd been able to make myself throw it up, because then at least I'd have had a taste in my mouth that was better suited to how I felt. My father had been strong, handsome, and funny – all of the things I was not and would now never be because he wouldn't be there to teach me, and I had lost him for good, and I would rather have tasted thick, nasty bile at the back of my throat than that disgustingly cheerful lemonade.

At some point in the night, long after the children were gone but while the men were still singing heartily, even if the words were getting harder and harder to understand, one of my father's closest friends from childhood came up to me and did his best to bestow upon me some words of wisdom. His name was Hoss Graves, and I remember that night, before he spoke to me, that I was already hoping he would feel some sort of responsibility to me as his best friend's son, that he would come over on Sundays, maybe, to have dinner with us or teach me how to better throw a football. I remember he was without his usual *Oakland A's* ball cap, probably out of respect for the dead, and his brown hair curled out where the hat used to be. He was drinking whiskey, I don't know what kind, but I could smell it off of his mustache, which I believe was there to compensate for the fact that he otherwise looked like he was barely twenty years old.

“Ranger,” he said, sloshing his drink as he patted me firmly on my shoulder. “You’re the man of the house now,” he began, forgetting about G-pa, “so you watch over your momma. Make sure no one takes advantage of her, now. Finer men than me have gone down that road, and it’s sticky. A sticky situation. You watch out for her, you hear?” I was old enough to know what he meant, and I didn’t like what he was saying, but I was angrier at the insinuation that my mother couldn’t take care of herself. She was

a good woman, and a tough woman, and she certainly didn't need looking after from a skinny little pimple-faced adolescent.

"Yes sir," I muttered, looking into my cup to avoid his gaze. Somehow even in his inebriated state, Hoss then noticed that I was drinking lemonade.

"What's that in your cup, son? You need a real drink in your hands at a time like this. Hey Jim!" he shouted at another union guy behind the makeshift bar at our backs whom I barely knew. "Get this young man a drink!"

"It's okay," I said, "I really don't need anything more to drink."

"Don't worry about it, kid. It's on me." I didn't know who was paying for all the booze, but I knew it wasn't Hoss Graves. It wasn't in me at the time to put up a real protest, though, so I let him take my depressingly sweet lemonade and hand me a smaller cup filled with something of a less cheery hue; it was darker, amber-colored, like stale piss in the morning after it's settled all night in the toilet bowl. He was right; this was what I needed.

I took a small sip, ever the cautious kid, and though my initial instincts told me that it was poison, I held it on my tongue, letting my gag reflex respond and subside, feeling nothing but disgust at the pungent sourness reminiscent of lighter fluid swirling around in my mouth. I swallowed, it burned, and I took another sip.

Hoss never did come over to see us. I suppose it was just as well that he didn't.

Chapter 9

I didn't see much of Leo the first several days he was staying with us. Our schedules were out of sync, with me "working" late afternoons and evenings that week at various cafés and Leo going to school during the day. Despite the lack of contact between us, it was beginning to dawn on me that I was now stuck in this place, no longer having the option of packing up and taking off to a different town and vocation on a whim if it suited me. I don't know why this hadn't fully occurred to me before, though I suppose in the aftermath of the death of a loved one, one sometimes feels more hospitable to one's fellow man than usual. The realization sort of seeped over me and settled in my mind as though I had been sitting pleasantly at a park bench, watching the sunset, only to discover that my feet had been resting in quick-drying cement and I would be stuck there all through the night in the cold as the fog rolled in, imperceptibly at first, but then appearing like steam from unseen vents in the ground and swallowing me up in an earthly cloud.

It suddenly struck me how irrevocable my consent had been once I had given it away. I wondered at my state of mind for having given it so freely, with hardly even a moment's hesitation to consider the weight and finality of what was to come. It wasn't just the one school year that I had committed to with Leo; I had my whole life ahead of me and G-pa was only 64. How does one evict one's own grandfather? Or imposter grandfather, as the case now seemed to be. As much anger as I felt about having been lied to my entire life, it all felt somehow very raw and yet abstract at the same time. I was furious at the *idea* of G-pa pretending to have been my real grandfather, but when I thought about the time we'd spent together during the formative years of my life, I couldn't think of how knowing the truth would've changed much of anything. Maybe it

would've made me more understanding of our differences; maybe I would've been less wounded by the rift created when I didn't come home after college. I just always assumed there would be someone and somewhere to come back to no matter how long I was away, and now that that was no longer the case, now that everyone else was dead and gone and this man was my only remaining family even though he technically wasn't, I couldn't seem to get all up in arms about it like I wanted to. And every time I tried, it was as if I were blowing all this angry hot air into a balloon that turned out to be made of porous materials, and I could blow all I wanted but that balloon wasn't going to get filled.

So that was where things stood with G-pa; Leo was going to be another challenge altogether. It wasn't until Saturday came at the end of that first week that I spent any significant amount of time with him around in the apartment, and Maria had been right about one thing at least; the kid was serious about his schoolwork. I'd told him he could use my laptop out in the kitchen when I wasn't using it (despite Maria's glowing review, I didn't trust a teenager to use it responsibly behind closed doors) and when I woke up Saturday morning, he was already typing away at the kitchen table on a term paper for European History.

"I hope it's okay, but I brewed some coffee," he said, without looking up from the computer. "There's still half a pot if you want any. I'll clean it up if you don't." I noticed there was a cereal bowl and spoon washed and drying on the dish rack.

"No, this is great," I said. "I usually end up pouring the other half down the drain anyway." Which was true.

"I can head to the library if you need the computer."

“No, no,” I shook my head. “I’m actually gonna head out for a run in a bit. You’re fine there.” We were still in that over-polite stage of new roommates that have been thrust together by chance rather than choice, and I wondered if he’d ever make it past that mode, or if that was simply how he’d learned to survive all these years, by being accommodating to such an extent that the other parties felt guilty for even opening their mouths to speak.

G-pa was already out and about like he usually was in the mornings, taking one of his interminable, rambling walks around the city to who knows where. It was probably a holdover from having lived all his life in the countryside, and the more oriented he became with the city, the less dependent he probably felt on my guidance, and, in turn, the more respect he regained for himself. It must have been hard enough losing his wife and moving out of his natural habitat all at once, but I sensed it was even more difficult for him to cede his status as man of the house to me. Though he said he simply didn’t feel like driving in a city he didn’t know, I think he also didn’t want to have to ask his grandson if he could borrow the car.

But I didn’t really care at the moment where G-pa was; I was thinking about Maria. My worst fears about her hadn’t materialized; she did call me that week, but it didn’t really leave me any more certain about where things were going with her. She’d tried to make it sound like a social call rather than like she was checking in on us, but eventually after a few minutes of aimless conversation, she started probing around with specific questions. She’d especially wanted to make sure that I’d cleared everything with Miss Angela, the landlady, though I don’t believe it was an accident that she hadn’t reminded me to do this in advance.

I'd learned from my misstep with G-pa's arrival, and I hadn't wanted to appear disingenuous with respect to our rental agreement, so I'd gone upstairs the previous week to explain the situation to Miss Angela and request her permission for Leo to stay with me. I wasn't sure what she would say, and part of me had wanted her to say no so that it wasn't up to me, so that it was out of my hands. Her response after I'd laid it all out on the table for her to decide was unexpected.

"You're not trying to start your own orphanage down there, are you? Because there are other places that need it more than here, that's for sure. You might as well go down to Darfur and round yourself up some Lost Boys if that's the case. There are plenty of refugees to fill the void if you know what I'm saying." I didn't.

"No ma'am," I insisted, "just helpin' out a friend of a friend." It was close enough to the truth. In all honesty, I didn't know at all what I was doing.

"I tell you what," she responded. "He can stay with you all down there on a trial basis. You boys come on up for dinner next Saturday after he's settled in, and I'll let you know after meeting him whether he can stay or not. Bring your girlfriend if she can make it."

That was it. I told her it was a deal, and now it was next Saturday, and the five of us were due to sit down together in my landlady's house for dinner that evening, but I couldn't think of a more mismatched batch of dinner party guests if I had to design one myself. And though I longed for time alone with Maria to begin the process of clarifying our relationship (and how romantic of me, I thought to myself, that I longed for clarification first and foremost before other things), Maria, on the other hand, seemed charmed by the idea of dinner with G-pa, Miss Angela, Leo, and me.

After pouring myself a cup of coffee from the pot, I sat down at the dinette across from Leo. “So you remember about dinner tonight upstairs, right? With the landlady?” I hadn’t told him that the dinner was intended as an audition of sorts for him to remain living there, so I was a little nervous that he might blow it off thinking he had better things to do.

“You mean with Miss Angela? Yeah, she’s been talkin’ it up to me all week long. Says we should be prepared to be ‘enlightened’ by her cooking, whatever the hell that means.” I thought about the fact that until G-pa had arrived, I had only been inside Miss Angela’s house upstairs the day I signed the lease, and here this kid hadn’t even been around for a week and the two were seemingly already bosom buddies. I am embarrassed to admit that my mind went there, that my gut reaction was that she chose to engage with Leo because he was from around here and ignored me because she didn’t have any interest in befriending an outsider. But then again, G-pa had been making regular visits up to the upper levels of the house since his arrival, so that clearly wasn’t it. I had always felt that it simply wasn’t my place to insert myself into her social realm – that I should wait to be invited in. I was a tenant, not a neighbor. But G-pa, and for all I knew, Leo too, had not made that distinction, and instead, they had taken it upon themselves to be chummy with the woman upstairs, and I wondered if in contrast I had appeared to her as unfriendly or standoffish.

I would make up for it that night at dinner, I thought. Here was an opportunity to shed my tendencies towards aloofness and demonstrate to Maria that I could be spontaneously charming. I was becoming acutely aware of the reality that I no longer had the option of inviting Maria back to my place after a night out together, and the fact that

she hadn't yet invited me to hers was beginning to cultivate a profound ache that had taken root inside me and was growing steadily with each date that went by without a satisfying resolution. Whether she was being cautious, coy, or simply enjoyed being pursued, I wasn't sure. I just wanted whatever stage we were in to be over and to be onto whatever came next.

By the time six o'clock came around and the three of us men were ready to head upstairs, I hadn't heard from Maria whether or not she was on her way. Rather than keep Miss Angela waiting, I left Maria a note on the door telling her to come join us when she arrived. Because of my phobia of committing any sort of faux pas, it physically pained me that my date appeared to be late for a collective dinner, and my stomach churned disagreeably over its empty self. I had asked her in advance to avoid bringing up my job search, telling her that it was a sore subject with G-pa, but she didn't know that *he* didn't know I was unemployed, and there was always the chance that she would blow my cover. Surely, the knowledge of this possibility was contributing to my abdominal distress.

Anyway, not knowing anything about Miss Angela's tastes in wine, and forever paranoid that I would one day unwittingly bring a bottle to a recovering alcoholic, I opted to bring a bunch of cut flowers from a farmers' market that I'd passed by on my run that morning as my gift to the hostess. I'd even brought the bouquet already in a vase, or rather, an old glass peanut jar repurposed as a vase, as I'd once read in a book on dinner parties that flowers are a terrible hostess gift because it requires the lady to drop what she is doing to find a vase. I didn't think about the fact that she might have allergies, but I really felt that her house could use a little bit of cheer, or maybe I just wanted something to look at while I was there that wasn't so meticulously spic and span.

The three of us men all filed out the door together, and as we passed the small end table at the entryway, Leo mentioned that he'd grabbed the mail on his way in from buying groceries.

“Lemme know if you'd like me to put it somewhere else next time.”

“No, this'll be fine, thanks.” I glanced down at the meticulously neat pile as I walked by, and there resting directly on top, angled just so I could see it, was the check from the grant that Maria had been awarded so she could provide an incentive for someone to take him in. To say that it took the wind out of my sails would've been an understatement; I felt instantly thrown off course, as if I'd just sailed under an enormous bridge, my jib fluttering madly about and the mainsail swinging violently back and forth, ready to take off my head with the boom at any moment. Now it was official, I thought: I was categorically a scumbag. But I couldn't pinpoint exactly why I felt that way. Wasn't it valid to be compensated for the inconvenience of having a strange teenager stay in one's home? People don't just take in extra roommates for free.

Still, it didn't feel valid at all; it felt like being someone's pimp, getting something for doing nothing. And to have Leo know about it made it even worse. The way he'd positioned the envelope indicated that he clearly meant for me to know that he knew, and that this was his way, I believed, of asserting that ours was an inherently unequal relationship. A warning, perhaps, to stay out of his way, to avoid any attempts to get buddy-buddy with him, because he was paying me with his very presence, and we could be friendly but we could most definitely not ever be friends.

But I didn't let any of these thoughts register on my face, and I carried on out the door and up the steps as if I hadn't noticed. When we rang the doorbell, I heard Miss

Angela shout through the window, “Come on in, but keep yourselves out of my kitchen!” Leo went in first, and we followed him into the sitting room where a pitcher of ruby-colored liquid bobbing with sliced fruit, a bucket of ice, and four crystal glasses awaited us on the coffee table. This was the room that felt most ominously of death to me, with the pictures of Angela’s deceased sons hovering over us, their grinning faces reflecting back at us in the gleaming surface of the cherry coffee table, which reeked of Lemon Pledge. I hoped the pitcher contained sangria, but my instincts nudged me towards fruit punch or Kool-Aid, though it ended up being none of those.

“That right there is iced honeybush tea. It’s sweet on its own, so you shouldn’t add a speck of sugar.” Miss Angela was almost unrecognizable as she walked in holding a platter of hors d’oeuvres, wearing a panoply of vibrantly patterned fabric draped around her body in a way that evoked an East Indian queen. Her admonition was unnecessary, as there didn’t appear to be a sugar bowl anywhere in sight.

“These are for you,” I said, awkwardly holding up the vase while she was still holding onto the platter. “Uh, where can I put them?”

“Over on the end table will be just fine – there’s not going to be any room on the dining room table for even your elbows when this meal gets served.”

“Can I help you with that?” Leo asked as he stood up and motioned for the tray.

“Not till you get in there and wash your hands,” she said, nodding her head to indicate the powder room in the hallway. “That goes for all of you. I’ve got this.”

As we filed our way into the closet-sized bathroom to comply, I was beginning to get the sense that Miss Angela had a way of making people feel like kindergarteners no matter their age. We sat back down in the living room and silently sipped our iced teas

while she finished preparing the meal, but when she was done, Maria still hadn't arrived or called, and Miss Angela wouldn't hear of us sitting down to dinner without her. This was why I had hesitated to get friendly with my landlord; I liked where I lived, and it made me uneasy in the way one feels when one's home is under threat when I considered that any one of the guests at this dinner could mess that up for me.

The conversation was slow to get going, but it eventually rested on the subject of food as we all admired the fresh spring rolls packed in cool rice paper that our hostess had prepared.

"Speaking of Chinese food," G-pa broke in, after Miss Angela had explained the difference between an egg roll and a spring roll to him, "maybe you can answer something for me."

"Go ahead," she responded.

"What's with all the Chinese food places around here? None of them actually do Chinese food right – they've all got these outrageous 'fried chicken-seafood-pizza-subs' signs all over them. Does nobody serve real Chinese food anywhere?" Though I couldn't safely eat Chinese food with all the soy in everything, I remember it being the one thing G-pa would demand every time we made it up to Eureka. I'd been in the district for a few years, and I had often heard complaints about the very same thing from friends who weren't from the area, that the cuisine had seemingly been bastardized beyond recognition.

"What you have touched on, my friend, is a government conspiracy to poison brown people," Miss Angela claimed. Leo snickered despite his attempts to keep a straight face, but G-pa – ever the conspiracy theorist – leaned forward. I sat there blankly,

unable to tell from her plain expression whether or not she was pulling my leg or sincerely believed what she was saying. As it happened, I wouldn't come to find out because this was the moment Maria decided to finally make her entrance.

If Miss Angela was dressed as a queen, then Maria was the king's concubine. When she opened the door, Maria glided in effortlessly on three-inch platform heels, the motion from her entry fluttering the skirt of her wraparound dress in a way that revealed a generous glimpse of her flexed upper thigh. The dress had a halter top with a neckline that plunged to a depth that exposed a birthmark that I had never seen before on her sternum. The mark looked to me like a small sandy island on a map in the midst of a vast and dark ocean, and I got the sense that, behind his steely exterior, Leo was blushing. Even Miss Angela couldn't help but drink in the vision of Maria's figure under the silvery fabric which clung to her skin as it fell; her gaze was fixed on Maria's behind as Maria apologized to all of us for being late. On another woman, the dress would have been too revealing, too eager, but on Maria, it was the perfect frame for the canvas of her body.

Miss Angela didn't let Maria sit down with us, and instead urged us all to the dinner table in the adjacent room. "I'm not serving up cold supper, so let's get down to business."

When she started bringing in the dishes for dinner, it became clear right away that the meal was not what any of us were expecting, and now I knew what she had meant when Miss Angela had told Leo to prepare to be enlightened. She had prepared for us an elaborate vegan feast: sesame kale, chilled cucumber-melon soup, marinated tofu kebabs, red bean masala and brown rice, and homemade flatbread. I was relieved that I could eat

everything but the tofu – I’d let her know about Maria’s and my limitations in advance but urged her not to make special accommodations – but my hopes for the evening sank into the pit of my empty stomach as I thought about G-pa, whose go-to food was Spam, and Leo, who seemed to subsist off of cereal, pizza, and ramen noodles, and how the two of them would react to such unfamiliar fare.

I shouldn’t have had such low expectations for Leo; here was a boy who had learned to show, or at least feign, gratitude towards any meal that was placed before him. But when G-pa filled his plate to the brim, raved about the tofu skewers, and pleaded for seconds, I began to get suspicious that there was some big joke that I wasn’t in on, or maybe he’d been coming up here during the day for more than just iced tea and conversation. And though Maria and I were seated side by side, she had won over the room with her presence to such an extent that I felt I no longer had any access to her, that she was behind an invisible velvet rope, and I needed someone else’s permission to get through.

Things were going just fine in general, though, and the pit in my stomach was slowly replaced over the course of the evening by remarkably good food. It felt like Sunday dinner with family, though who was in which role was difficult to tell. But as the dinner was consumed and the night wound down, my fears about letting things get personal with Miss Angela seemed to have materialized.

As we all stood up to help clear the table, Miss Angela gestured to Leo for a platter that was out of reach and said, “George, hand me that plate there, will you?” Leo paused briefly and cocked his head a bit to the side, and we all couldn’t help but look at him to see what he would say.

“Sure, Miss Angela. Here you go.” He was used to being compliant, but the damage was done; the hesitation in his voice had made her realize her mistake.

“Don’t all of you look at me like that – I know what I said. I’m not crazy, if that’s what you’re thinking.” I could tell she was flustered by the way she avoided our collective gaze as she walked away with a pile of dishes to the kitchen. We all glanced at each other and resumed clearing the table in silence, but Miss Angela came back to the table and would have none of it. “No way, you all go on home. I’ve got this. I don’t need help with the dishes – you cook it, you clean it.” I didn’t know what to say, so I looked to Maria for her input.

“Miss Angela, we got nothin’ else better to do; why don’t you let us take over? It’ll help me make up for being late.”

“No thank you, go on now. I don’t want anybody messing around in my kitchen but me. It’s been nice having you all. Good night.” She stood with her hands clasped around the back of one of the dining room chairs in a way that said she meant it, and there wasn’t anything we could say that would change her mind.

The abruptness of the evening’s conclusion made for an awkward exit as we all gave our thanks as cheerily as we could and lined up single file to get out the door. Miss Angela didn’t budge from the back of that chair, and instead waved goodbye while holding onto it with her other hand as if it were the only thing keeping her standing.

The four of us reached the sidewalk at the bottom of the front steps, and the glow from earlier in the evening faded to an even fainter glimmer as we stood speechless in our collective shame at being evicted. It seemed futile to ask Maria down for coffee – I didn’t think she’d want to linger in the spoiled atmosphere of our company of four – but I hated

to let her go off alone in that dress. I was jealous of the night for keeping her from me, but to ask her to go out with me in front of Leo and G-pa felt ridiculous. When Leo finally broke the silence, I was grateful.

“Well, I’d better get back to my term paper if I’m going to get it done by Monday. See you all later.” Perhaps because he’d endured stranger evenings than this one with far more tense conclusions, Leo seemed relatively unfazed by this one.

“And I’m gonna hit the hay,” G-pa, ever the early riser, yawned. “Maria,” he said, holding out his hand for hers, “always a pleasure.” He kissed her hand – a gesture I had never before seen him make – though if anyone could bring out the gentleman in a man, it was Maria.

When G-pa and Leo had descended down the stairs to my apartment, I had a momentary boost in confidence for the remainder of the night. I held Maria’s hand and leaned on the post of the railing at the bottom of the stoop, and the birthmark-island appeared brighter in the streetlamp, seeming like a beacon inviting me closer.

“Well that was awkward,” she said when they had closed the door, smiling sheepishly in embarrassment. “I’m sorry it ended that way; I know you were hoping to impress her so she’d let Leo stay with you.” It’s true that I’d been hoping to make an impression, but with Maria, not Miss Angela.

“I’ll talk to her tomorrow,” I shrugged. “She’s a good soul; she’s not gonna kick him out on the street.”

“I don’t know, Ranger. You don’t think he reminds her too much of her sons?” She’d voiced what we’d all been thinking when the wrong name slipped out of Miss

Angela's mouth. She'd still never spoken about them in my presence, but it was obvious who she'd meant.

"Come on, she made us a vegan feast. People like that have a soft spot for strays. I'll talk to her tomorrow and reassure her about Leo." I wanted to change the subject, but I didn't want to appear insensitive to her concerns. The right balance had always seemed elusive to me, but I reached for it anyway the way one does when a glass of water is about to spill over at the other end of a table. Still, that equilibrium between caring and not caring seemed to slip through my fingers in much the same way.

"I'm glad you're so sure of yourself." She took her hand back and folded her arms across her chest as a cool breeze raised a crop of goosebumps all over her arms.

"Trust me on this – she'll come around." I sensed that my opportunity for keeping her there was slipping away, so I tried to wrestle it back from oblivion. "Come have a drink with me. You look amazing, and I think that you in that dress is a combination that the good people of the district deserve to see more of, and I want to be there to see their faces." It was not the type of thing I usually said to a woman – I was always worried I'd cross the fine line between compliment and condescension, so normally I played it safe with something more direct and less potent. She raised her eyebrows and my heart rate shot up as I waited to see if that meant she was pleasantly surprised or pissed.

"You know, I'd loved to," she began, and I allowed myself a small, celebratory smile, but then she continued, "but I'm afraid I'm developing quite the headache. I should go home and go to bed before it becomes a migraine. Can I take a rain check?" I hated that she'd turned me down, but I loathed even more that she'd done it with such an

unimaginative excuse, as though I weren't worth the brainpower or the effort to come up with something believable.

"Sure thing," I forced a smile and stood up to walk her to her car. "I hope you feel better. It was good to see you." It was easy to fall back on familiar expressions and pretend that she was genuinely feeling poorly. She must have sensed I was on autopilot, though, because she reached out to my arm in what felt like reassurance.

"No really. I'd *like* a rain check." Maria looked up at me with an expression that could only be interpreted as an invitation, and so I held the back of her head gently in my hands and kissed her with everything that I had, trying my best to be like Tom Cruise with Kelly McGillis after their car chase and steamy fight on the side of the road in *Top Gun*. When it was over, I felt I had succeeded, but when I looked in Maria's eyes for confirmation, she wasn't even looking at me, but rather was staring right past me at something else entirely. Apparently, I'd blown it.

"Sorry, uh, we were out of bread, so I thought I'd head down to the store to grab some for tomorrow." I turned around and there was G-pa, already changed out of his collared shirt and slacks back into his undershirt and shorts, his chicken legs poking out and mocking my desire for Maria with their sheer ugliness. "Don't mind me," he finished, and shuffled along right between us like he hadn't just disrupted the most exciting moment of my night.

I sighed as I held the door open to her car after he'd walked away. "Good night," I said.

"It's not as bad as you make it seem." She squeezed my hand as she got in. "Go easier on him. It'll make things easier on yourself."

After she drove away, I thought about G-pa and how settled he already seemed to be, not just in my apartment, but in the city itself. Where was the culture shock? That this man of the outback could so smoothly glide into this urban environment and not freak out was impossible to me. In fact, it bugged the hell out of me; it didn't feel real. And where was his grief for Grams? As far as I could tell, he was shacking up with my landlady right under my nose and there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do about it. He didn't even seem apologetic about having lived a life of lies, or that I had agreed to hand over my life to someone who was essentially some random guy from the sticks. I wanted to be the kind of man who would just live and let live, truly, I did, but there was that anger floating around inside me somewhere, vague and untouchable. And frankly, I wasn't that man. I wasn't even his grandson. I was just a baby in a basket to him. I was nobody.

Chapter 10

Ranger, there are some things a man ought to know about him self. About his origins. His people. Now I know you probably think I got no business including you on my list of people and thats fair. And I'm sure you wanna know more about your blood relatives and I would urge you to contact them when you feel the need. Just call up the Johnstons and tell them what I told you and they'll believe you and you can go from there. But this ain't about that. This is about us and our family.

By the time you are reading this you will know already that Miss Angela's been teachin me to read and write properly all this time over the course of this time I been with you. The truth of it is, I always knew enough to get by – for road signs, lists, that sort of thing – but I never could seem to get through a full sentence without feeling just plain tired by the end of it. But a man wants to put some things down before he goes and as much as I love machines theres nothin that lasts longer than paper when it comes to words. Plus a mans got to have his soap box and I admit that part of why I'm puttin this down is so you can't argue with me. Call it an old mans perogative. Tho I know you don't think I'm old.

I feel like I've gotta put the important stuff up front in case you give up readin it so I'm just goin to come out and say some things. First is you gotta forget about the way things look to the rest of the world. You're so wrapped up in makin sure things don't look bad to somebody else that you're stuck like one of those rabbits in headlights. I know you think I don't belong stickin my nose in peoples business around here but you could not be more wrong about that.

For instance. The first week I came here to live with you I went out lookin to get a hair cut. I walked in to the closest barber shop I could find, you know the one on Bladensburg that I always go to now. Well when I walked in that first time you'da thought a beaver had just come into a furniture store by the looks on there faces. One fella looked up from cuttin hair and looked me right in the eye and told me flat out "We don't do white peoples hair." I never felt my cheeks get so hot in my life, cept maybe once when I got smacked by a girl in front of my friends when I was a kid, and I wondered if maybe things were different here then they were in California. Like black people were gettin back at white people for history, which would only end badly but you know I wouldn't blame them. Now I bet if it was you, you woulda just left and felt bad about it all week but I asked him why and he simply told me "Don't know how. Never cut white peoples hair before." I told him that was dammed near the craziest explanation I ever heard and asked him if he had clippers, which I knew he did because he was holdin some. He held em up and said "Yeah" and I said "All right then you can cut my hair. Unless its against company policy, that is." He told me "No sir. You have a seat and we'll get to you when we get to you." And that was it. Thats what I mean when I say you shouldn't worry so much about how things look. It'll only make you stuck.

Any way, thats not really the meat of what I wanted to say so I'll try and keep more to the point. You know I've never written anything before and its hard to stay on the same path when it takes so long to get down an idea, especially when I have to hit the dictionary for spellin. Some things are complicated and take a little while to come out properly. The thing is, you need to know how it was with your father and me. He never did learn of his true beginnings, and I often saw him in a state of disappointment. He was

disappointed in me the way people are when they think that the failures and limitations of their parents are destined to be their own. I suppose that's what drove him to more physical pursuits, though he knew that my limitations were not the result of poor breeding but rather bad luck and shortsightedness on the part of my mother. In that respect, it seems that bad luck is blind to bloodlines and has been passed down any way. Though I hope not for your sake.

Life could have been very different for us all had I made different choices. It was not written in stone that we live out our days on an old ranch with me working in the barn like I did. When I was a young teenage boy, I had ambitions to open my own garage up in Eureka and maybe one day have a house in town, a nice Victorian with five bedrooms. Even after your father and Bea came around it was still my plan for the future. One day I was walking on the road to a repair job with my tools in a napsack, this was when your father was young and I had not yet developed the reputation to have the work come to me. I was walking along when up ahead I saw what at the time could only be interpreted by my young mind as a beautiful vision from another world, an ivory 1963 Mercedes Gull Wing coupe pulled over to the side of the road. That this car was in our corner of the country was impossible, there were only about a thousand of them ever made. But there it was, wet all over after a rain looking like a great metallic pearl just pulled out of the ocean. I only knew of it because of those mechanics catalogs that always came to the house and never did I think that I would ever set my eyes on one of them in person. But unlike a vision, it stayed in place and grew larger as I got closer and closer until I was standing beside it and greeting its owner, a tall gangly man in a camelhair coat, leather riding gloves and a long white scarf. Now I was only about 18 at the time, so you can

imagine that such a man would be suspicious of my requests to look under the hood of such an incredible automobile. But he had been there for an hour all ready with not a soul driving by, and seeing that I had my bag of tools by my side it was plain that I was telling the truth about my vocation, and really what other choice did the man have. When I first put my hands on that engine I felt as though I was just a simple country doctor being asked to help the Queen of England give birth on the side of the road. I knew I had to play it calm, but keeping my hands steady as I moved them over her inner workings took all the control I could muster. The man, who confessed to knowing nothing about his own vehicle, stood beside me to watch and sensing my nervousness he shook in his boots for the both of us.

I lifted the hood and could smell the raw gasoline right away. Didn't take much of a looksie to find the leak in one of the fuel injection lines, so no wonder it was backfiring and running as awful as he'd said. After fiddlin around for a bit to make it look like I was doin serious work, I grabbed some electrical tape from my bag and patched it up enough for him to make it to the next town with a gas station, though I told him he wouldn't make it much further without a real fix, and that I didn't have the tools on me or I'd do it right there.

When I was all through with the operation and the engine roared to life like a creature from the jungle the man looked at me like I was some kind of apparition or saint. He offered to drive me to my destination since he had held me up and on the way he asked if I would consider coming to live above his garage in his carriage house in Sonoma to care for his fleet of vehicles full time. The salary he quoted to me would not sound like much today but it was enough then to make my eyes widen and was probably

near ten times as much as I would ever make back home. I told him I had a wife and son and mother to care for and that I appreciated his offer but did not think it would be best for the four of us to live all crammed up in an apartment above a garage. This was when Bea and I were still hoping for a child or two of our own someday, and that would make five or six of us up in one apartment compared to the relative openness and freedom of the ranch. He said he understood and left it at that and I did not regret the decision.

The truth of the matter was, it wasn't my family I had worried about but my own soul. I was born to fix things, to bring things back to life that were on their last legs for people who had no other alternatives and were depending on me for their very livelihoods. What he was askin me to do was to give that up to be a stable boy for a herd of thoroughbreds, to preen and grease beasts that could almost care for themselves. I was not built for that kind of work and so I turned down an opportunity that woulda meant I woulda finally had the money to open my own garage one day and live more comfortably.

When the man dropped me off he handed me 100 dollars which I accepted because he could afford it and he should have known how to take care of his car. It was more than I would make in a week. The man never told me what he did for a livin or what he had been doin out there away from all of civilization. I guess I forgot to ask.

Any way it wasn't because I never had enough money that I never went ahead and opened a shop of my own up in a real town. As the years went by and people in our parts got to know my work it became clear to me that they needed what I was doin like folks need a country doctor. You know that our kind of people didn't have the time or the money to take things to the city or pay a tow truck from over by the highway so I kept

things runnin up an down the Coast for folks who took care of their things and who deserved my services.

I stayed on the Coast not because I didn't have any other options but because it suited me and it gave me a purpose in life and I thought you oughta know why it was I never went anywhere in life.

Chapter 11

It was nearly a week before I heard from Maria after the dinner at Miss Angela's and the subsequent botched kiss on her stoop. She'd gotten caught up in work, she'd said, like always, but she wanted to get together for drinks on Friday. Meanwhile, Thursday came and I was throwing myself even harder into looking for work but still had no leads, and even with the new stipend for housing Leo, I only had a couple months of savings left before I'd have nothing. As I sat at one of my less favorite cafés scrolling through the wanted ads, my eyes glazed over from browsing so many employment websites, and I opened an email from Vic, the former owner of Milo's and my old boss at the bookstore, wishing me well with the job hunt. The day he'd told me the store was closing had been another Thursday morning with a date with Maria on the horizon.

I'd just set up a new display that morning when Vic came in earlier than usual to do the orders for the week. He was a swell guy, a graying baby boomer with a special knack for magic tricks and ventriloquism. He had been easy to work for in that he had clear and simple expectations and was friendly enough to make it feel like you'd be one of his good friends if only you weren't working for him.

This day, however, he didn't seem himself and was actually somewhat gruff as I recall when he walked in the door, saying just a brief hello as he went straight back to the cramped office. There weren't any customers browsing books, just a few sitting in the café where the barista was taking care of things, so I'd stopped dusting for a moment to go and check in with him. When I walked in, he was just sitting on his desk staring at a stack of remaindered art books that had recently arrived, one of many piles that reached

almost to the ceiling, and he had his index finger on his chin stroking the tips of his shortly cropped beard.

“Hey,” I said, “I took the liberty of putting out the new boxes of humor books out front; hope that’s okay.”

“I wish you hadn’t,” was all he said in response. I was mystified by what he could have meant by that; I’d only mentioned it as a formality. He usually gave me free reign of the place to set things up how I saw fit, and I had just been trying to make small talk.

“Um, I’m sorry? It didn’t take me long – I can tear it down again, no problem. What’s up?”

“It’s nothing,” he shrugged. “It’s just that we’ve lost our lease. The owners sold the space to some developers who wanna tear it down and build condos. That’s it. We’re closing at the end of the month.” All I really took in from what he’d said was “we’re closing,” and I wasn’t even sure I’d heard him correctly on that point.

“Wait, closing like reopening in another space, or closing as in ‘everything must go’?”

“There’s nowhere else the rent is cheap enough to move into. This was it. We auction off the inventory and the furniture, and then we’re done. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers to illustrate as if I hadn’t gotten the picture how sudden all of this was.

“Shit, what are you gonna do?” The bookstore had been his baby for over twenty years, and my first instincts were to offer my condolences, but as Vic continued, a small flicker of movement caught my eye just past his head and redirected my gaze to a precarious stack of boxes on the desk. There was a solitary ant meandering across a box

that read *Daedalus Books* on its side. It kept disappearing and reappearing as it swirled in and out of the thick black lettering, and I watched with interest as it reached the “s” at the end of “*Books*” only to turn around and head back in the other direction.

“Well don't look so surprised,” Vic said, interrupting my thoughts and dragging me back to the conversation. “You know this business hasn't been truly profitable since the nineties. It was only a matter of time, really.”

“Yeah, but the café made it work,” I pointed out. “You still make ends meet. I'm sure you can reopen in another neighborhood.” The ant oscillated among the a's and d's on the box, seeming to prefer the cozy confines of the enclosed letters to the more open and less reassuring “u” and “s.”

“Nah, you know the writing's been on the wall. Don't worry about me – I've been looking at my exit strategy for the last ten years. What are *you* gonna do, is what you should be asking right now. It's not exactly the best time to find a job out there.” I really didn't want to think about what he was saying. Sure, I knew that being an independent bookseller in this market was tenuous at best, or as some would say, hopelessly nostalgic. But Vic had been planning to retire, and I was supposed to take over the business, and there was the café to help pay the rent.

I looked back to the stack of boxes and couldn't immediately find the ant, but I searched a little further and noticed it was now climbing down the underside of an open flap of a different box entirely. I considered the mechanisms involved in the ant gripping the box while walking upside down and continuing to move forward at the same time. And why didn't it just let go? It had that exoskeleton with essentially armored plating all around its body – it's not like it would break a leg upon falling to the floor. Or would it? I

thought about how far an ant would have to fall to become injured, if it could fall the height of a canyon and emerge unscathed, and if so, why wouldn't it opt for the more efficient free-fall method than taking all that time and energy to crawl all the way down.

I, myself, had never had the guts or trust in someone else's flimsy equipment to go bungee jumping or anything like that, but I'd always longed to dive head-first into one of those forested caverns of New Zealand they're always profiling in *National Geographic*, to jump from the precipice of a lush hilltop and land in a shimmering pool of the underworld. But in reality, those pools aren't lit up like they are in the magazine. They're as close to being black holes of inky, sepulchral darkness as you can get on the surface of the earth.

"Hey, you know," I shrugged, "I always got the museum thing to fall back on. I'll be okay." I'd tried to make it sound like it was no big deal, but Vic didn't seem to be listening too intently anymore; by then he was rifling through papers in the desk drawers.

Maybe the ant had to walk the whole way back so it wouldn't get lost, following that invisible scent trail they supposedly leave behind them. Could it be that crucial to finding its way home? – I wondered. Weren't there enough crumbs around for an ant to live just about anywhere? Though I supposed it wasn't about the individual ant, it was about keeping up the colony. Or did ants ever voluntarily break away out on their own? Probably not, I decided. The renegade gene had likely been bred out of them millions of years ago. Probably not ever.

"Listen," I said, "I'd better get back out there. We can talk more later."

"Sure thing," he mumbled, and I left the office to go man the store.

I'd spent the last couple of years fancying myself the owner and operator of a real, bona fide neighborhood *place*, and the thought of suddenly packing up and pounding the pavement with my resume was almost unfathomable to me. It didn't fit into my script of how things were supposed to go in my life, though nothing ever really had. The end of the month, he'd said. It was already the 20th. That meant in ten more days I would be unemployed in the worst economy in my memory, and though the bookstore had always been a refuge for me, all at once I felt the need to bust out of there and run to the nearest unemployment office with the morning's classifieds and red pen in hand.

As I sat now weeks later in the café sipping an iced coffee while preparing my umpteenth cover letter for a position I did not actually want, I wondered if that might have been the smartest thing to do after all. Though G-pa was contributing with his miniscule savings and the proceeds from the estate sale, I – perhaps a little melodramatically, I admit – now felt the equivalent burden of having to provide for a family of three on my shoulders, with no paycheck. My credit card balances were steadily creeping upwards, and my bank account balance was plummeting, but at that point I still had faith in the power of my education and experience (and pounding the virtual pavement) to help me prevail, so I collected my wits and kept at it until my “workday” was supposed to be over, and then I went home.

When I got there, G-pa and Leo were both out, but the living room window was propped open, which I had explicitly told them not to do. There were bars on the windows so no one could really get in through them, but it was the principal of it – it made the place feel exposed and vulnerable when they were open. It was a hot June day, so the apartment had a sticky, swampy locker-room feel to it when I came in, because

even basements do not escape the heat and humidity of early summer in D.C. It added a touch of claustrophobia to my already unsettled mood, and I visibly scowled, though no one was around to receive my disapproval.

Standing there in my apartment with cisterns of sweat accumulating on my clothes and face, I was beginning to feel as though G-pa had had the correct sentiment after all with his tempered response to the splendor of an East Coast spring. Though I'd smarted when he'd burst my bubble over the grandeur of it all, summer was now creeping its way in and wilting my enthusiasm. Even though I'd lived there for years, I was finally starting to realize that experiencing spring in D.C. was like going to a genuine major league ballpark for the first time when you're a kid, which I'd managed to do once with my dad shortly before he died. There's a whole slew of confections laid out before you. You gleefully, giddily are coaxed into consuming all manner of delights – cotton candy, a soft pretzel, peanuts straight from the shell, and an Italian ice to top it off, maybe even a hot dog for good measure. But then by the end of the seventh inning stretch, you've been lulled into the barf bag of a D.C. summer, that glorious spring fading into a mosquito-infested bog better experienced from within the confines of an air conditioned office building, which in itself is its own personal hell.

I put down my messenger bag and was about to reach over to close the window when I thought I heard Leo's voice among several in a group of guys walking by out on the street. When they came within earshot, I couldn't help but stand there to listen; I was curious whether he let down his guard when he was out of the house or if he was always so reticent with everyone. The first sentence I could make out was spoken by a kid I didn't know.

“So Leo, uh, how you like livin’ in a cracker box, huh?” There was a round of snickers and “Oh’s” from what must have been three or four other guys in their late teens. I didn’t know how he knew them, but Leo’s was the voice that responded.

“Man, you don’t even know what you talkin’ about. It’s a Cracker *Jack* box, you know what I’m sayin’? It ain’t no common thang. It’s good, man.” I didn’t know what exactly he meant by that comment, but I took it to be a good sign that I had just been thinking about baseball, and here, he had brought up Cracker Jacks at almost the same time.

“No doubt,” said the first voice. “What it like eatin’ up all them cracker crumbs off the floor? They got you doin’ they dishes? They laundry?”

“Why? You offerin’ me a room? Look, it ain’t like that. These people the only thing keepin’ me from three hots and a cot. Deonté been there, right? Tell me – you go back to juvee before you stay for nothin’ in a white man’s house? And what about you, Tyrese? How you like still livin’ offa yo mama’s titty, huh? You like the shoes she buy you, the food she make, the roof she put over yo head with her two jobs so you can keep on bein’ a hood rat? How you like that, huh?”

“Yo, shut the fuck up.” This, from one of the other voices in the group.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. When she stop doin’ all them things an’ you ain’t got no full-time job ‘cause you tryin’ to get your *own* self an education, *then* I tell you ‘what it *like*.’”

My reflexes should have kicked in when I heard the footsteps coming down the entrance, but I neither left the room nor closed the window. Instead, when Leo came in

the unlocked front door, I was still standing there at the base of the window like an idiot with my bag at my feet.

“What’s up?” he asked, not seeming to be self-conscious about his prior conversation but nevertheless giving me a quizzical look as to why I was just standing around in the entryway.

“Oh, uh, nothin’ much. Just closing the window here because someone left it open.” It didn’t come out in an accusatory way, but I immediately wondered whether he’d take it that way.

“Yeah, that would’ve been G-pa. I told him it would get hot later, but he just said he’d rather sit around inhaling car exhaust from the street than have to smell his own farts, so…”

I chuckled in spite of my irritation at the window. “Yeah, that sounds like him all right. Sorry you had to hear that.” It felt strange to listen to this young man call him by that name, though, a name I had given him, after all, and until recently, a name which had been used exclusively by me. I was a little surprised G-pa had insisted on Leo using it, as a matter of fact. Wouldn’t Mr. James have been sufficient? I was going by Ranger, so there wouldn’t have been any confusion. But now it felt a little like the neighbor’s kid was over calling my own mother “Mom.”

“Listen,” he said, shifting his weight and looking out the window, “I don’t know what you heard, but the boys out there were just messin’. I know them from way back, and they’re just jealous that I’m the only one of them who’s got a future. They don’t mean nothin’ by it. They’re pissed because I remind them that they don’t have to be goin’ nowhere.”

I realized I didn't know much about his history, but the fact that he knew those guys walking around meant that he was probably from the neighborhood himself, and I imagined that he must have encountered a lot of ghosts since he'd returned. When I heard he'd been in foster care, I'd assumed he was an orphan, that he didn't have any relatives who could take him in, but now I wondered whether one or both of his parents might be alive but had been unable or unwilling to raise him, which, to me, would've been worse.

I didn't know how to end the conversation now that it was clear he'd caught me eavesdropping, and I was dwelling on his comment about his friends floundering through life when he broke into my thoughts.

“Anyway, I'm gonna go get some work done in the bedroom where the window's been closed and there's air conditioning.” I noticed that he always said “the” bedroom, rather than “my” bedroom, and it pained me to think that he'd probably trained himself to do that so he wouldn't feel attached to anything that might slip away at any moment, or maybe someone else had trained it out of him to remind him of his “place” in a house that didn't belong to him. Or maybe it was nothing and I was simply reading into everything he said. Either way, I stopped myself because that line of thinking was leading me down the road to feeling sorry for him, and I told myself that that was the last thing he'd want. But it was so hard not to.

When he'd closed the door to his room, I noticed the electricity and phone bills were both sitting unopened on the end table, and I began to feel the sense of panic from earlier in the day at the café seeping back into my brain, so I did what I usually do when that happens; I changed my clothes and went out for a run.

* * * *

Trinidad was not a large neighborhood. The bulk of it was essentially (though not formally) bound on all sides by either major thoroughfares or large landmarks. Two sides of the trapezoid were made up by Bladensburg Road, a gloomy stretch of used tire shops, potholes, and boarded up buildings and the industrial-looking Florida Avenue Northeast, the two of which met at one corner of the neighborhood. The other two sides were taken up entirely by Gallaudet University, a historically-deaf school, to the west and Mount Olivet Cemetery to the north, both of which were oases of green space in the heart of endless stretches of pavement, but were also fenced off completely to passersby, a tease of emerald peaking through black iron bars.

An even bigger slap in the face than those boundaries was the thoroughly gated, nearly hidden, and under-utilized National Arboretum located in the northeast corner of Trinidad, 446 acres of gorgeous urban forest, gardens, and parkland run by the USDA that was practically inaccessible to most of the neighborhood because of its out-of-the-way entrances catering to cars rather than pedestrians. Even more ridiculous were its hours of 8:00 to 4:30 on most days of the week, so that those who lived next door and wanted to go for a simple walk in the company of birds and blossoms rather than jackhammers and cement trucks before or after work or school were shit-out-of-luck, but tourists, retired people, and wealthy stay-at-home-moms from across town could walk right in.

I didn't know if this was true or not, but a woman from our block once told me that it wasn't always completely gated-off in that way, that in a typically government

inclination to fumigate an entire building to kill a single spider, the latest all-encompassing fence was in response to the post-9/11 mandates that all federal compounds be secured. Because you know how those terrorists are so keen on destroying our research into late-blooming azaleas, hybrid holly varieties, and the emerald ash-borer and whatnot.

But despite all of those natural and imposed barriers and boundaries, or maybe because of them, the approximately eight square blocks that made up the heart of Trinidad had a genuine neighborhood feel to it, which is why I'd moved there to begin with. People had lived there for generations and knew each other's kids and grandkids and cousins. There was a shiny new rec center with a new playground, without a fence, just a few blocks away from the seemingly always empty set of slides and swings behind the gate at Gallaudet. A failing and blighted elementary school had recently been shuttered and consolidated into a new building, and a thriving charter school had opened a couple blocks away just a few years ago.

As I embarked on my run – or really, more of a slow, plodding jog – around town, a low grumble in my stomach reminded me that I had not eaten lunch at the café in an attempt to save money – I only permitted myself beverages with free refills and a single pastry, the cheapest on the menu, to justify taking up space and bandwidth while I looked for jobs – and it prompted me to head in the direction of the Florida Avenue warehouse district so I could grab an authentic Italian sub sandwich for dinner on the way back.

In just the first two short blocks, I ran past mounds of trash scattered around a near-empty empty trash can, a bus stop with its glass walls shattered for the second time in as many months, and a light-post wrapped in the fake flowers and soiled and

weathered stuffed animals which cropped up now and then throughout the neighborhood like grungy candy canes of grief, ubiquitous memorials for those lost to street violence. I was certainly under no illusions that Trinidad was any sort of haven; it was, as redevelopment officials and real estate brokers liked to call it, a place “in transition.” This meant that the few other white people I usually encountered were what I labeled as colonizers; they were of the ultra liberal type who considered themselves to be progressive connoisseurs of decay, the kind of people who fervently believed that high crime rates in the inner city were a myth, and who greeted isolated reports of armed robberies out in the suburbs with glee and validation. They supposedly loathed the effects of gentrification but were undeniably the source of its inception. Who knows, maybe that’s what we all thought of one another. That we were the only white people who had legitimate reasons for being there. It wouldn’t surprise me.

But in that same short distance, I also ran past an old lady tending her enviable rose bushes in her front yard, and another woman – a retired nurse I knew from down the street named Mrs. Hartman – who walked as she always did with a plastic grocery bag in hand to pick up any trash that crossed her path. She’d won a neighborhood beautification award the previous year for her tireless work which was constantly being undone and which she did for its own rewards, and though it didn’t come with any gifts of monetary value, she displayed the two-pronged lawn sign proudly in the front yard of her row house.

Trinidad was messy, and it was complicated, but stuff *happened* there.

Anyway, by the time I’d made it to the deli on my way back to wait in line for my sandwich, I’d sorted some things out in my head and was feeling a little better about my

job prospects. I hadn't burned any bridges at the Smithsonian and still had some solid contacts there that I had yet to tap, and if that didn't pan out, I figured there was at least some archaeology work to be had with the constant road construction throughout the region, since most states mandated environmental and archaeological surveys whenever major roadwork was being done. My work woes sort of melted away for the time being as soon as I approached the entrance to the ultimate sandwich shop of my dreams.

A. Litteri, Inc. was the deli's full name as painted above the door. It was one of those places that was fundamentally impossible for you to learn of its existence unless you knew someone who let you in on the secret. In the middle of the back of a warehouse amidst dozens of warehouses with only a faded painted designation to announce its presence, the entrance to Litteri's would be mistaken by anyone passing by (but then, there would be no reason to pass by in this neck of the woods) for the back door of a meatpacking plant or grocery distribution center or textile factory. Never would you think walking by that it was open to the public, that the green double steel doors would lead to such a tiny, packed sanctuary of Italian cuisine.

When you are tapped by someone you know to be a part of the club that is the customer base of A. Litteri, Inc., you go in the door and down a narrow hallway of wine, where wine bottles stacked ten deep and a dozen shelves high seem to make up the very walls and support beams of the structure itself. Then you go past the refrigerator units of fresh, hand-crafted pastas and buffalo mozzarella until you reach the counter, and if you go anytime near the lunch hour, it will take a very long time to reach the counter. There, you will find yourself at the best Italian deli counter in all of the Metropolitan D.C. area, and you will come away with such a sandwich as shouldn't exist in this world of

homogenized preservatized bread and flavor enhancement packets, but there it is.

Something real. And you cannot have a bad day after a sandwich like that.

Today was a day in need of salvaging by a Litteri's sandwich, and I was lucky that it was Thursday and they were open till 5. I was sweaty from the jog but kept my shirt on because it was a food market, though there must have just been a shift change around somewhere and most of the guys in line – minus the handful of suits and skirts from Capitol Hill – were a greasy, filthy lot. I was feeling the heat and a bit of dehydration setting in, and my salivary glands stung for want of salt, soon to be provided by my capicola sandwich and washed down by a San Pelligrino sparkling water.

I was considering the labels on a series of Prosecco bottles about halfway through the line when I heard a familiar voice behind me calling my name. It sounded as though someone was talking with a hunk of sub sandwich in his mouth, but that was because it was Steven Plotkin, a graduate student at Gallaudet who lived around the corner from me. He used to frequent the café at the bookstore and was the guy who originally introduced me to Litteri's. Steven was one of the few other white people I knew who lived nearby, and he happened to also be completely deaf.

I turned around to face him as he navigated the cramped line to approach me. “Hey man, what's up?” I said, and he greeted me with his customary fist bump. Even though he was incredibly adept at reading lips – so much so that at times I had trouble believing that he was entirely deaf as he claimed – I still found myself mentally editing my speech in favor of fewer, more distinct syllables, suppressing, for instance, my tendency to say “what's happenin'” in favor of the former.

“Yo, thanks for saving me a spot in line,” he grinned. In the unwritten etiquette of Litteri’s, Steven had the right to cut in front of me because he had been the one to bring me in, but it would have been breaking rank, so to speak, for me to have done the same.

“Don’t mention it,” I shrugged, motioning for him to step in front of me. “So what’s going on? I haven’t seen you around lately.” I doubted that he’d heard of the bookstore’s sudden demise, but I didn’t really feel like bringing it up just before sandwich time.

“Man, you know, finals and everything, but that’s over with and I’m free for awhile. But I’m in a bind right now – I got this gig tonight but my sound system’s been acting up. It wouldn’t be worth it to rent, and the venue doesn’t have its own, so I’m up shit creek if you know what I mean. There’s nowhere around where they’ll fix it with that kind of turnaround time.” He lifted up his Phillies ball cap absently and shifted it so it was slightly more off-center on his head. A distinguishing characteristic of Steven was that in spite of the fact that he was a deaf graduate student, he moonlighted as an aspiring DJ with a burgeoning local fan base. Reflecting his unique blend of self-deprecating humor, he went by the stage name “DJ Def.”

I had not yet been to one of his shows, or whatever you’d call it, though he’d invited me on several occasions, but he’d explained to me as I’m sure he’s done so many times whenever it comes up that the art of spinning music live rested in one’s ability to match the beats of adjacent songs, and with the bass and volume cranked up, Steven could feel the music just as well as any of us could hear it.

As we progressed through the line and he told me more about his equipment problem, it occurred to me that I was in the rare position of possibly being able to help

him out. I told him about G-pa staying with me and that I didn't know if he had any expertise with sound systems, but I did know that he'd been known to fix everything from model planes to actual airplanes without so much as glancing at the instruction manuals and that he was getting so bored without any work that he'd practically taken my car apart completely and put it back together again since he'd been in town. Steven looked at me skeptically, as though he wasn't sure he was understanding me correctly.

“Come on, I know it's unlikely that my grandfather would be able to help you, but no more improbable than a deaf DJ, right? Seriously,” I insisted, “just bring your stuff by when you get back and I'll bet he will be there and will be happy to look at it for you. This guy is a miracle worker – I swear it on this sandwich that I am about to devour.” We'd reached the counter by then and I was giddily pulling back the paper wrapper right there in the warehouse parking lot. Not a morsel of that sandwich was going to make it home in tact.

“If you say so, man.” Steven's already thick accent was now compounded by the fact that he had actual food in his mouth. “I've got to pick up the rental stuff by seven if this doesn't work out, so it better work out.”

“Don't worry about it.” Though I could tell he was worried. I was too, at least a little. I didn't even know if G-pa would be home, or if he'd be as eager to help as I'd suggested. But the sandwich had lifted my spirits and boosted my confidence, and so off we went.

Chapter 12

I decided to walk home instead of finishing my run to let the sandwich settle undisturbed, and by the time I rounded the corner to my block, Steven was pulling up in his Suburban with his sound system in back. G-pa was home, all right, a fact which I could determine from down the block from the sound of him up on Miss Angela's porch, singing and playing some sort of blues tune on his guitar. G-pa had long been a fan of the backyard jam session, having played my whole life with the local boys every other Saturday at an old-fashioned amateur session in town, and though I hadn't expected him to give it up when he moved out here, I kind of thought he'd have taken it underground.

While I was uncomfortable enough as it was with the image of G-pa strumming up there on the stoop in this territory, I was even less prepared for the sight of Leo blowing away on a harmonica in concert with him. It was impossibly ridiculous to me, so much so that I stood there motionless with my mouth agape while Steven parked and came out to meet me. I was more than embarrassed at the scene with Steven there, because the only thing that made it bearable was the incredible sound the two men were producing; they sounded like an old Alan Lomax recording, minus the scratchy interference, but all Steven had to go off of was the visual of a grizzled countrified white man jamming out in a black neighborhood with a black orphan boy who was playing an actual *harmonica*. When he walked up, Steven shot me a glance the way a teenager might look at someone who's Dad was just spotted walking around town in bike shorts.

“So, this must be your grandfather,” he said to me, his eyebrows raised.

The whole thing made me silly inside. Of course Leo was playing a harmonica! He was an orphan! Who'd dragged all of his possessions in trash bags from house to

house! What else did he have the room for? No, while most boys his age would be satisfied with an MP3 player, he had to have a *harmonica*. Hadn't he just been ridiculed by his buddies for this sort of thing? It was too much for me, really. I didn't feel comfortable interrupting them, but the alternative was for Steven to stand there witnessing it in total silence, so I opted to cut them off and decided I could address the scene more easily with G-pa later on.

I waved my arms back and forth to indicate that they should stop, and G-pa waved back.

"Hey Ranger! Just in time, why don't ya join us! I've got a tambourine here in my case with your name on it." This was a joke to him, as we both knew from his countless futile attempts to include me in his jam sessions as a child that I had not a rhythmic bone in my body. In fact, it was becoming clearer each day that I shared none of G-pa's talents or interests whatsoever, and now that it was no longer a mystery to me why that was the case, I frankly wondered what sort of epoxy was holding us together at all.

"That's very kind of you," I dismissed dryly, "but I've got someone I'd like you to meet." I walked up with Steven to the steps. "Does Miss Angela know you guys are out here, by the way? Is she okay with you using her porch as a studio?" I couldn't help but ask this, but I was immediately self-conscious of the fact that it betrayed my anxiety about the whole scene.

A shout from inside the house answered the question for them. "Why did you stop your playing? I still have floors to mop, and it was going twice as fast in here with the music going!"

"Ranger's home!" G-pa shouted back.

“Oh, I see how it is, everything stops for Ranger! Don’t mind me!”

“G-pa,” I cut in, eager to bring Steven up to speed since he couldn’t tell what was going on, “I want you to meet my friend, Steven. Steven, this is my grandpa, Dick James.”

“Hello,” G-pa offered, and Steven reached over to shake his hand over the guitar.

“Good to meet you, Mr. James.” Though I imagined it was clear from the way Steven talked, I wanted to clarify the situation for G-pa because I was fairly certain he knew nothing whatsoever about communicating with deaf people.

“Steven’s deaf, so he can’t hear you at all, but he can read your lips, so just make sure you face him when you speak.”

“Okey-doke.”

“And this is Leo,” I indicated, “my uh, roommate.” I hadn’t talked to Steven in awhile, not since Leo had moved in, and I knew he’d be confused, especially because Leo looked his age. But I wasn’t about to explain the whole situation right then and there, so roommates had to suffice for the time being.

“Hey,” they each said as they nodded to one another.

I was eager to cut to the chase before it got any more awkward, if that was at all possible. “Look, G-pa, we hate to bother you, but Steven’s in a real bind.” I explained his problem, and I was hoping I could get away with *not* explaining to them that Steven was a deaf DJ, but I wasn’t sure I could pull it off if G-pa was going to fix his sound equipment. As it was, Leo was already giving me a look of incredulity that was steadily becoming one of his standard expressions around me.

Thankfully, G-pa wasn't the nosy type. At the mention of an opportunity to tinker with something new for a change, he promptly put down his guitar and stood up. "You just lead the way to this 'equipment' and I'll see what I can do. No promises, mind you." He always said that to his customers, though I couldn't think of a time when he couldn't perform mechanical miracles for anyone who came to him for help.

"I appreciate it, thank you," Steven said. "And good to meet you, Leo," he waved as we walked down the steps to his Suburban. Though he saw Leo wave in return, I'm fairly certain he missed Leo's response.

"Very good to meet *you*, sir." Leo was smiling in spite of himself, and I couldn't blame him for being amused. He waved with his harmonica in his hand as we walked away, and I could have sworn he actually winked at me on our way to Steven's truck. I suppose the joke was on everyone else with the harmonica. I guess when you're raised by strangers, constantly being shuffled from house to house, you'd have to come up with reasons to laugh, because if you didn't laugh you'd cry.

Steven and I unloaded his gear down into the apartment while G-pa cleared space to work in the living room. I could understand why Steven wasn't looking very confident about the arrangement; G-pa had no particular special equipment for evaluating sound systems, and in fact, was working solely from the contents of his "trunk of junk," which is what I'd come to call his case of all-purpose tools and supplies that was now doubling as an end table in the bedroom/living room. He got to work right away setting up the speakers, plugging everything in, and turning it on, while Steven stood there watching skeptically.

“Isn’t he going to ask what’s wrong with it?” he asked me, perhaps wondering if he’d missed something G-pa had said while he was hunched over with his back to us.

“Nah, he prefers to let the broken stuff speak for itself. I am not kidding you – this is a thing of beauty to watch.” One of the benefits of Steven being deaf was that, by just mouthing the words, I could talk about G-pa in front of him without him overhearing.

It seemed as though one of the amplifiers wouldn’t turn on, because G-pa kept fiddling with the power switch. Without even consulting the contents of his trunk, he whipped out a Phillips-head from his shorts pocket and removed the back panel of the speaker faster than anyone else I knew could have done it with an electric screwdriver. I couldn’t tell you what he was doing back there, not having the vocabulary to describe such things, but in barely the time it took for us to get all the equipment down there in the first place, he was done, and the faulty amplifier was booming out house music that Steven had set up on the turntable loud and clear.

“Holy shit, that was fast,” Steven whistled, which made me wonder how a deaf guy learns to whistle to begin with. “What was the matter with it?”

“There was a short in one of the circuits, plain and simple. I fixed it,” he shrugged, turning off the amp. That was G-pa, never one to elaborate on his work. I believe now that he thrived on the mystery and magic that he seemed to spin with his gift, and seeing him there working made me realize that his legendary status was in part a product of a carefully cultivated persona. It was real, but it was also partly an act. It reminded me of a scene from one of the *Star Trek* movies when Kirk asks Scotty how long the *Enterprise* will take to fix. Scotty tells him, “Eight weeks. But you don’t have eight weeks, so I’ll do it for you in two.” Then Kirk asks, “Do you always multiply your

repair estimates by a factor of four?” And Scotty replies, “How else to maintain my reputation as a miracle worker?”

Steven reached in his back pocket for his wallet and asked, “How much do I owe you?” but before he could open it, G-pa waved him off.

“No, no, no, that was nothin’. You can buy me a beer next time you come by. Besides, I’m retired now. This is my volunteer work I guess, helpin’ out my community and all that,” he chuckled.

“Seriously? Come on, let me at least buy you a six-pack.”

“Fine by me, but none of that pricey brown stuff that Ranger drinks. Some MGD would be just fine.”

“Sorry? I didn’t catch that.”

“A pack of Miller Genuine Draft will do just fine!” G-pa repeated, but much louder this time. At least deaf people didn’t know it when people shouted to make themselves understood, I thought, resisting the urge to wince.

“Got it,” Steven nodded. “In that case, I better pack up and head out to get ready for tonight. Thanks a million, Mr. James.”

“Always a pleasure.”

With that, I helped Steven reload his gear back into his Suburban while G-pa stayed in the apartment. As we lifted his amp into the back end, Steven looked at me and shook his head.

“What you have in there, my friend, is a gold mine. If people knew how fast he could fix stuff, he could charge an arm and a leg around here for rush jobs like that. Why doesn’t he set up shop somewhere?”

“It’s not as simple as that. Sure, he can fix almost everything, but he’s not licensed to do *anything*. He can’t set up a business without that sort of thing, and insurance and whatnot. He’s worked his whole life in a barn doing jobs for people he knows under the table. Things don’t work like that out here.”

“I don’t know, man. There’s a black market for everything everywhere. You just got to stay under the radar. Think about it. I know people who would pay a serious premium for work like that and who understand the value of discretion.”

“Okay, well, I’ll tell him you said so.” I meant what I said, and as Steven drove away, I considered the possibility that this could help our soon to be dismal financial situation, but I wasn’t under the illusion that it’d be some sort of panacea. The last thing I wanted was for us to revert to our former roles with G-pa as head of the household and me being dependent on him. I would even scrub toilets, or do anything at all really to protect the way things were (or heaven forbid, to have them move forward). I was done with that part of my life. I just needed to figure out what the next part would entail. But even before that, I thought, as I peeled the fabric of my sweaty t-shirt away from my skin, I needed to shower.

When I went back down to the apartment, G-pa was rearranging the furniture in the living room.

“Your friend there seemed like a nice fellow,” he said as he pushed his trunk back to where it was before. “Terrible taste in music, though.”

“Yeah, well, what do you expect?” I said. He grunted in response. “Thanks for doin’ that, by the way. I really appreciate it.” More grunting. Since he seemed to be in a

fairly passive mood, I thought this would be as good a time as any to ask him about playing the music up on the porch.

“Hey listen, I know you probably miss playing with the boys down at the tavern and all, but, um . . . do you think maybe it looks bad for you to be doin’ that around here?”

“Pardon?”

“It’s just that we’re not that far from the South – hell, we’re technically below the Mason-Dixon line, and, y’know, people have long memories around here for that sort of thing.”

“For what sort of thing, exactly?” G-pa squinted his eyes at me, and I knew he knew exactly the sort of thing I was referring to.

“Do you really want me to spell it out for you?” I don’t know why I thought I’d get the chance to have a private chat with him. A few moments later, the doorknob turned, and in walked Leo, who’d been hanging out on the porch the whole time since I’d gotten home.

“Yes, Ranger,” G-pa grinned, “go ahead and spell it out for me.” Leo just sort of stood there, clearly sensing that he’d walked into the middle of something.

“Uh, do you guys want me to leave? I was just gonna grab some stuff and head out anyway.”

“No, no,” said G-pa, folding his arms. “I think your opinion could be valuable here. Necessary, even.” He was probably hoping that I would be cowed into dropping it with Leo standing right there, but I felt strongly that I was in the right. I didn’t think it

was too politically correct of me to have reservations about projecting that sort of image in a neighborhood that was only a few generations removed from former slaves.

“Leo, we were just discussing whether or not it might be considered a tad . . . insensitive of an outsider white guy wearing a wife beater to be crooning out tunes like he’s Muddy Waters up on somebody else’s porch in a predominantly black neighborhood. With all due respect, guys, don’t you think it has a little bit of a whiff of the plantation to it?”

Leo’s eyes widened and he puffed his cheeks full of air, as if I’d just opened up a discussion on sex education in a classroom full of adolescents, and he started to look a little paler than usual. “I don’t know – they probably weren’t singing any Muddy Waters up there on the porch, if you know what I’m sayin’. It’s not like he was playing a banjo and chewing hay or anything, though I do admit that that would be a sight to see around here.”

I couldn’t believe he was defending G-pa about this. “Seriously? You really don’t think it looks bad at all to people walking by?”

“People gonna think what they think,” he shrugged. “Ain’t nobody I know gonna have a beef wit’ you over your music.” It was beginning to drive me a little nuts that I didn’t know who this kid really was. When we were just hanging around the house, he talked to me like he was the college-bound honors student that Maria had raved about, but when he was out and about or was trying to make a point about something, he shifted into this talk like he’s some cool kid from the streets. But *I* was from those same streets, though he didn’t know that, and what bothered me about it was that he seemed to feel the need to do that exclusively for my benefit, and I couldn’t tell which one was really *him*. It

was like G-pa and his hick talk that he used to get me riled up – why couldn't they just be the way that they *were*, whatever it was that that might be? Why did they have to try to fulfill some expectation of mine that I didn't even have?

“Look, I wasn't suggesting that somebody was gonna come by and shoot the guy, I just thought—”

“What *did* you think, Ranger?” G-pa cut in. “That I'm some poor old country bumpkin who doesn't know diddly-squat about the history of this country?”

“Well, quite frankly, G-pa, I don't know *what* you know about things. You never left the Coast until now, you never allowed a television in the house, and as far as I know, you still can't even read a newspaper. For Christ's sake, what do you want me to think?” I shouldn't have let myself get so agitated, but he was making me feel like an idiot for airing my genuine concerns about the way he was going on around there. I also knew I shouldn't have gone there about the newspaper, not in front of Leo anyway, but I couldn't take it back. I was now on the record as having belittled him for being unable to read.

“What, you don't think they talk about black people on the radio? I don't even know what to say about that. Boy, are you wrong about me, Ranger. You have no idea how much you are wrong.” He shook his head and put on his shoes. “I'm going out. Don't wait up,” he said, and slammed the door behind him.

Leo looked at me then like I'd just peed on the rug, and it only made me angrier still.

“If it makes you feel any better about things, he's not a stranger to people around here anymore. I know you don't know what he does all day, but we were up there for the

better part of an hour, and people were coming up right and left stopping to listen, waving, and greeting him by name. It's not bad that you're worried about him. It just isn't necessary."

I know he probably thought he was being helpful, but it was beginning to piss me off, frankly, that he could be so scrupulously accommodating almost all of the time, but when he wanted to be, he could deliver a blow with a single line that felt like the most politely delivered sucker punch there ever was. I knew it was a defense mechanism preened and cultivated out of necessity, but there was a certain quality about Leo that was already starting to grate on my nerves, a smug vanity in his delivery that made me feel as though we were performing roles in scenes of his own creation, and I didn't want to be a role; I wanted to be a person, a human, connecting with another human. But so far, it was all just theater to him, and I was his jester. And still, for whatever reason, I chased his approval.

Chapter 14

Now, part of why I'm tellin you all this is cause I have been remiss in passin down the stories of our people. You forget that before there were letters and books and TV people talked to one another and told stories to keep from bein bored silly. Your Grams was always the one who did the talkin in our house but she didn't know much about my half and so that's my fault for not sayin much.

You know my mother was Scotch-Irish and her folks didn't dawdle in comin out to California when they got here. But my old man who you never did meet was originally from Michigan and his granddad came over here from Prusha which is what Germany used to be called before the first world war. His name was Edward Meyer and he was a cabinet maker who had two brothers who'd come over before him. Now you know Germany was a much smaller place than America and letters took forever to get across the ocean if they ever made it at all. Well after the first two brothers came they were all supposed to meet up in Grand Rapids which was called the Furniture City in those days for all the lumber and wood-work they did there. Well when Edward got to New York on the boat he figured he'd walk all the way to Michigan because he hadn't gotten word how far it was and didn't have the money left to take the train. But he could not have imagined the distance he would have to cover and what he thought would take days ended up taking several weeks. By the time he made it to the edge of Michigan he was out of money all together and had to rely on handouts from farmers to eat and sleep and give him directions of where to go. Now as you know Michigan is up north and can be a cold and godfersakin place. One night after a long and freezing walk, Edward had been refused shelter at more than one farm - the exact number has been lost to my memory - even tho

he promised to do chores for his stay and was happy to sleep in the barn with the animals. When he was about to give up and go to work building a fire on the edge of the woods he came upon one last farm with light from a lamp and the fireplace still shining inside tho it was very late. Tho he did not have much hope to be offered refuge, he did not expect to be greeted by a man holdin up a shotgun with his wife hovering way back in the kitchen. He did not know what to do or say because his English was poor and he did not know why this man was holding a gun in his hands. But he was even more surprised because these farmers were black skinned and he had never been face to face with anyone so dark before arriving in this country. In his nervousness at the firearm before him he forgot much of the bits of English he had learned and resorted to using hand gestures to communicate his plight. When it became clear to the couple that Edward was a poor immigrant with good intentions they put away the shotgun and offered him supper and a place to stay in there barn in exchange for fixin some chairs that were broken.

All I could think about whenever I heard that story was how Edward must've been lyin there in a bunch of hay with his belly full of somebody's home cookin wonderin what made those people let him in. I have often wondered myself and I figure that only people who've been down on there luck themselves or are close to someone who has know about helpin people when they really need it. When it is inconvenient.

Now I know that's not that dramatic of a story and that he probably woulda lived and made it to Grand Rapids anyway but he had been turned away by all them so called Christians when all he wanted to do was sleep in their barn and woulda worked for it on top of that. And here these people who were afraid of bein robbed or harassed or whatever it was they were afraid of - maybe worse - opened there doors anyway and let

him in, and Ranger that means somethin. It did to him and it does to me and I'll be dammed if I don't think they deserve to be repayed with everything we have. Not them in particular but all of them. We made it here on there backs and even tho we - our own people - never supported anythin evil we ate sugar and wore cotton and a whole lotta people died so that we could live and so all those people worshipping that one man have got it all wrong as far as I'm concerned - and I know my departed mother is turnin in her grave when I say that - but here's the facts. We owe them in blood.

So there you have it. We have always had a history of picking up strays I guess because some of us have at one time or another been strays ourselves. Your father. My great granddad. And now you're helpin Leo. And that's a good thing. But don't think it makes up for anything. You ain't never gonna pay it back. Not with kindness anyway. Maybe a kidney. But I'm jokin. Mostly.

Chapter 15

The next day, Maria asked to meet up with me at a Caribbean piano bar in Eastern Market after work for drinks. The last time we went out together, we'd ended up hanging out with G-pa at the diner, so I was looking forward to a chance to be alone with her. But I was also dreading it, given that I had to come up with a way to tell her that I still hadn't found any whiff of a job and would soon have no way to pay the rent until something else turned up. I had a feeling she'd be more concerned about what that meant for Leo than for how that would affect my future plans, but that remained to be seen. Mostly, I wanted things to *move* with her, to break down whatever invisible barrier was preventing a physical relationship from taking place. I wanted to be bold. Decisive. But realistically, I knew I wasn't exactly in a powerful position at the moment. *Hey baby, I live with my grandpa and don't have any money. Let's make love.*

I got to the bar first, for a change, and grabbed a spot upstairs to have a view of the piano man. When Maria came in the room, she initially looked tired, her skin dull, with dark circles under her eyes that I had never seen on her before. But it must have been the lighting in the doorway, because when she saw me and stepped forward, her usual luster returned and she looked radiant as ever, her gold hoop earrings and bracelets catching a gleam of light that shined across the distance of the room. She came over and gave me a peck on the cheek when I stood up to greet her, and I called the waitress over to the table.

“What can I get you?”

“What're you having?” Maria asked me.

“A frozen strawberry margarita.” It was hot out again, and it’d sounded refreshing.

“Sounds good, make it two.” I waited for her to take off the decorative scarf around her neck given that it was fairly warm upstairs, but in her typical fashion of dressing for weather that was 20 degrees cooler than it actually was, she kept it on.

“It’s good to see you,” I offered. What was my problem? – I wondered, mentally kicking myself. That’s what you say when greeting an ex-lover, not a woman you are still hoping to bed. It drove me crazy that I could analyze to pieces everything that came out of my mouth with her, but for the life of me, I could not seem to be anything but a wimp in her presence.

“Same,” she said, taking the straw out of the water in front of her so she could down the whole glass in just a few gulps. When she got to the bottom of the glass, the ice that had accumulated there broke apart and rushed down to her mouth. A single cube of it escaped, somehow managed to miss her scarf, and landed squarely down her blouse between her breasts. She reached in, unfazed, to take it out and put it in her mouth before it had even made a wet mark on the outside of her shirt, but in that short time I felt whatever confidence I’d built up for the evening crumble and dissipate like bread in a duck pond.

When the waitress brought over Maria’s drink, she raised her glass to mine. “All I gotta say is, T. G. I. F.!”

“Amen to that,” I seconded, relieved to be moving things forward.

“So what’s new with you? How was your week?” Usually, Maria was the one who launched in about her life since our previous encounter, and I had been relying on that to

break the ice before I had to tell her about all the jobs I hadn't gotten that week. But I didn't have a response prepared for a direct question like that, and so I came out with the truth.

“Uh, I wasn't gonna jump right in with this, but since you asked. Well, it sucked, actually. Nobody's hiring, and not only have I gotten zero bites on my applications, I haven't even gotten nibbles.”

“That sucks.” Thank you, Obvious Girl, I thought.

“Yeah. I dunno what I'm gonna do next. Gotta pay the rent, you know?” I didn't mean for the comment to sound resentful about Leo, but I think she took it that way.

“Well, I'm sure if you tell Miss Angela about it, she'll be more than willing to give you a break until you find work elsewhere.”

“No. No way would I ask that of her. The apartment is her primary source of income. I'll figure something out; it'll be fine. It's just bad timing.”

“Is it ever a good time to lose your job?” I got the impression that she was still being defensive about Leo, and I couldn't believe that I was already having to explain myself to her when I really could have used a little sympathy for a change.

“I just mean with the economy and all,” I clarified. “But at least we're in D.C. so there's a bit of a buffer with the federal government here at least. I've just got to dig harder; there's bound to be something I've overlooked.”

“Sure,” she agreed, but I could tell by the way she stared off at the piano man as she sipped her margarita that her mind was occupied with the potential implications of an extended period of unemployment.

The guy at the piano was singing Sinatra's "Imagination" and for some reason, it reminded me of watching Mister Rogers singing the introduction for his show. I don't know why I'd always thought he sat playing a piano for part of it, but when I came across an episode of the show on television a year or so ago, I was surprised to see that there was no piano at all; the music was just playing in the background. It was funny to me how one's brain could fill in the gaps like that with images and memories that were utterly false. Or at least partly false. I imagined a brigade of little Pac-men chomping away at the recesses of memory inside the mind. No, not a brigade. That would be too sinister. They would be more like robots or zombies than soldiers. A cavalcade, then, of Pac-men, gobbling up nuggets of memory and then sending in counterfeiters to make sure you didn't notice that anything was missing. But things do go missing, or if they don't go missing they are simply not the *same*. Like they've use poorer quality materials, crayon instead of watercolor, for instance, or spackle instead of plaster. But it's close enough for government work and you hardly ever notice, except when confronted with actual facts. And even then, even then you don't always believe what really happened.

"Anyway," I said, as the piano man transitioned to a jazzier number, "I think G-pa has plans to do some mechanical work on the side, which would bring in some extra cash. The man seriously needs to get under the hood of a car again; he's exhausted all possibilities of replacing and recombining the parts of mine. Runs like a dream, now, though. We should take advantage of it. Head out of the district for a change. Maybe go wine tasting or something." The last time I'd taken Maria anywhere in the Subaru, it was to drop her off at home after a cocktail party shortly after we'd met and months before we started dating. It hadn't been running too well in recent months and had sputtered and

coughed out alarming colors of smoke – the kinds of colors one usually only sees when burning trash consisting of heavy amounts of plastic or other carcinogenic materials – the entire mile and a half to her apartment. It was also the *only* time Maria had ridden in my car, incidentally; by the time we got to her place, she'd declared it a death trap and insisted thereafter on taking public transit.

“That would be nice,” she replied warmly. “Maybe tomorrow?” I had to ask her to clarify to confirm that she had, in fact, just agreed to go out with me on a real, open-ended romantic outing, not an indefinite amount of time away but on a specific date and time that was soon.

“Tomorrow?” I croaked in between sips of my margarita. “As in, tomorrow tomorrow?”

“Unless you have other plans.”

“No, no, no, tomorrow would be great. Fantastic. Where do you wanna go?” I had a hard time dampening the strong note of disbelief in my voice that this was happening. I had only thrown it out there as a lark, an aside.

“Uh, I don't know. I'm not really up on the wineries of the mid-Atlantic.”

“I meant Maryland or Virginia.”

“Definitely Maryland. Fewer rednecks.” I cringed a bit at the comment, picturing G-pa as sometimes fitting that description.

“Good point,” I coughed. “We've got plenty of those around here anyway.”

“Oh I didn't mean...”

“No, no, I was kidding. That sounds great. I'll look into it tonight and plan something. I've got a friend at the Smithsonian who could make some

recommendations.” I’d been planning on contacting that friend anyway to gauge the hiring situation over there, so this was a good excuse, and now I wouldn’t be just calling her about potential jobs (always a faux pas).

With plans already on the books for the next day, I was finally free to relax for once in Maria’s presence. We ordered another round of frozen margaritas and decided to stay for dinner, and by the time happy hour had transitioned to evening and then to night, we were still around for dessert. My pessimism from earlier was dwindling and I could actually say with confidence that I was enjoying myself; I was beginning to think that I was getting everything under control.

The night ended with little fanfare given that we would see each other again in the morning. Maria lived not too far away, so I walked her home to extend my departure.

“I had a good time tonight,” she told me as we approached the entrance to her apartment, her arm resting in the crook of my elbow.

“I’m glad.”

“When will I see you tomorrow?” She turned to face me.

“How does eleven sound? We can grab lunch somewhere beforehand.”

“Good.”

“Okay, goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight.”

I was no longer anxious about not being invited in; we had real plans for the following day, with the potential for genuine privacy and intimacy. She leaned in close right then to kiss me, and maybe it was the margaritas, but suddenly I felt a surge of control, of authority, over my own will, my own actions, my body, that I hadn’t had in a

long time. Not wanting to appear too eager or too aloof, I gently tipped the bottom of her chin upwards with my thumb and forefinger so that her lips met mine, and I applied just the right amount of pressure with my mouth, slow and easy the way one does with a ripe nectarine, one that is so soft you don't even have to bite it with your teeth for the flesh to release into your mouth, and you suck gently at the edges of the opening, that wound you've created, so that none of its juices escape and yet no audible sound is made. It was as sweet as all that. All that and more.

* * * *

I arrived at her apartment right on time the next morning, with gluten-free guava turnovers from a specialty bakery on Capital Hill, a bottle of San Pellegrino, and some homemade paella that I'd whipped up that morning for the road (most of our shared dishes involved rice because it was reliably benign). We had at least an hour's drive to the nearest winery on the itinerary I'd whipped up late the night before, so I made some playlists of music that I thought would balance the road trip vibe with the romantic getaway, ditching the Radiohead in favor of John Legend.

I'd called to say I was on my way, so Maria was waiting outside on the steps when I got there, for once dressed appropriately for the balmy weather in a floor-length, turquoise fitted sundress that draped her silhouette with just the right amount of cling and silver gladiator sandals studded with rhinestones peeking out from underneath. The car was not only running like it'd just come off the assembly line, but it was also fresh from the self-serve car wash, where I'd thoroughly scrubbed and vacuumed every available

surface and crevice earlier that morning. I'd paid attention to everything that was in my control, even down to spraying diluted essential oils on the carpets to get rid of the cleaning smell, and the rest, well the rest could go fuck itself as far as I was concerned.

I double parked with the car still on so I could get out and open the door for her, and as I came around the back of the car to get back in, I could see her eyebrows raised in the passenger side-view mirror.

"This ain't your car, Ranger, don't think for a minute you're foolin' me. Uh-uh."

"What, you don't believe me? Go 'head and check the registration in the glove compartment. Same ol' car, just with a little more love and tenderness."

"No, last time you had trail mix embedded into the upholstery and it smelled like an old toaster oven. This is *not* the same car."

"You can believe what you want," I shrugged and smiled. "Either way, the ride is good, yes?"

"You got me there, but don't think I'm fooled, is all I'm sayin'." I was glad my efforts were having their desired impact. It boded well for the road ahead, and it allowed us to settle into that comfortable silence that is born of collective contentment.

As we pulled away to make our way out of D.C., Maria opened her window enough to rest her hand on the roof of the car, allowing me a glimpse of her exposed forearm and bicep. She was muscular in the way that a mare is muscular, not ropy or overly developed out of proportion to her body, but satin-smooth and strong in a way that made her strength appear innate and effortless.

It was only about a mile to 295 North, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, which was a little less direct but would be a bit more scenic than the alternatives. Coming from

the West Coast, where freeways and roads are strictly business, more or less efficient phenomena, I was bemused by the very concept of the Parkway. It's not like we don't have scenic highways in the West – we do – but they are not generally planned as such from the ground up, and they certainly aren't national parks. Rather than being patrolled by the state troopers, the Parkway was curiously under the jurisdiction of the National Park Police, so if you were to get pulled over for speeding, it'd be like getting stopped by a park ranger.

I have driven the length of the Parkway during every season, and it's best enjoyed in the spring and fall, as is everything else in the region. But in the summer, even the early summer, the towers of green on either side of the route can be simply too much, almost crass in their displays of fecundity. It is during the summer months that the tall deciduous forests lining the freeway become completely overtaken by invasive vines, choked to death by incomprehensible swaths of kudzu and English ivy. Instead of verdant woods made up of individual trees, the landscape appears to be occupied – nay, conquered – by monstrous jungle creatures, living mummies shrouded in camouflage, seemingly ready to spring forth from hiding to pounce on passersby and swallow them whole. The “scene” of the scenic route is really rather dreary when you think about it, a sea of green, yes, but monotonous, the same leaf replicated over and over again for miles and miles around. Even if you knew nothing about nature or ecosystems, you would know that something there didn't belong.

Still, it beat the Beltway, which was more of a traditional freeway sided with concrete rather than (extra?)terrestrial plants. It was only a little while before we were

literally out of the woods, anyway, and the vine-forests blocking our view were soon replaced by suburbs, and finally, the rolling, pastoral hills of the farm country.

“Hey, do you mind if we put on the radio?” Maria’s sudden and unexpected request interrupted my groove to the point that I almost drove into another lane.

“Uh, yeah, sure, go right ahead,” I sputtered, transparently disappointed in the fact that she was no longer into my music montage. Since we were out of the range of some of the more familiar stations, she pushed the scan button to peruse what was available. I watched and listened as she allowed the dial to pause and pass at gospel, pop, easy listening, and 90s alternative, but when it landed on an oldies station playing Don McLean’s “American Pie” and she let that, too, pass, I could not prevent myself from intervening.

“Whoa, wait. Go back,” I said, keeping my hands on the wheel.

“To what, Nirvana?”

“No, no, no, the one after that.” Sensing the urgency in my voice, she quickly navigated back to the oldies station. It was still in the first minute or so of the song, so we hadn’t missed much, and I couldn’t help but let my guard down enough to tap my hands on the steering wheel.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh come on, it’s ‘American Pie’! It’s one of the top ten greatest songs ever recorded.”

“According to whom?”

“Objectively.”

“Oh, *objectively*.” I knew where she was coming from, really, I did, but I didn’t want to let it dampen my enthusiasm, not for the day nor the song.

“*Helter skelter, in a summer swelter...da-da da dah da-da da-da dah.*” I only knew a few cursory lyrics at the beginnings and ends of stanzas in addition to the chorus, never having had more than a passing interest in the song except when it was actually playing. I do have fond memories associated with it, though, having sat around countless campfires after long days of digging and screening soil for artifacts – there was always someone with a guitar who knew how to play that song, along with a few other staples like “Hotel California,” and “Lean on Me.” It was a song that had always seemed to bring everybody together, no matter what sort of disagreements or rivalries there had been during the day’s work.

But I could tell she wasn’t having it; her eyebrows were raised coolly in skepticism.

“Come on, it’s iconic. It has something for everyone.”

“Everyone who’s from Kansas, you mean. It’s a good ol’ boys song.”

“What? No, it’s a song about the sixties, about upheaval, loss of innocence. The death of Buddy Holly. JFK. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

“Naw, listen, they just said ‘good ol’ boys’ right there in the song, just now.” She was pointing at the radio, as though if I just looked at it hard enough, I would see her point of view. It became apparent rather quickly that neither of us knew what we were talking about. I knew the song had been inspired by the famous plane crash with Buddy Holly and some other musicians, but I really didn’t have a clue what the rest of the lyrics were about. Maria was fixated on the countrified lingo of the chorus and couldn’t get past

the references to old men drinking and pickup trucks. In an attempt to salvage the rest of the ride, I good-naturedly asked if we could agree to disagree and suggested that she pick a different radio station, even though it pained me to not listen to the rest of the song. She eventually settled on Jazz and Justice, a public radio station from the District that I was surprised we could still get as far away as we were. They were playing “People Get Ready” by The Impressions, to which we both quietly sang along.

When we pulled up to the first winery on the list, I was more than a little relieved to get out of the car. It was no Sonoma, but the grounds were still picturesque, with cherry trees where there would have been ornamental olive trees had we been in California. We enjoyed our lunch on some picnic tables under a cluster of chestnut trees in the courtyard before heading in, and it occurred to me as we approached the counter that I had never tasted a local wine and didn’t know what to expect. This particular winery, I was dismayed to learn, specialized in sweeter wines, so I declined to try most of what they had to offer. Maria, on the other hand, was delighted and had already developed a convivial glow about her by the time we’d returned to the car to head to the next stop.

The next place was just as nice looking but had significantly better tasting wine. We lucked out with a generous pourer named Matt who excelled at the kind of banter that keeps you hanging around for more. He convinced us to buy a couple bottles along with some of the tasty crackers they’d put out in bowls for free while patrons tasted wines. It didn’t take long in our conversations for it to come out that he and I were both from California.

I remember asking him, “So whatever made you move out here?”

“Too many winemakers in California. It’s like being an actor in New York or L.A. I had a better chance of actually making my own wine over here someday instead of peddling someone else’s if I hadn’t left.”

“How do you like it so far?” I emptied the glass of the Cabernet Franc we were tasting in one swig and he astutely poured me a little more.

“Man, you know, it’s not bad. I’m from S.F., so I’m still not used to the summers.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” I agreed, “and the *mosquitoes!*”

He nodded emphatically and kept going. “And the drivers! What is with the people who drive with their hazard lights on and don’t get over all the way in a turn lane?”

“And they don’t ever move to the shoulder for accidents or when they break down in the middle of the road!”

Maria rolled her eyes as Matt and I went on about the deficiencies of the climate and culture like fellow expatriates in a foreign land. I am sure that we sounded elitist; we were so giddy in our disdain. But it felt good to commiserate for a change, and I didn’t feel like Maria would take offense since she wasn’t even from our continent.

“You know, nobody’s keepin’ you all here against your will. We were doin’ just fine on our own before you got here, thank you very much.” Maria’s tone was lighthearted, but there was a note of resentment in her statements that likely came out as a result of all the wine.

“Oh come on,” I joked, “you know you feel the same way about the winters.”

“True that,” she conceded, and we turned the conversation back to the wine.

When we finished tasting all the wines they had to offer, Matt asked where we were going next and gave us recommendations of people to ask for and to tell them he sent us to ensure good service.

Looking back on the day, I have trouble pinpointing exactly when it became clear that we were both too drunk to carry on. It had never been my intention to drink so much that I wouldn't be able to drive us home, but that was the trouble with wine tasting – it was so easy to lose track. By the time we'd finished at the fourth winery, which had a sprawling vineyard and adjacent inn on its grounds, we were visibly drunk enough that the manager asked for our keys and offered a steep discount on a room for the night. I hated to admit it, but I was giddy that the suggestion that we spend the night together had come from an external source, and really, there weren't any other reasonable options; we were more than an hour away from D.C., too far for a cab.

Maria turned out to be a giggly drunk and didn't seem averse to the idea, but I wanted to seem like a gentleman and offered to pay for her to have her own room so it wouldn't appear that I was trying to take advantage of the situation or that I planned it to happen that way. She snorted and laughed, and in her uninhibited state, said to me right there in front of the clerk at the front desk, “You *really* don't wanna get laid, do you.”

I was still less drunk than she was and hadn't yet let down all of my defenses. “Whaddya mean? I'm just tryin' to do the right thing and be polite. I didn't wanna assume or anything.” The clerk, a middle-aged woman, visibly suppressed a smirk, and Maria rested her elbows seductively on the counter.

“Heaven forbid you as-*sume*.” She punctuated the end of the word with her index finger poking into my arm. “You know what they say when you as-*sume*. You get some *ass* out of *me*.” She laughed ridiculously at her own joke and the clerk cleared her throat.

“So will that be one room, or two?”

“I...uh,” I was sure I was blushing when I looked over at Maria and then back to the clerk. “One, please.”

Chapter 16

Anybody who has ever had wild, drunken sex knows that it's usually significantly better in theory than in practice. We weren't falling-down-drunk, but drunk enough to stagger and stumble through fits of laughter on our way to the room. At the time, I was excited by the fact that she had initiated the liaison, because even though she was inebriated, it assuaged any guilt I may have felt about being perceived as having taken advantage of the situation.

I appreciated the frankness associated with Maria's state, and as we closed the door with the "do not disturb" sign on the outer knob, she pushed me to a seated position onto the bed and proceeded to lecture me on my romantic habits.

"Ranger, your problem is you are too *polite*." She poked me in the chest as she slid out of her sandals, and I avoided her gaze, staring off instead at the Keurig coffee maker on the desk behind her.

"I know, I know," I shook my head, "story of my life, really. I just – I wanna be respectful, y'know? I just—"

"And you talk too much. Always 'splainin this an' 'splainin that."

"I—"

"Shhh." She put her index finger on my lips. I found myself inexplicably riveted by the coffee maker across the room. It was one of the kind that have those individual pods of instant coffee-like goo where you put in the pod and the machine punctures the lid and somehow infuses the goo with hot water and calls the result coffee.

This time it was Maria who tilted my chin upward to redirect my attention toward her. In one motion, she untied the strings of her dress behind her neck, and the whole

garment fell as if pulled by a heavy weight into a gratified heap at her feet. Her chest was completely bare, her only underwear being a tiny, silver thong, which molded seamlessly to her sculpted body. You would think that her breasts would have commanded my attention, given their joyful proximity to my face, but it was her birthmark which stood out to me in the moment, upstaging the rest of her anatomy as though a spotlight had been shone on it by mistake by some errant technician. Though before, it had seemed to me an island, now it was more of a bird shape, an osprey, with wings outstretched high and back as if about to land. Its location squarely between the mounds of her freely hanging bosom was beautiful and symmetrical and could not have been better placed if done so intentionally by a skilled tattoo artist. The mark was lighter this evening than it had been before, almost the color of raw milk, and as I reached up to cup her breasts in my hands, my thumbs met at the bird-mark and pressed into it hard as if it were a button or key to a secret portal to another land.

But that was as intense of a feeling as I remember having over the entire course of the evening. The wine had taken its toll and as she leaned down to kiss me, my tongue was so numb that it seemed disconnected from my body entirely. I remember us being vigorous and loud, but I felt as though I had been bathed in Novocain from head to toe, or that I was enclosed in a full-length winter wetsuit. Even when she scratched my back emphatically with her manicured nails to get me to go deeper inside her, I could feel nothing. I remember that her hair was secured up in a tightly coiled bun with some sort of bejeweled circlet of metal like an Egyptian princess, and I wanted to take it down to run my hands through it as I held her head to kiss her, but something about the way it was secured so tightly and perfectly had made me feel like taking it down would have been a

violation. It was strange, then, to watch her head bobbing up and down as she rode me, as though she were a doll or a creature on a carousel whose whole body gyrated on its axis, but whose hair was unmoving, plastered in place.

When we had finished, she got up to pee and crawled back to bed without saying a word, falling asleep with her head on my shoulder within minutes of curling up with me. The dim lamp next to the bed was still on and I couldn't reach the switch without waking her, so it stayed on the whole night, and I slept fitfully. The way her head was positioned, I had a view of just her bun with the circlet of jewels around it, and though the light bulb in the lamp was faint, the reflection off of the headband when it caught the light made my eyes water, even when they were closed.

I must have slept for a stretch near dawn, but the morning seemed to explode into being with an early summer sunrise piercing through the gaps in the curtains, drowning out the light from the lamp with its white-hot blaze. Maria had rolled over in the night and was still asleep and snoring when I got up to brush my teeth with my finger in the bathroom. My tongue was the color of black plums, and so was my saliva against the white ceramic sink as it swirled down the drain. I was grateful for the travel-sized bottle of Scope nestled in a basket on the counter with the lotion and shampoo, and after swishing some in my mouth and drinking a full glass of water, I decided to shower, thinking I'd make a stronger entrance back into the room wearing a white towel around my waist rather than my green striped boxer shorts.

Maria was already dressed when I came out of the bathroom, but she was sitting at the desk holding her head in both hands, and her face was the color of wet cement.

“Good morning!” I said from across the room. She groaned in response. I’d never had much of a problem with hangovers, so I wasn’t terribly sympathetic when someone I knew had one. “I think breakfast is included with the room, but if you’d like we could go out for some hangover food.”

Maria just glared at me and said, “Ugh, don’t mention food. Though we probably should have eaten dinner.”

“As I recall, you didn’t really give me the option,” I teased, “but sorry you’re not feeling well. Checkout’s not till noon, so I can always order something up. Eggs. Bacon.” I was disappointed that her queasiness prevented us from repeating the previous night’s encounter, minus the alcoholic haze, but on the bright side, nothing felt awkward or forced between us. I’d had only a handful of mornings-after, and so far, this one at least rated in the middle of the pack.

“I should really be getting back. I’ve got a pile of reports due tomorrow that I’ve barely started working on.”

“Of course. Lemme just get dressed, and I’ll be ready to go.” It was always work with her.

Perhaps feeling embarrassed about her behavior at the front desk the night before, Maria asked to wait in the car while I checked out of the inn. Even at half price, the room was more than I was hoping to pay now that I was unemployed. I still had a small amount of savings, so it wasn’t like I was going to run out right away, but it made me uneasy to be racking up unintended expenditures. When I got out to the car, Maria was still holding her head firmly in her hands as if to prevent it from falling off her shoulders entirely.

“Could we just get some coffee?”

“Sure, no problem.” We’d passed a café chain at the freeway interchange, so I drove back the way we’d come and went in to get it for her. I didn’t want to aggravate her condition by talking too much or turning on the radio too loudly, so I figured I’d just let her sit in peace once we were on our way back. There wasn’t much to be said anyway; I still didn’t know where we stood, since the whole thing had happened while we were drunk, and now certainly wasn’t the time to confront her about it.

When we headed out onto the road again, she gulped eagerly at her coffee, and so as not to sit in total silence, I turned on the classical station in the hopes that it would be a soothing distraction. They were playing Rachmaninoff’s piano concerto in D minor, a favorite of mine. Though I couldn’t produce music, I enjoyed consuming it no matter what the genre. The mood wasn’t quite right for what I was after, but I was counting on the DJ to make the next track a cheerier number and was settling into the low thrumming of the cello music in the background when Maria broke the silence.

“Could you turn that off?”

“Of course. Sorry, I was hoping it would help.”

“Actually, could you just pull over?”

“Like, right now? Here?”

“Now.” I suddenly understood the particular urgency in her voice, and given that I had just cleaned my car and loathed a mess, I abruptly stopped the car and pulled off the road.

Maria was as graceful as you could be, really, in that situation, pulling up the skirt of her long dress and holding it in one hand at her knees so she could kneel on the grass beside the drainage ditch and retch into the gully. I made myself watch because I believed

I had been responsible, and as the black liquid poured out of her mouth onto the ground, for a fraction of a moment I held the bizarre notion that her insides must have been as dark as her skin, when clearly it was the coffee.

The absurd mental disconnect reminded me of when I was a freshman in high school trying to break into a pick-up basketball game at the court near our apartment complex. We lived in a neighborhood with a lot of immigrants and refugees, Russian, Mexican, and Hmong mostly, but also a sizable African-American population. There weren't any soccer fields nearby, so everybody played basketball. I was the only white kid without an accent and was fresh from the sticks, trying to keep my head down and not get beat up.

There was one black kid playing that day whom I knew from my floor. His name was Raphael and he took the same bus as me. The guy was crazy smart, but he didn't have the time or patience for homework, so we'd already worked out a system where I'd do his math problem sets and he'd offer me his services navigating the complex hierarchy of status and nationality at a school that was fully 25 times larger than the one I'd attended back home. Everybody liked Raphael, though he was no one's best friend, so he kept trouble at bay by manufacturing an air of inaccessibility about him, but I made it into his inner circle because I was both valuable and harmless.

The first time I went to shoot hoops, it was a typically hot, dry day in early October in the Central Valley, probably in the high eighties, and the guys at the court were stripping off their shirts left and right. I was hanging back against the chain link fence, watching, waiting to be invited in, when Raphael took off his t-shirt as well, revealing a deep and distinct tan line around his neck and shoulders from what was

probably his track singlet. I noticed that his hairless chest and abdomen seemed lighter than my arms and legs, which were heavily bronzed each summer in the California sun to an almond shade of brown. The day was unremarkable in almost every other way, but I remember feeling so ridiculous, so stupid in that moment that it had come as such a surprise to me that Raphael could have tan lines.

Maria spit out the remnants of the contents of her mouth and promptly stood back up, with only a slight groan to indicate that anything had been wrong. I had gotten out of the car to try to offer my assistance or support in some way, but she didn't need her hair held back, so there wasn't much for me to do but to stand back and lend a hand to help her back up when she was done.

"I guess that wasn't such a good idea," she said, brushing off grass clippings from the hem of her skirt in the back.

"Probably not," I agreed, and we returned to the car to head back.

* * * *

It was raining when I dropped Maria off at her place; she gave me a kiss on the cheek and told me she'd had a really nice time despite the morning's consequences of overindulging. I told her I hoped to see her again soon, she agreed, and we left it at that. We both knew that the ball was in her court, since inviting her over to my place was still out of the question.

I was hoping to return to an empty apartment so I could take a nap to process the day, but when I arrived, it was anything but empty. I opened the door to find G-pa

kneeling in the living-room-bedroom with the screen folded back and newspaper spread out covering the floor from wall to wall. On top of the newspapers, there rested a variety of small appliances and other contraptions – including a microwave, three vacuum cleaners, a blender, and two toaster ovens – each with a name scribbled next to it in marker. The newspaper-junkyard covered every available surface in the room, including the futon, and G-pa was busy drying everything off with an old undershirt as I came in.

“What. The fuck.” I stood there staring at him as he kept wiping away. I’d only been gone for a day and a night and couldn’t understand how he’d amassed so much junk so quickly and what the hell it was all doing in my living room.

“That’s what I said. Why the hell is it raining like this in June? It never rains in June. Not like this, anyway. Misting, sure, but not a downpour. I barely got these inside from out back before the clouds opened up and it started rushin’ down like Niagara Falls.” And what did G-pa know about Niagara Falls? – I wondered.

“That’s not what I was referring to. But not everywhere has a wet season and a dry season, G-pa.” It sounded patronizing even to me, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re tellin’ me! The weather’s all over the place out here! Wet, dry. Hot, cold. It was thirty degrees warmer yesterday! There’s no rhyme or reason to it!”

“What’s with the piles of junk, G-pa? Please tell me you got Miss Angela’s permission before storing that stuff in her backyard.”

“Permission? Ranger, it was her *idea*. We were up there havin’ some coffee – she brews a hellofa Turkish coffee by the way – and your friend Steven Whatshisname comes by with his van full of broken down this ‘n that and offers me a wad of cash if I can fix it for him. Says he rounded it up from friends of his – starving students, he says – and

neighbors. Everybody he knows has a broken down somethin' or other and is too broke to replace it, so he offers to take it off their hands and return it in working order for a fraction of the price of a new one. Then he comes to me and asks if I can fix it all, and I say, the hell I can, with a finger up my nose in my sleep. Ten minutes a job. Fifteen for somethin' tricky. And he says, so if we charge ten bucks for the small stuff, fifteen for the bigger stuff, that's a dollar a minute. That's sixty bucks an hour. And if anybody's got big stuff, washers and dryers and cars, then we charge a whole lot more, but still cheap compared to the repair shops. He gets ten percent for bringin' me the work, Miss Angela gets ten percent for the space – I offered more, but she wouldn't take it – and boy, we're in business!" He was talking like a motor was running his own mouth, so much so that it was hard to keep up. I hadn't seen him this filled with glee since I was a kid, so I resisted the urge to jump right in and complain about the junk everywhere. At least, not right away.

"So...where's it all gonna go? Since the backyard is clearly not an option."

"Miss Angela's got space in the shed back there but she lost the key to the padlock. Soon as we get our hands on some bolt cutters we've got ourselves a spot. And if we need more room, she says we can use her guest room downstairs. It's mostly empty and she says she hasn't had any guests in years." Part of me wondered who made up the "we" that he kept referring to, but the other part of me didn't want to know.

"And what about cars? You don't have a garage or any real equipment."

"I know, and it's a cryin' shame. But we'll have to limit our services to the simple stuff. I can go to them if it's in the neighborhood. Do what I can. Send 'em someplace else when it's a big job. Like a country doctor referrin' patients to a hospital for surgery."

“You’re not in the country anymore, G-pa.”

“Aren’t we though?” I didn’t know what he meant by that and frankly, I didn’t care.

“Well I’m glad you’re getting nice and settled in here. You’ve got yourself a place to stay. Looks like I’ve also inadvertently gotten you a job, which is convenient now that I’ve lost mine. Oh yeah, I lost my job, by the way. Store’s closing. Don’t worry about me, though, I’ll be all right. I’m working on my next big thing. But really, I’m happy for you. I even got you a built-in family of strays to rescue, just like you always wanted.” Something about the way he always tore me down when I was excited about something made me feel the need to do the same, though it wasn’t as fulfilling a feeling as I might have hoped. I hadn’t intended to be out with the weeks-old news about my job, but now that I had, it was an instantaneous salve to my conscience.

“What’s the matter with you? Did you get fired or something? Where you been all night anyway?”

“See, that’s the thing, G-pa, I don’t need to tell you where I’ve been. This is my apartment, and you are my *guest*.” And I am a *grown-up*, I thought to myself, petulantly, though I at least had the sense to recognize that if you have to say it out loud, it loses some of its potency. “And no I did not get fired; I told you the store’s closing. But I’ve got it under control. I’m taking care of it.”

“If you want me to leave, I’ll leave. Just say the word – you know it don’t take me long to pack.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. But now that we’re on the subject of you being here, what exactly *are* you doing here? What is it that you were hoping to

accomplish? Did you come out here to fix me? To set me on the right path? Because as much as I love an intervention—”

“Ranger, I wouldn’t even begin to try.” Because he didn’t think it was his place or because he didn’t give a rat’s ass? – I wondered. “You know it’s nobody’s business but your own what you do with yourself. I don’t have any secret agenda. You’re the only connection that I’ve got left, plain and simple.”

“Oh? Because I was under the impression that you had other ‘connections’ now. One, in particular, stands out in my mind.” This was the first time I had made any reference out loud to my assumptions about him and Miss Angela. I didn’t know if anything had actually happened yet, but it looked to me like things were well on their way to a full-blown affair, judging from the amount of time he spent up there, and it was beginning to get under my skin.

“Watch yourself, Ranger. Your Grams still has fresh dirt on her grave, and I’m not sure what you’re insinuat’g, but I don’t like it, and I don’t think she would neither.”

“She doesn’t have any grave at all, does she. Those ashes are still sitting there in your trunk of junk, waiting to be laid to rest. Isn’t that why you said you had to come out here, because I would ‘mess it up’?”

“Just waitin’ for the right sorta day. You oughta do these things right; you only get one shot at it.”

“Is that it? I got the impression that you were distracted by other things.”

“Have you got somethin’ to say, Ranger?”

“I don’t know, G-pa, have you?”

“You don’t know what you’re sayin’, or you wouldn’t be sayin’ it. You don’t want me to talk to nobody? If you’re referrin’ to what I think you’re referrin’ to, I’m pretty sure I’m not her type. But that’s beside the point. You want me to stay holed up in here drinkin’ and playin’ sad, lonesome songs on my guitar all day long? I coulda done that back home. Whaddya want from me, boy?”

I wanted to say that I wanted him to go home, to soldier on like the hardass I knew him to be when I was growing up would’ve done. This new version of the man who’d raised me was someone I didn’t recognize. I knew I should have been happy for him that he was getting on with his life, but I wanted him to feel what I was feeling. Like my own personal magnetic field was in a period of reversal, its poles no longer clear and reliable but instead spiraling like jumping-jack fireworks, spastically spinning my inner compass out of control.

“That’s not for me to say, now, is it, G-pa? It’s not for me to say. You do what you’re gonna do; I’ve gotta go work on my resume.”

This was the way all of our disagreements seemed to end: ambiguously. I left him there to head to the bathroom, but it was locked, presumably with Leo inside. I couldn’t even piss when I wanted to anymore. My laptop was on the dinette where I’d left it the day before, but it was presently open and in use. I thought about what particular kind of an ass it would make me if I took it and left to go to a café to browse more job listings, and I wondered if Leo would even flinch, or if he’d come to expect such bigger disappointments than this that such an inconvenience, that I would take all of his research and notes on what looked to be the soliloquies of *Henry V* for an indeterminate amount of time just because I could, would be only a flea bite of a nuisance to him, already

scratched and scabbed over by morning. But I would never do that. I was insufferably polite, if only for self-interested reasons, so of course I simply left.

I pictured myself entering into a sort of cinematic brooding sequence in which I flipped up the collar of my trench coat and penetrated sheets of rain to prowl the stormy industrial underbelly of the city at dusk. But it was still only late morning, and the rain had stopped as suddenly and ferociously as it had begun, and there was even a rainbow now, arching defiantly across a rather violent looking cumulonimbus. The sky itself appeared to have fractured directly above me, a blanket of pale blue dotted with cotton balls to the west above the Capitol and the remains of the front to the east. With the summer sun already vaporizing the nascent puddles beneath my feet, it was too warm and soupy for the trench coat. After ditching it in the back seat of my car, I slumped in the driver's seat and took off in a huff.

But as I drove off with nowhere in particular in mind, it became incredibly difficult to stay angry with a fucking rainbow beaming overhead. To tell the truth, even I was beginning to tire of my own grand gestures of sulking, suddenly thinking it rather fatuous of me to be still moping around like a teenager at my age. So I took four right turns and ended up parking back in front of the house instead. When I went back inside, G-pa was attempting to peel disintegrated bits of wet newspaper off of the face of one of the toaster ovens, but it was all gummed up and he seemed to be making it worse.

“How can I help?” I offered, and I shut the door behind me.

Chapter 17

The thrill of finally having made real and measurable progress with Maria had mostly worn off by the time I had my next “work” day, and this time I was the one who was suddenly “busy” with preparing for “job interviews” when she called to go out again. The tedium of keeping up the pretense with G-pa that I still had a job had worn me down, and even though I was now out with the truth, the shame of it had settled around me like the thick coat of pulverized wood dust from a saw mill. After so many identical days had passed before me that I no longer associated the smell of my morning coffee with alertness but with boredom, I started to fantasize about taking days off from the daily grind of the job hunt to – I hadn’t really thought through what, specifically – to just go and do something else.

Though I’d been rotating cafés each day so as not to overstay my welcome and to keep things fresh, they all eventually blurred together into one caffeine-infused reminder that I was paying other people so that I could look for a job. I, who since I had reached the legal age of employment, had never *not* had a job. Who’d worked my way through high school, college, and graduate school, and who’d been disciplined and responsible enough to have earned and maintained the grades for a Regent’s scholarship to pay my tuition. But the old adage of doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results made me begin to question my sanity, and so one day I decided that the message boards and human resources departments wouldn’t notice my absence. I rejected half a lifetime’s dedication to the philosophy that hard work pays off and the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and I didn’t show up.

Instead, I went to the movies. My matinee ticket cost less than a day's worth of coffee and snacks, and I could move around to different theaters within the multiplex I'd chosen in Chinatown and still remain anonymous because there were always throngs of tourists in that particular cinema looking to escape the heat (or rain, or what have you).

That first day, I saw three films, all of which were of genres that I usually avoided (it was the summer blockbuster season, after all). The first one was animated; I remember this distinctly because there were a lot of children there and I felt uncomfortably self-conscious sitting in that theater as a solitary man in the middle of the day. When it was over, I left the theater quickly and hung out in the bathroom for fifteen minutes or so to wait until people started showing up for the next show, a spy-ish action flick dominated by a plethora of explosions, which is about all I can remember about it. Finally, the only show that was left in my last available timeslot was a romantic comedy, which I rarely watched unless it was clear that it would be more universally funny, like *When Harry Met Sally* or *Groundhog Day*, rather than a sappy love story.

This one was not of the variety which I ordinarily went to see, but it was marginally better than sitting in a café cutting and pasting cover letters into emails. It was a rags to riches sort of story, an updated *Pretty Woman* but with an actress who was younger and technically prettier than Julia Roberts but who was unencumbered by her nuance or complexity of character. I marveled over that male fantasy of falling in love with a hooker and then rescuing her from men like them; it had never made sense to me. What actual prostitute would delude herself into believing that a guy who paid to have sex with prostitutes could be anything but a desperate, disloyal scumbag underneath?

I thought about my mother, who ran away from her own tramp of a mother (this being her own characterization of the woman) when she was thirteen to hitch a ride to the mountains with a group of hippie backpackers, and how she said she'd left to break the cycle of inherited prostitution (which had allegedly persisted since at least the days of the Gold Rush) and avoid being recruited into her mother's massage parlor, a.k.a. brothel. She eventually wandered into town and lied about her age, claiming she was sixteen, to get a job at the Laundromat, which was desperately seeking workers and took a chance on her because she was polite and clearly not on drugs.

This was what I had come from: I was descended from orphans and whores. If I had been an artist of some kind, I am sure that that would have been just the origin story I'd have needed to have launched a long, fruitful, tortured career. But I was an unimaginative regular Joe, an unemployed one at that, and I would have much preferred a thread of something marginally noble in my past, some aide-de-camp to General Washington, or a brave soul who'd barely escaped slaughter during the French Inquisition, onto whom I could grasp for strength, or at the very least, for reassurance. But the way things had been going, I was clawing my way out of a dumpster and into a landfill. I couldn't even find work cleaning toilets. At this rate, I would be turning tricks myself, or at the very least working as a stripper, by the end of the year. So much for improving my outlook by heading to the movies.

I didn't make the mistake of heading back to the theater the next day. I was trying to avoid tedium, after all, and there were only so many movies out at one time that weren't patently awful. Overnight as I lay in bed not sleeping, or dozing between G-pa's predictable hourly flushes of the toilet, it hit me that despite having lived in D.C. for

years, I'd never done the tourist thing. I'd only made it out to the biggest of museums (namely, the Natural History, Air & Space, and American History trifecta), and only then when friends came to town. It struck me that I owed it to the city, and the country, really, to visit all the museums and monuments I had taken for granted, to immerse myself in the cultural institutions of the nation and maybe come out on the other side all the better for it. Though I had worked as a curator in the bowels of the Smithsonian, I'd really only catalogued artifacts. Pottery shards, pieces of flaked stone. Ancient garbage, really. As a student of anthropology, I had been interested in *people*. So after packing my lunch in advance to save money (and ensure that I had something safe to eat), I embarked on a tour of the Capital City which was long overdue.

I knew that I was running out of money and that this little cultural detour was my way of avoiding the inevitably foul work of procuring employment. I had only enough in my checking account for two months' rent. After that, I would have to resort to paying Miss Angela via cash advances on my credit cards, which, given the exorbitantly high interest rates, was essentially the equivalent of being indebted to a corporate loan shark (with very big corporate teeth); I would never be able to pay it back. Otherwise, I'd have to hit the road and apply for food stamps. Intellectually I knew this, but at the same time, I firmly believed that no matter *what* I did for the next month or so, no matter how many more positions I applied for, I still wouldn't have a job at the end of it, so why *not* goof off? Knowing that two months from now, life was going to become increasingly difficult and tedious, why not have a little vacation?

That first day, I felt like I was cutting class or playing hooky and kept looking over my shoulder while out and about, wary of some imagined goody two-shoes spotting

me and reporting my delinquency to the non-existent authorities. I felt naked and exposed with this dirty little secret seemingly hidden in my pocket, marking me from within as a non-productive member of society.

When I pulled up to the Hirschhorn Museum on my bicycle (gas no longer being in the budget for local outings), I experienced the strange sensation one feels when inadvertently stumbling into the neighborhood of an ex-lover. This was my former backyard – the Smithsonian Castle was only two buildings away – and for some reason I felt like an intruder going there in such a way, just to watch rather than being a participant. A voyeur, almost.

It was a Friday, and at 10:00 AM when I arrived, there were hardly any other visitors in the gallery, save for a handful of students and retired people presumably taking advantage of the free space and air conditioning. Having no direction or agenda, I meandered along at a distance behind a young mother and her toddler, who themselves were probably stalking the same corridors just to get out of the house. I went my own separate way at a natural endpoint, but then ended up going in the same direction again by chance on the third floor. There was a special installation up there by artists from the so-called Light and Space Movement, which sounded a little airy-fairy, but intrigued me enough to check it out.

The gallery emitted a sanitized fluorescence from some light source deep within the space, and the description at the entrance indicated that the exhibit was somewhat intense and could overwhelm the senses, which was immediately confirmed by sounds of fussing, tears, and a hasty exit of the mother and child, the latter of whom was rubbing her eyes as if to wipe away dirt or debris. The young mother then gave me a sheepish grin

of bemused resignation as she wheeled the stroller towards the sculptures up ahead and cautioned me in a hushed tone, “It’s way too bright in there,” as she passed.

I ignored her warning, of course, confident that my sensory tolerances exceeded those of a one-year-old, and went in anyway once they were out of sight. Right away, however, I understood precisely what she had meant, though I am not sure I could explain it adequately. The room was long and bare, save for a series of shockingly blue-white vertical lights connected in a series which resembled an incredibly elongated, old-fashioned radiator. My head began to hurt the very moment I crossed the threshold and rounded the corner into the exhibit space, and I instinctively averted my eyes to face the floor. Bizarrely, the room felt dark, as if lit by only a string of black-lights, but these were clearly not those. They couldn’t have been UV rays either, or the museum would’ve handed out goggles like the ones in tanning salons. There was a more detailed description on the wall, but I was unable to read it in the crippling glow.

It couldn’t be described as dazzling, or even brilliant, for such words imply a brightness and luminescence that was utterly absent. But it was worse than looking into the sun, because it was everywhere, and you couldn’t look away because it was reflected off of the walls and the floor and so you had to simply submit to it or leave. I closed my eyes in a last-ditch attempt to immerse myself comfortably in the light, but my eyelids were as ineffectual at blocking out the radiance as white gauzy curtains would have been at preventing the city lights from penetrating a bedroom at night.

I gave up, feeling a bit defeated and strangely drained, and walked out into the atrium, where the summer sun poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows and seemed like a cozy old 40-watt incandescent light bulb in comparison to where I had just been.

There was the mother again, with her daughter standing up and pressed up against the glass, staring down at the enormous fountain in the courtyard below.

“I told you,” she said, not seeming to judge but simply stating a fact, as I walked by them on my way to the escalator and exit.

I nodded, “You were right.”

When I got outside, I decided to ditch my itinerary and spent much of the rest of the day visiting area fountains instead. Something about the cool water effervescing into pools all across the city had a calming effect and helped to clear my head of everything. Sitting at the edge of the nautical-themed fountain at the Naval Memorial, I resolved to be undeterred by the morning’s art-induced headache and push on the following day with my originally scheduled outings.

I anticipated a bit more competition from visitors on a Saturday, which is why I was determined to stay off the National Mall. The Postal Museum at Union Station was what one would expect of a postal museum. Tributes to the men and women braving centuries of rain, sleet, and snow. Historical postal vehicles. Historical stamps. No mention of anyone going postal. I came out of it knowing more about the United States Postal Service than when I had entered, which admittedly hadn’t been very much. From an anthropological standpoint, it was pretty dry stuff, but since I had formerly specialized in prehistory, I was somewhat biased against historical exhibits, feeling that there was an inherent lack of mystery in the telling of a story that has been documented and verified rather than teased out of comparatively reticent stone, wood, and fibers.

It was almost lunchtime when I left Union Station, but I decided to keep at it and postpone my midday meal in favor of more sightseeing because I was feeling productive

for the first time in weeks, though that didn't really make sense since I was technically goofing off. The National Building Museum wouldn't take up too much time, I figured, and I had yet to be outright inspired that day by anything I had seen, which I suppose was an inherent goal in going to these things. What I hadn't taken into consideration was that I might run into someone I knew, however, and that it might derail the rest of my day, perhaps even the rest of my summer.

When you walk into a place where you don't expect to see anyone you know, it can sometimes take a few extra moments for recognition to take place, like when little children don't recognize that the person standing right in front of them in an aisle of the grocery store is their teacher, with whom they spend several hours a day but only in a single, specific setting; in their small minds, the teacher doesn't exist outside the school. This was my experience upon entering the Building Museum and asking a docent at the front desk for directions to the restrooms; it wasn't until after I had asked the question that I realized the docent was Leo, the young man presently living with me in my apartment.

He waited to respond until he could see the flash of recognition across my face, and then he said, "Hey, Mr. James."

"Leo! I didn't expect to run into you here. And please, it's Ranger." My mouth went dry and cottony as I tried to think up a reasonable explanation for being there on what was ostensibly my lunch break – I still hadn't told him about the bookstore.

"Yeah, I guess when I've said 'I'm heading to work,' I haven't really been specific about where that is," he said. I suppose it had never come up; the kid didn't talk much. I knew he had a part-time job some days after school and occasionally on the

weekends, but I had pictured McDonalds or the equivalent, which was where 90% of the people I knew in high school had started out in the workforce.

“I guess not. So you work here?”

“It’s an internship. I’m applying to architecture school next year.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that makes sense then.”

“Can I help you with anything?” Now there was a question I never expected to hear from him. “Other than the bathroom, which is over there and to the left, by the way.”

“Oh, I was just passing through on my break. I like to check out all the places off the beaten path, you know. The ones that aren’t swarming with tourists.”

“So you found another job, then?”

“I’m sorry?” I began to feel myself shrivel up like a worm deserted on the sidewalk in the sunshine after a rainstorm. Had G-pa told him? – I wondered. Or maybe he’d seen something about my job hunt in my search history when borrowing my laptop? There was no feeling on earth that was worse to me than being caught in a lie. It was worse than nausea, worse than humiliation. It was disgusting.

“The bookstore. It closed, right?”

“How did you know?”

“It was in the newspaper. The Metro section, about a month ago.” Among all the declining readership of print journalism, Leo had to be the exception.

“So…” I hesitated to explain myself, lest I dig myself in an even deeper hole than I was already in.

“So I know G-pa was gonna offer to pay more of the rent now that he’s got some cash flow, and I figure you didn’t want him to part with his money since he’s gotta save

up for retirement and all. At least, that's what they say anyway, though I wouldn't mind some of that Social Security tax money to stay in my pocket right now, if you know what I mean." I didn't know whether he believed this to be true or whether he was conjuring this story up so I could save face, but either way, I was appreciative.

"Sure," I agreed, nebulously.

"Don't worry, I wasn't gonna say nothin'. It's none of my business." But he was wrong about that. It was his business, because if I couldn't pay the rent anymore, he didn't have a place to stay. I wasn't sure what he understood about my financial situation, however, and I wasn't about to enlighten (or frighten) him.

"I appreciate that. But he knows now. I hadn't had a chance to tell you yet; I'm sorry about that." He shrugged like it was nothing to him.

"Hey listen, I'm about to head out on my lunch break, you wanna grab a bite to eat? Seems like we're always comin' and goin' at the wrong times, and I don't want you to think that I think of your house as a hotel. I know you're makin' sacrifices so I can be there and all..." He trailed off, but I got the feeling he was talking about Maria and the fact that I no longer could take her back to my place.

"Don't mention it. It's good Karma, you know?" I didn't believe in Karma, but it was one of those things people say in those situations. "Lunch sounds good. Let's do it."

He went back to an office to say something to someone who was probably his supervisor and then we left. Leo was still wearing his lanyard with his name badge, so he looked like any other intern in the town which, no doubt, invented the intern. He asked if I could eat hot dogs and I told him I could and that I knew which group of carts had a

brand of buns that didn't contain soy. Hot dogs, surprisingly, despite everything else they are crammed with, do not usually contain common allergens.

We each grabbed our all-beef franks, a bag of Utz chips, and a bottle of soda – if anything needed to be washed down with carbonated syrup-water, it was hot dogs and chips – and staked out a spot on the edge of the reflecting pool in Judiciary Square. It also happened to be the site of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, which gave me the feeling that with all the memorializing going on around this town, maybe it was too easy to let it fade into the background until it was all just furniture and decoration to everyone.

Leo and I suddenly found ourselves together for a meal in a setting from which we could not easily retreat and one which was not particularly conducive to small talk, and I could think of nothing to say. Lunch was his idea, after all, so I waited, patiently, for him to break the silence. He didn't. Finally, after eating my entire hot dog without either of us uttering a word, I said something.

“So architecture, huh? What got you into that?”

He took a swig from his soda, set it down, and then he answered. “Well, you know, you grow up in this town. There's a lot of old buildings and stuff. Everything's big. Columns, domes. Everything like that. But when you grow up where I did you only see all that stuff from up on the hill.” I thought about what hill he meant and realized he must have been referring to Carver Terrace, the neighborhood across from Trinidad which overlooked the Capitol Building from a distance. “Everything up there is all these brick rectangular prisms. Blocks made of blocks. It affects your state of mind, you know? You live in a shoebox, pretty soon you start to think maybe you're a shoe. I mean, if you

gotta build a building, even a really cheap building, you don't have to make it ugly and depressing as shit." He paused to open his bag of chips and pop one in his mouth. "So I figure I'll grow up and build the prettiest little projects you ever did see. Why not, right?"

"Why not," I agreed, though he didn't strike me as the drawing type – none of his notebooks had any doodles or sketches or anything like that. "So do you have a portfolio or something?"

"Yeah, I got all that. Ms. Arnold got me in touch with a mentor awhile back." He was talking about Maria. "She set me up with this architect she knew from Howard University, and he helped me get this gig at the Building Museum. If I want to apply Early Decision, I need to apply in the fall."

"Where do you want to go?" I imagined someone with no family would not have the usual constraints pulling them in one direction or the other, but I was wrong.

"It's gotta be Howard. Have to stay where people know me, where people can vouch for me, you know? Where they've got my back. This city's home. Where else am I gonna go?" He had a point. With his parents out of the picture (whether they were dead or absent, I still didn't know – part of the orphan's code was to never ask what happened to another orphan's parents), Leo would of course cling to the only constant in his life, the familiarity of the district itself. He was still just a kid, and despite all of his pretense to self-sufficiency, he needed security like any other teenager. I had lost myself in that train of thought and was not prepared for what he had to say next.

"So what are *you* gonna do? Can't be many bookstores out there hiring right now."

“I’m actually an anthropologist.” I omitted the fact that I was somewhat of a lapsed anthropologist, in that it no longer held my interest as a discipline.

“I know, G-pa told me.” I wondered what else he knew about me that I didn’t know about.

“There isn’t much of anything hiring right now, it would seem. Got any openings at the Building Museum? I have ‘museum experience.’” I said this in my best self-mocking tone.

“I could ask...”

“I was joking.” I wasn’t, though, and I think he knew that, but he pretended I was anyway.

“I know.” We’d both finished our lunches by then and were just sitting there with our backs to the reflecting pool watching a group of pigeons duke it out over a discarded falafel.

“This was good to do, having lunch together. We should do it again sometime.”

“Yeah.”

Chapter 18

Somethin Miss Angela told me the other day reminded me of how strong women were back in the mill days in the valley, and I thought you should know about it. When the old man moved us to Petrolia for the new mill that had opened up there, the company was building temporary housing for the mill workers just comin to town until they could prove themselves as good workers and buy a proper house. The company only built the frames of the structures, and to save money, the women would put up the sheetrock, paint, and wallpaper all by themselves while the men were at work in the mill. I was too young to help out much, so I mostly played jacks on the floor and watched as these mothers and wives made houses out of skeletons. It struck me even then that men were the weaker sex, for what women lacked in brute strength they seemed to more than make up for in moxie and general competence at life.

In those boom days of the fifties, the enrollment at the local school swelled like the Mattole in winter, and the men had to build additions to fit the more than a hundred students who attended, which I am sure is hard for you to believe since there were barely that many people around altogether when you were growing up. Don't think I never went to a proper school, though – I surely did. But by the time I was in the 3rd grade I still could not read a lick and I was causin such a ruckus with my bad behavior that they sent me to the good Mrs. Wipplebock up the road who kept a handful of pupils on her own at the Adventist church. This lady tried and tried every trick up her sleeve, and don't you think I didn't try myself. But the thing was, I just couldn't sit still long enough and keep my eyes on the page to turn those letters into anything important in my mind. Maybe if I could have touched them and held them in my hands, the way you did with those

refrigerator magnets we had when you were a little boy, if I could have turned them over and moved them around with my fingertips, maybe they would've held some meaning for me. But as it was, they were just flat little scribbles on a page and didn't really seem like real things to me then. What's changed that's made me able to understand them now, you're probably wondrin. I suppose now I've just got somethin to say.

But anyway after much hand wringing over the fact that I should go to school because my legs were no good for manual labor they all gave up on me and my mother kept me at home, which suited me just fine and dandy because there was always somethin to fiddle with, take apart, and put back together around home, tho I did get quite the beating once for messin with the outlets and redoing the wiring in the house – a sin for which I was later forgiven because it turned out I had fixed an irritating buzzing in the walls that had given my father headaches. We later moved from town out to the old homestead because Mother said she wanted to raise chickens. She was always so shy that it was painful to watch her get herself in a tizzy tryin to think of a good way to say hello to someone she knew on the street, and so I think the real reason was that it would be a relief from people. But we never got any chickens because my father, who loved the thrill of social life, left us to join the merchant marines just after we moved in and it was up to me to be the breadwinner for Mother and me, and we no longer had the spare money to buy the chicks or build a henhouse. I would have forgiven him if he had ever come back, my father that is, but he never gave me the chance and for all I know his very first boat capsized and he sank to the bottom of the sea. That's what I like to think happened anyway.

But getting back to women. You see, Miss Angela told me a little bit about her story which I thought you ought to know even though it was a very private thing. I don't think she would mind tho because it's you and she likes you more than you think she does. You know about her two boys who died. The one was killed by a stray bullet that was meant for someone else and the other was stabbed later that same year for his sneakers. Did you know they were twins? They don't look like it in their pictures, but that's because they were fraternal twins.

Well Miss Angela never intended to have any babies, and isn't that so often the truth. She was in nursing school back then and was fond of a fellow nurse – now I'm not tryin to make a scandal here, it's just the facts – who was also a woman. One day, one of the doctors in training at the teaching hospital where she worked saw her share a moment with this woman, not a scandalous moment, mind you, but a private moment nonetheless. The kind that involves hands touching and a certain kind of look that can only be interpreted in one way. Well Miss Angela did not know she had been discovered until later that night when she was doing inventory in the supply closet like always and the doctor in training came in and locked the door. Makes you wonder why they put locks on the insides of supply closets, but that's getting too far into the details.

So this man came in and told her about what he saw and she knew right away what he was in there for. She did not want to be kicked out of nursing school, for who would believe a girl like her over this doctor boy, so she let him have his way with her beside those boxes of rubber gloves and bed pans and that is how she conceived her two boys.

Now the reason I tell you all this, it really is not to shock you or make you feel bad, but there is something about a woman that makes her stronger than a man in nearly every way but in body – and sometimes even there too – and you really need to know this about them. For what did she do but hide her condition for as long as she could to finish nursing school, then months later delivered her boys at home with the help of that other nurse who she loved. I can only imagine, well I do have some experience with this, but I can just see Miss Angela lying there with all that pain tearing her up again on the way out like it did on the way in, but doubly so. And she didn't let it break her. Her parents had kicked her out, so she moved here where nobody knew her or cared. She had no way to get a husband and no desire for one anyway, but she and that girl raised those babies together living as sisters and switching off to go to work and sleep. That is until one day when the boys were old enough to be in school and the woman took off with another woman who was younger and whose belly was not sagging from having borne two children at once. I would say that that is so like a man, but well you know that doesn't apply in this case.

I know that this is not my story to tell, but when she told me I thought of you and knew that you needed to know of it because it has value in being told even though it doesn't belong to me. That woman talks a blue streak as my mother used to say and I sure do enjoy her company. I am sorry if I gave you the wrong impression of our relationship by not making it clear, tho it really wasn't for you to stick your nose into. Anyway, you know I never was much of a talker, and it goes without sayin that I miss your Grams. Though I'm sayin it anyway for your sake.

Chapter 19

It was two more demoralizing months before I could find myself a job of any kind. After our weekend of wine tasting and the following week, during which I sulked about my lack of prospects and generally avoided meeting up with her, Maria suddenly went AWOL for reasons I will go into later on. G-pa was still paying his half of the expenses and had since offered to pay more because he now had plenty of income from his fix-it work on the side. But I would have none of that, not because I cared whether or not he spent his extra money but because accepting his financial help would have placed an invisible choke chain around my neck, and I would have rather jumped over the fence and hanged myself from it than allowed for that to become the new normal.

It wasn't at all easy procuring this job, though I realize that three months total sounds like nothing given the times we were in. My contacts at the Smithsonian had still been solid, but everyone everywhere seemed to be laying off staff rather than hiring them. There were some archaeology gigs to be had, but all of them were well out of the region, and as ambivalent as I was about the living arrangements, I didn't feel right just up and leaving town with G-pa and Leo living in my apartment, though I knew they would probably get along just fine without me. So I was left with whatever was available locally, and that was slim pickings at best.

I knew I shouldn't have expected to find something so quickly, considering the economic realities of the day, but it is difficult not to believe that you will be the exception, the sole survivor in a calamity, as if there were some entity in the universe rooting especially for you and no one else, announcing, *Behold! Enter these sublime*

ramparts, which were built for thee and thee alone to shelter you! Of course it would talk like that. And it wasn't so ridiculous a notion. People thought like that all the time.

Lately, the media had been romping through an orgy of stories about so-and-so losing his house after running out of unemployment benefits or about someone with ridiculous experience and education sending out her four hundredth resume. Stories of the multitudes of people who no longer counted as being officially unemployed because they had been hunting for work for so long that they had given up the chase entirely. My situation was not so dire as to place me in the position of going hungry (yet), but I would have doggedly faced the streets before I accepted money – charity, really – from G-pa.

I will spare you many of the details because they are now overly familiar, but suffice it to say that I exhausted every available channel I had to find employment, though I did turn down a genuine offer from someone who will remain nameless to sell ecstasy to local college students; I didn't think I fit the part.

But I did eventually call every single person I knew in town during a single marathon weekend of abasement to find out if anyone had caught a whiff of a job prospect in the fumes of their office gossip. Nada. There was nothing. I began applying to entry level positions in every industry that I was capable of entering – service, retail, agriculture, government, non-profit, et cetera. I even looked up professions with the Bureau of Labor Statistics to see if I was missing anything, to make sure I was thinking outside the box, but almost everything was the type of work that required experience or training, like “Truck transportation and warehousing,” “Chemical manufacturing, except drugs,” and “Natural resources, construction, and utilities.” I even took the test to substitute teach, which I was otherwise qualified to do because I had a master's degree,

but the one day I managed to do it was such an utter disaster that I don't even want to talk about it.

This is a representative sample of the 473 jobs to which I applied: barista, busboy, bartender, receptionist, file clerk, canvasser, community fundraiser for Greenpeace, part time au pair coordinator, telemarketer, staff assistant for the DNC, front desk assistant for a Republican fundraiser, food demonstration sales specialist, community liaison, Jenny Craig program sales consultant, life enrichment activities assistant at a nursing home, concierge associate, landscaping laborer, carpet cleaning technician trainee, porter – which is not, as I thought, someone who carries bags at a hotel – but is a kind of custodian, dog daycare attendant, Ace Parking valet, night dispatch for a locksmith company, junk removal assistant, lab tech, and janitor. When I didn't get the janitor job because there were five other guys ahead of me who had significant janitorial experience, I knew I needed to rethink my strategy.

I reverted back to my initial instincts and finally took a trip to the unemployment office. Telling myself it would be as bad as the DMV, I tried to be mentally prepared for how abysmal the experience might be, but it was not as bad as all that. It was much, much worse.

The DMV is a great equalizer; everyone who has a car has to go to the DMV eventually. But the unemployment office is generally only visited by desperate, depressed, and desperately depressed people. One doesn't go there if one has other options.

From my experiences with the DMV, I knew to show up at the unemployment office a half-hour before the doors opened to get in line. There were 154 people ahead of me when I arrived at 7:25 A.M. The wait was five hours to meet with a counselor.

When they opened the doors and we all shuffled in to take a number, it was readily apparent that there would be standing room only, and the office resembled a large square subway car crammed to the doors at rush hour. We were all at least grateful for the air conditioning, because it was already in the eighties outside with eighty percent humidity by eight o'clock in the morning.

I didn't expect to see so many young children there, though I suppose that if you can't find work, you probably can't afford childcare either. There was one man in particular who stood out to me, a stocky Latino guy in his early forties with three under the age of four in tow, all of whom were girls and still in diapers. He had that sort of hollow, sunken look of being continually on auto-pilot, and I wondered if there might be even more older siblings at school or day camp. I also wondered where the mother was, but of course, she must have a job, I thought to myself. The man had been near me in line and did not get a seat at first, but then an older woman dressed rather nicer than the rest of us who looked like she should be retired by now insisted that he sit in her seat so as not to have to place his youngest on the floor. All three children – toddlers, really – had bottles or sippy cups of milk in hand, the oldest with what looked to be strawberry flavoring mixed in.

The older woman in nice clothes cooed at the youngest and asked the man what he usually did for a living; he said he was a contractor, but that no one was renovating their homes anymore so he hadn't had a job to do in four months. She nodded and told

him she had been in real estate. The children had been entertaining one another with a stack of brochures by setting them up like dominoes on an end table and knocking them down, but presently they all sat down on the floor, the youngest back in the man's lap, and sipped their milk. None of them had dirt on their faces or tangles in their hair, though there was a small strawberry stain on the oldest girl's shirt, which otherwise had the words "daddy's princess" written in gold lettering above a glittery tiara that hovered over a pink cupcake. She looked up at me for some reason with a gleam in her eyes like we were in cahoots over something, never breaking eye contact until her cup of milk was completely empty.

"Daddy, I pooped," she announced, still looking at me. I looked away then from the girl to the man, who looked up at the digital number counter on the wall and then at the paper number in his hand.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to wait. It's almost our turn."

But it wasn't almost his turn – perhaps it was numerically speaking – but not in terms of how long it actually took for the next couple of numbers to be called until it *was* his turn. So we all sat there as the stink of it slowly worked its way over the waiting area until a half hour had gone by and another half hour until the smell had diffused into the background stench of decrepit carpet squares and sweaty bodies and we no longer noticed, and the girls ran around in circles with generally free reign of the place because no was in the mood to be contrary or authoritative about anything at all.

By the time it was my turn, I had left for some lunch and come back, but I had still been standing for so long that I no longer felt like I had any legs at all, that I was merely attached to the floor itself. When my number appeared, I was surprised I could

even move forward because for a moment I thought I might not be able to take a step without falling on my face.

My case coordinator's name badge announced her as Elmyrah Higgins. She looked to be of Egyptian descent – maybe it was her thick, black eyeliner – but she had no discernable foreign accent. Come to think of it, Elmyrah really looked like more of a man than a woman; her long, curved acrylic nails stenciled with a purple leopard print capped thick, sturdy fingers that otherwise looked perfect for woodworking. Her neck was obscured by a flimsy scarf tied in a knot, but something about her jaw line and the bridge of her nose gave me the impression that she was a transgender woman, though I could tell that in more forgiving lighting she would likely pass with no question.

Elmyrah had just finished helping a woman who was about to lose her unemployment benefits because she had enrolled in a medical technician training program, which meant that she technically wasn't available at the drop of a hat to take any job that was offered to her, one of the pre-conditions for obtaining unemployment benefits. The woman could not be made to understand the contradiction in being required to actively seek employment while being simultaneously forbidden to do the only thing that promised to eventually get her there. I hadn't been able to hear the conclusion of the meeting because the lady's words were muffled between choked-back tears, but it didn't look good.

As I approached the counter ever-conscious of the universal rule to flatter and by-all-means not piss off the gatekeeper, I greeted Elmyrah with the most genuinely warm smile and hello that I could muster after five hours of standing around and sitting in a plastic blue chair with no elbow room on either side.

“Hi there! You are just the woman I was hoping to see.”

“I don’t doubt it, honey.”

I told her of my difficulties with finding suitable employment, knowing that she had heard it all before and hoping that by sparing her a sad tale of woe that I would earn her favor and get the inside scoop to some sort of little-known job opportunity. I did seem to win her favor, for once able to charm my way into someone’s good graces by being simply polite, friendly, and respectful. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much good favor could do for someone once you’d made it to the unemployment office. There were simply no jobs to be had that were not being categorically snatched up the moment they were announced.

“Listen, honey,” Elmyrah said after we’d gone round and round about my available options, “I’m gonna tell you something that I don’t always tell people, because most people who come in here are looking for hope. You, sir, seem to have a good attitude on your shoulders and can probably handle the truth. I could put you in some job training programs and get you on unemployment benefits and send you to a workshop on resumes, but the fact of the matter is that you’re not gonna find nothing out there right now that matches your qualifications, and I know you know that already or you wouldn’t be here. There’s only one sure thing I got for you, baby, and almost anybody else with your background would surely turn me down, I’m sorry to say. But most of those people are looking for a capital J-O-B, and you look like you just might have the desire to take whatever comes your way, am I right?”

She had me pegged. I thought about my dad loading logs onto trucks in the rain and mud and my mom using a toothbrush to get at the mold on the underside of the rims

of toilet bowls so that I could grow up and not be a laborer, but I reminded myself that it was only temporary and told myself that I would take it. Whatever it was, I would take it.

“Sure thing,” I said. “Sign me up.”

And so I found myself in early August on a road construction crew on a project benefitting from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds during one of the hottest summers in D.C. history, holding the stop/slow sign at one end of the project to let traffic know when it was safe to pass. On my first day on the job, my work boots sank perpetually into the freshly-laid asphalt like I was standing in a tar pit that was trying to engulf me into a gooey oblivion. My safety vest chafed at the insides of my arms every time I put one of them down to rest, and my ears, which were crammed into a too-tight helmet, felt as if they were on fire. But I had a job, and what a job it was.

Chapter 20

A few days before that first day on the road crew, I was out buying the requisite work boots for the job when I got a call from Maria saying that a legal issue had come up and she needed to get back to Trinidad in a hurry, and could we meet for drinks that afternoon before she had to leave the next morning. I said sure, and since she hadn't elaborated, in the hours before we were to meet up, my brain managed to imagine all kinds of immigration nightmares she could be facing that would force her to flee the country on such short notice, and I was already running through the potential scenarios of the horrendous bureaucratic red tape people supposedly had to go through when dealing with Customs and Border Patrol (or was it ICE now? – they'd changed the agency's name so many times that I'd lost track). I'd seen the movie *Green Card* with Gerard Depardieu and was panicky at the mere thought of having to lie to a government agency to help keep her in the country, but as I waited for her that blistering afternoon at The Reef in Adams Morgan, I resolved to do whatever it would take to help her out.

She got there late, probably from packing in a hurry, and I had already downed two mojitos by the time she joined me at the bar.

“Sorry I haven't been in touch, and thanks for dropping everything to meet me,” she said, out of breath herself from walking in the heat. Finally, she was sweating; I supposed that everyone had a boiling point, even if it was 95 degrees. It irked me that she still pretended like I could be busy in my situation, and her allusion to me “dropping everything” just reminded me that I had nothing important to do, but I suppressed my irritation in the spirit of concern for a friend (lover? I still didn't know which).

“Don’t mention it. I’m here for you no matter what,” I said, gently holding her hand under the bar. I hoped the assertion didn’t sound as desperate to her as it did to me, but I was preparing myself for what I thought would be sobering news and preparing her for me to swoop in like a hero and take care of everything for her, whatever it might be.

“Thanks, that’s...sweet? of you.” She seemed somewhat put off by my concern, and I probably should have taken that as a signal. “It’s just that something came up, and I need to take care of some things in person, some paperwork and other stuff.” It wasn’t like her to be cryptic, but if I had been listening at all with my brain rather than my ego, I would have realized this wasn’t at all what my imagination had blown it up to be and I wouldn’t have made a complete and total ass of myself like I proceeded to do.

“Look, if you need me to do anything, I’ll do it, you know? Whatever it is, like if you need me to marry you so you can stay here, I would do that for you. Just know that, okay?” Nevermind that it was as ugly of a marriage proposal as you could get, or that it didn’t make sense for a person in fear of being deported to be planning to leave the country voluntarily. No, in my mind, which had apparently run away with itself along with my faculties long before that conversation, this had to be about an immigration snafu, and I, being an American, could help her. As if all any immigrant needed was an American friend to vouch for them to make all their woes disappear. But that just goes to show how little I actually knew about Maria, and how much of a dumbass I could be.

“I’m sorry, what?” she blinked, taking her hand away and shaking her head in disbelief. “Are you asking me to marry you because you think I’m an illegal alien?”

“No!” I surprised myself with my own forcefulness. “I mean, it would be fine if you were. I’d assumed you were a legal resident, but if you weren’t and you needed a

green card, I would do whatever I could in my power, which admittedly is not very much, to help you with that. That's all I was saying. Okay, yes, and I would marry you if it would help. It came out wrong."

"You *would* marry me. If I *needed* you to." When she put it that way, it was pretty clear to me how gross I'd sounded.

"That's not what this is about, is it. You aren't going through immigration problems."

"No."

"Permanent resident?"

"Citizen. Of the United States of America. Me." She thumped herself on the chest with her palm for emphasis or clarification, as if she were talking to a caveman.

"Oh fuck. I am an ass." I grabbed my head with both hands, in part to conceal my reddening face.

"Yes."

I wanted to dive into the enormous fish tank that was behind the bar, and come to think of it, I probably should have, because it would have saved me from further humiliation that afternoon. After the initial shock and incredulity at my gross misunderstanding of her troubles wore off, she went on to explain that the paperwork was for finalizing a divorce from a husband that she'd never told me about. He was reluctant to sign the papers, and she was going there in person to make sure that he did, and one of her sisters was about to have twins, and she wanted to be there to greet her nieces or nephews into the world. That was it.

Though I had been crushed by my own denseness, I still was in pursuit of some grand heroic gesture, perhaps even more so because I had fallen so ungracefully before her.

“Let me go to Trinidad with you. You shouldn’t have to face your ex alone, and it could help to have me with you.” She looked at me as though I were a horse jockey and her not-quite-former husband was a champion boxer and could squish me like a bug, or maybe I was just reading into it. I fully deserved her skepticism, and I knew I was grasping at straws.

“Okay,” she said, way too easily. I gave a start at her reply, not expecting her to agree without a fight, especially considering the huge, and one might argue unforgivable, blunder I had just made. “You can come with me on one condition,” she added.

“Shoot.”

“You point to me on a blank map where you think Trinidad is.” She got out a pen from her purse, and with startling accuracy, proceeded to draw a passable outline of the Western Hemisphere on her cocktail napkin.

“You mean, *exactly* where it is?” I sucked at geography. Other than Europe, parts of Africa, and the countries with which we had been at war, I was terrible with maps.

“General vicinity,” she offered, generously (or perhaps arrogantly, believing I would fail).

I looked at her sketch, which was so well done as to seem to be the type of thing someone learns to perfect in order to have a cool party trick in the back of their pocket.

“It’s in the Caribbean,” I said, hesitantly, because even though I was pretty sure of at least that much, I was beginning to doubt everything I knew about the world altogether.

“Point,” she insisted. She’d drawn a whole slew of islands in that region, and the only ones I could really be confident about were Cuba, because of its proximity to Florida, and Haiti, because its propensity for disaster kept it continuously in the news. I held my breath, and rather than delaying the inevitable by hemming and hawing, I went for it and pinned my hopes and remaining dignity on a small blob south of those two known landmarks.

“That’s Jamaica,” she said, and I couldn’t tell if she was disappointed or relieved.

“Come on, there are so many islands there. Three tries?”

“You weren’t even close.”

“Okay, where is it, then?” She indicated with her pen what looked like a small promontory jutting off of what was maybe Brazil or somewhere in that area. Not what I thought was part of the Caribbean.

“That’s no fair, it looks like a peninsula the way you drew it! It’s practically attached to South America.”

“That’s Trinidad.”

“Really? But it’s almost touching...”

“Venezuela.”

“I was going to say that.” There was really no way I could salvage the situation, but now that it was slipping so far out of my control, I finally felt like throwing all my chips on the table and going for it. “Look, I know I screwed up there, chalk it up to the

fact that I grew up out in the boonies and was raised by hick parents, but I really think I should go with you. Nothing is keeping me here, and I'd like to really spend some time with you for once. Alone."

"Nothing is keeping you here? You've looked months for a job, and you're just gonna walk away from it? And your grandfather?" She didn't mention Leo, arguably because he really wasn't my responsibility, but I resented the fact that she thought I was duty-bound to show up for this temporary road construction gig, especially when G-pa was doing just fine financially on his own.

"He's not my grandfather." At least that caught her off guard a little, and she didn't look quite so defensive as she had a minute ago. And yes, I was going after her pity.

"What?"

"My grandmother died in childbirth and he pretended the baby, my dad, was his so he could marry someone who wasn't my grandmother, and no one was ever the wiser until he confessed all this to me after he got out here and had already weaseled his way into my apartment. Into my goddamned *life*. I don't owe that man anything."

"So wait, he adopted somebody else's baby and raised him *and* his offspring – you – and you don't think you owe the man? You've got a twisted sense of justice, Ranger. Stay home. Go to work. Figure your shit out. I'll call you when I get back." The look on her face more than likely could have been a reflection of my own, for we were both probably equally repulsed by my behavior.

I didn't want to argue about this, I just wanted to go with her. To get out of the pit into which my life had imploded and follow her somewhere I couldn't even find on a

map. It was about me, and I knew that. Being unwillingly unemployed for months on end will do that to a man – bring out the selfish bastard in him. But I'd already blown it, and she'd seen right through my motives.

She told me she was leaving her phone off when she landed so it wouldn't accrue international charges, that a friend from work was watching her apartment, and that she didn't know when she was coming home. I asked her to email me so that I would know that everything was okay and she said sure, though I didn't have high hopes that I'd earned even that small courtesy.

When I got back to the apartment, my gut was roiling with serpents of self-pity, and though I didn't really want to face any of my "roommates," I felt even less like being alone. G-pa was tinkering out back and appeared to be his usual chipper self, or I should say his *now* usual chipper self, for he had never been as outwardly cheerful as he had been since moving out to D.C., which was in no small part why I'd assumed he was involved in an affair with Miss Angela. What else brings an easier smile to a man's lips but the new love of a woman?

To tell the truth, I missed the old grumpier G-pa. Now, his voice had a piercing cheerfulness that, like an overzealous mockingbird blaring the songs of car alarms several hours before dawn, grated on one's nerves. Everything he said now seemed to come with an exclamation point and a slap on the back, and my general gloominess of late had only seemed to bolster his enthusiasm, like he was rubbing my nose in it, though I suppose I could have been biased by the comparative malaise from which I judged him. Still, after the disastrous farewell with Maria, I didn't know if I could stomach another jovial comment from him about the state of the weather.

“Hey G-pa,” I said when I got out to the backyard.

“Ranger! Come give me a hand!” He was trying to move a heavy microwave from the ground to the top of a makeshift work bench he’d prepared, and when I got closer, I noticed that his mirth was masking the great difficulty he seemed to be having with lifting the appliance.

“I got it, G-pa, why don’t you sit down and take a rest. How long have you been working out here? It’s crazy hot!” He let me take over with the lifting and wiped his brow with his forearm.

“No, I like it. My bones have been aching somethin’ awful lately, but this heat works wonders! I’ve never been so hot in my life, and I never knew what I was missin’!” When he spoke of his bones, I reflexively looked at his legs poking out from under his shorts and was alarmed by their larger than average girth – his post-polio chicken legs had inexplicably ballooned and they now looked instead like the limbs of an overweight diabetic.

“G-pa, what’s up with your legs, man? I think you should really sit down and put your feet up. Have you been drinking enough water?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he waved me off. “It happens now and again. Gettin’ old you know, your body starts to behave in mysterious ways.”

“I don’t think your legs swell up from old age, G-pa. I think you should go see a doctor.”

“I don’t have a doctor.”

“I’ll take you to urgent care. They’ll see anyone, even old kooks who hate doctors. Come on.” He didn’t seem to be buying it.

“What, and pay a couple hundred bucks for a guy your age to tell me to go home and put my feet up? No thanks.” I forgot that he didn’t have insurance; I’d always purchased my own and was suddenly reminded that I’d had to let my own coverage lapse in spite of the new job. But I couldn’t think of a benign reason for his legs to be swelling up like they were, and so I insisted in my best authoritative voice.

“It could just as easily be a female doctor, and I’m not asking, I’m telling you. Now let’s go. I’ll drive you – the microwave can wait.”

“As long as you’re offerin’ to pay for it if they tell me to go home and put my feet up, suit yourself. It’s your loss.”

“Happily,” I replied. Although I hated the thought of having to fork over a couple hundred bucks that I didn’t have if it was indeed nothing, the alternative was to hope that it was *something*, which was a slippery slope I wanted to avoid. Not that I thought hope would have any effect on the outcome; I didn’t.

We walked through the apartment on our way out and ran into Leo as he was coming in. I told him what we were up to as I looked up emergency rooms on my laptop, and he suggested we go to Howard University Hospital because it was relatively close. I looked up directions, but he interrupted and said he could direct us there himself and actually had some stuff to attend to out there if we didn’t mind giving him a ride. All the while, G-pa just stood there shaking his head and said, “You boys are fussin’ over nothin’.” I then told Leo that of course he could come, we ignored G-pa’s admonitions, and we all hopped in the Subaru for the ten-minute drive straight up Florida Avenue Northeast to get to the ER.

I drove with G-pa in the passenger seat and Leo behind him. What kind of conversations can you have with three men spanning three generations driving to a hospital with no hint of what was to come of it? The answer is none at all. It went that way a lot, though. I often heard the two of them chewing the fat around the dinette when I was in my bedroom, but whenever I came out for food or whatever, a hush smothered their chitchat like the boss had just walked into the break room. I guess they felt united by the fact that both of them were in a sense interlopers and didn't really feel that they belonged there, though I tried to make them feel welcome. But it's like when you rent a room in someone's house that they own; you might become friends with the other renters living there, but you can only be friendly with the landlord. Even though I didn't own the place and Miss Angela was the landlord, I felt as though the three of them were bosom buddies somehow, and I was the odd man out.

But for once as I sat there driving and stealing glances at G-pa's swollen legs, I was more worried about him than I was for myself. As we got close to the hospital, I tried to ask him about how long this had been going on and if he had any other complaints, but he was evasive and dismissive, and I only hoped he would be more honest and forthright with the medical personnel.

When we arrived, Leo thanked us for the ride and said he'd check back at the desk to see if we were still there when he was on his way back – otherwise he'd take the bus. It was late afternoon in the middle of the week and thankfully there was hardly anyone else in the waiting room. I doubted G-pa had been to a hospital for his own sake since he'd had polio as a young child, and I imagined that the experience would be

bewildering and unpleasant at best, and I was fully prepared to help navigate him through the system step by step.

I was utterly shocked, then, when he accepted the clipboard of forms at the front desk and commenced to fill them out himself, albeit very slowly and with great effort. He sat down beside me, and without saying a word, filled in the spaces for his name and address (which he indicated was the address for my apartment, not for his shuttered house in California), and carefully checked off the boxes indicating his health history. Though my body and head were purposely facing forward, I stretched my eyes as far to the side as they could go to sneak a glance, or really, to stare at what he was writing and how he was writing it.

His printed letters were large and purposeful, each one crafted individually and painstakingly rather than automatically. When he attempted to read the larger chunks of text, he moved the tip of his pen along word by word, and for longer words, syllable by syllable until he seemed to grasp the overall gist of what it was relating.

He said nothing to me by way of explanation, not even donning a self-satisfied smirk, and signed the waivers and medical release forms with the same old third grader's script that I had always remembered him using for his signature. My mind was buzzing with questions that I didn't think I could tactfully bring up, and anyway I didn't have the opportunity because he was called up as soon as he was finished with the forms. I restrained myself from offering to go with him; he wasn't a child, and I was beginning to realize that I needed to stop treating him like one even though he was out of his natural habitat and presumably more lost than he let on.

As he got up to be seen by the triage nurse, I did allow myself to urge him to tell them about any symptoms he had been experiencing lately, even if they seemed unrelated. He grunted and disappeared behind the double doors.

As it turns out, I then had several hours ahead of me to sit in that waiting room and contemplate the recent developments in my life: I was days away from starting my first manual labor job since I'd been in college; I probably no longer had a girlfriend (whom I wasn't sure I'd ever had to begin with) because I had made culturally insensitive and condescending assumptions about her as a human being (I *would* marry you, if you *needed* me too); and somehow G-pa was now magically at least passably literate (or had he only pretended to be unable to read and write all along?). There was so much nagging at my brain and vying for its attention that I could attend to none of it with any real nugget of concentration. And so I sat there essentially at the mercy of my environment, only responding to the immediate stimuli in my vicinity.

I'd been to many a hospital in my day, having been preternaturally inclined to disaster and illness, as I said before, and they all tended to look the same. But it dawned on me after a couple of hours had gone by that – aside from one of the doctors walking around, who was a Vietnamese woman – G-pa and I were the only light-skinned people in the entire ER that day. The patients, the doctors, nurses, and orderlies on duty were all some shade of black or brown. I only mention it because it was something that you notice, when you are demonstrably different from everyone else in the room, only it had rarely happened to me. Really, I had only experienced the sensation when I'd vacationed in Japan and worked in East Africa.

The feeling reminded me of a hospital I had to go to once in rural Kenya where the staff and patients were similarly dark-skinned. It was a colonial-era structure with maybe a hundred rooms, a private hospital generally utilized by the locals who were comparatively middle class and the smattering of white Kenyans in the region, though I saw none of the latter when I was there. There was only one doctor in the entire hospital, a man from India named Dr. Butts. I'd ended up there, not from contracting some horrible tropical disease – malaria or schistosomiasis – or from being gravely injured by exotic wildlife, which would have been far more romantic, but because I had come down with a comically virulent case of strep throat, probably from playing so much soccer with the runny-nosed village children who lived near the research station where I worked. I'd had strep throat so many times in my life that the streptococcus bacterium and I were nearly family (we'd spent so many holidays together), but this strain was more than my body could take, and overnight my tonsils had swelled up to such an extent that, not only could I no longer swallow the antibiotics that I'd brought with me from the travel clinic, but I couldn't even swallow water, period. Needless to say that being only a few degrees north of the equator, I wouldn't have lasted 48 hours without it. So, someone from the archaeological research station kindly drove me the two hours from the bush on dirt roads to the hospital in town and left me there, unable to talk, with only my passport and my wallet.

The triage nurse in that hospital spoke only Swahili and bits of English, and since I couldn't even whisper, I'd had to mime what was wrong with me and point to my name in my passport. The waiting room was full, but for some reason (was it because I was white? – I still wonder), I was seen right away by the doctor in his office, which, rather

than a typical medical office, was essentially a gigantic study with 30-foot ceilings, the kind one envisions in an old English manor, complete with a library of real books on the walls, an ornately carved desk, oriental rugs, and leather chairs.

I did my best to explain to Dr. Butts that I couldn't speak or swallow, which I think he could infer from the rasping sound I made in lieu of speech and the handkerchief into which I kept spitting, because when you are unable to swallow water, you can't swallow your own saliva either. He diagnosed me with strep throat on the spot – no 24-hour strep test just to be sure – and pulled out a syringe (disposable, I was relieved to notice – even in my deliriously dehydrated state, I wouldn't have allowed otherwise) and a vial of antibiotics from the drawers of his regal wooden desk. He gave me an injection right away and prepared my arm for IV fluids, telling me I was to be admitted for a day or two until the swelling went down in my throat.

I don't remember much of the next 24 hours. The nurses mostly spoke Swahili, and there was no call button or technology of any kind in my room other than a single lamp next to the bed (an actual twin bed with a wooden frame and real bedding). I faded in and out of consciousness, still feverish and weak. I do recall that at some point, a nurse came to change the bags of fluids, and for some reason fumbled over the thingy in my arm and my blood spurted all over her bare hands; she wasn't wearing gloves, though she didn't seem all that concerned about it.

I fell asleep and woke up in the middle of the night to a burning sensation in the arm with the IV. It felt like a million tiny pin pricks, and I imagined that something had gone horribly wrong with the IV. When I finally had the energy to open my eyes and turn on the lamp, I saw instead that a contingent of tiny ants had set out to conquer my bed

and was after what I can only guess was the glucose solution flowing into my arm, as they ignored every other part of my body. Whereas ordinarily I'd have flung back the covers and jumped across the room, in my condition I was tethered to the bed and was operating in the different state of mind one adopts in order to adapt to the circumstances of living in a foreign country, namely, a sort of detached acceptance. So I just sat there and laughed, feeling significantly better from the fluids and antibiotics, and methodically brushed away and squished the ants one by one until there were only a few cursory ones left on the bed, and then I went back to sleep. I remember it being the most peaceful sleep I have ever had in my entire life.

Chapter 21

Leo had come back to the waiting room of the ER after a few hours had gone by and I still hadn't heard anything meaningful about G-pa's status, other than that he was being dragged around the hospital for a series of tests, including a CAT scan (or was it an MRI? – I can never remember the difference; it was the kind where your whole body is inserted into that coffin-like mechanical tube and you can't move a muscle or the whole thing is ruined, whichever one that was; I'd had my fair share of each, but couldn't seem to keep them straight). Either way, the front desk personnel were generally tight-lipped about what was going on back behind the double doors, and I didn't even know if he was still in the same wing anymore.

I told Leo when he walked in that I had no idea how much longer G-pa would be and that he should probably head home on his own, but he insisted on staying, saying that he wanted to be there to help out in case it was something serious. Even if it was, I wasn't sure what he thought he could do, but his presence broke up the monotony at least, so I didn't argue with him.

My mind had been running wild with speculation as the hours ticked away, which was always a bad thing when it came to my impetuous imagination. I knew next to nothing about physiology, but I speculated about what could cause such swelling in the legs. A blood clot wouldn't have affected both legs, so I ruled that out, but that was the extent of my hypotheses and I didn't have my computer with me, so I tried not to dwell on it too much.

The two of us sat there shifting silently in our chairs for awhile until I finally decided to raise the subject that had been nagging at me since G-pa had gone behind the doors.

“Hey Leo, you’re home at different times of the day than I am, right?”

“Sure.”

“Have you, y’know, noticed G-pa spending much time with books or other reading materials lately?”

“Why do you ask?” he wondered, a little suspiciously, ever-cautious of accidentally selling somebody out.

“It’s just that, well, all my life he’s acted like he couldn’t read and then today he fills out his hospital forms by himself. As if he’d learned somehow in secret, like he didn’t want me to know. But then he fills out those forms right in front of me, so now I know, and I don’t know what to make of it. You haven’t been teaching him, have you?”

“No,” he shook his head, “but he has asked to borrow a pen now and then.” He paused, presumably to consider whether or not he was divulging privileged information. “I *have* seen him working with a notebook and a pen and a dictionary that I think he borrowed from Miss Angela. I’d seen it before on her bookshelf in the living room anyway. And he sometimes takes the newspaper out of the recycling bin after you’re gone, but I didn’t ever ask him about it. It wasn’t my business.”

“Of course. I appreciate that, and I don’t mean to be probing you about his activities, it’s just so strange to me. I don’t understand it. Why now?”

“Why *not* now?” he shrugged. “What else is he gonna do? His wife’s gone, he doesn’t travel. The walls start to cave in if you don’t have an outlet for your mind. Least

they do for me.” It was too simplistic and neat of an explanation for me to accept, but I suppose it explained some things about Leo.

“Has he talked to you about her?”

“You mean Bea?” At the mention of Grams’ given name, a slight flash of jealousy rose inside me, that he knew about her when G-pa had hardly spoken a word of her in front of me since she had passed away. “A little bit. Usually when he’s tryin’ to do somethin’ she used to do for him. Like how to do his laundry and fold it nicely. When I first got to your place, he asked me to take him to the Laundromat to show him what to do, and he talked about her while we waited for his clothes to finish. She must’ve been a funny lady; he always laughs about her.” Why hadn’t he asked *me* for help with the laundry? And how many conversations had they had? It had to be plenty to warrant the comment that he “always” laughed.

“My mother worked at a Laundromat when I was growing up. A full-service one, before she became a maid.” I wasn’t breaking the orphan’s code by mentioning this fact; one was allowed to bring up one’s parents independently.

“Mine does laundry in prison.”

“Seriously?”

“Naw, I’m just messin’ with you, but I had you for a second there. She actually got hit by a bus.” He registered my look of skepticism and added, “No joke. Walkin’ to come pick me up from after-school daycare. Hit by a bus. I never had a father.”

“My father died when a tree fell on his head.”

“Now you’re messin’ with *me*.”

“Nope. He was a lumberjack.” He leaned back and scrunched up his face in disbelief thinking I was getting back at him for his earlier gag. “Seriously,” I insisted. “His friend was cutting down one tree and it fell into another tree, and a giant branch fell off *that* tree and knocked him out cold.” He burst out laughing at this explanation, and I couldn’t help joining in and chuckling at it myself. It was kind of funny the way I’d described it, sounding more like the death of a Loony Tunes character than an actual person. Incidentally, an orphan was also allowed to laugh at the circumstances of another orphan’s misfortune, provided his own was equally bad or worse.

“No shit?” he said.

“Yup.”

“And your mom?” Leo was not technically breaking the code by asking, because I had been the one to broach the subject of parents and he had told me already about his mother.

“Homicidal bathtub edges.” At this point we both began snickering uncontrollably, silly from the absurdity of it all, and I could barely make it through the rest of the explanation because I had tears in my eyes from the laughter, my voice rose up to a ridiculously high pitch, and I was heaving to catch my breath in between words, “She...(snort)...slipped...(snort-snort)...and cracked-her-head-open!” The last bit came out almost as a squeal, and we drew stares and tsks from waiting patients and family members as we descended into fits of hilarity.

“Oh man, we are definitely going to hell,” Leo finally commented as we both eventually wiped our eyes and drew deep breaths to calm down, erupting occasionally into aftershocks of chuckling.

I looked at the clock on the wall, the plain circular kind that used to be everywhere but now only persist in waiting rooms, taunting those in wait with a visual image of just how slowly time passes in a waiting room, and I noticed that over six hours had gone by since we'd arrived. It was now close to eleven o'clock, and the waiting room had begun to fill with the more desperate cases as the night progressed. I decided then and there that I'd had enough of waiting, enough of being polite. "Hang on a sec," I told Leo as I got up from my seat.

"Excuse me, hi," I said to the young woman at the front desk. "Sorry to bother you again, but my grandfather has been back there for six hours now and I really need to know what's going on with him." The shifts had changed recently, and I thought I could try my luck with a new and fresher front desk person.

"I'm sorry, sir, but as I'm sure they said before, I can't give out that information except to the next of kin."

"I *am* the next of kin. I am the *only* kin. That man is my grandfather, and he raised me, and I am his only living relative on the face of the earth. His wife is dead, his only son – my father – is dead. I'm it, lady, and if you don't tell me what is going on with him, I will go through this hospital room to room until I find him."

"Are you threatening me?" she asked, and as a security guard walked through the door from standing watch outside, I realized then that this was perhaps the wrong crowd in front of which to drop my lifetime commitment to the do-not-piss-off-the-gatekeeper mantra.

"Is this man bothering you, Robyn?" the security guard asked as he approached the desk. Great, I thought, they're on a first-name basis.

“Probably,” I said, a little snarkily. “I’ve been asking people for the last six hours what’s up with my grandfather and no one’s told me anything.” At this point, I saw Leo get up out of the corner of my eye to join me, likely to prevent me from doing anything stupid.

“Patient confidentially, sir, I’m afraid I can’t disclose anything,” she said, same as the last five times I’d asked someone for more meaningful information above and beyond “he’s having some tests.” At that point, she looked up at Leo standing next to me and asked him, “And who are you?”

I looked at Leo then back at her and said, “He’s our foster kid, so he’s family too. Look, can you at least ask the man if it’s okay with him for you to tell me? Is he even conscious? What have you done to him back there? This is almost like *kidnapping*, for Christ’s sake!” I admit I was becoming unreasonably agitated, but the very fact that he had been undergoing tests or treatment for six hours by then meant that something was most definitely wrong. “Would you even tell me if he was dead?”

“Quit harassing the young lady, Ranger.” I turned to look where G-pa was emerging from behind the double doors, half-expecting him to be in a hospital gown and wheelchair, but the only difference from when he went in was the ID bracelet on his wrist and a noticeably haggard appearance. “As you can see, I’m fine and dandy, though I am touched by your concern.”

“What the hell, G-pa?”

“Let’s go, son. I could *really* use a meal.”

“Don’t you need to check out or anything?”

“Oh so *now* you’re worried about following procedure,” chided the woman – Robyn – at the front desk, who had by then correctly assumed that I was harmless and had waved off the security guard.

“Already did it back there,” G-pa pointed around the corner. “They’re gonna send me the bill.” He laughed then, and I wasn’t sure whether that was because the bill was absurdly high or because he had no intention of paying it or both. “C’mon, I’m starving.”

I looked at Leo, who just shrugged and said “Me too.”

As much as I wanted desperately to know what had gone on back there and what the diagnosis was, if anything, I knew that G-pa enjoyed making me squirm, and for once I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction by nagging him with questions. We would go grab a bite to eat, and he would have his meal and delight in the suspense, and *then* he would tell us what the hell was wrong with him.

There was a sports bar a couple blocks away that we could walk to, and I was grateful they didn’t card at the door. I’d heard of this bar, mostly in reference to its drag bingo night, but had never visited, and I’m sure the three of us men spanning generations and backgrounds, one of whom was donning a hospital bracelet, were a motley crew even for them.

We all ordered burgers and fries and a pitcher of beer. Nobody asked to see Leo’s ID, and it was a Wednesday night with no major sports games on, so the place was fairly deserted except for those lingering on after the bar’s trivia night. The passing thundershowers that had been sweeping over the city in waves no doubt contributed to the emptiness as well, but we had come during a break in the showers and were only dusted in drizzle.

Still refusing to give G-pa the pleasure of my burning curiosity, I instead directed my attentions to Leo and asked him if he'd accomplished whatever it was that he'd needed to do in the neighborhood.

“Oh. Yeah. I had an interview for an apprenticeship program for high school students at the School of Architecture and Design.”

“How did it go?” G-pa asked in between glugs of beer.

“Good. They gave it to me. It's for the fall.”

“What, they gave it to you on the spot?” I said. “Just like that? You must have an impressive resume.” I took a swig of the beer, something local that was on special, and nearly coughed at its overly-hopped bitterness as it went down. “Is it paid?”

“Yeah, they give you a small scholarship. For educational expenses.”

“Congratulations!” G-pa bellowed.

“Yeah, congrats,” I echoed. We held up our glasses and Leo took a sip of the beer we'd poured for him, but I don't think he liked the taste of it either.

“So, uh...” Leo began, clearly puzzled as to why we were not talking about the thing that brought the three of us out to a gay sports bar across town at midnight in the pouring rain to eat dinner together, “so, what did they say about your legs?”

G-pa guzzled his beer like it was water and wiped the ketchup off of his fingers with his napkin. Good old Heinz ketchup, I thought, blissfully soy-free since 1876.

“Fellas,” he said, stalling for time by probing for food in his teeth with his tongue, “your guess is as good as mine.” He said this while fumbling with a pack of sugar that he'd just grabbed from the condiment tray.

“What, after a barrage of tests lasting half-way into the night, you’re tellin’ me they don’t even have an *idea* about what’s wrong with you?” I asked, a little combatively, my curiosity finally released only to be squelched by his nebulous, possibly deceptive pronouncement. “And since when do you put sugar in your beer?” I added, just as he was about to dump the contents of the packet into his pint glass. He stopped short and appeared startled.

“Whoops! I forgot it wasn’t iced tea. Look, I’m as befuddled as you are, really. They said maybe it was because I’d had polio as a kid. Sometimes the symptoms flare up again and you have aching, weakness in the limbs, which I’ve had lately.”

“But your legs were like balloons when we went in there,” I reminded him, though as I glanced now at what I could see of them under the table, I noticed they were a much more normal size at the moment.

“I know it, but I’ve been flat on my back all night in a hospital bed, so I guess you were right from the start. I just needed to put my feet up.”

“I suppose I’ll be footing the bill, then, since it turned out to be nothing.” I didn’t believe what he was telling me for a minute, and I was hoping I could guilt him into admitting whatever it was that he was hiding from us – from me.

“Don’t bother,” he waved me off, “I’ve got it taken care of. You were right to make me go, since they thought it was bad enough to do all those tests, and just because they didn’t find anything yet doesn’t mean it wasn’t something after all. Doctors think they’ve got everything figured out, but you know they’re only as smart as their instruments. The human body is a complicated machine, and nobody’s ever found the blueprints.” Now who was dishing out vague platitudes, I thought.

It was like G-pa to be distant and evasive, but this was different. He was outright lying to me, actively concealing something about his condition that he didn't want me to know. For what? Because he thought he was protecting me? Because he was the only family I had left? When was he going to stop treating me like a child, I wondered. When he was dead? Probably not then either, I thought. He would be coddling me from his grave.

I would have confronted him right then and there but for Leo, who wouldn't have understood the history behind it and probably took the man at his word. So we finished our meal, talking, instead, about the weather, watching the sheets of rain outside and attempting to gauge if and when there would be a break in the storm so we could bolt the two blocks back to the hospital parking garage. As it happened, we guessed wrong and ended up driving back in my car soaked to the bone. I've been trying to get the smell of mildew out of the upholstery ever since, but it just won't go away.

Chapter 22

You always were attracted to the big city life weren't you. When you were a little boy, someone would be putting on hayrides down on a ranch nearby somewhere and you'd pout and say, "But I wanna go to the circus!" I blame your mother for letting you watch so much television at the laundry, but the fact of the matter was, you'da come up with those ideas no matter what. I knew it was a terrible mistake for her to take you away from your home when your father passed and throw you into the harsh realities of where you lived, but it was her decision to make and she was only concerned for your future. You never were meant to work with your hands, always the thinker, and she wanted you to have the opportunities that no one she knew ever had, and the best she knew how to do that was to change your geography.

Now I never did have to say I told you so, because you found out soon enough what was lacking in that world. I suppose I should explain why it was that I took you back out there when you ran away to come back home, for I am sure you are still resentful over the whole thing. I never thought you had it in you to hitch a ride all the way back to the Coast from West Sacramento, but since you were only 14 and from the sticks, I guess you were probably less wary of strangers than you are now.

Don't think I didn't consider your pleas to stay when you got to the ranch all filthy from walking the ten miles from where you'd been dropped off in town and told me what it was like where you two lived. You still had that shiner on your face that you'd gotten in the fight at school, the one that got you suspended, and though you didn't boast about it, your mother had told me on the phone that you'd broken the other kid's nose. I didn't think you had that in you either, though I don't have much to say on the subject of

fistfights. Anyway, I know that you were miserable living in what sounded to me like cell blocks the way you described them – rows of identical apartments with bars on the windows and nothing but cement all around, and that you lived in a run-down part of town in a city that was more industry than metropolis, and that your dream of living in “town” had become a living nightmare. But it was not for me to say whether you could stay or go, and I’d seen enough mothers separated from their babies – and that’s all you ever were to her – to know I couldn’t do that to your mom.

But what really made me throw you in the pickup and drive you then and there, cryin and sniffin like you were a little boy the whole six hours back to West Sac, was that I knew you hadn’t been away long enough to know where it was you really come from. You’d been begging to go have your adventures in the big wide world out there since you could read a comic book, and though it was about as low as I had ever seen you, even worse than when your dad died, you still didn’t have a clue what you’d be giving up if you left again. As much as it broke my heart to do it I was right. I was right then and I still am, because here you are, still somewhere else doin whatever it is that you’re doin.

What is it that you’re doin, Ranger? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself that lately? Is it because of Maria? I hate to say this if you don’t already know it, but she is not the girl for you. That fine woman, beautiful though she is, will be possessed by no man, mark my words. I don’t blame you for tryin, but the girl is a firefly – you put her in a jar next to your bed, her light’s gonna go out, plain and simple. Open up the lid, boy, and find yourself a housecat.

You know I saw you the other day out workin, not spyin on ya, mind you, just out for a haircut. You were standin there holdin the sign like you do, STOP, SLOW. STOP,

SLOW. *I saw that it was you, but Ranger, I couldn't really see you. I know it was you, because how many guys who look like you are out holdin those signs in this town, but the pavement was so hot that the wavy lines rose up like steam and blurred out your face like you were just some guy without a face holdin up a sign. It gave me the shivers even tho it was hot as hell. I'm not sayin there's anything wrong with holdin up a sign for a living. It's a job that has to be done, and it's an honest one at that. But why's it gotta be you, Ranger?*

I didn't come out here to lecture you, and despite what you might think, I didn't come out to get in your way or because I was lonely or whatever it is that you've figured about my intentions. I came out here to take you back home. And it doesn't look like I'm gonna be able to do that now, does it. It don't look like I'm gonna do much more at all.

Chapter 23

There are certain moments in your life that will stick with you to your grave, or at least to your deathbed, and G-pa's as-yet-unexplained trip to the hospital got me thinking about that. I have been close to death so many times that I already know what I will see there. But it won't be an image, it will be a series of them, like a filmstrip inside my mind.

The first time I saw a city, it wasn't Eureka, which was much closer to where we lived, it was San Francisco. I was six years old and had been pestering my parents for over a year for them to take me to the zoo, and so one weekend when my father was home from logging, he and my mom packed me between them in the Ford Ranger, shit-brown with orange and beige stripes on the sides, down the coast on the 101 all the way into the city. The drive is now automatic for me, but this was the first time I would be crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, the first time I would see skyscrapers. The City had always been the penultimate destination for my young imagination. You could never be alone, there were a thousand and one things to do there, and...well that was enough, really.

The change in climate and landscape is the first thing you notice on that drive, emerging from lush redwood rainforest into chaparral dominated by manzanita, and with every mile southward, the redwoods become sparser and sparser until they appear at the side of the road only sporadically, their greenery thinner and thinner. At some point they become more like skeletal telephone poles than trees, baking in the drier grasslands of the Sonoma Valley, emaciated, alone, and out of their element.

The disappearance of the redwoods coincides with the first glimpses of the uppermost wetlands of the bay, the ubiquitous deer and elk of the North Coast are replaced by waterfowl. And then off in the distance a long and dark bridge, the longest you have ever seen, appears to the left, and you are disappointed by how plain it is and how it is not gold. You mention this and your parents tell you, “That’s not the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Golden Gate isn’t made out of gold; it’s red.” It’s the first of many disappointments to come. Treasure Island doesn’t have any treasure, or pirates even. Alcatraz doesn’t have prisoners anymore. The list goes on.

But what matters is the moment, what sticks with you is the fascination of discovery; you are the six-year-old Sir Francis Drake of the Mattole Valley. As you weave down the 101 in and out of the Marin Headlands, the city flickers in and out of the trees and hills blocking the view. Finally you make it through the rainbow tunnel and you see it for real. Here is truly a city upon a hill. Forget the view of the ocean, you are transfixed by the rocket-ship outline of the pyramid-shaped skyscraper and all that it portends. This will be the best day of your life.

That’s what I felt at the time, anyway. I remember my father stopping at the first gas station we passed after we got off the bridge to get a map of the city so we could find our way to the zoo, and I remember that we kept getting lost because it was a cheap map that didn’t indicate the one-way streets. When we finally got to the zoo, it was already after lunch and we had been driving since dawn. I was sorely upset that the zoo wasn’t near any skyscrapers, but instead was in the residential Sunset district on the opposite edge of the city up against the ocean, though I cheered up once we got inside the gates.

I didn't care about the exotic birds, reptiles, or barn animals. Like every kid, I wanted to see the chimpanzees, the lions, and elephants – everything you couldn't see in the wilds of North America. So after I was stuffed full of peanuts and cotton candy (the only snacks available that wouldn't kill me), I dragged my parents to the primate center to see the monkeys and apes.

The dense fog that day came straight off the Pacific without a buffer and seemed like a thick, grey sponge which hovered over everything, threatening to wring itself out at any moment to release the rain within. We got to the primates and I made my best monkey sounds at the monkeys and thumped my chest at the gorillas. It was the orangutans which captivated me, however, though I had never been particularly interested in them before. That day, they were in an enclosure with glass on one side so you could get right up next to them if they were feeling friendly. I remember being up against the glass as one of them ambled over straight towards me and stood there looking right at me, putting its opposite hand right up against my hand, and though I am sure now that this experience is common enough, for me, at six, it was earth shattering and I could barely breathe. He (or she) then looked long and hard with its eyebrows raised and a sort of question in its eyes that I was too young to decipher at the time. I didn't know what else to do so I started to cry, and my father thought it was because I was afraid, so he picked me up and put me on his shoulders even though I was six and too big for that by then (the man was an ox).

He walked us over to another orangutan, an older one who was lounging on its side and appeared to be eating some gruel off of a stone platform with one of its very long fingers, longer than my forearm at the time. We watched – my mother, father, and I

– as the “man of the forest,” which is what the sign called them, finished the gruel and licked his fingers, only to spew it all back up again into an identically shaped pile onto the platform, and without delay – before I could look away – he began eating it all over again in the same manner as before. I couldn’t help but wonder, even at that age, how many times he had done that before we had arrived, eating and regurgitating its food and then eating it again and again and again. And he did it so nonchalantly, as though he were doing it simply because it was something to do. Maybe that’s why I’ve always hated a mess, come to think of it. It’s as good of an explanation as any.

My mother scurried us away after that with the excuse that she had to go to the restroom. We all went and washed our hands and then headed to the tigers – I’d insisted. The program said that you could watch them feed the tigers at a certain time, and I don’t know what I pictured, maybe these giant cats licking at enormous bowls of tiger kibble, but it wasn’t like that at all.

We filed into this large warehouse space in the back of the enclosures, and I was grateful that my dad could lift me on his shoulders because it was a packed house. The depot was surrounded by floor-to-ceiling iron bars that made up the fourth wall of several holding cells the size of storage units with elevated floors. One by one, the doors on the cells slid up and down to let in the monstrous cats, who towered over us like beasts from the ancient past. But there wasn’t any food yet in the holding pens. I suppose half the appeal of the show was that they were hungry and paced and jumped at the doors and roared this deep, guttural rumble that was like the biggest locomotive you could imagine clanging over steel tracks right before your nose. And I am sure my child’s malleable memory made this part up, but I somehow still feel as though one of the zookeepers came

in running the edge of a broom along the iron bars as he approached the trap door with his tub of raw flesh, still on the bone. Once the trap doors slammed shut, the tigers possessively tore into their lunches, grabbing at what looked like the butchered remains of a goat or perhaps a deer, and I firmly believed in the moment that one of the animals we'd viewed earlier in the afternoon had simply been plucked from its exhibit and slaughtered and skinned for the spectacle.

Again, I cried, but not because I was afraid; I'd seen animals hunted, torn open, and eaten before by other animals in the fields back home, and I'd helped my dad with game that he'd hunted back home, but the experiences of the day had culminated in such a heap of disillusionment and disappointment that I couldn't find any other way to express what I was feeling, though I hated to cry in front of my father. I don't know what I had been expecting from caged wild animals, I guess that all of them would just sit there regally, as interested in us as we were in them. I expected the coloring-book version of a zoo, not the one where gibbons masturbated into their faces and macaws plucked out their own feathers from a cage in which it was too cramped for them to fly.

My father tried to maneuver us through the hordes to get out of the warehouse, but it was packed too tightly with people, and I was too unstable up on his shoulders for him to elbow his way through. I begged for him to let me down because the nausea that had been creeping its way into my gut was reaching a point beyond my control and by the time he had crouched down enough to let me slide down his back, I was already throwing up blue cotton-candy syrup down the front of my clothes. Thankfully, none of it managed to get on my father, though I was certain that in that very moment I had lost any chance at his respect once and for all, thinking, one day I would become a man and make it up to

him and show him I could be brave and strong of stomach. But I never did, not while he was alive. As I look back on it, I am sure that he was just coping as any adult would have, but when it happened and he stood there laughing as I cried in my mess, I didn't think that maybe he was just letting off steam from what had turned out to be a pretty crummy day for all of us; I knew he was laughing at me.

We left then and because the motel stay would have been too expensive, we drove straight back the whole six hours as originally planned, never entering the heart of the city. I slept the whole way just so I could get away from the shame of it all, the only remaining shred of dignity located somewhere deep within the recesses of my little boy's slumbering mind. I rode in the truck shirtless, my favorite plaid one that I'd been wearing having been ruined. Not even my mother, washerwoman by trade, could get out the blue stains when she tried scrubbing it with Tide the next day. Thus, the shirt went in the trash, and my dad went back up the coast to work, and I never asked them to take me anywhere like that again.

And this is what I've seen in my mind whenever I have almost died: a swarm of orangutans swinging from the bare branches of dead redwoods beside the freeway as I drive south along the 101, all the way until they reach the bay, where – I can see in my rear-view mirror – they let go of the branches one by one and fall into water that is bluer than Kool-Aid, getting smaller and smaller as I keep on going down the road.

Chapter 24

The unusual thing about being the guy who holds the stop sign in a construction crew is that you have to take an actual certification course before you start work as a “flagger,” so it seems one can’t even hold up a road sign these days without special training. The half-day course went over traffic laws and construction zone safety, showed a variety of poorly produced accident reenactment videos, and reminded me of why I’d hated drivers’ ed as a teenager, but when I finished I was certified to do something that most other people were not; I had a marketable skill. Oh, the joy of getting a certificate.

As I’d expected, the learning curve on the job was steep, not because holding up a road sign was difficult (it was in fact mind-numbingly simple), but because navigating an actual construction site with various unfamiliar machinery and hazards was so outside of my experience that it was like being in a foreign country. It was also like being in a foreign county in that, aside from one other guy who was African-American, the rest of the road crew spoke primarily Spanish on the job, including the foreman. Since I’d come from California, I’d made the mistake of assuming they were from Mexico, but Mo, the black man on our crew, corrected me on my first day.

“Most of them are Salvadoran,” he told me. “That’s why the Mexican food around here is so bad; it’s not made by Mexicans.”

Mo (not Moe) had decided within fifteen minutes of meeting me that he was going to call me Ranger Rick – a not uncommon nickname that plagued me throughout high school and college – to get back at me for jokingly wondering aloud why he’d been named after one of the Three Stooges. Again, he corrected me.

“It’s not M-O-E, it’s M-O, like ‘Mo Money, Mo Problems.’ It was my first word as a kid ‘cause I always wanted more food, and I said it so much that people just started callin’ me ‘Mo,’ and I guess it stuck.”

Mo was large but not at all what I would call fat; he was a big man in every other way, and his stature and posture reminded me of my father. His knowledge and general ease with which he navigated the construction site made me feel inadequate around him, which also echoed how I used to feel around my father, who had always been as close to being Paul Bunyan as a real human could get in my mind. Because Mo was a pro at the road construction business and was fluent in English, I was assigned to be his charge, and given my relative ignorance and ineptitude, there was no way I could feel like anything but the man’s squire.

As we set up cones one morning that first week, before the heavy machinery made it impossible to talk to anyone, I learned that Mo was from Mississippi and used to own a lawn care business, but his wife left him “for a skinny guy” because he’d gotten fat cutting grass for ten years with a riding mower. He told me he hated conventional exercise, so he moved out here to be close to his brother and figured the only way he’d lose weight would be to do physical work, hence the road construction gig. In the first year, he sweat off sixty pounds on the job and never looked back.

He taught me that week to wet a bandana and hang it down the back of my neck from under my helmet “like an A-rab” so I wouldn’t get burned and so it would help keep me cool. I also learned from him to bring giant bottles of water that I’d frozen at home the night before, because it would start melting right away and I’d have cool water to drink throughout most of the day. “Otherwise,” he’d told me, “it’s like swallowing warm

piss and you won't drink enough of it to stay hydrated," which I'd learned the hard way on my first day as I pushed through the nausea and headaches accompanying an afternoon of dehydration. Though he was bigger and darker-skinned, the heat didn't seem to bother Mo the way it did with me; there were advantages to being from the South. "You think this is hot?" he'd ask whenever I'd pull at my sweat-soaked vest and pant in between gulps of ice water. "You wouldn't know hot if coals jumped out of a fire and burned you in the ass."

When I wasn't "flagging," I was the road crew's errand boy and performed odd chores that didn't require the use of expensive machinery which I was not allowed to touch – sweeping, shoveling, mixing. Strangely enough, the flagger, who basically just stands around doing next to nothing all day, supposedly has the most dangerous job on the site, because he or she is in closest proximity to oncoming traffic and is not too seldom the recipient of road rage from drivers furious at unexpectedly having to wait their turn so as not to collide head-on with other vehicles when four lanes go down to one.

It didn't take long for me to confirm that this was true, for by the end of my first week, I had been the target of a variety of projectiles aimed from drivers' seats, including chewing gum, cigarettes that were still lit, chewing tobacco, and just plain spit, and more than once I had my steel-toed boots to thank for me still having toes after drivers decided to express their ire by getting up close and personal.

It is difficult to express the special brand of mental and physical exhaustion one experiences standing still for hours on end on the barbecue pit that is asphalt in the summer sun, with, instead of the whir and hum of office computers and fluorescent

lights, the brain-rattling pandemonium of jackhammers and excavators, pavers and rollers as background noise, with noise being too gentle of a term, for it is a veritable earthquake of turbulence inside the body. Hard labor would've been better than standing still all day until blood pools in your feet and calves and your veins are prickly from the tremendous effort of circulating blood against the force of gravity with no help from any significant movement, and I longed for the "breaks" from operating signage when lanes would temporarily open and I would be relegated to shoveling stray asphalt. I had blisters on my hands and feet that I popped each night with a sterile pin and then soaked in ice baths to fulfill my days-long dreams of bitter cold to counter the heat. But the ice burned too, and ultimately I could find no relief from my aching limbs except in sleep; I was too tired even for beer.

Meanwhile, business was booming with G-pa and my friend Steven, the DJ. I marveled at the magnitude of junk that Steven hauled in his Suburban each week and dumped at our door and at the breakneck speed with which G-pa turned things around from garbage to good working order. Even in my fog of exhaustion, I wondered at the sheer quantity of stuff coming through our doors, and how Steven could know so many people with so much broken down crap, but because of the fatigue, I didn't have it in me to ask. I didn't have it in me to do anything. Not to think about my future or to plan out how I would eventually get a better job. Not to daydream about a better life or to find out what was going on in the world or to care when news of world events made it into my brain despite my best efforts to keep it at bay. But it did leave me with the capacity to care for one thing and one thing only: the desire for a woman.

Now that Maria was out of the country and physically out of reach, I ached for her in a way that I never had when I knew she was only a few neighborhoods away.

Surprisingly, she had honored my request to let me know she'd arrived safely, though I hadn't heard from her in the week after she'd landed. But to have her soft hands on my bare back, which was sore and throbbing from road work, to have the diaphanous scent of her hair and body, like white clover after it rains, cleansing away the stench of burnt rubber and diesel fumes that clung to my nostrils even after I showered, to have her fingers in my hair, delicately tracing the imprint of the helmet on my forehead, it was all that I lived for anymore, and it was as good as gone.

I got out of bed to start my second week on the road crew with the resignation of facing a prison sentence after losing all of my possible appeals. What else are you gonna do? You show up, you go through the motions, you come home, you go back. Lather, rinse, repeat. The woman on the radio said that it would be a day of record-breaking temperatures, a Code Red day with a heat index up to 115, and that's not even counting the effects of the pavement. Cooling centers would be open around the city, and I wasted a full ten minutes over breakfast wishing I was a staffer in one of those buildings.

I grabbed a third frozen water bottle out of the freezer on my way out just in case; there wasn't much else I could do to stay cool. Work would continue unless there was lightening or snow, neither of which was remotely likely for that day, and I couldn't exactly strap ice packs to my chest. By the time I'd walked the eight blocks to the work site, which was conveniently located just down the road, I was already soaked with sweat, and the bottles of ice were rapidly reverting into water, though it was just after dawn.

“Looks like the devil himself is gonna pay us a visit today. You say your prayers last night, Ranger Rick?” joked Mo as we entered the construction zone and began to set up the traffic cones.

“Bring it,” I quipped defiantly. As much of a wuss as I considered myself to be, I certainly wasn’t dumb enough to let it show in such a testosterone-rich environment. It was a fine balance, displaying just enough self-deprecation to let them know I knew my place while maintaining the façade that I was rough around the edges in my own special way, that I was scrappy even.

The morning went by like all the others of the previous week had gone; when it’s hotter than hell outside for days on end, a few degrees hardly seems to make a difference. But then the afternoon sun changed things and equipment became actually too hot to handle without wearing leather work gloves. The pavement laid down the previous week had refused to set in the sizzling heat and was as dark and malleable as molasses cake fresh out of the oven.

I drank water whenever I could, but it wasn’t always easy to do. I couldn’t just lay down the sign and bend over whenever I wanted to take a sip. The third bottle had already been repurposed as a miniature hose to pour down my neck at regular intervals. When that was empty, things became increasingly more difficult.

At first I started getting my sign orientation mixed up, and instead of having the opposite word facing my counterpart at the other end of the zone, I began mirroring him so that, for instance, both stop signs would be facing out and the slows would be facing in, meaning that either traffic stopped entirely until I figured it out, or two cars careened down the narrow corridor aiming right for one another when I made the opposite mistake.

It only took a couple near mishaps before the foreman himself came over to see what was up. I told him I'd just gotten the protocol reversed in my head, but in truth, I genuinely thought I had been doing it correctly.

The wavy lines of heat undulated off the pavement all around us, and they obscured and warped my view like mottled glass as far above the ground as Mo's head, which bobbed up and down off in the distance like the horse head of an oil well as he shoveled raw materials into machinery. It got so that all the other workers started to look like those old-fashioned PlaySkool people with the faces rubbed off from wear, cylindrical and featureless, propelled by some outside force within their vehicles.

Then everything went white and I saw my father standing over me, but I couldn't see his face because the brightest sun I had ever seen blazed behind him and bathed his front side in a dark shadow. He took my helmet off and touched my forehead like he used to do to check if I had a fever when I was a kid, but instead of being sopping wet from sweat like it usually was, my hair was dry and brittle.

"Dad," I said, reaching out for his hand.

"You're one sorry-assed fool," he replied, and I blacked out.

When I woke up, it was three days later and I was lying in – what do you think – a hospital bed. They told me I'd had heat stroke, which supposedly was an order of magnitude worse than heat exhaustion and could've killed me, but I wasn't worried about that because I hadn't had my orangutan vision. Mo had had the foreman call an ambulance because he realized I'd been hallucinating and had stopped sweating, which were some of the signs you were close to frying your brain from hyperthermia. At the hospital, they'd packed me in ice packs to cool me down in a hurry since my body had

lost the ability to regulate its own temperature, which I wish I had been awake for because I bet it'd felt good. But I'd slipped into a heat-induced coma and missed the whole thing.

I learned this all from Leo, who had been on his way to meet with his mentor at Howard University and happened to be there during visiting hours when I awoke.

"G-pa will be glad to know you're doing better," he told me after he and a nurse related to me what had taken place. I looked around the room, but I saw no sign that anyone but me had been there for any meaningful length of time. No magazines on the coffee table, no pillows and blankets on the armchair, no food or drink in the trash. There was a get well card on the end table signed by Mo and the guys, and in the envelope there were coupons for Gatorade as a gag.

"What's the old man been up to these days?" I asked, not wanting to seem too bent out of shape that he wasn't there.

"Yeah, about that..." Leo looked apologetically at the nurse and asked her if we could have a minute. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that something had happened to him, something related to all his mysterious tests and swollen legs, and that he had perhaps been admitted to the hospital as well.

"What's up?" I braced myself for the worst, but somehow was still completely unprepared for what he had to tell me.

"G-pa's in jail."

"Is he?" I responded, without skipping a beat. My detached tone masked the shock I felt at receiving the news. "Well, that's different."

Chapter 25

I should have known something was up with Steven's supply chain, and so should have G-pa, come to think of it. For a deaf graduate student, even a deaf graduate student who was a DJ on the side, to have that many connections to people with broken down junk was asinine.

According to Leo, Steven had allegedly stolen much of the equipment from local thrift store donation drop-off areas, those under-staffed backs of warehouses and parking lots (only in America would people "donate" broken junk to poor people rather than fixing it or throwing it away). There'd been enough reports of stuff going missing from these drop-off zones that the police eventually put together a sting operation and followed Steven back to my apartment where G-pa was waiting to accept the loot. He was being charged with conspiracy to commit larceny, and though bail had been set at the relatively low ten thousand dollars, G-pa forbade Leo from telling Miss Angela that he was in jail because he didn't want her to feel obligated to bail him out. When I asked where Miss Angela thought he and I had been these last couple days, Leo said G-pa had told him to tell her we'd gone camping.

It was not the thing one hopes to learn upon waking up from three days' involuntary rest, and though I didn't have the money myself, that's what bail bondsmen were for. I called the nurse so she could take the IV out of my arm and get the doctor to release me, citing a family emergency for my need for haste.

She balked at my insistence upon leaving. "I don't think you understand, young man, but you were this close to organ failure." The nurse held up her thumb and

forefinger with only a smidge of separation between them. “You’re not going anywhere for at least the next twenty-four hours for observation.”

“Seriously? You’ve been observing me for three days, haven’t you? I’m awake and clearly not brain damaged, and I really need to get out of here.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

I considered for a moment ripping the needles out of my arm and walking away – what were they gonna do? – but part of me welcomed the orders to stay in bed and just chill out for awhile. My body felt like I had accidentally ingested something poisonous, not like an allergen, but something truly deadly and toxic, like hemlock. Leo then chimed in, saying that he needed to head out to his meeting, but he’d check back in later, and I thanked him profusely for being there, probably looking foolish and a little pathetic in my gratitude.

“Don’t worry about it. You’d do the same.”

“Right,” I agreed. Would I? – I considered as he walked away. I thought about how soon I might have left him to his own devices if a promising job opened up out of the region and wondered then whether he had visited me out of obligation or genuine concern, and it bothered me that I cared. But the truth was, we sort of needed each other now; he needed shelter, and I needed the extra cash, and so I was beginning to feel as though there was a reciprocity to our relationship that I hadn’t been able to acknowledge before.

When he’d gone, I grabbed the phone beside the bed and called Miss Angela, apologizing for G-pa’s deception through Leo, and explaining the situation with me being

confined to bed and G-pa in a jail cell. I didn't care that he didn't want her involved; I wasn't going to stand by and let him sit there indefinitely until I was released.

She didn't hesitate to offer to bail him out, though she was alarmed that the whole operation had gone down outside her house without her noticing.

"Why didn't the fool call me?" she asked rhetorically.

"Yeah, well, you know how stubborn he can be." Or I assumed she did anyway; I didn't really know what she knew about him.

I hung up the phone happy in the knowledge that actions were being taken to release G-pa from jail, and I allowed myself the freedom to not dwell on what would happen next. I didn't want to think about lawyers or court appearances, or that I would have to go back to slogging on the asphalt as soon as I got out. For at least the next twenty-four hours, I could just lie there and think about nothing at all, and it was such a release that I felt as if the stress of everything had materialized into a liquid within my body and then to vapor, and it was now escaping through my pores into the air.

But I had underestimated the speed with which someone could be released from jail in the District once the bail bonds people got involved. It was only about five hours later, sometime after the nurse had removed my dinner tray, that I woke up from dozing with G-pa clamoring into my room.

"What the hell happened to you? Leo said you fainted on the job?"

"I did not faint. I was in a coma, didn't you hear? For three days. With near-organ-failure. And where were you when that was going on? Oh right, you got arrested."

"At least I took it like a man. Here you are, lyin' in bed on life support because you passed out from the heat." He was joking, and there was no real anger or contempt in

his voice when he said it. In fact, the look on his face betrayed a great deal of concern, more than I had seen on his face in a very long time.

“You know me. Always pretending to almost die as a cry for help.” He shrugged off my comment and took a seat next to the bed.

“So is there anything I can get you? They said you might be in here for another day or two.”

“How about an explanation?”

He sighed and looked at his hands in his lap.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. You know I had nothing to do with what went on.” It pained me that he looked so guilty when I had been the one to introduce him to Steven after all, and though he did set up that business arrangement without my knowledge, I felt entirely responsible for his predicament.

“I don’t mean that, I just mean what’s gonna happen? What did they say about your case? Did they get you a lawyer?”

“They sent in some schmuck who said he was a lawyer but I sent him right back out again when he said I should plead guilty so I’d get probation. Fuckin’ lawyers.”

“What, so you’re gonna argue your case yourself now? You don’t have to do what the lawyer says, but you do need a lawyer, and we don’t exactly have the money to hire one in case you haven’t noticed, especially since all the money you’ve been making has allegedly resulted from a criminal enterprise.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll figure somethin’ out. I’ve got people who can vouch for me.”

“It’s your word against his, G-pa.”

“I said I’ll figure somethin’ out.” I didn’t want to push any further, since he was beginning to seem agitated, and frankly, I didn’t have the energy to maintain the argument. “I’m gonna go get us some grub.”

“I already ate.”

“So did I, but hospital food and jail food don’t count. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“I think visiting hours are almost over.”

“The nurse said I could sleep on the couch. If you wanted the company.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks for doin’ what you did.”

“Sure thing, G-pa.”

I dozed some more while he was out buying us some half-smokes and fries from around the corner, and we ate in silence when he got back. I got the feeling then that maybe the reason we didn’t talk much was because we didn’t need to, because everything important was implied. Maybe we’d gotten to the point of our relationship where talking would be redundant and I should just sit there and respect the silence. So I did. And the strange thing was, I felt like he was telling me things in the intermissions between words that I should have been listening to all along, which sounds like a mumbo jumbo kind of thing to say, but it still felt that way nevertheless. I don’t know what I thought I heard in between munching and smacking on hot dogs; I’d always assumed it was indifference. But there he was, getting ready to spend the night with me on a hospital loveseat, so I guess it was something else.

* * * *

The doc came in the next morning while she was making her rounds to check me over and I asked how soon I could head back to work, explaining my financial situation, the months of being unemployed, and that I'd only been on the job for a week or so. I figured she'd say in a few days or by next week at the latest, but when she said I wouldn't be able to work out in the heat for several weeks at the absolute minimum, and realistically more like a few months, I was dumbfounded. When I asked why, she said it had something to do with toxins having built up in my system from all the work my body had to do to prevent itself from shutting down completely, that my organs could be damaged and we wouldn't know right away, and that my body may not regain the ability to regulate its temperature in extreme conditions for awhile, meaning I could fry my brain a lot quicker and more lethally if I went back out again too soon. When I joked that I wasn't aware that there were different grades of lethality, she ignored me and suggested that I look into applying for workers' compensation benefits since my condition had resulted unquestionably from being on the job, and that she would be happy to sign any necessary paperwork. And then she told me that this wasn't a recommendation, it was reality; if I didn't follow her orders, the next time she saw me would very likely be to sign my death certificate. Charming woman.

They finally released me the next afternoon after completing an amount of blood work that bordered on vampire-esque and other tests to determine that my kidneys were still functioning for the time being. When we got back to the apartment, I felt so drained from the experience that even though I'd been supposedly resting for days, I, along with G-pa who'd only slept either in jail or on a tiny sofa all week, went straight to bed.

I fully expected to crash when my head hit the pillow, exhausted as I was, but everything around me conspired to keep me awake. The vertical blinds on my stunted basement windows clapped together in the current from the air conditioning, and the sunlight flickered through the gaps as the flaps were jostled back and forth. The sheets on my bed, pilled all over with tiny nodules of hardened cotton from being washed a billion times since I'd gotten them in college, felt suddenly like sandpaper on my bare skin, rubbing me raw every time I moved even a centimeter.

But worse than my physical environment were the insomnia-laden traps set by my own damned mind. I shivered uncontrollably from my sweat evaporating in the path of the AC unit, and I imagined that I'd somehow developed a superhuman tolerance for heat à la comic book superheroes as a result of my heat stroke experience and would forever be sensitive to the cold, which would now be my temperature equivalent of Kryptonite. I pondered what it'd be like to be able to raise my core body temperature to laser-hot levels at will, to be able to melt objects with just a touch. What a useless superpower. So you could turn a spoon into a puddle of metal, and then what? Then you'd be left without a spoon.

I gave up on my attempts at sleep and went out to the kitchen area, where Leo was perpetually working on my laptop.

“Hey, I hate to bother you while you're working, but could I use my computer for a few minutes? It's kind of urgent.”

“Yeah, of course. I'm sorry if I've been hogging it too much. You can always let me know if you need it; I'm not gonna feel bad about it.” Enough with the over-accommodating already, I thought.

“No, no, you’re fine. It’s just I need to send an email right away while I’m thinking of it. I’ll let you know if I need it otherwise.”

“No problem.” He stayed at the table while I composed my letter to Maria. “So they let you out?”

“Yeah. Now I gotta worry about G-pa.”

“Yeah. Lemme know if I can help.”

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

One of Maria’s closest friends was a criminal defense attorney in the District, and though I knew I hadn’t earned the favor, I was hoping she would feel for G-pa’s plight and ask her friend for some pro bono help since the case was relatively cut and dry. I also knew that Maria wouldn’t doubt his innocence and would probably feel compelled to ask for help for that reason alone. I told her about his bizarre hospital visit as well, not because I wanted her to help out of pity, but because I was genuinely concerned and thought it might push her friend to become involved in his case. I didn’t ask for forgiveness in the letter; I hadn’t done anything yet to deserve it, and I knew that. But I did apologize again for being dimwitted and horribly insensitive and that I was asking for G-pa’s sake, not my own. I hated that I couldn’t call her, because all the letter would be was plain words on a page, and I didn’t know how to create a sense of something genuine and urgent without resorting to adolescent formatting and punctuation. (“*Please!* G-pa needs your help!!” was thoroughly undignified and out of the question.)

I also hated it because I didn’t know if she would open it, or if she’d open it and choose not to respond, so I’d just have to wait indefinitely for her reply.

Leo was still sitting across from me reading when I had finished, and G-pa was snoring out on the futon, unencumbered by any sort of insomnia. I handed Leo back my laptop, but he was looking at me in a way that made me feel like he was expecting more, like I was supposed to say something to make him feel better about all that had gone on there recently, which surprised me given what I assumed he'd faced in his past. I figured upheaval and instability were just a way of life for him, as it had been for me, but the look on his face craved encouragement nevertheless.

“Shit’s about to get real for him, isn’t it,” he finally said, when I had nothing to offer him by way of reassurance.

“You could say that.”

Chapter 26

It was another day and a night before Maria responded, and in that time, I managed to stay in bed the entire time except for trips to the bathroom and to eat a few bowls of cereal with almond milk. To my surprise, she called me on the phone, though it was from an unrecognizable number. I picked up without hesitation because no one ever called me and I had nothing else to do.

“I didn’t expect you to pick up; I thought you would be working.”

“Yeah, something happened at work and they say I can’t go back for awhile, so I’m getting workers’ comp until they clear me to go back.” I hadn’t wanted to bring it up, but I didn’t want her to think I had quit.

“Is it serious?”

“Naw, it’s no big deal; they just said I need to wait a bit to go back till I get cleared by the doc.” I didn’t want to make it about me, so I quickly transitioned away from the incident. “What’s up?”

“You emailed? About your grandfather?”

“Right. I don’t want to put you in an uncomfortable position with your friend, but I’m really worried about him. He can rub people the wrong way, and I worry about his chances in front of a jury, you know?”

“I already talked to Anton about it; that’s why I waited to call you. He said it’d be hardly any extra work to take on G-pa’s case and he’d be happy to help out a friend.” I’d hung out with Anton a few times at parties we’d attended together, and though she’d always spoken of him as a friend, I got the impression that there was a history there, and I was banking on Maria’s irresistible charm to win him over. Frankly, I was surprised that

she'd even asked him; it was Maria whom I thought it would be difficult to convince. Though I suppose I shouldn't have been too shocked; G-pa had ingratiated himself to everyone else he'd met, after all.

“Wow, that's fantastic. I can't thank you enough.”

“Don't thank me. It was the decent thing to do.” She was right, of course, though I was still baffled. It was rare that I met someone who acted without spite or expectations of reciprocity. And here I was foolish enough to let her get away from me (or, let's be honest, to drive her away from me).

“So...”

“So now you wait for Anton to call you. He said he'd be in court today but he'll contact you tomorrow. And that's it.”

“So that's it, then.”

“Yep.”

“How's your sister?”

“Still pregnant. False alarm.”

“Ah. And your husband?”

“Ranger...”

“Sorry, I just wanted to know how you were doing.”

“I'm fine.”

“I know.” And I wanted to say right then that I loved her, but it struck me as being a very selfish thing to say. Selfish and vain, ineffectual and barren. But that's when it came to me, and not until that moment, when all was lost and futile; I kept it to myself.

“Well, all the best to your sister.”

“Thanks.”

“Talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

I wanted then to put together a grandiose plan to win her back, but I loathed myself too deeply in the moment to put my heart into it. Instead, I got out of bed to tell G-pa the news, only to find that he hadn't woken up yet for the day, though it was after nine and several hours after his usual wake time of first light. But whereas I had been mostly lounging in bed awake for the last couple days, he'd been actually sleeping quite a lot since we'd gotten back, and I didn't want to disturb him.

I pulled back the screen and sat down silently in the chair next to the futon bed where he lay, snoring softly like a child. He was curled up into a ball like a potato bug around his sheets, which were bunched up in a heap at his midsection. It's not every day that you can watch someone sleep when you don't have a regular bedmate, and there's something incredibly endearing about it. It's an inherently unequal relationship, one person conscious, the other unconscious, sharing a fragment of time but not necessarily within the same universe. He looked so vulnerable and grey, and I wondered how this could be the same man who replaced entire engines of tractors and trucks when I was younger. I never saw my father sleeping; he always slept behind a closed door, never napping on a couch or a hammock. I wonder if he would have seemed more human to me if I had.

“Ranger, what are you doin' here?”

I awoke with a start to G-pa standing over me in the chair – I guess I had dozed off while waiting for him to wake up.

“What? Oh, sorry. I came in to tell you something but you were asleep.”

“Well I’m awake now.”

“Right.” I told him then about the offer of legal services from Maria’s friend, and he seemed bolstered by the news. The trial date had been set and was a few weeks away, but with me out on workers’ comp and G-pa now out of legitimate tinkering options, I shuddered at the image that arose in my mind of G-pa and I hibernating in our respective beds until then. I already stank from two days without a shower (or was I also excreting toxins through my skin from the heat stroke? – hard to tell). G-pa hadn’t shaved in more than five days, and that combined with his morning turkey-hair made him look the part of a mental patient.

“What are we gonna *do* for the next three weeks?” I asked suddenly. “I’m tired of seeing you in your undershirt every day. I’m tired of *being* in my undershirt every day. I just about died last week and I feel like I might as well be dead for all that I’m doing with myself.” It was more frank than I think I had ever been with him.

“I miss the ocean,” was his reply.

I sighed. “We can’t go to the ocean.” It would have violated the terms of his release to go so far out of the area.

“I know, I was just sayin’. I miss it.”

“We’ve got rivers. We could go out on a river.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s all we got.” When I said that, he sighed again in a way that conveyed a heap of sorrow and disappointment, the kind usually reserved for young children whose parents can only afford thrift store rejects and underwear as Christmas presents.

“You have a spare fishing rod?” he asked, after letting the river option simmer for awhile.

“I’ve never gone fishing.”

“That can’t be true. Your daddy loved fishing.”

“Nevertheless, I have never been.”

“How is that possible?”

“You tell me?” He thought about this for a moment and then gave me the kind of look one gives an elderly dog with a skin condition at an animal shelter, but he didn’t say anything. “Anyway, no, I do not have a spare fishing rod, to answer your original question. I do not have any fishing rods.”

“We need to go fishing.”

We went back and forth about this for a minute until I realized that his use of the word “need” was not hyperbole in this case, at least not to him, and so I looked into how one might rent a boat and rods cheaply in the district. It turned out that we could rent a rowboat and some rods for around twenty bucks for the day just over the border with Maryland at a park in Bladensburg (of the Battle of Bladensburg in the War of 1812, a battle which we lost, allowing British troops to march on Washington and burn the capital, according to the unsolicited information proudly provided by the boat rental employee when I called).

“When do you want to go?” I asked, once I’d compiled the information.

“Now.”

“As in, now-now?”

He stretched his arms behind his back and cracked his knuckles slowly in a way that had always made me cringe.

“Yeah.”

An hour and a half later, I had showered and we were completing the paperwork to rent a rowboat on my first fishing trip ever on what happened to be one of the most polluted waterways in the country, the Anacostia River. In my time living in the district, I'd heard various news reports that there was so much pollution from runoff and sewage that one could actually get hepatitis from swimming in it (which was why it was illegal to swim in rivers in D.C.), and the fish, when not washing up dead in droves on the shore, more often than not contained toxic levels of PCBs and mercury or had been rendered intersex by the chemicals in the water, such that males could sometimes be found carrying egg cells in their testes. It was a far cry from the hillside rivers and streams of my boyhood, several of which were safe for drinking directly from the source and did not even contain giardia.

Unsurprisingly, the fish in the Anacostia were deemed not safe to eat, but due to the perniciously invasive nature of the non-native snakehead fish, we had been instructed by the boat rental folks not to release those fish if we caught any. So we could fish legally, but we couldn't eat them, and we couldn't put many of them back if we caught them, meaning we could catch fish and then put them into the garbage. Already, I was feeling ill, and we hadn't even encountered any raw sewage yet.

The heat wave that had been afflicting the region since Memorial Day had not yet abated, and it showed no sign of doing so in the near future. Whenever I had pictured fishing trips in my mind, they had always been early morning affairs, involving dewy

pre-dawn excursions in chilly temperatures. I imagined that the fish in the woefully shallow Anacostia would be so hot that day as to be near comatose at eleven o'clock when we finally made it onto the river.

It must have been a slow day at the Bladensburg Waterfront Park where we'd rented our equipment. The young woman who'd assisted us had taken nearly a half an hour to process our rental order, which I believe was simply because there was no real prospect of anyone else coming in that day, so she'd given us the VIP treatment with full tour guide service. The facility offered regular free boat tours of the river, and I got the feeling that she was new to the job and felt like we'd be good practice for the real tour spiel (an assumption furthered by the fact that a megaphone rested at the ready on the edge of the counter).

"You know, the Army Corps of Engineers hired people during the New Deal to lay concrete on the banks of the river during the Depression. I forget why," she told us, apropos of nothing, as she was ringing us up. "Now we're trying to remove them to restore the wetlands, because it turns out that's what filters out all the goo that flows into the river. You should check out some of the restored areas while you're out; they're marked with little flags, and you can see some neat wildlife back there."

"We'll be sure to do that," I told her, though I had no intention of steering us anywhere in particular for the sake of sightseeing, and I'm sure G-pa didn't either.

"Oh! And then there's Dueling Creek on a branch just downriver and to the right where Stephen Decatur shot James Barron, or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, there were about fifty duels there because it was illegal in D.C., so people had to come over to Maryland to settle a score. Francis Scott Key's son died there too. Lots of

other famous people too. Supposedly you can still find artifacts from the War of 1812 lying around out there. I could probably show you around if wanted me to.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I think we can manage.” I wasn’t in the mood for my first fishing trip to be hijacked by a gum-smacking tour guide pretending she had that megaphone with her the whole time. In fact, though, I had mixed feelings about the impromptu outing in general. It was beyond unpleasantly hot outside, and G-pa insisted that he would do all the rowing so I wouldn’t croak on his watch, since I’d been forbidden to undertake any physical work in hot weather. But that meant the burden would fall entirely to G-pa, and I didn’t know what sort of condition he was in at all. I wasn’t even sure it was safe for me to *be* in the boat in the heat, but I didn’t really care too much about that. The whole thing simply made me uneasy. If any recreational activity was messy, it was certainly fishing. I saw gloves behind the counter that looked like they were intended for gripping fish and wished that I had the spare money to buy them.

G-pa was adamant that we didn’t need anything more than a chicken sandwich for bait, so we’d packed two of those with us and paid for the rented rods and boat. I’d brought the wide-brimmed canvas hat that I used to use on archaeology digs and a cooler’s worth of frozen water bottles and loose ice. As I slathered on some SPF 70 sunscreen, I mentally tried to will the sun block to physically repel the sun’s rays – as if it were a reflective emergency blanket – in the futile hope that I could somehow influence my physiological responses by using visualization techniques, but all it did was make me more aware of how penetrating the sunbeams could actually be.

When we left the landing, I half-expected to see the front desk girl holding out her megaphone while continuing to give out advice and poorly remembered history, but as I

looked back, the dock was empty. As G-pa rowed away towards an indeterminate destination, I noticed two Latino men on the rocks along the bank across the river. They looked to be fishing with nothing but twine wrapped around empty water bottles and a paint bucket for their catch, and I wondered whether they knew the fish weren't safe to eat or if they didn't care. Maybe the Anacostia was filthy, but it was cleaner than some places. The men looked relaxed, and I figured theirs was probably the smarter approach on a day like this. Cheaper, too.

"Let me know if you get tired. I don't mind taking over," I said to G-pa, still wary of his insistence upon doing all the work.

"I ain't gonna get tired."

I hated to think that this would be another one of our adventures in an enclosed space where we barely spoke to one another, despite the fact that I was becoming more comfortable with the silences, but I didn't want to force the conversation where it didn't naturally want to go; I never did.

The girl at the desk hadn't been lying about the wildlife. We soon came upon what I guessed were several egrets, or whatever the eastern equivalent of egrets was – I wasn't good with birds. Foot-long turtles lounged in the sun on rocky outcroppings and dipped back into the water when they began to bake from the heat. We even saw a bona fide bald eagle, which I had never seen before in real life and in the recesses of my brain had assumed for some reason that they were almost extinct; it caught a few up-drafts and circled around before settling on its perch in a tree.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do with the fishing rod, but I assumed that G-pa would tell me if I was doing it wrong, so I just held it out and let the hook drag

behind the boat a couple feet below the surface. When we got to a spot that G-pa deemed appropriate, he stopped rowing and joined me, and we drifted along in the current.

I never really believed that one could just stick a string in the water with something intriguing dangling at the end of it and wind up with a fish attached to it, so I'd pictured a long, stifling afternoon of just sitting in one place all day on a plank with no padding, wondering if that slight tug at the other end of the line was a piece of trash or a fish escaping after nibbling off all the bait. For a country boy, I was admittedly citified. So when G-pa got a live one not ten minutes into his efforts, it was as if a mythical creature had just asserted its existence right there in front of me.

From what I could see over his shoulder as he reeled in the creature, it was undoubtedly a catfish, even to someone who'd never seen one before; the whiskers alone had made that clear. But as G-pa pulled it out of the water by the line, it didn't look right to me. Its jaw jutted out unnaturally, and at the base of its chin (if you could call it that), there were two bulbous tumors, red and inflamed, bulging out of its face. At a certain angle, it looked as if the fish was sporting a beard of cherry lollipops.

"That's one ugly sonofabitch," G-pa announced as he brought the fish into the boat to remove the hook.

"What the hell is wrong with its chin?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. These were the cancerous lesions referenced in the fishing advisory posted in the rental office; two-thirds of the catfish in the river supposedly had them.

"Hell if I know," said G-pa, but the look on his face told me otherwise. He did know. He looked into that fish's pitiless eyes, cold and implacable as any scaled

creature's would be, and then whacked its head against the edge of the boat, stunning it before he reached his fingers into its gills and snapped its neck back in one clean motion.

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just figured you caught the fish and then it just died on its own; I didn't know you had to kill the damned thing with your bare hands.”

“Well, would you rather slowly suffocate or have your neck broken quickly?”

“No, it makes total sense, I just never thought about it.” I really didn't want to have to do that myself, however, because I knew I'd mess it up and it wouldn't be quite as clean as all that. “Why'd you kill it, though? We're not gonna eat a mutated fish. You coulda put it back.”

“No, we're not gonna eat it, but now we can eat our chicken sandwiches because we've got bait.”

“I didn't know fish were cannibals.”

“You don't know much, do ya?” Now we were getting somewhere. Part of me was hoping to have it out with him, to resolve all the unspoken slights and general evasiveness over the years. Now I almost hoped I would catch a fish so he could tell me just how ineffectual I was at it. At being a man, at being his grandson.

While he filleted the cancerous catfish with his pocketknife for bait, I continued to hold my line passively behind the boat. The cicadas roared in applause, it seemed, at his efforts, their huzzahs reverberating over the river for miles in either direction and drowning out the sounds of the city. They were such monstrously loud insects that it was uncanny to me that they were so seldom visible; I always expected parades of them

swarming the tree trunks in formation to account for all the noise, but the only time I'd ever seen any sign of them was when I came upon their empty exoskeletons which littered the sidewalks and crunched under foot. The commotion was a driving droning sound with a quality that fell somewhere in between sinister and comfort, the distinction depending – like approaching sirens – on the particular circumstances of the listener.

We ate our chicken sandwiches along with a full-sized bag of potato chips, the salt being necessary to maintain a decent electrolyte balance. The cooler was still full of ice, though the frozen water bottles were becoming depleted as we drank and drenched ourselves throughout the afternoon; I wasn't about to resort to splashing myself with contaminated water from the river no matter how hot it got out there.

Eventually, I got into just the right position so I could hold my fishing pole, lean back on the side of the boat, and nod off now and then. I was beginning to feel confident that I hadn't been deprived of anything by staying home all those years while my father went out to fish alone, when the pole nearly flew out from my relaxed grip and I had to jump up to grab it from going over the edge. I could go into detail about the struggle, but this is not about the fish, or even me catching the fish for that matter. Suffice it to say that after much effort but likely less of a sense of urgency than it seems now in my memory, I managed to reel the fish in and get it onto the boat. It was easily three feet long and weighed a good twenty-something pounds.

Its spookily narrow fish face had eerie fangs and betrayed its identity as one of the invasive snakeheads, and my heart sank at being morally obligated to kill the beast only to have to throw it away in a dumpster afterwards.

“Give it here.” G-pa reached out in an apparent offer to deal with the fish himself, but I declined.

“I’ve got it.” It helped that it was ugly, because I was fairly sure I wouldn’t have been able to bash in the head of something beautiful. Still, after whacking it against the hull to stun the fish as G-pa had done, I wasn’t about to reach my hand into its gills and rip its head off, so I grabbed my own knife from my pocket – yes, I carried a knife – and jammed it into its head like a spike. The fins shot up and then went slack, and the fish remained there with its head impaled by my knife directly into the wooden seat, and my only regret was that someone else would have to sit there after we returned the boat.

“That’s one way to do it,” G-pa remarked, and I couldn’t tell whether it was out of approval or disdain.

“Yeah, well, it did the job. It’s a shame we have to toss it in the garbage – that’s a big hunk of meat.”

“Who said anything about throwing it in the garbage?”

“You’re not seriously suggesting that we eat that thing, are you? Because I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve probably been exposed to enough carcinogens and heavy metals in my lifetime.”

“C’mon, one fish is not gonna kill you.”

“Actually, I think it might.”

“Fine, I’ll eat the whole damn thing myself.”

“You do that.” I wasn’t going to be bullied into consuming toxic waste, even if it meant that I wouldn’t get to eat the first and probably last fish I’d ever caught in my life. “We should probably head back now; it’s getting close to when we need to turn the boat

in.” My hopes for some sort of meaningful man-to-man talk had faded, and now I only longed for another shower and an iced tea.

G-pa reached into the back pocket of his shorts to pull out his handkerchief so he could wipe his brow, but as he did this I heard a distinctive plop behind him in the water.

“What was that?” I said.

“What was what?”

“Something just fell out of your shorts and into the river.”

“Really?” We both leaned over the hull to peer into the current, and as G-pa realized what it was, he nearly fell out of the boat himself lunging for it. There was his nylon Velcro wallet, bulging at the seams from being stuffed full of who knows what, floating down the river. “Shit!” He missed, and as the wallet bobbed away, he grabbed the oars and directed me to try to lean out and grab it as he went after it with the boat.

“Good thing it floats,” I said in an attempt to reassure him. I figured a leather wallet would surely have sunk by now, but this synthetic one showed no sign of going under anytime soon.

He steered frantically, attempting to corral the floating wallet between the boat and the rest of the river downstream, but every time we made a pass, it was not close enough, even when I used the spare oar to nudge it closer, and I couldn’t lean any further out without capsizing the boat. By the fourth pass, G-pa was thoroughly exhausted and I worried we wouldn’t make it back to turn in the boat.

“I don’t think this is gonna work, G-pa. I think we need to call it quits and head back.”

“No!” He shouted at me with a desperation that I’d never heard in his voice before. “There’s five hundred dollars in there!”

“What the hell are you carrying around five hundred dollars for? Jesus Christ, turn the boat around.” I didn’t think about where the money would have come from; maybe it was his life savings, I didn’t know. In the moment, I just figured I should indulge the man and try my best to get it back.

We did two more passes and I sacrificed my hat to the toxic sludge in a last-ditch attempt to catch the wayward wallet, but it didn’t work. It was not going to work, and the wallet was slipping faster and faster downstream. We needed to go back, and I said as much.

“Fine, I’ll jump in and get it myself, for Christ’s sake!”

“It’s just money, G-pa. You are not jumping in that river; I will tie you up myself, and don’t think I won’t do it.”

“It is *not* just money!” I still thought he was referring to the cash, perhaps metaphorically this time, but something about the anguished look on his face made me pause.

“What is it?”

“It’s your Grams. It’s the only picture I have of her out here. And her hair; I cut a lock of her hair off before they cremated her. It’s in a sandwich baggie in one of the pockets.” He looked down in embarrassment, only to have to face the still-impaled snakehead fish glaring at him from his funeral perch on the bench. He looked back out to the river and seemed about ready to flee the boat to go after the wallet, so I grabbed his

wrist to hold him back. I'd never actually seen G-pa swim, and with those chicken legs of his, I pictured him flapping about like a hen trying to go after his floating possession.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, shaking my head, kicking off my shoes, and pulling off my shirt. “I’ll get the damned wallet.”

Chapter 27

I lied the other day when I said I didn't know you'd never been fishing with your dad. I'd forgotten about that, but when you mentioned it, it all sort of came back to me. I was always surprised that you never asked him to take you with him, though I guess you were waiting for him to be the one to ask. I guess you thought it would be a rite of passage and that he was just waiting for the right moment to take you, once you had proved yourself that you were finally a young man. I don't really know what you thought, but that's my guess. You always wore your feelings on your sleeve you know.

Here's the thing, Ranger. There's no good way to put this, but you weren't your daddy's son. I wrestled with whether or not to tell you this at all, but there's no other way you could find out on your own anymore, and I figured maybe this would finally make things make sense for you, knowin how you always chased around his approval like a kitten after a butterfly.

You know how your mother and father got together soon after she came to town and how the wedding was thrown together quick because she was pregnant with you. I suppose that was mostly my doin, I confess. He admitted to bein with her many times off in the woods after goin around together for only a week or so, and so I told him he didn't have a choice in the matter, he had to do the right thing and marry her.

But you also know where she came from, what she came from. She was clear enough about that from the start, about why she came there and what she was runnin from. And she was good to him and good to you, and nobody thought to ever question her story. But you know they were just young things when they had you, and you might wonder why it was that you never had a brother or sister. It wasn't because they were

disappointed in you and didn't want another, and having lived under the same roof as them, I can tell you they had plenty of opportunity.

But eventually your dad was turnin twenty-one and you were about six years old by then, and he got to wondrin why your mom hadn't had any more babies since you. He took it upon himself to go see a doctor about it in Fortuna, and well, the tests said he was shooting blanks, as they say. I guess that's one thing we had in common; maybe there was somethin in the water, though I hope not, for your sake.

He came back from the doc and had it out with your mother right in front of your Grams and me – you were at school. He was so angry and so big and powerful that we half expected the dishes to fall off the walls themselves in sacrifice, but he just sat there on the sofa with his elbows on his knees and his hands and fingers together in a pyramid and didn't move a muscle while she explained. Well you see, she really did run away to escape bein put up for hire by her momma, but the trouble was that she had miscalculated and had already been forced into bein with her first customer by the time she made her getaway. The way your mother told it, her momma found out she was plannin to run away and slipped her something in her Kool-Aid, took her upstairs, tied her up to the bedposts, and left. When she came to, a fellow she didn't know was havin his way with her and she was so out of it that all she could do was let it happen.

Her momma expected that she would stick around after that, probably from the shame of it all, and so she didn't watch her too carefully. But she went ahead with her plans and left the next mornin when the drugs had wore off. She never knew she was carryin you when she went into the woods with your dad, and she never knew you weren't his until he told her for sure. She said that she was never the type of girl to mess around

in the woods with a boy, but that the only way she could think to get rid of the stink of this ugly hairy man, which was all she could remember about him, was to replace it with the good and trueness of the love of a boy. That was just how she put it. Good and trueness.

We all just sat around the living room as she said all this, and I remember watchin the rage slowly leave your dad's face and be replaced by something else entirely, something very truly sad. For not only had he learned that day that he could never have a child of his own, he had learned that his one and only son was not his but was a product of something hateful and vile. And yet he loved you, and he loved her, and none of you had done anythin wrong. But he was different after that. He was lonelier. He spent more time away on his own, and you never heard of him carousing in town like you did some of the other guys from our parts. He still loved you more than anythin, but it was clear to me that somethin had clouded over his affections, and though you could see it burned just as bright inside him, less of the light made it out than before, and I am sorry for that, though I am not sure what else could have been done. You at least had a father who cared about you and stayed with you as long as he was alive, and that's an awful lot.

I'm tellin you all this not because I want to make you feel bad but just the opposite. It's not that you never measured up to his expectations, it's that you were such a delightful child and he was sorry that you weren't his own. I know that you're probably gonna feel grief about this and wonder all about your true origins, but don't waste your time on it. It's all bull. So what that the seed was planted in such a bad way; it was tended properly and with great care. God that sounds awful and girly, but there's no other way to put it. Stop mopin around, Ranger. You had it real good compared to lots of folk. We had a good life.

Chapter 28

When you are about to jump into one of the most polluted rivers in the nation not entirely of your own volition, there is a feeling that is unique to situations having potentially lifelong negative consequences, like the precise moment of unprotected penetration with a stranger, wherein up to that second you had a choice in things, and then after that it's all up to chance. There is a sense of crossing an invisible line, of cutting a string onto which you once grasped for some semblance of control. Once your foot leaves the edge, there is a sense that a net has been removed and you are now in a tumbling, spasmodic freefall through life.

I told myself when I jumped into the Anacostia that I wouldn't let my head go under, that I would limit my exposure to disease and decay by preventing my eyes, nose, and mouth – those precious mucous membranes – from coming into contact with the chemical soup. But the wallet seemed determined to get away from us and had drifted away quickly in the current, and though I tried swimming the breast stroke without fully submerging my head, I couldn't get enough thrust to catch up to it with my face upturned, and I couldn't catch my breath properly through my nose alone. As a result, I mostly doggie paddled in place and spit repeatedly into the water out of the instinct that as long as I was constantly spewing something out, nothing substantial could make its way in.

“Christ, don't drown on me, Ranger. Do you even know how to swim?” He knew I knew how to swim. I'd won trophies for the backstroke in high school, and though he hadn't seen them in person, he'd surely heard of them through my mother and Grams. The trouble with the backstroke, though, was that you couldn't aim at something if you were swimming backwards.

I looked back to G-pa, who looked about ready to jump in after me, and I felt myself take a humongous breath and reluctantly dip my head under the water, straining with my neck as though struggling against the hand of someone else who was pushing me under. I kicked my best dolphin kick to propel myself forward, and I realized there was nothing I could do to undo what I had just done; from then on, I would always be a man who had once swam fully submerged in the Anacostia River.

It didn't take too long of swimming properly to catch up with the wallet, but the waters were fairly choppy, and every time I paused to steady my reach, it managed to slip out of my grasp, in part because in the act of reaching I produced a wave of water that always carried it further away. I wasn't sure of the stability of the wallet's buoyancy, so I changed tactics and decided to get as close as I could and then lunge for it so that I would overtake it entirely, even if that risked sinking it below the surface. I wasn't about to heroically free-dive down into the contaminated sediments to chase after a non-living thing.

As I prepared to make the final push, an oblique ripple in the river's surface running crosswise to the current sent a Precambrian message up my spine to my ancestral brain and gave me pause without me consciously knowing why. I still went for it, but perhaps with less thrust than I otherwise would have done, and as I launched my body towards the wallet one last time, I came down with a splash and emerged, not with the rough seams of the nylon wallet in my grip, but with the slick head of a rather ferocious looking eel.

I hadn't known that eels lived in rivers or I possibly would not have jumped in the water in the first place. Far more frightening to me than snakes (which I didn't find to be

all that frightening), the visage of an eel conjured up the worst demons I could imagine. Their eyes were beadier and their jaws more crocodilian than other sea creatures, and they always looked so stunned and angry, like slithering zombie mariners.

This one had apparently been stalking G-pa's wallet as well, probably thinking it was a frog, and had come at it from the opposite direction, clamping down with its mouth just as I was about to claim it for G-pa. It took something different from courage for me to hold on to that eel as it thrashed its body like a mechanical whip; it required a complete suppression of my baser instincts, an intentional tightening in my gut like the bearing-down one must do when encountering heavy g-forces to counteract the stomach's tendency to release its contents in response.

I was too engrossed in the moment to remember if G-pa was shouting at me when this was happening or if he just stood there at the edge of the boat dumbfounded, unable to contribute in any meaningful way. Once I got a handle on the eel, I pulled its slithering body toward my chest so I could pin it with one arm as I attempted to rip the wallet from its jaws with the other. But in doing this, the eel seemed very different to me, and with most of its body obscured under water and only its face looking up at mine through the crook of my elbow, it seemed more like a puppy offering me the morning paper. It was helpless and pitiful as it gazed at me from my arms, and I almost felt guilty taking away its prize, though I knew of course that it was worthless to the creature.

Then quickly, I wrenched the soggy mass from its mouth and let the eel go with a sort of scream, recoiling and thrashing with my arms and legs to repel the animal away from me.

“Fuck! Did you see that?!” I shouted back to G-pa in the boat, which was about thirty yards upstream. He just stood there with his mouth agape, and I turned back to watch as the dorsal fin of the eel pierced the river’s surface like a razorblade as it sped away with an agile swiftness that I envied.

I swam back to the rowboat with the wallet in a death grip feeling weak and woozy as one does when a rush of adrenaline subsides. When I returned, I tossed in the wallet first, and it landed on the bench next to the still-impaled snakehead, and I pulled myself in with G-pa leaning into the other side of the boat to balance out the weight and prevent us from capsizing. I took one of the water bottles from the hull and poured it immediately over my face, filling my mouth with several gulps and spitting it back out into the river. I longed to strip off my wet shorts to douse myself clean of the filth that I could feel and smell in a very tangible way, but there was nothing with which to cover up if I did. The skin on my chest burned a little with a stinging sensation, and I didn’t know whether that was from a day’s worth of sun, from some compound in the eel’s skin, or from the river water itself. Perhaps it was all three.

Meanwhile, G-pa was rifling through the contents of his wallet, wiping them on his clothes, and laying them out on one of the benches to dry in the sun. I watched out of my periphery as he slipped the baggie with the lock of hair surreptitiously into his pocket and continued his chore. When I was done rinsing and he was done wiping, I looked down at his spread and was puzzled to see only a handful of one dollar bills in the pile of drying money.

“Where’s the five hundred bucks?” I asked.

He looked down at the stack of ones and shrugged.

“That’s how much I thought it would take for you to let us keep trying.” I looked at him then and saw a man who was much older and smaller than he’d ever been in my imagination. I didn’t blame him for wanting back his wallet so badly, but I was hurt by his insinuation that I helped him out of the need for money rather than what I felt was the truth, which was that I jumped into the muck for *him*, because he’d had that look on his face, and I didn’t want him to lose anything more because he – we – had already lost so much.

“I didn’t do it because of the money.”

“Okay,” he shrugged again.

“We need to head back.”

“Okay.”

I helped him move his treasures to the spare bench, and I saw my senior portrait from high school among the photographs that he’d separated and wiped clean. I’d never sent him that photograph, so it must have come from my mother. There was one of her in there too, with me and my dad, the three of us sitting on a bunch of rocks overlooking the coast. It was the day of my first real daytrip to the ocean, not just a roadside stop to dip my toes in the water, but a real whole day at the beach. We were surrounded by wild mustard blossoms, which I’d later heard was a weed scattered by Franciscan Padres in order to make El Camino Real, the road connecting all the Missions, easier to find. In the picture, I am dressed in corduroy shorts and a striped polo shirt, my mother is in some sort of sleeveless beach jumper with her *Charlie’s Angels* feathered blonde hair, and my father dwarfs us both. I must’ve been seven or eight at the time and remember hoping we

would see whales, not knowing that it wasn't the season for them. It was another one of those days during which my father saved my life.

We'd been climbing around the tide pools, chasing purplish crabs from one hole to the next and petting sea stars that clung to the rocky outcroppings. I remember standing up triumphantly at the edge of the rocks with a minnow that I'd managed to capture in my cupped hands. With no warning, there was a rush of waves spraying straight up in the air like a geyser after hitting the cliff's wall, and as it crashed back down onto the rocks, it plucked me off my perch and swept me into the ocean, just like that.

I knew how to swim but not well at that age, and my situation was made worse by an enormous kelp forest which drifted just off shore, which caused me to panic from the feel of its thousand tendrils that were like fingers or mouths grasping at me and pulling me in deeper. I fiercely treaded water, but this entangled me even more, and I struggled to stay afloat against the many arms grabbing me down into the sea. But then before I could even shout that I was caught, this single arm, sturdy and powerful as a crane, reached over and yanked me from the tangled seaweed just as another giant wave was about to smash me against the rocks. He held me with one arm and clung to the holes in the rocks with just the fingertips of his other hand like some magnificent water spider to prevent us both from being swept out again in the wave's aftermath and then pulled us up the cliff to safety.

"Jesus, I thought you both were dead!" my mother shouted when she'd helped us gain our footing at the top and we'd backed away from the edge.

“Well, we’re not,” he said, and we left the tide pools unceremoniously for the sandy stretch of the beach.

G-pa had been the one to snap that photograph, which had been taken before we’d gone down to the water. I looked up at him standing there on our rented boat, and he looked so relieved, so sated, like a baby after its fill of milk, that I wanted to hug the man.

“Sit down,” he said. “I’ll get us back in time.”

I glanced down at my bench and grabbed my knife to release the fish head, then flung its carcass into the cooler against the ice. G-pa powered us back to the dock in record time, huffing and blowing out his nostrils like a sled dog to get us there. When we returned the equipment, the same chipper girl from before was the one to check us in.

“Didja catch anything?” she asked, eyeing the cooler that hung from one of G-pa’s arms.

G-pa looked at me before he responded. “Nope.”

Chapter 29

Miss Angela was out front watering her roses to help them rebound from the heat when we got home that evening. When she asked what we'd been up to and G-pa showed her my catch in the cooler, she became giddy with excitement over the prospect of planning a spontaneous fish fry.

"I'll make a fish curry and fry up the rest with some potatoes and we'll have ourselves a barbecue!"

"No-no-no," I interrupted, "this is not an eating kind of a fish. This is an Anacostia River fish; you can't eat that stuff. If G-pa wants to grill it up and poison himself with it, that's his problem, but we are not feeding this up at a party."

Leo then came out from the main house with a ladder and a screwdriver.

"I tightened the fan in the living room, Miss Angela; it shouldn't wobble anymore, for awhile anyway."

"Come look at the fish Ranger caught!" She motioned him over to the cooler as if I had never said anything about its supposed lethal properties.

"Whoa, that's a big fish," he said admiringly. "Who gets to cook it?"

"No. No one is cooking this fish, except maybe for G-pa, but you cannot eat this thing; it is not for eating."

"What, are you gonna put it on your wall?" Miss Angela squinted her eyes at me and stood up to her full five-foot-ten height. "I don't know about you, but I grew up in Mumbai, and where I come from we do not just throw away food."

I looked at G-pa, who only grinned from ear to ear and nodded to Leo.

"I can't say no to a free meal," he shrugged.

I glanced in disbelief at each of them, ineffectually it would seem, because they all just stood there drooling over the fish. I really didn't want to be responsible for making them all sick, but they were technically grown-ups (even Leo), and I also wasn't going to be a killjoy and dispose of the fish against their wishes to prevent that from happening.

“Suit yourself, guys; this is all on you. I'll make the salad, but there is no way in hell I'm going to eat that thing.”

The three of them took the cooler into Miss Angela's house, presumably to clean and fillet the fish and to hear G-pa's tall tale of our experience. I, on the other hand, royally stank, so I promptly went down to the apartment to strip, soak my shorts in the sink with two capfuls of detergent, and then take a painfully scalding hot shower.

As soon as I stepped into the stream from the showerhead, the effluvium that emanated from the vaporized muck on my body drove me to cough, hack, and wheeze, and I briefly considered the possibility that I might die from inhaling poisonous fumes, like when one unintentionally blends bathroom cleaners that create a noxious gas when co-mingled. The slop that accumulated on the floor of the tub was a swampy green-grey, and I made a mental note to bleach the tub when I was done.

When I got out, I went straight to bed without getting dressed, this time falling into a deep, dreamless sleep. I woke up feeling restored a few hours later after dusk with the sound of music and many voices laughing and talking at once from somewhere outside, enticing me to get out of bed. I put on some blissfully clean clothes and went out back to find that the fish fry had become not just a reality, but was already a thrumming,

thriving party, complete with citronella Tiki torches and a blues jam session accompanied by G-pa and friends.

The smell of battered, fried fish and homemade chips wafted out of the kitchen from the open sliding glass door and windows and merged with the citronella in a heavy, citrusy combination that made me drowsy all over again. As many people were inside as were out back, and there was a soft, yellow glow to the atmosphere that was compounded by fireflies flickering around in the grass, along with the torches and the lighting from indoors. I didn't know these people, but I had made this party from the very fact that it would not have existed had I not caught that fish, and I marveled over that thought as I looked around at the mostly unfamiliar faces.

“Here he is, the man of the hour!” Miss Angela cried from the kitchen window as she saw me approaching the back porch.

People turned to look, and somehow they knew that I was the man she was speaking of, and they nestled their beers in their elbows and shifted their plates to clap and whistle, some of them raising the fried fish between their fingers to show their approval. I sheepishly waved and then ducked into the kitchen where Miss Angela was serving up fish curry into paper bowls of rice. I understood that a twenty-five pound fish would stretch a long way, but what really baffled me was that these people even *wanted* the fish at all.

“Please tell me you told them where this fish came from and that it might contain enough chlorofluorocarbons to render them infertile.” To me, the fish was borderline radioactive, and despite my shower, the change of clothes, and the spices working their

magic in the simmering pot before me, I still tasted that spoiled river water on the back of my tongue and had to continuously fight back my gag reflex.

“Relax, Ranger. They know where it comes from. These people know about the Anacostia.”

“It just doesn’t feel right. I mean, there’s a government advisory out on this stuff. It’s not even legal to swim in there.”

“They sure do ban a lot of things, don’t they.” When she said this, I realized I also caught a whiff of something pungent and burning coming from the yard that was separate from the candles, and I hoped for G-pa’s sake as a man pending trial that no one in the neighborhood would be of a mind to call the police and complain about the noise. Thankfully, it seemed as though much of the neighborhood was already there, and as I glanced around, I started to recognize faces from several of the stoops, yards, and hangouts in the vicinity. “Here, have some chips,” she said, handing me a plate of pub-style fries and a bottle of malt vinegar.

“Thanks,” I said and walked back outside.

Some of the men playing with G-pa in the yard, I knew, were guys he’d met at the barber shop and the diner, but I didn’t know the man who was singing and playing the twelve-string in front of the group. He was closer to my age than G-pa’s, but his white undershirt – crisp, not shabby like G-pa’s – paired with suspenders and slacks and a smartly cocked newsy cap with engineer pinstripes on his head summoned another era. His voice alone, with its bramble-textured roughness and syncopated cadence, conjured up Lead Belly himself. They were doing “The Bourgeois Blues,” which I recognized from G-pa’s records from the old days back home. Leo and his harmonica were expertly

providing the rhythm, and it all felt so real and genuine. Except there was G-pa, and I didn't know who he was supposed to be, maybe Pete Seeger minus the communism, but I guess it worked. It was one hell of a party anyway.

“So you're the one we have to thank for this feast?” I turned to see a young woman whom I recognized from one of the restaurants I used to frequent (before I was broke) on H Street where she was a waitress.

“I'm the guy you have to blame, at least. Notice I'm not eating it myself.” She laughed, thinking I was making some sort of a joke.

“You're Ranger, right? You used to come to the bar where I work.”

“Yeah.”

“I'm Elise. I live in The Blue House.” The Blue House was not just a description of the color of the building's exterior where she lived; it was also the name of a vaguely notorious cooperative-living household down the street from us which variously attracted international students, activists, intellectuals, and free-loaders. Elise, with her wide earlobe tunnels, nose ring, Tree of Life tattoo, and thick dyed-black bangs was probably somewhere in the middle of those. She was otherwise fairly attractive, but not especially my type.

“Oh, right on,” I said, noncommittally, as I reached into a cooler for a beer. The house she lived in reportedly had seven or nine bedrooms depending on who you talked to; it also had sunflowers painted on the side that were made to look like an actual garden, and there was always some sort of PVC-pipe greenhouse and paint bucket container-garden display-in-progress out front. I'd always assumed that the people who

lived there were a little flighty, a little self-righteous, and I'd never given them much of my attention.

"Have you been over yet?" she asked in between bites of fish, exaggerated "mm's," and licking the grease off her fingers.

"Nope." I nibbled on fried potato wedges that were surprisingly well-made, but they didn't begin to satisfy the hunger I had in my belly from being out in the boat all day.

"You should come by! There's a poetry reading and sangria on Thursday nights at eight. It's *always* a good time." The way she leaned into the word "always" told me definitively that she was coming on to me in a way that indicated she wanted to go to bed with me that very night.

"Okay," I said. I probably would go because I had nothing better to do, but I didn't like poetry readings or other public displays of earnestness. I also would probably go because I sensed that Elise was barely containing a desire to take her clothes off right then and there, and with Maria gone and not likely coming back anytime soon (at least not to me), I was feeling lonely and a little sorry for myself, and I longed for something physical and meaningless to dull the ache inside that was compounded by the fact that after the day's labors, I was starving for protein.

"Fuck it," I said suddenly. "Let me have one of those." I said this without really thinking as I eyed the array of battered fish on her paper plate. "Squeeze some lemon on it for me, would you?"

She seemed positively pleased that I'd asked and doused one of the strips with juice from a lemon wedge, then offered it to me at an angle and with a look that

suggested she wanted me to eat it directly from her hand. I did, and as it entered my mouth, I knew from its aroma that it would be delicious, and it was. As I chewed and swallowed, I reveled in its perfect crispness and how it practically dissolved on my tongue, but as soon as it went down my throat, I knew that something was terribly wrong.

My mouth began to itch and swell in a familiar way that drove me to dash through the party guests around the corner to get out of sight, and I made myself throw up into the bushes. I was already wheezing and feeling like a was going to pass out when the music stopped and G-pa and Leo appeared in the side yard looking concerned.

“What is it?” G-pa asked, though the recognition of what was happening quickly emerged on his face. “Where’s the pen?”

“Bag,” I wheezed. “Laptop.”

“Where is it?” he asked urgently.

“I know where it is. I’ll get it.” Leo ran off and was back within sixty seconds, though he had to fight his way through a growing circle of concerned guests.

G-pa took the EpiPen from Leo and administered the shot just as the fireflies were beginning to multiply in my vision by the thousands into brilliant bursts of light casting the rest of the party into a rapidly fading penumbra. The epinephrine rinsed through my veins and opened my throat, and I gasped for air, feeling as relieved as those fish lucky enough to be released back into the water after being caught. I thought back to G-pa’s swift method for dispatching the ones we’d kept, and I shrank from the thought that I would have let them suffocate if left to my own devices.

“What the hell happened?” G-pa asked as he helped me back to my feet from the kneeling position to which I had fallen.

“I ate some of the fish,” I shrugged, legitimately perplexed. “I thought I could eat it.”

Miss Angela emerged from the back of the quickly dispersing crowd and shook her head.

“You said you wouldn’t eat any of it, so I made the batter with milk the way my mother always did! You should have said something! I would have made you special batter.” She tsked and scolded me with the relieved exasperation of a mother whose child had just narrowly escaped getting run over in the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, I was just really hungry all of a sudden. I’ve always been able to eat fried fish before; I didn’t know.” The adrenaline began to subside and I felt incredibly cold and jittery all over my body.

“Your mother always made it with beer,” said G-pa.

“Are you okay?” I hadn’t noticed Elise, the girl from The Blue House, standing beside G-pa, but I suppose she must have come after me, alarmed that I took off like that with no explanation.

“I’m fine,” I brushed away her concern as though it were a stray eyelash. When her earlobe then lit up brightly in response, I thought I was still having trouble with my vision and worried I might need another dose, but then I realized it was only a firefly nestled inside one of her ear tunnel studs, flashing like an LED earring. I almost told her that there was a lightning bug in her earlobe, but then I stopped myself. I suddenly didn’t care. About her, or the space where the flesh of her ear used to be.

“I’ll go get you some water,” she said before leaving abruptly, water being the universal offering for all sudden and public maladies.

“Do you need anything?” Miss Angela asked, seeming guilty for having been marginally responsible for my reaction. “I can make you some special batter; there’s still a tiny bit of fish left.” Around her, the buzz of the party slowly regained its momentum.

“No, I’m good, thank you. I should probably stick to my original intentions. And it looks like you have more guests to feed.” Some more friends or neighbors had found their way through the fence and into the backyard, and they waved in our direction to get Miss Angela’s attention. She excused herself and apologized again for the milk in the batter, leaving Leo, G-pa, and me standing there in the narrow side yard amongst the boxwood shrubbery.

“Thanks for coming to my aid; it hit me too fast for me react on my own.” They both shrugged off my gratitude, and we all shifted uncomfortably, waiting for an appropriate excuse to disperse. Thankfully, my phone rang, and I stepped aside so I could take the call.

“Ranger?” a woman asked.

“Maria,” I replied, still jittery from the shot and now even more so from the unexpectedness of her voice.

“I needed to talk to somebody,” she told me, her voice catching in a way that made my heart race, and not in a good way.

“What is it?” I pictured a thousand things that could have gone wrong to make her sound like that, from her sister bleeding to death in childbirth, to one of the babies being born with a defect, to the possibility that all of them had been lost entirely. My family’s history had conditioned me to greet the potential news of a birth with sobering pessimism.

“She had the babies.”

“And?”

“And Ranger, they are *so* beautiful.” Something unclenched inside my empty abdomen that I didn’t know I had tightened. She seemed to be openly weeping now, no longer trying to hold back her emotions, and it got to me. “I’m sorry for what happened before I left,” she added.

“Uh, don’t be?” I was genuinely perplexed as to why she was apologizing, for I had been the one with the unequivocally repellent behavior, but I attributed it to her being overwhelmed in the moment. “When did it happen?”

“Just an hour ago. She went into labor this afternoon, and they came all at once. I held the first girl while the other one came out, and she held onto my finger like I was her mother. It was so powerful.”

“That’s great,” I said, a little envious. “That’s really terrific.” I’d never even held a newborn.

“And really, I’m sorry for telling you that you couldn’t come with me; I know you’ve had a hard time of it lately. I’d like you to come down and be with me for awhile. I can get you down here and back on airline miles; it won’t cost anything. It’s such a beautiful thing; I’d like to share it with someone.” Even in my post-anaphylactic-shock state, I caught that she hadn’t said “I’d like to share it with *you*,” but I allowed myself to bury the discrepancy and latched onto her invitation like a barnacle to a cruise ship.

“Um, sure? If that’s what you’d like.”

“It wouldn’t be for too long. I know you’ll want to be back for G-pa’s trial.”

“Of course.” The mention of G-pa’s legal difficulties combined with Maria’s sudden reversal made my head whirl, spin, and sputter like the blades of an underpowered blender attempting to pulverize huge chunks of ice.

“Good, then. I’ll call you about the details tomorrow after you and G-pa meet with Anton. I’m really looking forward to seeing you.”

“Me too,” I said, and I believed that I meant it, even though just minutes before I was accepting food from the hands of a stranger, one whose seduction I had not intended to resist until I’d had an allergic reaction to the experience. I realized that I was likely taking advantage of some prehistoric mating instincts and a flood of sentiment aroused by the births of her nieces, but I had been pining after Maria in a way that had left me entirely subject to her whims and desires, and I simply could not turn her down.

“There you are! I thought I’d lost you. Here’s the water.” I turned to see Elise holding out a plastic cup for me to take.

“Oh hi. I probably shouldn’t touch that actually, since you, uh, had the fish in your hands. The residue from the batter could cause another reaction, and I’m fresh out of adrenaline sticks.”

“Oh,” she said, “that makes sense.”

“Sorry,” I said. “It was really nice to meet you, though, but I’m gonna go now.” I pointed to the basement and started backing away. “I’ll see you around!”

“Okay! See you!” she waved, a little astonished at my hasty exit. I waved back politely as I descended the stairs to the lower level. “Don’t forget about poetry on Thursdays!” she added, but I had already closed the door behind me.

Chapter 30

The meeting the following morning with Maria's friend Anton, G-pa's new lawyer, went as well as could be expected. I hadn't remembered him to be so chiseled, tanned, and looking fiercely like a Native American warrior before, but I had never before seen him in a suit, with his shoulder length ochre hair tied back sleekly down his neck. Without his customary happy-hour flip-flops, he transformed into this sculpture of a man, all confidence and business, and if there really had been any history between Anton and Maria, it was unfathomable to me that she had turned from him to me.

During the brief but comprehensive meeting, Anton explained that the evidence against G-pa was mostly circumstantial, but that it would look fairly bad to a jury that he had never questioned where the vast supply of goods was coming from. Still, because he had no criminal record, there was a fair chance that he would be exonerated, with the caveat being that G-pa had to appear kind and trustworthy and otherwise endear himself to the twelve-member panel of adjudicators. Anton trusted Maria's assertion that G-pa was innocent, so he didn't press G-pa to plead guilty to avoid serving time. In turn, G-pa seemed comfortable with the man's assessment and was cautiously optimistic when we left the meeting.

As we walked out of Anton's office in Foggy Bottom and got into my car, I struggled with how to tell G-pa about Maria's invitation. I didn't want him to feel like I was abandoning him in a time of need, but it would only be for a few days, and I figured the two of us would be inclined to pluck out each others' proverbial feathers like two old parrots if we stayed caged up together in the basement apartment awaiting his trial. I felt guilty about leaving, but Maria had done us a huge favor by getting Anton involved in the

case, and I thought that if I reminded him of that, it would be easier for him to digest that I was going to visit her.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said when I told him I was taking her up on her offer.

He didn’t often weigh in so directly and unequivocally in my affairs, preferring instead to grunt and harrumph his opinions on such matters like a donkey with hay fever. Frankly, I was a little taken aback by it and became somewhat defensive in response.

“And why is that, exactly?”

“It’s not for me to say, really. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up for somethin’ that’s not gonna last. She’s not the one for you, at least not for the long haul.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“Says the man who married a stranger to help raise someone else’s baby.”

“I listened to my instincts. It worked out okay, didn’t it? Anyway, my instincts tell me she’s not the one for you. That’s all I’m gonna say. You do what you’re gonna do.”

“I’ll go ahead and do that.”

I dropped him off at the barbershop per his request and headed back to the apartment to throw some things together for the trip. But when I opened the door to the basement flat, I was puzzled to hear muffled, pleasurable moans emanating from Leo’s bedroom, some of which were strikingly feminine in nature. I stood there for a moment with the door ajar to confirm what I was hearing and then shut it with a loud thunk that rattled the old windows in their crappy aluminum frames. The moaning stopped suddenly

as I'd predicted and was replaced by a hurried rustling of fabric – not much stayed contained within the flimsy interior walls of the old building.

Ordinarily, I'd have wanted to retreat to the confines of my own bedroom so as not to have to bear an awkward encounter when the occupants of the other room emerged, but Leo was no roommate. Forget the fact that he was technically 18, he was essentially my charge, and this was my apartment, and if there was anything indecent going on behind those doors, I felt I should know about it.

I poured myself a second cup of coffee for the day that had been lingering in the pot all morning, sat at the kitchen table, and waited. Sure enough, after much emphatic whispering from behind the door, Leo stepped out of his room and nonchalantly introduced the very young lady who trailed behind him as his friend Vanessa. From school, he added, after she'd muttered hello. I didn't cut him any slack by attempting to appear occupied, either; I merely sat there with my cup of coffee, grinning outrageously until he saw her out. She'd looked to be barely old enough to attend high school, and as she walked down the hall behind him, I noticed that the tag of her snug t-shirt was sticking straight out in back; she'd put it back on inside-out.

So all along, I'd resisted bringing Maria home after a night together out of a naïve respect for the innocence of Leo's youth and for propriety's sake in general, and here he felt it was perfectly acceptable to bring home a girl who looked to be barely out of middle school and make me an accessory to statutory rape.

When the girl had left, Leo strutted back to his room and was about to shut the door without saying anything as if nothing had happened, but I called him back out to the kitchen.

“What the hell was that?” I projected down the hallway.

“Excuse me?” he asked as he came back out.

“I said, what the hell were you doing?”

He raised his eyebrows, visibly balking at my audacity to confront him like that.

“I don’t think that’s really any of your business. I don’t answer to you; I don’t answer to nobody. I’m not a kid anymore, see.”

“That may be true, but *she* certainly was.” Leo pursed his lips in defiance.

“Yeah, well, I’m free to make my own mistakes,” he shrugged, still unconcerned.

“Like hell you are, not when you’re living rent-free in my house, not when you make me an accomplice, ‘cause if and when her daddy finds out that you’re bangin’ his little girl, I can guarantee you he’ll be bangin’ down *my* door asking how *I* could let this happen.” Now that I had his attention, I found I had more to say, despite my better instincts. “You walk around here like you’re this squeaky-clean little orphan boy, like you’re a goddamned saint, and everybody else around you has done you wrong but you can *do* no wrong. And I’m tired of it. You’re sure as hell no Oliver Twist.” I hadn’t intended for this to escalate like it was, but there was no stopping it now; it was as though the pressure valve on the whole damned thing had just blown right off.

“What, and you think you’re the fucking pope? I may be living rent-free, but you get paid for me to be here, so get off your damn soapbox already. How much they pay you? A grand a month? Twelve hundred?”

“Fraid not. Apparently you’re not worth that much.” I didn’t really mean that, and to prevent myself from saying something nastier, I abruptly left the kitchen and then returned with a manila envelope from my dresser drawer. “You wanna see how much I

get paid? It's not even from the government, it's a fucking non-profit. There," I threw the envelope on the kitchen table with the back facing up, where I'd written *LEO* in all caps. "There's your fucking checks. Never did I think for a *second* that that was my money. Happy fucking graduation, by the way – pardon me for being a little early. It's all in there. All forty bucks a week of it."

I stood there waiting, willing myself to calm the heck down, and indicated that he should open it. When he took the envelope, he peered in and hesitated like it could be some sort of practical joke and something might zap his hand when he reached in. I grabbed the envelope and dumped it out on the table, and the weeks of token checks fluttered out like oversized Monopoly money. He didn't make a move to pick any of it up, and from the look on his face, I could tell that he wanted to be anywhere else right then than where he was. I felt badly that I had yelled at him, but he'd needed the talking-to, because despite what either of us wanted to think, he *was* still just a kid, and I *was* a father figure in his life, and like it or not, we were stuck together for the time being. I hadn't wanted to lord it over him that I had been saving all of the checks for his graduation, but it wasn't any of that narcissistic, altruistic bullshit that had made me save it up for his sake. Of course I had thought about using it for myself. The amount that would accumulate if he stayed the entire school year would be non-trivial, probably enough for him to buy a slick new computer to take to college. But in real time, it wasn't going to even begin to fill the whole that was my bank account; it was lunch money. And I was tired of being the bad guy, of feeling like I had to apologize for doing something that came down to a choice to extend basic human kindness.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked, still looking at the checks on the table. Now he was the one who looked like he’d peed on the rug.

“Go where? To your room? I think we can both agree you’re a little old for that.” He seemed relieved that I was now attempting to make light of the whole thing.

“I’m sorry I brought a girl into your house.”

“Believe it or not, I understand the sentiment. Just make sure she’s legal next time, yeah?” He nodded. “And be discrete about it, will you? This isn’t a dorm; it’s where I live.”

Just then, G-pa came in from getting his haircut, and I quickly brushed the checks, which I’d already endorsed, back into the envelope and handed it to Leo, who accepted it bashfully and tucked it under his arm.

“Oh,” G-pa said, wryly, when he saw me sitting there. “I figured you’d be gone already.”

I decided not to respond, and Leo took the opportunity to escape back to his room.

The next day, I made the plans with Maria for me to travel down to Port of Spain in Trinidad, and even though I wasn’t heeding his advice, G-pa kept the remainder of his disapproval bottled up and stored away. I assured him that it was only for a few days and that I’d be back to do whatever he needed to help prepare for the trial, namely, to coach him on how to conduct himself in front of a judge and jury so that his crazy-old-kook-y side stayed home.

Miss Angela was already assisting in this effort by dragging G-pa in front of her television – an epic feat in and of itself – to watch back-to-back DVDs of *The Practice* with her commentary providing the take-home lessons for each episode. I watched a few

of the shows along with them before I left, but after it became clear that the series didn't follow the regular courtroom drama formulas, and innocent clients were convicted while several of the guilty ones got off Scott-free, I recommended that maybe she switch to something tamer, like *Matlock*, which had universally happy endings.

By the next morning, I was already riding the Metro to the airport for a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Miami and another two-hour flight to Port of Spain. Not wanting to embarrass myself further in front of Maria or her relatives, I'd checked out the only available guidebook to Trinidad and Tobago from the library, an off-brand guide that I wouldn't have spent money to get but I figured was better than nothing. I spent the flights and layover reading this pristine copy – it had apparently never been checked out – from cover to cover. I knew it was still an outsider's look into the country, but I hoped it would be a small, if somewhat frosted and slanted, window into a place I knew almost nothing about.

For instance, it revealed that the demographic breakdown was about 40% African, 40% East Indian, and 20% Syrian, Chinese, and a bunch of other ethnicities. I had pictured a more affluent version of Haiti, with African traditions dominating, but I decided that since I had already demonstrated a remarkable capacity for pigheadedness, I would do my best to relegate my assumptions to a more out-of-the-way drawer of my consciousness and adhere strictly to the facts. Besides, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my "knowledge" about this region of the world could be entirely summed up in a rapid-fire word association game. Haiti: political unrest, disease, famine, disaster. Jamaica: Bob Marley. Puerto Rico: American-ish, *West Side Story*. Cuba: Castro. Dominican Republic: invasion of. The Bahamas: Jimmy Buffet and "Kokomo."

Trinidad and Tobago: the Miss Universe Pageant and the Olympics (the only times I could recall hearing anything remotely about the nation). It was bad-bad.

As I delved deeper into the guidebook, however, it struck me as consisting of all the wrong facts. “Carnival” was actually the very first word in the introduction, but I wasn’t going there during Carnival, and besides, a week in the year of a dual-island nation seemed hardly representative of the whole cultural experience. I tried to picture how the same author might begin such an introduction to the United States. *NASCAR*. *Burning Man*. *Super Bowl Sunday*. But, go figure, nothing seemed to fit.

“Ugly” and “dirty” were two descriptors that apparently came to mind to the author when describing the capital city of Port of Spain, which I found surprising given that I thought the point of guidebooks was to sugarcoat everything so you would buy the related maps, phrasebooks, and other such guides from the same publisher. I didn’t think I would ever use the word “Trini,” which sounded vaguely like some kind of homophobic slur, or “limin” or “mas,” but now I knew how savvy the authors were that they could use these terms correctly. The whole book felt like some sort of an inside joke, but I couldn’t tell with whom the joke was shared – maybe nobody. Maybe the joke was on them.

That these facts were staring me right in the face by early afternoon as I walked off the airplane into Piarco International Airport was strange to me, that I was able to reach almost to South America in such a short amount of time and be a world away with so little effort.

The problem with visiting a post-colonial island nation such as Trinidad and Tobago (shortened in the guidebook to the quaint abbreviation “T&T,” which of course

made me think of explosives), where the residents descended from slaves, indentured laborers, immigrants, and tribes from a plethora of locales around the world in addition to the island itself having been colonized by more than one occupier, was that there were so many sensibilities one could potentially offend. Judging from the guidebook, as an American, I was an outsider's outsider, for not only did I know next to nothing (which was probably, I conceded, worse than nothing) about Caribbean collective culture or the local Trinbagonian dialect or the native Caribs, but I didn't know how much of the colonial culture had taken root in the consciousness. Do I ask for crisps or chips, or something else altogether? – I wondered, as I disembarked from the plane with my stomach gurgling in hunger. Would asking for crisps imply that I arrogantly assumed everything in a former British colony would be British simply because they had adopted cricket? If I asked for chips, would I get French fries? Was there some other word for it there that you only knew if you were from the island, and if you didn't use it you would get a dismissive smirk from the wait staff along with whatever you ordered?

Looking back, I'm not sure what precipitated such a level of anxiety over the language, but I was fairly concerned with what words I should use to describe things. I didn't want to use the Trinidadian Creole words in the guidebook for fear I would misuse them or mispronounce them or otherwise come across to the locals as the fool that I was. To put it plainly, I didn't trust guidebooks, which have always been written for and by foreigners. How did the (presumably white) male (presumably American) author Tim Evans really know whether the van from the airport was really called a "maxi-taxi" or whether the locals had always just been putting him on?

I shouldn't have gotten the guidebook. One would think that a former anthropologist would have been eager to immerse himself in an unfamiliar culture, but there's a reason archaeologists are interested in dead people; it's all guesswork and there's no one left to tell you you're wrong. I wasn't going to ask anyone where I could find the best doubles or roti; I was going to walk along the streets until I came upon food vendors, and then I would point and ask for "that." I would remain silent until spoken to. I would try to be invisible.

The view on the drive from the airport was more industry than idyllic, and I got the impression that Jimmy Buffet had never spent many of his vacations this far south in the Caribbean Sea. By the time I reached Maria's sister's neighborhood of St. James, which according to the book had produced Nobel-prizewinner V.S. Naipaul and rap star Nicki Minaj, I had seen more oil rigs than palm trees, more smokestacks than beaches, but since I hadn't earned this vacation, it seemed appropriate that my first trip to the tropics would be to an island more focused on drilling for oil to ship primarily to the United States than on attracting American tourists to go there in person.

I'd asked the driver of the airport van to drop me off at the nearest open-air market because I wanted to appear at the door with a bouquet of flowers, not just out of congratulations, but as a peace offering to Maria and her family. I didn't know how much they knew about me (if anything at all), but I thought I might need to do damage control for having mentally misplaced their home country by more than a thousand miles.

Though the guidebook had enlightened me about the island's rich Indo-Trinidadian heritage, I had assumed Maria's sister would live in one of the more Afro-centric areas and was surprised at the degree to which East Indian influences seemed to

dominate the immediate surroundings. There were brightly colored Hindi murals on some of the walls, elephant architectural accents, and silk saris on many of the women in the market stalls. I had expected bright colors, but not *these* bright colors, and not displayed in these ways. I'd arrived thinking I would be surrounded by the aesthetic of Carnival and instead I felt immersed in a miniature Taj Majal (a six foot tall replica of which, in fact, sat at the entrance to a nearby park).

It wasn't long before I came across the infamous (at least in the guidebook) "doubles," which looked essentially like a chana masala sandwich between two pieces of naan, at a stall near the edge of the fruit market where I'd arrived. After confirming that it was both soy- and dairy-free, I bought some with the currency I'd exchanged at the airport and ate it, and it was quite good, though it didn't transform into anything of mythical proportions in my mouth as the book suggested it might.

There were flowers for sale at the opposite end of the market, and I recognized baskets of papaya, melons, and pawpaw for sale on my way over. I didn't know the names of any of the flower varieties, but I purchased an oversized bouquet of gigantic fuchsia and salmon-colored blossoms to make up for my gargantuan misstep of the previous week. When I'd collected my change from the vendor and was about to look to my map for the quickest route to the address where Maria was staying, I saw the very image of Maria herself browsing up ahead in the market among the baskets of papaya, and I was suddenly very grateful for the serendipitous opportunity to reunite away from the prying eyes of her family members.

She was dressed differently than usual, more like the locals I'd seen at the airport, and her hair was adorned in a completely new way, more loose, more free. "Maria!" I

called out, but she didn't hear me, or didn't register it as directed at her. She had her back to me and was walking away, and even though I called her several more times, it was lost in the din of the marketplace and traffic, and I had to rush to catch up with her. When I reached her, I touched her shoulder gently from behind so as not to startle her, but when she turned to face me she seemed altogether flustered and puzzled to see me.

"I'm sorry, I was calling you from back there, but you didn't hear me."

"Yes?" She seemed impatient as though she were waiting for me to tell her she'd dropped something.

"I'm here!" It was all I could think of to say. "These are for you."

The look of confusion vanished and she cracked a smile.

"You have mistaken me for my sister. I'm Izze. Maria's back at the house."

"You're the one who just had twins?" I visibly looked her up and down in disbelief looking for signs that she had recently given birth, knowing that her belly should have still bulged from her swollen uterus.

She laughed, "No, that's Madeleine. I'm the twin sister? Of Maria?" the inflection in her voice indicated that I should know this, but I regretted that I knew nothing about her family other than the fact that she had several siblings, one of whom had just had twins. This wasn't something I had forgotten; she had never brought it up. But how, in the course of several months, does one neglect to mention that one has a twin? How had it not come up?

"Oh right!" I feigned understanding. "Sorry, I'm a bit disoriented from the travel. So how are the new mother and babies doing?"

“Maddie’s fine. The babies are small but starting to gain weight already; the milk comes in quickly when you’ve got two little birdies nibbling at you day and night,” she chuckled at the image, seeming relieved that it was her sister and not her enduring the trials of new motherhood. “Anyway, would you like to walk back to the house with me? I just came out for some air. The babies are sleeping, so it’s not very chaotic at the moment.”

“Please, that would be lovely.” We walked out of the market in the direction of some menacing looking storm clouds, and I was grateful that we were only around ten blocks from the house.

“So you are the aspiring architect Maria has told us about?” she asked as I fell into step beside her, apparently confusing me with Leo.

“No, uh, I’m an anthropologist?” I faltered, clearing my throat. It was still theoretically true, and I wasn’t about to go from being a future architect in her mind to a road construction worker-bee who was on indefinite leave from his position. “I used to work for the Smithsonian, but I’m between jobs at the moment. Taking some time off.”

“Oh, that must be nice.”

“It has its ups and downs.”

The buildings in the square were fairly worn, some dilapidated, but the vagrants I had read so much about seemed to be, for the most part, elsewhere – that is, with one notable exception. As we navigated the bustling streets, we came upon a shirtless man seated beside the road who was contorted in some sort of bizarre yoga pose. He had a white beard and wore a white turban and canvas shorts, and he sat leaning up against the cement foundation of a building filled with shops, with a large glass jug of coins resting

beside him. The man was humming and ahhh-ing an unfamiliar tune and was missing many of his teeth, the ones that remained seeming close to rotting away themselves. His eyelids were mostly closed, but as we came nearer to his position, it became less and less clear that he even had eyes between the lids; they were just slits with dark, empty space where the orbs of his eyes should have been. But worse than that was that if you looked at him directly, not just in the sideways glance reserved for beggars and street urchins that one means to pass without acknowledging, if you really *looked* at him, you noticed that what you thought was a yoga pose where his arms were clasped behind his back and his shins were tucked beneath him was just an optical illusion of your peripheral vision; in reality, he *had* no arms, and his legs were just stumps ending at his knees, and he was just sitting there, singing, unable to move on his own and completely at the mercy of whoever put him there and of everyone who chanced to be walking by.

I looked at Izze without turning my head but she looked straight ahead, seemingly unperturbed. *Shouldn't we stop and offer to help?* – I thought. *Shouldn't we ask if he needs someone to hold up a drink of water?* But she kept on walking, the man's presence barely registering except for in a slight quickening of her footfalls. He was probably a fixture in the neighborhood, I realized, and I deferred to her expertise in the matter, to her confidence in walking right by, though it gave me pause.

As we got closer to where the house was supposed to be, the residences became increasingly more refined and ornate until they were bordering on estate-like. I had pictured a humble row house or a detached home sided with stucco, maybe mint green or peach colored. What I was faced with as I followed Izze through an iron gate, was a Victorian mansion, complete with turrets, tricolored trim, and a meticulous garden, a

building which, if I had to have guessed, would have been well-suited to an ambassador's residence or a large bed and breakfast.

I was clearly missing something. Here I was entering into a situation whose details I was expected to be familiar with, at least in passing, and I was utterly out of my element. I felt as though I had been invited to a regular garden party only to arrive and learn that I needed to successfully complete a corn maze and scavenger hunt before I would even be admitted. I was winded and anxious, and as Maria's twin sister reached for the handle of the door, I felt like I was entering a fun house that was someone else's decidedly un-fun idea of fun.

There was a man sitting in the parlor near the foyer, a white man, who spoke with a slight accent and was having a phone conversation over what sounded like a business matter and waved at us as we came in. A tray of tea and cookies (biscuits?) rested on the coffee table before him and he was simultaneously talking, sipping tea, and typing on a computer on his lap. A young woman in servants' clothes, whose broad features and dark skin reminded me of certain aboriginal peoples of the Pacific, greeted us at the door and offered to take my bags, but I demurred and said I'd like to keep them if she didn't mind. Izze introduced me and asked her to let Maria know I was here, then motioned for me to sit in the parlor with the man on the phone while she skirted off to use the restroom. The man had watched our exchange and waved me in himself when he saw me approach.

"Just make sure the sign is hanging above the stage where everyone can see it rather than below, and the logo should be thirty percent bigger than it is in the proof. Yeah, thirty percent. Yeah, that's it. Okay? Send it over to the office when it's done. Okay, bye." The man lowered the phone and closed the computer to shake my hand.

“Sorry, work doesn’t stop just because your wife has twins. You must be Ranger? I’m Klaas.” So not British then, I thought as I returned his handshake. I tried piecing together how Maria’s siblings went from being abandoned and scattered to relatives as children to congregating now under the roof of this European man’s wealthy manor, but I supposed that the sister with the twins must have married into it.

“You’re from Europe?” I asked, not trusting my assessment of his accent to be any more precise than that.

“Actually, the Netherlands Antilles, Curaçao to be exact.”

“Ah,” I said, though I didn’t know where that was either. He went on to volunteer that he was the chief public relations officer for one of the major petroleum companies operating on the island. He seemed eager to talk about himself, and when I asked how he’d met Maria’s sister, he said that she was working for the government agency overseeing regulations of the drilling operations when they met at a conference, and he was rather proud of the fact that he’d managed to literally get in bed with the regulators (though of course he hastened to mention that she’d resigned as soon as they began their relationship). He went on to explain that they had tried to conceive for years to no avail, and the twins were the result of two years’ worth of fertility treatments, though what kind of treatments they were, he didn’t elaborate.

“We were already looking into adoption proceedings, when bam! She was getting carsick left and right and I knew she was pregnant.” He was so pleased, so tickled with himself, that one couldn’t help but share a little in his enthusiasm.

“That’s fantastic,” I said, only then beginning to wonder what was keeping Maria. “Listen, do you know where Maria is at the moment? I think the maid went to get her, but she never came back.”

“Oh, you mean Esmeralda? She’s the wet-nurse; the maid has the day off. Anyway, you know how twins can be, they never sleep at the same time and you would go insane if you tried to nurse them all night on your own. Maddie is of course doing the bulk of it for the bonding, but of course they need breast milk exclusively. It’s much better for their brains.”

“Right,” I nodded, but I hadn’t heard the term wet-nurse used in anything but a historical context, and I didn’t realize that it was still a thing, an occupation. I couldn’t imagine nursing twins myself, though, so I suppose I didn’t really blame them since they had the money, but I wondered where Esmeralda’s baby was, and who was feeding *it*. But that was me getting sentimental about things again like I do sometimes, and it isn’t really helpful to anyone. I supposed that what mattered was that Esmeralda had a job and she was providing for her family.

“But Maria?” I added, reminding him of why I’d mentioned the maid. “Is she here?”

“Let’s go see,” he said abruptly standing up and heading for the staircase in the entryway. “She was helping put the bubs to sleep a little while ago. She might be still in the nursery.”

“Oh, I don’t want to disturb them,” I said, a note of caution creeping into my voice. I hated to think of the ire that would rain down on me for waking up the infants with my arrival.

“Newborns sleep through anything,” he insisted, brushing off my concern, so I tentatively followed him up the stairs.

When we reached the landing, it was clear to me that this stairway represented only one wing of the sprawling mansion, and we tiptoed down the hall passed a polished banister that smelled heavily of bergamot to a grand room at the end. The door was slightly ajar and he slowly pushed it open all the way. There on a daybed lay a woman who had to have been Maria’s sister Madeleine. She was upright but asleep, her belly still swollen like the face of Half Dome, with her bathrobe open on one side and a tiny infant suckling at her breast. Maria sat off to the side of the spacious room in a rocking chair facing us with the other baby in her lap who appeared to be nursing her pinky. She raised her spare hand to her lips in a silent shush, and so we just stood there watching them from the doorway without saying anything.

The babies were clad only in their diapers, and their skin was shriveled and pink, like that of piglets; from across the room in the dim light from the curtained window, they didn’t look anything like Maria or her sister. As I glanced from one baby to the other, Maria returned her attention to the one attempting to devour her finger, and in that moment I couldn’t tell you why I was there. I failed to understand why this man whom I’d just met had taken me into the bedroom of his baby girls where his wife, whom I had yet to meet, lay partially exposed in the most intimate of poses, not even aware herself that I was there. I could not have felt more uncomfortably out of place had I parachuted through a stranger’s roof directly into their living room.

I waved to Maria to indicate that I was going back downstairs, though I’m not sure that she saw me as she directed her gaze downward to the being in her lap. After a

short delay, Klaas pulled the door gently closed and followed me back down to the parlor.

“Isn’t it something?” he marveled, visibly moved by the image of his slumbering newborn daughters. I merely nodded in response, not knowing what to say to the man.

He noticed his laptop on the coffee table and seemed to collect himself fully back to the present.

“It looks like they’ll be up there for awhile, and I’m afraid I have to go shower and shave for a video conference-call in a short while. Can I get you something to drink? You know they distill Angostura bitters right here in Port of Spain.”

“Yes I did know that.” I had read about it in the guidebook. “Ice water would be great, thanks.”

He walked away and quickly returned with a bottle of water from the refrigerator and told me to make myself comfortable until someone came down. I suddenly wondered where Izze had gone, and if there were any other siblings or relatives lurking around the compound, but I didn’t think I would get to find out anytime soon. I seemed to be nothing but an afterthought to everyone in the house except this man who was manic, I supposed, from the recent births of his only children.

I noticed that the flowers that I had bought at the market were already beginning to wilt on the coffee table, so I gathered the bouquet and walked through several rooms to get to the kitchen so I could rummage around for a vase. We’d always kept them under the kitchen sink, but in this kitchen there were three sinks. As I went about opening all the cupboards methodically, I noticed a tribal mask on the wall above one of the counters,

which made me imagine how this whole scene would have looked at the beginning of the Holocene.

Klaas would have been the chief of some distant tribe who'd claimed Madeleine as his bride, probably after killing her father in a raid, a dispute over hunting grounds perhaps. There would be no wet-nurse, but maybe one of the closer relatives of Maddie who had older toddlers would help with the nursing of the twins in order to keep the peace; if the babies were up all night crying, no one in the village would get any sleep in their mud and grass huts. But the twins, the twins would be revered as significant, magical even – a sign from the gods. The clan would have given credit to Klaas' extraordinary virility, not understanding that it was an extra egg from the woman's womb that had made it possible.

Maria and Izze would also have been claimed as Klaas' wives in all likelihood, which left me, a low-ranking male from Klaas' tribe with no wealth or feats of valor to my name. I wouldn't even be there. Someone would have killed me off long before.

I finally found the vases in the cupboards underneath the kitchen island and chose the only one that didn't dwarf my bouquet, a glazed clay piece that looked like it had been handmade. After cutting off the tips of the stems with the kitchen shears, I spruced and primped the flowers as best I could to make an attractive display, and with still no sign of activity anywhere in the house, I grabbed a pad of paper, wrote a note to place beside the vase, and left.

A passing thundershower had come and gone during my short time inside, and I strolled along the sidewalks with the trees still dripping rainwater onto my face, crossing a carpet of freshly fallen hibiscus blossoms and crushing them into a messy pulp under

my feet. I came upon something that smelled of manure but realized too late that it was a ginkgo tree whose spherical, orange berries stank like an elephant's latrine and were now squished and embedded into the soles of my loafers; someone had probably planted the female tree by mistake.

I debated whether to return to where the limbless man had been sitting to see if I could offer assistance other than cash, never being one to alleviate those pangs of guilt by throwing money at beggars. The man was clearly being exploited by someone; he was entirely dependent on other human beings for the most basic survival needs, so someone had to have put him there, and I hated to think that the only thing they thought he was good for was begging (though I couldn't think of what he might want to do that he *could* do besides sitting around and singing, so maybe he didn't mind all that much after all). I wanted to ask him but I knew I wouldn't have the guts. It wasn't my place, and I didn't want to turn him into a curio. I didn't want to acknowledge with my nosiness that he was a freak show.

I ultimately wound up back on that street entirely by accident, for though I believed I was walking in a straightish line by following the same street, it had really been a spiral and took me back towards the shops and marketplace. At the moment, I wished that I smoked cigarettes so I could have an excuse for loitering around to watch the man from a distance, not worrying, of course, about his opinion since he couldn't see but about what people walking by would think. I compromised and bought a glass of soursop juice from a vendor who was preparing it directly from the fruit, which I sipped with a straw while squatting across the narrow road diagonally from the man in the white

turban, who seemed to me to be singing a single, unbroken tune that went on and on, somehow managing to never loop back on itself.

I watched the shoppers bustling to and fro with their bundles and slowly consumed my cloudy white juice, which looked alarmingly milk-like, though I had watched it flow straight from the flesh of the fruit into the cup and so I wasn't concerned about there being any dairy. As I considered the man's circumstances and looked at him sideways (though only occasionally so as not to appear as though I was gawking, which I suppose I was), I got the impression that he was now turning his head a bit and singing in my direction on purpose, and I even believed that I saw him wink at me once with one of his empty eyelids, and the feeling made me shiver though it was quite warm.

When I'd finished my drink and no longer had an excuse to loiter, I crossed the street to browse the wares on display in front of the shops near where he was sitting. I thought about how many times in my life I had relied on other people intervening to prevent me from dying, even though it was usually members of my own family who'd saved me. Despite the fact that this guy didn't appear to be close to death or in any imminent danger, I still felt responsible for him in some way. I felt culpable. But what could I realistically do? I pictured myself offering to hold up a sandwich to his mouth or physically carrying him to the bathroom, but the image seemed grotesque and bizarre, and I couldn't get passed it. Besides, I thought, I would be gone soon, and he would still be there day after day until he died, and me bringing him a sandwich wasn't going to change that.

By the time I had reached the stall adjacent to his perch against the wall, I had decided that I would have to say something, though I still didn't know what, and my heart

was pounding like a jackhammer at the thought of speaking to him at all. But it turned out that I didn't have to think of something because he spoke first.

“Do not feel bad,” he said in heavily accented English. “I would not give me money if I were you either.”

I looked around, but there was no one else he could have been talking to; everyone else was minding their own business in their own worlds. At first I felt like slipping away without responding, but the impulse quickly subsided and I decided at last to engage him.

“Can I get you anything?” was my feeble response. “Like a drink or something?”
How did you get like this? Who brought you here?

“I would like a sign.” I thought that he meant a sign from the universe, but I couldn't really tell what he'd meant because he wasn't looking at anything and gave no other cues.

“I'm sorry?” I asked, for clarification.

“The wind blew away my sign. Would you make me another one? Maybe you can find an empty box?” I looked around at the mounds of empty cardboard boxes stacked behind many of the stalls and figured that would be easy enough to do.

“What did you want it to say?” I asked when I had returned with a sturdy white box from an okra stall. I decided I could write on the bottom and prop it up for him so people walking by could see it.

“God Bless.”

“That's it?” *Not, “Please can you give me a drink of water?”* – I thought, fairly disappointed in his choice. I noticed that he was somehow mostly dry despite the brief

rain shower that had just passed through the area and wondered whether one of the vendors had been kind enough to cover him with a towel or a tarp like they did for their goods to help keep him dry.

“That is it.”

I fished through my bag for an indelible pen and wrote what he’d asked me to write on the box, but I added something else that I felt at the time was important to say. When I placed the box beside him and stepped back to have a look, it read:

WHAT ARE ~~YOU~~ WE WAITING FOR?

GOD BLESS

“Okay, I put it next to your jar there,” I said. “Anything else?”

“No, it’s okay. You can go.” And like that, he was singing again, aiming not at me this time, but back out to the street, to all the people walking by.

I didn’t linger in the square after that, but instead took the shorter route back to Maria’s sister’s house. When I got back, Maria was reading a magazine alone in the sitting room. She brightened when I came in, stood up, and kissed me the way I’d been dreaming about since she’d been gone, with her tongue earnestly pressed against mine as if she were searching for something, and it very nearly weakened my resolve to tell her what I needed to tell her.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” she beamed, clearly in the throes of a contact high from the births of her sister’s children.

“Yes, they’re beautiful.”

“I’m so glad you made it.” She motioned for me to sit next to her on the sofa and took my hand in hers.

“Maria, I need to go home.” She let go of my hand and flashed a look of concern.

“What’s happened? Is something wrong with your grandpa? Or Leo?”

“No, no. At least, not that I know of. I mean, aside from the usual, that is.” Jesus, man, spit it out already, I thought to myself. “Sorry, I know this is going to sound awful of me – it *is* awful of me – but I really shouldn’t be here. I need to go back and be with G-pa, and I’m sorry that I didn’t figure that out until I got here, but I didn’t. I will pay you back for the airline miles; I don’t know when, but I will definitely pay you back.” When it fully registered to her that I meant I wanted to turn around and leave immediately, her usually perfect composure began to crumble and fall apart like a newspaper in an unexpected rain shower.

“Wait, there’s no new emergency? You just want to go home? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I know. It’s bad timing.”

“Bad timing? Fuck, Ranger, you just can do whatever the hell you want, can’t you. Nobody else matters. You just accept someone’s charity and then walk all over them.”

“Charity? Look, I’m sorry about this, but I mean it when I say I will pay you back.”

“I’m not talking about the tickets. I don’t give a crap about the tickets. I’m talking about Anton’s services. About Leo – the money from the agency. Everything!”

“I don’t follow.”

“I set that up for *you*, and you treat it like it’s an obligation, like it’s a burden to have him there.”

“Uh, last time I checked, Leo was the one accepting charity from me *when he moved into my house.*”

“It’s only charity if you don’t get paid.”

“Oh, so you are seriously trying to claim that you set that up for my sake and not Leo’s? That money isn’t even enough to cover dinner and a movie.”

“You had no job! And no job prospects! And I saw the balances on your ATM receipts, there was no way you were going to make it without some sort of assistance.” I didn’t want to haggle over the fact that the stipend was nowhere near enough to keep me from going under if I hadn’t gotten a job precisely when I did; it was now beside the point.

“Look, we are both weirdly emotional right now, and I don’t wanna fight with you. You gotta believe me that I am not doing this to be a dick, though I concede that maybe I am one independently of this incident. The fact is, your family needs you right now, and when I saw you here with them, it just became clear to me that mine needs me too.” Christ, that was corny, and the glare on her face told me I was losing her; I needed to be more genuine than that if I was going to salvage any shred of dignity that was still left in there. “Come on, you don’t really want *me* here. You want a body. Am I right?” In response to that, her glare softened into a scowl and she looked away. “Your twin sister, whom I wasn’t even aware that you had, had me confused me with Leo the ex-foster kid. I don’t know anything *about* you, or your family, or your life, and it’s not because I haven’t been listening. I think it’s because you want it that way.”

She looked back at me and was clearly still furious, but she didn't have anything to offer in reply. I told her to give my congratulations and regards to her sister, and asked that she tell them I had to leave to attend to something that had come up back home, though I told her I understood if she wanted to vent about what I jerk I was instead.

The hardest thing my body ever did was to leave her there on that sofa, to resist whisking her up to some forgotten loft in that grandiose residence and pulling her close into me as I'd dreamt of doing for weeks. But I did resist. As clumsily as I'd expressed it, I'd meant every word that I'd said, and some indescribable, illogical, powerful *something* was telling me to get the fuck home already.

"Just do me a favor, and don't call me when you get back," she said, swiftly pulling away after allowing me to kiss her on her forehead. "I'm not made of fucking Teflon."

After I left the house, I wandered around for an hour or so before catching a taxi to take me to the airport. I had just enough currency for the trip back and a bit more, but I didn't ask for my change from the cabdriver since it wouldn't have been worth exchanging. It had been foolish of me to come, and I'd realized that. I was already composing a formal letter of apology to Maria for the confusion, for selfishly accepting her invitation, and for using her airline miles, and I once again pledged to reimburse her as soon as I could.

Seeing her there with her family had jostled me good and hard, like snapping clean wet laundry before hanging it on the line, enough to make me recognize that I needed to go home and be with G-pa, even if all I had to offer him was my company. I

knew it was strange and awful of me to show up like that and just turn around and leave, but sometimes you had to do the rotten thing to be true to someone you loved.

What I didn't tell her was how I'd felt when I saw her holding and rocking that newly born child, that it was inconceivably beautiful to me in a way that I had not known I had the capacity to appreciate. The scene as a whole had been troublesome, mostly because I had no place being in it to begin with, but the image of her alone with that tiny baby in her embrace had stirred something in my gut, something slight and faint, like breath on a thin curtain or a veil – an exhalation.

Chapter 31

There are certain times after you make a mistake when life seems to be a conscious force, flooding you with a wash of circumstances demanding regret and remorse above and beyond what seems necessary for the lesson to have been learned. Such was the case when I returned and found that Leo had been arrested and charged as an accomplice in Steven's scheme. Steven had since changed his story and was now alleging that G-pa had been the ringleader and Leo the scout and hawker of the stolen merchandise, a story corroborated by a young man named Tyrese who had also been arrested in connection with the robberies and who happened to be a longtime acquaintance of Leo and had prior convictions on his record.

As G-pa and Miss Angela filled me in over coffee late at night when I got back – they had tried my phone while I was in Trinidad but it had been off – both Steven and Tyrese had agreed to plead guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence for cooperating with the prosecutors and testifying against G-pa and Leo. Absurdly, Leo's bail had been set at limits none of us could afford because he had, until recently, been a ward of the state and was deemed a flight risk in that he had no proof of permanent residence and no legitimate family, and his social worker could not be reached because she was out of the country at an unknown (to the court) location.

I had dozed on the plane from Miami and presently tried to reflect on where the day had taken me, but instead I found myself trying to pick up the pieces of a life that, like an ugly clay pot that had been a gift from a friend, I hadn't even wanted, but now that it was broken I was lamenting its loss because of what it had signified.

“We’re meeting with Anton tomorrow. He’s already agreed to take up Leo’s case, but he’s not sure what he can do,” Miss Angela explained as she refilled my coffee.

“There’s nothing *to* do.” G-pa was reserved and quiet in the way I remembered him being from my childhood, and he stared into his mug, focusing, it seemed, on something past the coffee and beyond the bottom of the cup, straight through the table. “I’ll have to go down there and do the right thing.”

“Which is...?” I asked.

“Plead guilty. Like the first lawyer said, they’ll give me probation. I’ll take full responsibility and insist that Leo had nothing to do with it.”

“They’ll say you’re protecting him,” I maintained.

“So what? We’ll bring in character witnesses who will all say there’s no way Leo could have been involved in something like that.” It was hard to believe that G-pa was speaking in basic legalese after only a couple days’ worth of TV marathons, but there it was.

“People would say the same thing about you, though.”

“Not from around here. Not enough of them. I haven’t been around long enough.” G-pa was one of the most stubborn men I knew, and he had that look about him then – that resolute look of a big old dog whose put all his energy into getting up onto the couch and there’s no way in hell you’re going to get him down – that said we were done arguing; he had made his decision. But I knew the reason G-pa had resisted this option so vehemently before was that he thought it mattered what somebody was on paper. He didn’t care what people thought, but he had respect for ceremony, and to be officially considered a criminal would have been a great wound to his pride.

“But what if they don’t give you probation? If you say you’re the ringleader, they might be inclined to give you a harsher sentence.” I didn’t know what I would do if they actually put him in prison for a crime he didn’t commit; I thought I might go crazy.

“Well then, I’ll have another tale to tell, then, won’t I.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, and there was nothing else we could really do until morning. The three of us shuffled off to our respective beds, and all I could think as I brushed my teeth was how Leo was just a boy spending his first night in jail, and if he had never met me he wouldn’t be there, and there was nothing I could do about it until morning.

But there was. I could call Maria, now that I had a number for her. But it was late at night, and I hadn’t exactly ingratiated myself to her family by showing up and disappearing with little explanation, and she had expressly forbidden me from calling her, and what if I woke the babies? Though realistically, the house was so huge that there was no way they would hear a phone ringing all the way up in their nursery, and I reasoned that they were probably awake and nursing anyway. I didn’t know where the phone was or who would answer it, and I wanted desperately for G-pa or Miss Angela to make the call, but that would have been a cop-out, and I knew it.

As I dialed the number for the house, I dreaded the prospect of Klaas answering the phone, fearing that he would interrogate me for bailing on them like that after he had welcomed me into his home. But I needn’t have worried; it was Esmeralda, the wet-nurse, who picked up on the other end.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” I said when she answered. Her quiet voice had an airy quality to it through the phone, like tall, dry grass in a breeze.

“I am awake,” she replied, and I couldn’t tell from her spooky declaration whether she was simply stating a fact and that I’d indeed woken her up or if she meant that she had already been up when I’d called.

Where is your baby? Why aren’t you with her?

“Can you get Maria for me? It’s very urgent. It’s about a student of hers who’s in trouble; please tell her that.”

“Okay,” she whispered, and I wondered if she was being especially quiet because the twins were nearby or if that was just the way she talked on the phone.

It was several minutes before I heard anything on the other line, and in that time I thought or imagined I heard tiny little breaths rising and falling, syncopated like hushed maracas, *huh-huh ahhh, huh-huh ahhh*, somewhere in the room where the phone was resting. I tried to guess what Maria might say if and when she picked up. “*You’ve got a lot of nerve,*” was one phrase that came to mind.

“What’s happened?” she asked instead, bypassing whatever feelings of anger she must have had towards me out of concern for Leo – she had to have known it was about him.

“Leo’s been arrested. For stealing the appliances and TVs. He’s in jail and the bail is too high and we can’t get him out,” and just like that, the tears and snot began to gush out of me like a flash flood, whisking me away in a deluge of unfiltered emotion that took me utterly by surprise. I felt like a complete boob.

“It’s okay, it’s gonna be okay,” she said, probably referring to Leo, rather than to comfort me.

“It’s not okay!” I sobbed, feeling at the same time embarrassed, relieved, and wholly incapable of putting a stop to the crying.

“I’ll wire the money or charge it to my credit card, it’s fine. He’s fine. This sort of thing happens all the time.” She sounded concerned but confident, a little bemused by my outburst, and I wished then that I could have shared in her grace.

“Not to him,” I sniffed, wiping my nose on my shirt sleeve.

“He’ll be fine,” she repeated, and though she was speaking to me like I was a toddler who’d scraped his knee, the tone and timbre of her voice were soothing, and the storm of tears quickly began to pass.

“I am so sorry,” I said. *I am so sorry.*

“About what, Ranger? You were right, it was silly of me to have asked you to come. It was maudlin, really.” I could tell from her voice that she was trying to save face by appearing infinitely strong and impenetrable, despite what she’d said when I left, that that was the role she felt she needed to play. She’d thought I meant I was sorry about leaving, which I was, but I had meant in the greater sense. Sorry about the mess I’d made of things. Sorry for having gotten involved in people’s lives who would have been better off without me, and not in a self-pitying sort of way for once, but in a genuine I-fucked-up-and-am-finally-taking-responsibility kind of way.

“Well that too, but I mean that I’m sorry about Leo. You trusted me to take care of him and I totally screwed it up. I didn’t know Steven was like that, or I wouldn’t have brought him by.”

“Leo can take care of himself; this is not on you. I told you that all he needed was a couch, and you gave him that, right? Don’t be a fool and make this about you. Now where’s he at? How much do you need?”

Her rebuke was mild but effective, and I cleared my throat and dried my eyes. “We need to put down five thousand.”

“Done. Fill out the paperwork with the bondsman and tell him to call me for the money. I’ve got the phone, so it’s not going to wake anybody up except those of us who were up already.” Somewhere in the very distant background I heard one of the newborns crying and I sympathized with its plight; only days before it had left this warm, dark, nourishing place and had come out into the relative cold where it had to work to get sustenance and everything was foreign and unfamiliar and generally indifferent to its suffering.

“Thanks.” I couldn’t bring myself to say anything else. It was the second time in a week I had called desperate for her help, and it would have been stupid to think that I could have said anything that would have made things better. “I know you didn’t do it for me, but thanks. For being above it.”

“It’s what I do.”

* * * *

The bail bonds office was about as spare as you could get for a business, just a single row of bench chairs bolted to the floor, a small flat screen TV secured to the wall behind the empty counter, and one large, framed floral print hanging on another wall, the

kind of pastel still-life that was meant to be a token calming influence on the generally agitated clientele, but instead looked as though the artist had only found dusty, fake lilies to use as inspiration, and it was really rather depressing to look at it head-on. That was it, no carpet, no magazines, no brochures, no ads. I found it oddly refreshing that one could be under no illusions as to what this place was about: selling insurance that your loved one wouldn't skip town, and if they did, someone with a battering ram and a shotgun would be at your door to haul them back to jail.

The woman behind the counter surprised me, first by being a woman running a bail bonds office on her own at 1 AM, and second by being dressed in professional clothes. I don't know what I'd pictured – Daisy Dukes and a tank top maybe, tattoos up and down – but it seemed this was a serious business, and if I hadn't known where I was, I might've guessed from looking around that I was at an airport rental car agency.

I was the only one in the office besides Cherise, the bail bondswoman, and she interviewed Maria on the phone about Leo's history while I filled out the paperwork. It felt good to be useful, even though I couldn't have gotten him out on my own, having drained my bank account and nearly maxed out my credit cards from the period of unemployment. Maria had had experience with this sort of thing before, and she knew the right things to say. It helped that Leo had impressive-sounding references from the Building Museum and Howard University which Cherise intended to check in the morning, but generally, his impeccable record, grades, and standing in the community, along with Maria's five grand, were what got him out of jail by 5 AM that morning.

When I showed up at the Central Detention Facility (otherwise known as the D.C. Jail) to collect Leo and take him home, I was a little worried that he would blame me, but

I was even more nervous that he wouldn't, that he would just chalk it up to bad luck, which would have made me feel much, much worse. Because it was only a couple hours until dawn, he'd essentially spent the night in jail anyway, so my efforts to prevent that had ultimately failed.

"Thanks, man," he said to me when he'd gathered his things and walked out of the processing area.

"I'm sorry it took so long. We had to get the money from Maria; she's the one to thank." I looked him over for signs of acute stress, but he seemed relaxed enough as we went out to my car, though obviously fatigued.

"It doesn't matter. I didn't expect anyone to come at all. Like the court said, I don't have any people." At that, my heart sank, though he had stated it as a simple matter of fact; that was the world he lived in.

"Well, clearly they were wrong." I wasn't trying to have a moment with him. I hadn't earned a moment, especially after our confrontation before I left, but I wanted to communicate that he mattered, though I quickly changed the subject so he wouldn't feel obligated to respond. "Do you need anything before we head home? Do you want to go get something to eat?"

"Did you not make it to Trinidad or something?" he asked, just remembering that I wasn't supposed to be in D.C. "Tell me you didn't come back because of me."

"No, dude, you're not *that* important," I joked. "But seriously, though, I didn't even know about your trouble till I got back. I felt like a chump for leaving town while G-pa was just hanging around waiting, so I turned around and came back. The whole thing was misguided; she's really too good for me." I know he was just a kid, but he felt

so much older sometimes when I talked to him, and it felt good to be open about what was going on in my life for a change.

“Not gonna argue with you there.”

“Oh thanks,” I said in a mock-offended tone.

“What, she’d wind up supporting your ass while you tried to find yourself, and ten years down the road, all that’s changed is she’d be a lot poorer and you’d be sellin’ junk pottery at an artists’ stall in Eastern Market.” I could always count on Leo to be frank, and it was no different from anything that G-pa ever said, but it somehow stung a little more coming from a young high school student who had his shit together way more than I did at the moment. He was where I used to be, the scholarships, the life goals, and being around him more than anything else made me feel ashamed.

“True that,” I nodded. “So about the food? Do you want any?”

“Nah, I don’t have an appetite. I just want to shower and get in my own bed.”

“I think we can arrange that.” I felt the same way after traveling all day long, and once we were home, I showered after Leo did. We didn’t talk about the criminal charges on the way home, and I didn’t tell him about G-pa’s decision to plead guilty; it could wait until we’d all had some sleep, which G-pa was already doing obnoxiously loudly when we arrived.

After the shower, it had never felt so good to put on a clean undershirt and pajama pants, like slipping on my own skin again. Before I went to bed, I filled a glass of water and saw on my way back to my room that Leo’s lamp light was still on under his door, so I knocked softly to say goodnight. I heard him get out of bed, and when he opened the door, I could tell by the glossy sheen on his face that he had been crying and had hastily

wiped away the tears. There was still a vigorous tremor in his upper lip and he looked down at the floor instead of into my eyes.

It wasn't what I'd expected. I said, "Hey," as gently as I could and then took him in my arms into a tight bear hug, which he welcomed with a choke and a sigh. I noticed that he smelled familiar and realized it was because he'd been using my soap and so he smelled like me. "We're gonna fix it. It's gonna be okay." I felt his tears spatter on the sleeve of my undershirt like thick raindrops and pool on my skin underneath.

"I know," he said, and we wiped our eyes and went to bed.

Chapter 32

We had an appointment for eleven the next morning with Anton to figure out what to do about Leo's and G-pa's cases, and it was a struggle to get out of bed after the long night. Miss Angela insisted on coming with us, saying, "I don't want you all doing this without me." When we arrived at the office, G-pa announced that he wanted to meet with Anton privately before everybody else came in and we talked about Leo, and I assumed he wanted to discuss his intention to change his plea to guilty in an attempt to combat the charges against Leo.

The two of them emerged from the office nearly twenty minutes later, and Anton appeared quite changed by the encounter. I couldn't adequately read his expression, but he was significantly paler than before, and his body language was softer, less clipped and formal than usual; even his warrior's ponytail seemed to droop. He let us all into his office and paused before he spoke, glancing over at G-pa, before continuing.

"So I'm a little surprised by this development, but I honestly don't think the prosecution has a case against Leonardo, here."

"It's Leo," I said.

"Leo, then. Both men have prior convictions, and Leo has been, by all accounts, a model citizen his entire life. He's employed, his expenses are low, and there really isn't a motive that I think would stick. I think the other defendants know they'll get a harsher sentence from their priors, and they're just sniffing out a deal, even if it stinks."

We all nodded in understanding.

"But it makes things difficult for Richard," he continued.

"Dick," I corrected.

“Dick,” he acknowledged. “I think if he pleads guilty and testifies that Leo had nothing to do with it that we can get probation for Dick and the charges dropped for Leo.” We all sort of looked at Leo, then, who looked at G-pa and nodded ever-so-slightly in gratitude, which brought a shine to G-pa’s eyes. Never could so small a visual gesture have been felt so strongly, or so it seemed to me.

“What’ll happen to Steven and Tyrese?” I asked.

“With Dick pleading guilty, the deal will be off the table and they’ll have to face the charges head-on.”

“Do you need us to testify on behalf of Leo?” I asked, motioning to myself and Miss Angela. Anton looked at both of us and cleared his throat.

“Only if they don’t drop the charges. In that case, we’d definitely need your testimony,” he said to Miss Angela, “but to be honest,” he added, looking at me, “your financial troubles and spotty employment record of late are problematic, and I think we’d be better off without it. We would need Maria’s input as his social worker, though, as well as potentially a contribution from Leo’s mentor at Howard University.” So it’s on the record, then, I thought. I was officially a bad influence.

The rest of the meeting focused on strategies, logistics, and future meetings, and I suppose I tuned most of it out. The important thing to me was that if everything went as planned, nobody would go to prison, which may as well have been Siberia or the underworld as far as I was concerned. It was a place with which I had no experience, and with which no one I had ever known had had any experience, and it was a place where you weren’t supposed to go if you’d done everything right. But here G-pa and Leo had done everything right, and there was a disconcertingly real chance that one or both of

them might end up there for an unspecified amount of time, and I felt as though all of the assumptions I had about the world and my place in it were utterly worthless, like I'd jumped from a tall building with a safety net at the bottom, but someone removed the net while I was still in the air and now I was just falling.

As we drove back to the house, I looked at G-pa in the rearview mirror, who'd given up the passenger seat in deference to Miss Angela.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I asked.

"I'm for damned sure," he said, and he never looked back.

* * * *

Nothing much happened between then and the sentencing hearing that didn't go as expected. The prosecution dropped Leo's charges once G-pa agreed to plead guilty, and we all just waited around after that, filling up our days with doing laundry, preparing meals, and doing the dishes so that we wouldn't have to dwell on G-pa's unknown fate. I didn't trust the system to give him probation, and I gathered that G-pa didn't either. He spent much of those days holed up behind the screens in the living room, I guessed mentally preparing himself for the prospect of living in a confined space. Whether he was asleep in there or awake, I couldn't know, but I thought that if it were potentially my last couple weeks before going to prison, I'd want to live it up a bit more.

On the day of the hearing, we all got dressed in our Sunday best to put in a respectable show of support for G-pa. Even Maria, who was back from her trip overseas, arrived at the courthouse in a pastel suit and church hat wearing white heels and white

pantyhose. Miss Angela wore a navy blue pantsuit, and Leo had on a grey suit from a thrift store that was a couple sizes too big. The tan suit that I pulled out for the occasion was the one which I usually wore to weddings. I guess I was hoping that the happiness vibrations from those ceremonies would infuse the hearing with echoes of optimism and somehow influence the outcome; I was only superstitious when a situation called for it, and this one seemed to be dire enough to warrant it.

G-pa, who hadn't had the opportunity to attend a wedding in decades, wore the suit which he took out for funerals, black coat, black tie, and before he'd matted down his wiry grey hair with gel, he'd looked a little like Einstein without the mustache.

It would turn out to be one of the last times all five of us were together, and had I known that, I believe I would have taken a picture for posterity, though it would have seemed somewhat inharmonious given the circumstances. Considering the fact that the events following the proceeding were somewhat difficult to process, to say the least, it would have been nice to have had that moment of staid, dignified calm preserved for memory.

As it turned out, G-pa never even spoke at his hearing. Apparently, the sentence had already been negotiated between the prosecution and Anton as a result of some information that was brought to their attention through pretrial services, and there was nothing to deliberate. None of us except for G-pa knew that, however, and we were all elated, then immediately stupefied, when the judge announced he was letting G-pa out on supervised release "due to the extenuating circumstances and the court's acknowledgement of the defendant's declining health and terminally ill prognosis."

After all that, we had to learn he was dying of cancer from a judge. Since we were hearing it for the first time – though I conceded that I probably should have realized it before – it had indeed felt like a judgment, as if the court itself was condemning him to a death sentence.

He didn't look back at us when the sentence was delivered but stared instead at the seal of the court above the judge's bench, and I suppose I'd never looked at it closely myself, but when I did, it seemed to me that the eagle was flashing everyone, that it had spread its legs in order to present its cock to the world until someone on the committee had thought better of it and slapped a banner over it in a last-minute, half-hearted nod to humility. That was the real story, the one they probably told all the freshman officials when they got their tour. That underneath that flag was a big F-you.

Chapter 33

I know you don't know it yet, but I'm goin downhill fast, Ranger. The other day I was tinkerin in the yard out back and I had a sneezing fit from a gust of wind that had blown up a cloud of dust and dirt into my face. It wasn't until I stopped sneezing that I realized I had pissed myself, just like that. I am just glad that I wasn't out in public, but it doesn't change the shock of it when you're standin there in your own puddle of mess. They said this would happen, and they were right, and I'm tellin you this so you understand that this is not a way to live as a grown man. I don't have it in me to buy myself diapers so I bought some of those pads for women so the store clerk would think they were for my wife. That's what it's come down to, your grandpa is wearin sanitary napkins and rollin them up in newspaper bags that I carry around in my pockets so I can hide them in the trash. I think you will understand why this can't continue much longer.

There are things that I'm not gonna be able to tell you that you're just gonna have to figure out for yourself. Forgive me for gettin all philosophical on you (I had to get up and ask Miss Angela how to spell that one – damned thing wasn't under 'F'), but that's what you do in my situation. I'm not sad, really. I don't think I'll be joining your Grams anywhere, because I don't think there's anywhere else to go, but I didn't want to live another twenty years like a recluse on that ranch, tho I loved that place as much as anyone could. I know you hated how far away we lived from so-called civilization, but there were always people comin and goin, and livin so far away from people made it that much more important when we got together with them. This is why I had my music.

I heard on the radio once, some science program on the public station – see you can learn things in other places besides books – that there aren't any primate

communities with males numbering greater than eighteen, that any more than that and tensions and rivalries make them tear each other apart. But humans have lived in groups that numbered over a thousand for ages, even in prehistoric times, and the scientists, or anthropologists I guess it was – I know that was your thing, don't think I didn't pay attention – said that they think we were able to do it and keep the peace because of music. That when we play together our brains release hormones – and yes, I know what that is, tho I forget what this one was called – that calm us down and make us feel friendlier toward each other, and that doesn't happen when we just talk to one another. You can never walk in another man's shoes, but you can play his music, and that's as close as you're ever gonna get. Not listening to it, but playing it.

I'm not really sure where I was goin with this, cept that words can only get you so far. Here I am tryin to tell you all these things before I die when what I really should do is play you a tune.

Chapter 34

“I don’t want your pity,” G-pa insisted as we all sat around a booth at the diner after the hearing. “It’s why I never said anything to begin with. Now you’re all gonna treat me different, and I don’t want that. I just want to eat my waffles and die in peace.” He had grown especially fond of the chicken and waffles at the diner, and he tore into them now like it was his last meal, which would come sooner rather than later, he’d said; the doctors had given him only a few months to live back when we’d taken him to the ER for his swollen legs. He’d refused treatment, of course, preferring instead to live out his days in what he thought would be carefree abandon rather than the legal quagmire in which he’d been submerged.

I’d ordered two beers and had already dispatched the one by the time the others’ food had arrived, fully intending to be solidly drunk before facing this new catastrophe, but he wasn’t making it easy. At Miss Angela’s prompting, he took us through the doctors’ explanations of the eventual end stages of his disease – inoperable, metastatic prostate cancer – and it sounded frankly hideous. But I was still reeling from the news and trying to picture my life without anyone in it, anyone at all whom I loved, and it prevented me from becoming overly preoccupied with the progression of his impending death.

The person who seemed most visibly uncomfortable at the discussion was Leo, who had been thrust into a relationship with G-pa out of chance rather than choice; I could bet that he’d never had a foster family quite like this one. Amidst all the talk of hospice care versus home hospice, burial requests, and whether or not G-pa had a will (Anton, it seemed, had volunteered to extend his pro bono services in this regard), Leo

had said not a single word, and I had never seen a young man less enthused by his roast beef sandwich with pickle and slaw on the side.

To help steer the conversation towards less macabre territory, I piped up, “So, there’ll be time for all this later; why don’t we celebrate the fact that nobody here is going to prison, shall we?” I raised my bottle of beer to Maria’s Bloody Mary and motioned for Miss Angela and Leo to do the same. “To Anton, without whom we wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Cheers,” everyone granted; I had at the very least chosen an object for admiration upon whom we could all agree, and it had successfully derailed the conversation enough for there to be a shift in the mood.

“Oh, Leo,” I added. “Miss Angela mentioned that she thought it would be a good idea for you to move upstairs to the main house so you could have more privacy and space for drawing and studying. Do you want to tell him about it?” I asked her. In fact, I had been the one to recently suggest this arrangement to her, thinking it would be better for him to have a reliable mother figure in his life than a messed up foster brother and incarcerated foster father, and though I had been concerned that she would shy away from such a commitment given the memories it would likely dredge up, she had been surprisingly enthusiastic about the idea.

“Oh right,” she said, taking my cue. “You would have the whole upstairs to yourself, and there’s an office with a computer that I hardly ever use up there, as well as a bed and bath. It’d be no trouble to have you there, as long as you keep it clean and pull your weight with the chores; I’d rather like the company.” I thought it especially

pertinent to bring this up given G-pa's health; the boy didn't need to be living amongst death, and G-pa would need the privacy of his own bedroom if he decided to die at home.

Home. I smirked at the thought. Here his death would be, not on his ranch of fifty years, surrounded by old friends and family, but in a rented basement in an unfamiliar city with a friend of just a few months, a foster kid, and me at his bedside; I didn't even count Maria, the non-girlfriend of his non-grandson.

"That'd be really nice," Leo replied, with a wistful, unbelieving quality to his voice.

Maria paid the bill – none of the rest of us had any money yet – and she was decent enough to invite us all over for dinner later. She'd make a terrific ex-spouse, I thought, always keeping up appearances for the senile great-grandmother in the nursing home and remaining cordial for the children. But G-pa said he thought he'd like to sleep off the rest of the day, and so we all simply went home.

The next morning was a Saturday, and G-pa came into the kitchen still wearing his suit from the court appearance the day before. It was now significantly ruffled, his tie twisted. He told Leo and me that he was heading over to a blues session and he wanted us to join him, and he wanted to invite Maria and Miss Angela to go too. Though we'd had the night to process his condition, I was leaning on every word he said, half-expecting him to keel over at any moment, and so I agreed without hesitation.

"I heard about it from a guy I met in the slammer," he said, in all seriousness, "and I thought it'd be good to check it out." I assumed he was referring to his few nights in jail weeks before, but it was hard to tell. "Man, I've always wanted to say that!" he added with a grin. He seemed rested, refreshed.

We had planned to take Leo's stuff upstairs anyway (all of it still fitting into a single oversized trash bag and his backpack), so we called on Miss Angela to join us on the outing, and I reached Maria by phone. There was no way any of us was going to turn down any reasonable request from this officially dying man to do something for him, so we just sort of followed him wherever he wanted to go like a train of puppy dogs.

This wasn't one of those sessions in the back of a bar that proprietors host in order to promote business, G-pa explained on our way over, ten minutes away in Maryland; it was a thing in and of itself, formerly taking place in an actual D.C. barbershop for over half a century until somebody bought the building and kicked them out. Now it was housed in an old dance studio that had gone out of business, and it seemed me when we arrived to be entirely the wrong atmosphere for the blues, which had previously occupied primarily dark and smoky spaces in my imagination.

Sunlight catapulted in through floor-to-ceiling windows and sheer white curtains, and balance bars bordered the room, conjuring visions of vivacious five-year-olds prancing around like little bunnies in their tutus. The fourth wall was of course a solid panel of mirrors, making the room seem deep and expansive, and the pine-colored floors showed every clump of dirt and dust tracked in by years of wandering musicians and guests. The only amenities in the studio were an array of pockmarked metal folding chairs and a few drought-tolerant potted plants that doubtless only got watered once a week.

There was, however, a giant cooler of beer off to the side with a torn-up, taped-on handwritten sign that said, "Take a bottle, Leave a bottle," and though nearly everyone had a beer in hand, the chest was still somehow completely full.

We got there before anybody had started seriously playing; the sign on the door said that things got going around 1 PM “bluz time.” I marveled at G-pa’s capacity to enter exclusive-seeming spaces without an invitation. I could have never walked through that door on my own; I didn’t know the code, I didn’t know the lingo. I would spend the entire time nervous about where I should stand and wondering what people were thinking about who I was and why I was there. And if there was to be music, what if everyone danced? I could not, would not dance, not without at least four drinks, one after the other. No, I would have to leave if that were to happen.

What struck me the most, though, as I looked around at the assemblage while G-pa and Leo were off chatting up the other musicians and Miss Angela and Maria sat together talking on some chairs, was that the people, almost without exception, were downright *nerdy*. It was a fairly even split between white and black (and oddly, I thought, a single young Korean American with a goatee who wore round, John Lennon style dark sunglasses, even indoors), but the nerd atmosphere was unmistakable. People, regardless of race, wore billowing Hawaiian shirts, old dirty sneakers, and too-short denim jeans. The women – and there were plenty of women, some looking to be in their seventies – had frizzy hair, bold floppy blouses, and Native American beaded earrings. One man even had a crooked moustache, shorter on one end than the other. Whatever happened to the blues being ultra cool? – I wondered, though I supposed that if you were gathering weekly at an abandoned building that was open to one and all, including novices and non-musicians, and that you were only there for the pure soul of the music without all the accoutrements of a bar or café or other establishment, you were dedicated to something above and beyond a “scene.” G-pa fit right in.

Once things got going, the congregation played for four solid hours. G-pa was picking on his guitar, and Leo blowing into his harmonica, along with seven other harmonica players who were also part of the jam. They just went ‘round and ‘round the big wide room, made even bigger by the mirrored wall, alternating solos while the rest of the room provided backup. The music was alternately discordant and sublime depending on whose turn it was to do a solo jam, but more often than not it was the latter, for even when a novice was playing, the group knew when and how to pick up the slack and boost the melody, rhythm, and volume to compensate in the background, so that even when someone faltered and dropped out, the whole gang kept on grooving like a finely tuned and well-oiled machine, and it was then that I finally understood the appeal of the session to G-pa.

For once I wanted to join in and cursed myself for being musically incompetent. But though I didn’t have an instrument in the traditional sense, I realized halfway through the jam that I was singing along. The great thing about blues music was that the lines repeated over and over, and the group would usually play a single song several times in a row before changing tunes, giving me ample opportunity to learn the words without even trying to if I didn’t know them already, though often I did. By the end of our time there, I was crooning out the St. Louis Blues along with the rest of them, though maybe a little more off-key than most. *If I’m feeling tomorrow like I feel today / Oh, if I’m feeling tomorrow like I feel today / Gonna pack my trunk, and make my get-away.*

When it came time for one of G-pa’s last turns for a guitar solo, he looked across the room directly at me and we were both nodding our heads in time with the music, and he seemed to be at his peak. His syncopation was devilish, and his riffs were spot on, and

even though some of his moves earned whoops and hollers from the others gathered in the studio, I truly felt in the moment that he was playing exclusively for me.

I was grateful to Maria and Miss Angela for sticking it out the whole way through for G-pa's sake, though they seemed to genuinely enjoy themselves. The mood on the ride home was a polar opposite of the same time the day before, like the feeling that remains after a long sigh. We ate dinner together in Miss Angela's dining room, and though there was the inimitable shadow of death lingering in the air, her home seemed more warm and lively than it ever had to me before. Her floors still shined unnaturally clean beneath us, but when you looked down and saw everyone else looking back, it seemed so much less sterile than before.

After Maria had left to go home, Leo went upstairs to settle into his new space, and Miss Angela fell asleep on the back porch as the three of us sat conversing and watching the fireflies, and it seemed as though she'd intended us to come and go as we pleased.

We sat in silence for awhile, but then G-pa spoke quietly so as not to disturb Miss Angela. "It is a very fine thing to sit here with you and watch the flickering of their tails the way they do. If you just let it all in and don't pay too much direct attention, there's a rhythm to it, a method to it. Like Morse Code. Somewhere in there, there's a message. I don't know what it's sayin', but it's in there."

It seemed the type of statement that one should simply let be, and so I did. We eventually roused Miss Angela enough to get her inside to bed and went downstairs ourselves to say goodnight, which ended up being the last thing I ever heard him say out loud.

Chapter 35

The letters were all waiting for me on the coffee table when I got up, bound together in the blue spiral notebook where he'd written them, with the simple inscription, "To Ranger," written at the top of the cover. He must have opened the door to my room before he left, because I awoke to the sound of it thumping almost closed each time the air conditioning turned on, the suction from the intake vent pulling and then releasing it over and over again, like deep breathing. He'd slept on the futon couch in the living room as usual, telling me earlier in the day that he didn't feel like moving into Leo's old room just yet, something about letting a space rest in between occupants. The screens had been folded back against the wall, and his bedding folded crisply and piled up neatly on his trunk, which was atypical of his morning habits, but I assumed it was in preparation for his eventual move back into the office. The notebook was arranged on the table facing outward so that I would have to see it when I passed, and when I did pass, it had the desired effect of entirely overwhelming my curiosity.

I sat down on the futon and opened it on my lap, but at first I didn't read the words, marveling instead at the document as a whole, complete artifact. While paging through the notebook, I could see the rapid evolution of a writer painstakingly forming each letter in the beginning and carefully crafting each word, the pressure of the ballpoint pen that he'd used making indentations on the backs of the pages that I could almost read with my fingertips, as though he had embossed or engraved the words onto the paper. Then later, somewhere in the middle, he'd found his stride, and though the letters were still printed carefully and deliberately, the words were more fluidly formed, and by the end, unless you had the entire span of the progression before you, you would not have

believed that the same person who had written the first page had also written the last, so naturally the handwriting on those final pages seemed to flow together.

When I did finally begin reading, everything else dissolved into the background like I had been absorbed into a giant bubble and I forgot that I hadn't yet gotten dressed or had coffee or eaten anything for breakfast. It was all-consuming in a way that is rare in this world, and an indication that I had stumbled upon something good and true.

It was only once I had finished reading, sometime after noon, that the growling in my belly asserted itself fully into my consciousness, and I brought the notebook to the kitchen table in a daze to prepare myself a bologna sandwich with mustard, not because I felt like eating but simply because I wanted the discomfort in my belly to go away. There, on the kitchen table, was a note in G-pa's hand – which I had just spent the last several hours becoming intimately familiar with – that said simply “Gone fishin. –Gpaw.” He had never before left me a note, but it didn't seem overly odd to me at the time. Though the only outward sign of the progression of his illness had been a noticeable increase in fatigue, we all knew that his health in general was in rapid decline, and I assumed he simply didn't want me to worry about where he was.

It was only much later, after spending the rest of the day helping Miss Angela harvest and can the tomatoes from her garden while trying unsuccessfully to process what I'd read of G-pa's letters, only when the fireflies were beginning to flicker just before dusk and he had not returned, that I began to be concerned, and all at once I realized while sipping iced tea (plain, unsweetened) on Miss Angela's front porch with her and Leo that he had left me the notebook in such a way as to say goodbye, and that I would never see him again.

As if to confirm my suspicions, a woman from the neighborhood, Mrs. Hartman, walked by the house and stopped to ask if we'd heard on the news that there was a boat on fire drifting down the Anacostia that the police and firefighters were attempting to corral in order to put out the flames and potentially rescue any survivors from drowning.

"Shit," I remember saying, then getting up without saying another word and jumping in my car to veer down M St until it dead-ended into the corner of the Arboretum and the Langston Golf Course. Both were federal facilities, as it turns out, with presumably federal trespassing charges lingering over me if I went into either one after hours, but the fence on the golf course was shorter, so that was the one I chose to scale in order to reach the riverbanks as quickly as I could. We'd heard the sirens and helicopters from the porch, but they had not been unusual for that time of day in our neck of the woods; now I used them and the distant cluster of flashing lights to find my way in the darkening hours to the river's edge.

When I arrived, I witnessed a scene that I found to be both foreign and yet strangely familiar at the same time. Up the river, the flaming remains of a rowboat drifted downstream, while on either side of the waterway, fire trucks extended their ladders as far out over the river as they could with men in yellow-orange protective gear climbing over the rungs like monkeys, their limbs dangling this way and that, in apparent preparations to attempt to snag the burning boat as it passed. There were a couple of patrol boats roaming around with flashing lights which kept their distance but shined searchlights into the water to look for survivors. It wasn't until the blazing boat approached and one of the firefighters fell from a horizontal ladder into the water that I realized I had seen this all before, but never in such detail, never with such clarity. In my

mind, I had always seen this image through a mirror, and the scene had always been distant and unclear due to a glare from the sun. But now I was looking head-on, and it wasn't the sun, it was the flames themselves that made me squint and my eyes water.

As I watched, dumbstruck, the fire devoured the boat in a suicidal frenzy that was close to putting itself out from running so quickly through its fuel, and I was astonished by the indescribable quality of blue produced by the joint reflection of the late evening summer sky paired with the burning boat on the water's surface. There must have been a mineral in the paint on the boat's hull that made even the flames themselves burn blue, bluer than blue topaz. It was altogether electric and horrible, but I couldn't look away. I just stood there on the riverbank, and the longer I stared, the more it seemed to me that the fire was somehow burning without producing any smoke whatsoever, that it was all contained right there on the surface and everything that burned simply succumbed to the depths of the river or disappeared entirely, gone forever from this earth.

Chapter 36

My apologies for the boat. The money in this envelope is meant to cover the costs of a new one, but there's more with my grandson Ranger if it doesn't. His address is on the stamped envelope folded up inside. Please return this letter to him.

Kindly yours and sorry again,

Dick James

Dear Ranger,

I hope that you will see that this was really the best way to do things. Long drawn-out deaths are not for farm animals and they are not for me. I am not the jumping kind, maybe if we were near some spectacular cliffs perhaps, but there's nothin like that around here that I know of. Not one for guns or poisons neither. There's something shameful about shooting yourself, and poison is for rats. No, I'm hopin that there's not much to clean up after everything is all done. Also hopin I get drunk enough to go through with it and you're not readin this letter with me floatin somewhere out to sea. I think I'd rather go out in a puff of smoke and be done with it than die of thirst and exposure. Anyway, it's sorta nice to have a say in the matter.

I don't know what else to tell ya.

You should know we all loved you. If you'd paid attention, that is, you'da surely known it. Everything we did was for you.

There's some money in the trunk for you. Sold Stella and all my tools this mornin to pay for the boat and leave you with somethin to cover any unforeseen expenses. The house is all paid off and is yours if you want it. Sell it if you don't. Anton has the details.

There's some more money back home in a safe under the stairs in the cellar. You'll figure out the combination. Don't need it for retirement anymore, but that's what it was for. Tho to be honest I didn't really ever plan on retiring – that's why there's not much in there. I can't even begin to tell ya what to do with it, but I trust you'll put it to good use.

This wasn't supposed to be about business but I don't know what else to say. I feel like I'm supposed to tell you something wise and lasting but that just feels like bull. It's all what you make of it anyway, and if I'm the guy with the answers then I believe we are in deep trouble as a species. Just know that there is value in things that are small and uncomplicated. A well-balanced tool, the grooves made of many footsteps on old stairs. Watching a sapling go from seed to shade tree. Fraid that's it. That's all the two cents I've got.

Best of luck, Ranger. See you in the by 'n by.

–Gpaw

Chapter 37

Maria came over and stayed the night with me after I got through with several hours of answering questions from the police and they were finally satisfied – in no small part because of the envelope produced by the flabbergasted desk clerk at the boat rental place and a thorough search of my apartment – that G-pa had acted entirely alone and had intended strictly suicide, not terrorism, when he'd doused the boat in rubbing alcohol and set it on fire. I doubted if he'd realized that because of where we were, that would immediately be what the authorities would think, or he likely would have found some other way to save me from the trouble. It helped that they were already officially familiar with his condition, so it wasn't too difficult this time, not as hard to explain as the incident on the plane, for instance.

We all sat around Miss Angela's table once again, drinking beer and whiskey this time instead of coffee, and with Leo taking the place of G-pa. I was becoming weary of the crises, but I supposed that this being the penultimate crisis would make it the last one to come for some time.

None of us could bring ourselves to talk about it. That someone would choose to light himself on fire, even to avoid a grossly undignified death of another kind, and even completely and totally shitfaced as he likely had to have been in order to dull the pain, was something better left to the horrors of our private imaginations rather than the reality of the night's conversation. We'd all been preparing ourselves for the inevitability in our own ways, though clearly we hadn't been prepared for this, so it wasn't a scene of grief but rather one of resignation. We wanted to be happy for him, but it had been so awful in its own way.

“What are you gonna do now?” was the unavoidable question voiced by Leo once we’d had a few rounds and I’d shared with them some of the things he’d written in the notebook.

“Go home, have a funeral,” I shrugged. “He knew everyone in town. They’ll want the closure.”

“What do *you* want?” Maria asked, in her counselor’s way of trying to provoke an emotional response in order to start some sort of healing process, I guessed.

I wanted a fucking family, I wanted to tell her, but I wasn’t going to say that, not in front of these people who had taken me in and made me a part of their lives whether they had wanted to or not.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t really know.”

She made love to me that night in the basement, the first time I’d had the place to myself since I’d come back with G-pa from California. I wish I could say that it was cathartic and that I wept, but I was drunk, same as the first time, and so I hardly felt a thing.

In the morning, she made me breakfast, for which I was extremely grateful, and then she left to go to work. She didn’t offer to come with me to California for the service and I didn’t ask her to join me, and we both knew then that each of us had moved on for good. Everyone truly important to me was dead, and it occurred to me suddenly, when she had left and I had nothing to do but wash the dishes and stare at the walls until sundown, that I had absolutely no reason for being there anymore.

Miss Angela wouldn’t hear of me finishing out the lease in absentia; she insisted it would be a piece of cake to rent out the space to someone else. I sold all of my

furniture, my desktop computer, and my TV so I could buy back G-pa's guitar, which was an antique and had a surprisingly hefty price tag, and his tools, both of which had been easy enough to find at one of the pawn shops within walking distance down on Bladensburg. I didn't know what I would ever do with them, given that I was neither mechanically nor musically inclined, but I didn't want some stranger to have them; they were rightfully my inheritance, and I wanted them more than I wanted my own stuff.

I put the Stella in the passenger seat and packed up what little else I had in the Subaru, including my clothes and G-pa's trunk of junk for the long drive back to the Coast. When it came time to leave, Miss Angela and Leo walked me out to the curb to wish me farewell.

She gave me a tight squeeze and said, "I'm sorry to see you go," though she didn't ask me to reconsider. "I'm sorry to see you both go."

"Me too," I said. She had tears in her eyes, and I could tell that they had meant a lot to one another, which I now understood in the proper context after reading what G-pa had written.

Just then her phone rang from inside and she put her hand up, saying, "I need to get that, but don't leave without saying goodbye!"

Leo and I stood around my car, awkwardly kicking at broken glass and pebbles in the gutter while we waited for her to return. I wish I could say that I left having forged a life-long bond with Leo during our time living together, but it had been a trying time for both of us. He'd been precariously on the precipice of homelessness and then was charged with a crime he didn't even know had been committed, and I'd lost my job, grandparents, and bearings over the months he'd spent in my apartment. I had been

merely a stepping stone to him, an obstacle he'd had to navigate before he could get on to the next challenge, which was as it should've been. I was no Uncle Ranger, and so I left any future contact up to him, not wanting him to send me Christmas cards every year or take me out to dinner any time I was in town out of obligation.

"I'm glad that Ms. Arnold hooked us up," he eventually said before Miss Angela came back outside. "I never would've met Miss Angela if it wasn't for you. Did she tell you she's letting me stay here through college if I keep my grades up?"

"That's terrific – she hadn't. I imagine that won't be much of a problem for you." He smiled shyly and nodded, still toeing the dirt around in the gutter. Then he looked up at me into my eyes deep and hard, and said much of what he'd wanted to say in that way, and I was grateful for the silence and the truth in his gaze. It was what I needed to hear.

Miss Angela walked back down her steps, hugged me again, and wished me the best. Leo shook my hand and said, "It's been real," and they both stood on the curb and waved as I drove off on my way back to California for the service and whatever else awaited me out there.

But first I needed to take Grams' ashes out to Arlington to spread them on her daddy's grave, which is what had supposedly brought G-pa out there from the get-go. It was easy enough to find the site with help from the visitor's center and the map they marked for me. Because it was a workday and it was hot outside, the place was relatively deserted except for a few tour groups. There were always tour groups.

The spot was shady and secluded and surprisingly weedy, considering it was where our national heroes were interred. Given all of the legal troubles we'd accumulated that summer, I – ever the rule-follower – was nervous about getting caught dumping

something without authorization on a national cemetery, but it was surprisingly easy to do in relative privacy. I believe that as much as G-pa had wanted me to think he had no attachment to her ashes, and that he came back with me fully intending to carry out her wishes, in the end he couldn't bring himself to part with the physical remnants of his lifelong love, and he was probably grateful to have left it to me.

I didn't feel emotionally involved in the ashes in the same way; I'd said goodbye to her in California, and this was just ceremony as far as I was concerned (and with only me there to witness it, I wasn't even sure it was that). When I'd reached the marker for Lt. Douglas Myerson, there were late-summer thundershowers approaching on the horizon, and so I quickly reached into my messenger bag, which itself concealed the bag of ashes, and drew out handful after handful until the bag was empty; it didn't seem right to simply dump out the contents of the bag as though it were potting soil or fertilizer. You can't throw away a bag like that once it's empty, not with traces of someone's remains still adhering to the edges, so I tucked it away to take it back home with me just as the wall of showers swept over the area and drenched it completely, soaking me along with it. In just a few minutes, you couldn't even tell I had spread anything over the grave, so completely had it been absorbed into the patchy grass and dirt.

In the long and circuitous walk back to my car, the rain never once subsided, pummeling me in a deluge of a downpour, "a rip-snortin' thunderstorm" as G-pa would've said. My canvas shoes were completely waterlogged within minutes, and my bare feet squeaked against them and sloshed inside with every step. I couldn't even see the Potomac, just Robert E. Lee's house up on the hill with water rushing down its many columns; you could easily have confused it with the White House in that kind of rain if

you were from out of town and didn't know what you were looking at, if you were lost or disoriented and didn't know which direction you were facing. Same style, same flag, though the latter presently looked more like a wet rag from being drenched by the sudden storm.

I'd learned my lesson about getting in the car while soaking wet, so I grabbed a towel and some dry clothes from my duffle bag in the back and changed under a tree in the parking lot with the towel obscuring my nakedness. I was in and out in less than an hour; no one bothered me, no one cared that I had been there.

I'd called ahead back home to tell all the family friends about G-pa and to ask them to delay the memorial until I arrived, as it would take several days to reach the Coast by car. I regretted that I didn't have a body to deliver, but I knew they'd welcome me and throw a hell of a wake just the same. Now all that was left to do was to choose the route, and I decided to go the way G-pa would have gone: more or less without a map, driving with my gut, heading due West.

Chapter 38

In the glove compartment of the Subaru, there was a ten-year-old, fold-up Rand McNally of the United States that I'd bought myself as a graduation present, fully intending at the time to take off between jobs someday and hit all of the lower forty-eight in a giant, meandering road trip. But at the time, I'd never accumulated enough food, gas, and lodging money to finance the excursion, and so it'd been packed away, virtually mothballed like most of my young dreams. The map's glossy finish seemed almost garish to me when I pulled it out, but I only needed to consult its shiny, spill-proof pages to plot out a rough course. Now that I had the opportunity to take the trip, I lamented the fact that the circumstances required a certain degree of haste; when you don't have a lot of family, your friends and neighbors are your family, and they would be wanting to hear directly from me what the hell happened with G-pa.

I'd actually never driven across the country before at all; the last time I'd moved, I'd flown out on a plane while the car and my things made their way out separately on a tow truck and moving van. I projected about ten hours of driving a day and hoped to make it at the end of the fifth day, but to tell the truth, the moment I left the Beltway and headed into West Virginia, my sense of time's passing blurred and I stopped only when my body demanded food, a lavatory, or sleep.

The solitude one experiences on the open road should not be underestimated; it is not a place for the emotionally unstable or seriously depressed. The relative ease with which you can coast along the open highways of the heartland without hardly a thought toward the road means that if, like me, you are unable to stomach talk radio, then you are left at the mercy of your own thoughts, day after day. My thoughts invariably turned to

the contents of G-pa's notebook, which I had not yet had the opportunity to fully digest until I'd embarked on this long, solitary drive.

That first night, I stopped near Louisville, Kentucky, and after enjoying breakfast-for-dinner and beer on tap at a local diner, I found myself secluded in my roadside motel room rather than exploring the nightlife of Louisville; I just didn't have it in me to seek out anything new, choosing instead to linger over a six-pack with the Stella perched on a stuffed corner chair as my companion and me on the bed with the notebook.

He had somehow managed to fill all of the pages of the pad of paper, front and back, and though I didn't count to see if they were all there, the cover claimed there were 120 sheets. To be honest, after G-pa's revelation that he wasn't my real grandfather, the news that my father hadn't been my real father was less of a blow and more like someone had walked gently barefoot across my back, releasing all of the hidden pressure between my vertebrae, making my spine feel refreshingly as though everything was now in its proper place. It *was* a comfort to know, and it *did* help things make more sense to me.

But what I found particularly distressing were the stories about Miss Angela and most of all, my mother. I couldn't understand how they could just go along through life harboring such secrets as though nothing had ever happened. The question of how my mother had raised me without coming to hate me troubled me deeply, though I supposed if what G-pa had written was true, she could have wishfully believed that I was my father's son until I was already in elementary school, when the bond was already fully formed.

The notion that I had come from a man of filth, however, who would rape a drugged adolescent girl who was tied up to a bed (for even though he had paid for her fair

and square, that surely is what it was), did not quite settle into my conscious mind, but instead flickered at its periphery like a loose light bulb in the corner of a room, flitting on and off intermittently. I tried to believe, as G-pa had said, that it wasn't important, but it does make you wonder things about yourself that maybe you would otherwise never have considered. It makes you wary.

By the time I'd read the entire thing cover-to-cover for the second time, I'd finished most of the six-pack, and the Stella sat there facing me from her perch in the motel room. I was as lonely as I had ever been and in serious need of some company, and with her long neck and buxom hips, she was as close to a real companion as I was going to get.

I put the notebook away and picked her up gently, sliding my hands down her sides, and my fingers plucked at the edges of the strings softly and hesitantly as though I were separating cornsilk and didn't want to bruise the flesh of a single kernel. She was surprisingly in tune and let out a hum in a way that was inviting and familiar, like coming home.

I lay the guitar down on the bed and tucked in close beside her, too exhausted from the day's drive to hold her up on my lap. I turned out the lamp beside the bed and just lay there like that in the dark with my arm resting on the body, softly stroking the strings, slowly and in no particular order, over and over again until the sound of it eventually lulled me to sleep.

That first night, that was all that I tried with her; even after the six-pack, I was too shy and self-conscious about misplacing a note, even though I was the only one who could hear it. But the next night, after a long day's drive through St. Louis and Kansas

City, I stopped in Lincoln, Nebraska, grabbed a takeout burger and fries, and holed up in my motel room with G-pa's guitar once again. I looked up some basic chords on my laptop and tried them out, still delicately thrumming, still too shy to make her sing out. After an hour, my wrist was cramped from the effort and my fingertips stung from their lack of calluses, but it had been satisfying in a way that made me feel as though I was a slightly better man when I went to bed that night than when I had gotten up that morning, and what more could you ask for, really, than that.

The third night, I tried plucking out some tunes, not looking up how to play them this time, but by figuring it out blindly, making mistakes using trial and error, the same way some friends and I once taught ourselves how to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Jingle Bells" on a touch-tone phone when we were kids. The simplest tunes I could think of to play were from The Beatles, so there I was strumming out "Let it Be" and "Hey Jude" in the slow-motion style of a kindergarten music ensemble, completely arhythmically and with false notes galore. I even found the nerve to sing along once or twice.

That was the night that I stayed in Rawlins, Wyoming, and if you have ever had the opportunity to drive on I-80 through the entire state of Nebraska and then half of Wyoming in a single day, you may also have wondered, skeptically, about the validity of overpopulation as a global phenomenon. As my eyes searched longingly past the Subaru's dusty dashboard for the telltale tips of trees anywhere in the distance, I was reminded of having to read *My Ántonia* in high school, wherein Jim mentions that trees were so scarce throughout the Nebraska countryside that people would visit them as if they were persons. I couldn't understand such a sentiment at the time having grown up

practically in the redwood forest, and even though we had moved to the flat and rural Central Valley, there were still plenty of trees around for the eyes to feast upon. But now I knew what he had meant, land so brown, barren, and exposed that anything protruding from the ground, even a rocky outcropping or a singular boulder, would've been a welcome sight, would've made me feel less alone. Still, I kept searching.

The fact that I had even made it to Interstate 80-West, however, had been cause for celebration in and of itself, this being a highway with which I was intimately familiar. In California, it is freeways, after all, not individual trees, that take on personas of their own, and are treated with affection or disdain accordingly. I-80 was how you got from Sacramento to Lake Tahoe for camping or seeing the snow, or how you made it from the Central Valley to the San Francisco Bay. It connected all that was beautiful to me: the Coast, the City, the fertile Valley, and the mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests of the Sierras. Once I was on this road, I knew I was headed home, and the car practically drove itself.

On my last night on the road, I decided to stop for the day in Battle Mountain, Nevada, just based on the name alone. I'd just driven into the first truly Western sunset of the journey, where the sky is clear and the horizon distant and sleek. A thin line of brick red at the base bled into brilliant yellows, which then faded upward into an azure blue before blending ever darker as you looked further and further up until it was ultimately the color of midnight. You could read a book by the light of those stars. And though I knew that the ocean was still another five hundred miles away, wishful thinking tricked me into half-believing that it was just over the visible mountains, as though these were the coastal ranges rather than the local mountains of Northern Nevada.

I booked my night's stay in the lobby of The Shoshone Motel, wondering as the clerk handed me my key what the Shoshone would have thought of the fake English ivy appearing to creep up the arched trellis marking the entrance to the lounge. But even the kitsch made me homesick, for it was the kind of embellishment to which one becomes accustomed when one grows up in parts of the country where interior design is dictated solely by the contents of the home and garden section of the locally owned hardware store. Sure it was ugly and ridiculous, but it was also somehow not. Someone – an actual person – had stood there looking at the bare space and had decided that *something* there would be better than the absence of something; it would be better than nothing. Even if it was tacky, dated, and not quite the right shade of green, it represented the universal desire to live and work among living things, even where such things would not ordinarily thrive, such as the windowless lounge of a country motel under fluorescent lighting.

I bought a carne asada burrito from the taqueria across the street and brought it back to my room along with my duffle bag, which was filled by then with mostly dirty clothes, and the Stella guitar. It occurred to me, for some reason, as I sat watching news of wildfires in Colorado and Utah while eating dinner with the guitar next to me on the bed, that there would be music at G-pa's memorial. That all the boys he used to play with in town would mark his passing with a session extending long into the night, and unlike Grams' service which was appropriately held in the church, this one would be at our ranch, and I would be expected to preside over it.

I turned off the TV and left the burrito half-eaten on the end table in order to look up some blues chord progressions on my laptop. I couldn't do a solo, I couldn't pick a damned thing still by that point, but I could surely memorize a few chord progressions.

Since I wouldn't need to be playing individual notes, and the crowd would all be playing together at once, even a child could learn to do that in one night.

I looked up some of the standards that I remembered from the days when I lived there and used to go with him to listen and play on the pinball machine in the back of the tavern. "Goin' Down Slow," "Every Day I Have the Blues," "Crossroads." The beauty of it was that the chord progressions repeated throughout the entire song, so there were just a few hand positions to learn. I was still awkward with my strumming, not knowing at all how to appropriately strike the strings. You'd think that after being around it my whole life that it would have come naturally to me, but I am ashamed to say that I never did look, not closely anyway, not so as I could see what was really going on. But despite the awkward form, it surprised me by sounding almost like music.

I played that night in that motel room in Battle Mountain until well after midnight – I'd asked for a corner room so I wouldn't disturb any potential guests, though I hadn't seen anyone else in the parking lot but me. I played until my wrist was so sore from being contorted in unfamiliar positions that I could no longer hold a chord, and I placed the Stella on the ubiquitous cushioned chair – she didn't have a case – before settling into bed.

It was a cheap mattress, with cheap, starchy-rough sheets, but it didn't matter. In the few minutes after I turned off the light before drifting off to sleep, I fingered the semi-hard circles of skin that were beginning to calcify on the fingertips of my left hand, poking at them with my thumbnail to feel the novelty of it the way a child's tongue worries a new tooth-bud. It hurt like hell, but I fell asleep easily, then rose the next day with the sun.

Chapter 39

I left before having coffee that morning, hoping to make it home before sundown. I'd called up G-pa's best friend, Roger, the one who'd taken in our dog Rusty, the day before to let him know when to expect me in town so I could tell him over a couple of drinks what all had happened. I also had the ulterior motive of hoping he'd let me take back the dog, if she was still alive that is, because I sure as hell didn't want to stay the night alone in that old house with nothing but dust bunnies and spiders for company. One need not believe in ghosts in order to feel the impressions that people have left upon their things and rooms, to smell the oils they have left on the woods of furniture and floors, to feel their breath in the breeze from a window.

By the time I got to Tahoe, I was cruising around 85 miles per hour and felt that I shouldn't have been as eager as I was considering I was headed back for the last family funeral I would ever attend unless I ever got a wife and family of my own, and if I did I sure hoped I'd never live to see their funerals. But something deep within me reached down and fastened my foot to the accelerator, and every time I stopped for gas, that foot tapped impatiently on the ground until I got back in and drove off once more. When the Bay finally came into view after half a day's drive and I could see the entire region from the road, it felt like it all belonged to me, like everything I could see with my own eyes was mine. I was happy to share it with anyone and anything, but it was most definitely mine.

The drive across the Bay and then up the 101 went quickly, like watching home movies, despite taking several hours. Once I reached the winding roads of the Coastal Ranges and got off the freeway, there was still a two-hour drive ahead of me, and it was

then that a fog began to roll in early and thick. The theoretical two hours stretched into five, and though I had been hoping to make it before sundown, it was becoming apparent that there would be no sundown at all, at least none that would be visible to me. The space in front of me on the road simply became a darker and darker grey, until I eventually had to slow down to under fifteen miles per hour – and sometimes to a complete halt – in order to stay on the pavement. The headlights only made it worse, creating a wall of reflected light that mocked my attempts to see through the vapor, but there were no streetlights, and I had to keep my taillights on so I wouldn't get rammed from behind. Thus, my return trip culminated in a crawling drive up Roger Thompson's gravel road with my head out the window to listen and watch out for livestock, three hours later than I'd planned.

It had only been about four months since I'd last seen Roger, and so we fell back into acquaintance quickly and easily without much small talk. I hadn't seen Rusty meandering around the grounds with their other dogs on my way in, but I hesitated to ask about her right off the bat, not wanting to receive any more crushing news just yet. Instead we sat around his breakfast nook while his wife Sharon brought out some homecured sausage, cheese, fruit, and beer, and chewed the fat about G-pa.

“So cancer, huh? He's younger than me! And they couldn't operate?”

“Nah, he had to have had it for years and just ignored the symptoms. Who knows what they could have done if he'd seen a regular doctor.”

Roger snickered and shook his head. “That's what he always said about people and their cars. ‘If they'd just take care of it and bring it to me for regular tune-ups, I

wouldn't have to do all these expensive jobs that they always complain about!' Never could take his own advice."

"Nope," I concurred, gratefully popping a few grapes in my mouth as Sharon sat down with us at the table. Since they were Grams and G-pa's best friends, I'd grown up calling them by their first names rather than "Mr. and Mrs. Thompson."

"So he really lit himself on fire, then?" Roger asked as he opened up his can of beer. He was like family, and as such was allowed this direct line of questioning. I'd forwarded him the news reports, but things like that are never real until you hear about it from someone who was there.

"Yep. Him and the whole boat along with him. I've got the letter he wrote me if you wanna read it. Might make more sense than me tellin' you."

"If you wouldn't mind," he said.

Just then, I saw my old dog waddling down their long hallway into the kitchen, and when I saw the large protrusion on the side of her abdomen, my heart sank.

"Shit, not her too," I said, wondering how a tumor had grown so large in her belly in such a short time.

"What, you know any other pregnant old ladies? Because this is about the oldest bitch I've ever seen in her condition."

"I'm sorry? You mean that's not a tumor? That can't be; she's eleven years old! She'll never carry them to term without it killing her."

"Vet says she's the very picture of obstetric health. She doesn't know how, but that's the verdict anyway, otherwise we'd have had them aborted. You didn't tell me she wasn't fixed!"

“I didn’t think we had to!” I marveled. I gave her another once-over as she slowly nudged up against me for a back scratch and saw, sure enough, that her nipples were enlarged and that her belly was symmetrically and evenly big on both sides, just as it should’ve been if it were filled with a litter of puppies. As far as I knew, this was her first pregnancy, and I wondered if she’d know what to do at her age, if the instincts would still be just as strong.

“Tell me you’ll be takin’ her off my hands,” he pleaded, half-serious, but good-naturedly so. “She’s eating three times as much as all the other dogs, and Sharon’s let her take over half our bed!”

“She’s pregnant!” Sharon protested in her defense. “Can’t let an old pregnant dog sleep out in the muck.”

“Or even on the rug, apparently,” he shook his head.

“Are you serious?” I asked hopefully, though unsure of whether I was prepared to be a midwife to a geriatric dog and a nurse to puppies on my own, with no idea what my plans were for being back in this neck of the woods. But I was eager for the opportunity to try; eager for the idea of it anyway. “Because I miss this old gal; she’s the only family I’ve got left. I don’t mean to be an Indian giver, but I’d be happy to take her back if it would be lifting a burden. If I’d be saving you the trouble, that is.”

Roger looked at Sharon as if to ask her permission to give up the dog to me, and I could tell she’d developed somewhat of an attachment to her while she was here because she looked down at her beer instead of at either of us.

“I’ll compensate you for the food costs and the vet bill. You shouldn’t have had to pay for extra expenses for someone else’s dog.” I made that last point to drive it home

that she really hadn't ever been their dog in the four months she was there. "And I'd be grateful for the company," I added, trying to sound as pitiful as I felt so they wouldn't be able to refuse. These were people who had seen me through four funerals, who'd probably changed some of my diapers when I was a kid, and now that they were almost surrogate parents, I was hopeful they would indulge me on this. They'd never had any children of their own.

"Don't look at me," Sharon finally shrugged, "I don't have time for 'round-the-clock care of newborn pups if she doesn't make it, so you'd be doin' us a favor." Roger and I both relaxed in relief, and then she added, "But only if you give me one of those puppies once they're weaned."

"Fair enough," I said. "You'll have your pick of the litter." I had all the time in the world to care for puppies. Time was all I had to my name, in fact. That, and the house, the land, and G-pa's guitar. And now a very old, miraculously pregnant dog. "Who's the father?" I added, wondering what kind of puppies they were going to be.

"Don't have a clue," Roger shrugged. "I guess we'll have to wait and see."

I stayed for a couple hours to shoot the shit and share stories from both the old days and the new, but I'd been driving for five solid days and was yawning into my hands when Roger suggested I stay the night with them. I thanked them profusely for their hospitality but said I really would rather be getting home to sleep in my own bed, which along with most of the essentials, had not been part of the auction and was still waiting for me in my dusty old room.

"Suit yourself," Roger said, "We'll be seeing you tomorrow anyway." He'd told me they'd tentatively planned the service for the day after next depending on whether or

not I made it back by then, and he and Sharon had offered to come by to help prepare the house. “Do you want her tonight or tomorrow?” he asked, referring to the dog.

“Tonight if you wouldn’t mind,” I said.

“Sure thing,” he nodded, and retrieved her leash and collar, a gallon sized zippered bagful of dry food and can of wet food, and the special instructions from Shelly, the town’s veterinarian. “She’s due in another couple of weeks or so; we’re not really sure. Just call Shelly if you need anything.”

“Take some muffins and bananas, too,” Sharon added, handing them to me in a paper bag. “There’s no food in that house, none I’d want you to eat anyway.”

“Thanks a million. I really can’t thank you enough.

“You might change your mind when you awake to a cloud of old dog farts in the night, but that’s not my problem,” he chuckled. “It’s good to have you home, for however long you’re planning to stay.” I honestly didn’t know how long that would be. After all, they say you never can go home, and the reasons I’d left were still in abundance. So I just nodded and hugged them both, then gathered up Rusty’s leash and took the old girl out to the car for the twenty-minute drive home.

The fog was getting patchier and much less dense as I headed into the small valley where the ranch was nestled in-between steep, forested hills, and as I turn up the long dirt driveway, it occurred to me that I had never before approached the house in total darkness with not even a porch light to illuminate the entrance. The house looked different lit up just by my headlights, like the face of a jack-o’-lantern with no candle, the two top-storey windows for eyes, the front door a long, drawn-out boxy nose, and the

porch railing a complete set of rigid teeth, neither grinning nor frowning, but simply frozen and stiff in place.

As we got out of the car, Rusty whined and flattened back her ears at the presence of a barn owl looming over a nest it had made in the crook of an awning support beam. I left the headlights on so I could unlock the front door – I still had my old key, and it still worked – half-expecting a swarm of bats to fly out and scare the bejeezus out of us, which is the other reason I wanted Rusty to come home with me that night; I had always been afraid of the dark.

But when I opened the door there was nothing, not even moths darting about, and it wasn't at all frightening. It was just empty. I turned on the lights, and they still worked, and everything was where we had left it. I went out to the car for the guitar, the dog food, and my duffle bag, and then locked the car door out of a city-dweller's habit. I wandered through all the rooms just to check on things and to get my bearings, and by the time I got upstairs, I found Rusty already asleep on the bed. But not on my bed, which was only a full, on Grams' and G-pa's queen-sized four-poster, and so that's where we slept that night. No sheets, just a thin quilt that I grabbed from the linen closet, and I left the window open to air out the room and so I wouldn't be bothered by the dog smell.

I don't know why I thought that I'd be able to sleep, though. I kept picturing spiders descending onto my slumbering face from the light fixture above the bed. This imaginary sensation was compounded by the very real and loud cooing of a bird from its perch in the gutter right outside the window, and it kept repeating over and over again. I used to think the sound was from some kind of owl when I was a kid until Grams

corrected me one day after she'd asked me how I'd slept one night and I'd complained of the noise.

“No, dear, they're not owls, they're mourning doves, but I can see why you would think that. They're like pigeons; you should look for them. You'll see what I mean.”

But of course, my child's mind had heard “morning” dove, and it wasn't until many years later when I saw the bird's name in print that I made the connection. Never before had the sound been so annoying to me and yet so absurdly appropriate at the same time, and I found myself chuckling softly in spite of myself.

I was too tired to sleep, an idiotic problem that nevertheless often plagued me when I was thoroughly exhausted. I got up so as not to disturb the snoring dog with my restlessness and found myself wandering from room to room in the dark. When I got to the living room and entryway, I saw in the diffuse ambient light from the moon shining through clouds that the keys to the F-150 were still dangling from their hook on the wall, and I felt compelled to grab them and go for a late-night drive around the property.

I don't know why I felt like patrolling the ranch after being on the road for most of the week, but it felt different getting into the seat of the truck. I had a better view of things, a more upright posture, and it was more open and comfortable than the car had been. I guess I was hoping to check on the state of things, to see what kind of work I had cut out for me, maintenance-wise. I thought maybe it would inspire me, and silly ideas began to form in my head once I had turned the ignition and the truck roared to life despite its extended convalescence. I could open a bed and breakfast, maybe. A home for lost boys. Or a juke joint.

As I drove around the grounds, a light rain slowly percolated down through a cluster of trees, and from the looks of the parched and brittle vegetation in the meadow and the honeycombed earth beneath it, this was possibly the very first rain of the season, though the fog would have helped keep things somewhat moist throughout the summer. The windshield wipers on the truck appeared to be shot, probably from baking out in the sun for so many months, so again I had to drive with my head out the window. There were no rabbits on the road that night, but I thought about the ones that G-pa, my dad, and I had chased in our lifetimes, and my mind began to drift and wander like a balloon untethered from its string. Without intending to, I found myself navigating the same sharp curve that led directly into the eucalyptus tree which had intruded on our last outing together by having taken root in the middle of the dirt road.

It seemed even larger than before, though it couldn't have grown much in the months since I'd been there. A thick carpet of fallen leaves and bark had accumulated under its canopy, forming both a physical and chemical barrier to the growth of other kinds of life. Now, with the fresh moisture splashing on the leaves, the acrid stench of it rose in the mist and masked the smell of almost everything else around. I didn't know how big it was in diameter or if I could even drag it off the road by myself if it fell in the wrong direction, but I suddenly wanted it gone. Out of the way.

Under the folding bed cover in the back of the truck, I knew there was a stash of tools and rick-rack that G-pa kept in case he came upon something that needed handling while he was out and about. I went around to the rear and peeled back the cover, not caring what else would get wet; I would clean and grease everything later. There was the usual variety of axes, hatchets, and saws along with a whole lot of other things I wouldn't

have known what to do with. But if there was one thing I grew up knowing how to do around that place, it was how to fell a tree. My father wouldn't have had it any other way.

I backed the truck out of the way but left the lights on and put on G-pa's work gloves – which fit surprisingly well – so that the handle of the felling axe I'd chosen wouldn't slip out of my hands in the rain. I could only guess which way the tree would fall – the limbs were splayed out every which way – but I started cutting on the side that looked best and was opposite the direction of the prevailing wind, which had begun to blow stronger as the rain progressed, whipping the drooping leaves into my face. The visibility was terrible, and I was basically cutting blind, but I didn't care if a branch fell on me or what. I just wanted the damned thing out of the path. After somehow successfully cutting about a third of the way through on the first side, I went around the tree and started a notch higher up to create a hinge to control the fall.

When I returned to the front side, I swung up and up again hard towards the back notch, putting my whole body into it and already feeling the blisters forming on my hands from the chafing of the damp leather, pilled and cracked from wear. I was soaked to the bone, but I just kept thinking how I wished my dad could see me, but it was just me out there. Me and the mice and the squirrels and the birds. There would be no bird's nest that I would be knocking down, not in this tree. The local birds never used them for hardly anything at all, other than as a watchtower from time to time.

Which is exactly what this one seemed to be at the moment, for I looked up and paused when I saw the outline of a large bird of some sort standing on the lowest branch node looking down directly at me, wondering what the hell I was doing. There was this raptor, what looked to be a red-shouldered hawk judging from the long black-and-white

tail and burnt sienna chest, staring down at me, dripping wet just as I was, both of us standing there in the rain. It stretched out its wings to shake off the excess moisture, and from the illumination from the headlights of the truck, I could see deeper into the canopy through its transparent wing feathers as though they were long, cloudy windows arranged side by side.

When the bird had settled back down, I picked up the axe to resume the job, and when I swung it again like before, the hawk didn't seem to mind. So I kept on swinging, driving the axe hard, up, and back into the tree until all I could feel was the rhythm of it, every beat drawing it closer to falling, closer to death.

END