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## Manifest Destiny

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MANIFEST DESTINY

by

John Nardone

Bachelor of Arts  
University of Scranton  
1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing  
Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
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**Thesis Approval**  
The Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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The Thesis prepared by

John J. Nardone

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is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Examination Committee Chair

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## ABSTRACT

### **Manifest Destiny: A Novel**

by

John Nardone

Douglas Unger, Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
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In order to complete the University of Nevada Las Vegas English Department's Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts degree, a student must complete 54 hours of graduate course work related to creative writing, literature, and international study. In addition, the student is expected to devote 12 credit hours to a culminating work of publishable quality. To fulfill the requirements of my MFA Thesis, I am composing a novel entitled, "*Manifest Destiny*."

The novel, as indicated in the title, is meant to intuit a commentary on the westward migration of European settlers in the United States. The main character, Dominic Rossi, grows up in Philadelphia – a city built around its history – but by the end of the novel he makes his personal trek west to America beyond the Rocky Mountains, a part of the country in which he feels less inhibited by historical expectation, fulfilling an individual destiny.

The novel begins with Dominic Rossi working with his father in the enterprise of stealing cars, but he gets caught after stealing the car of a girl named Laura Shelley. When his father is sent to jail, he moves in with his mother on the outskirts of town and

ends up in the same school district as Laura Shelley. They become attracted to each other, and when Dominic reports the girl's name to his mother, she reacts by indicating a greater history between the families. Dominic later discovers that his mother had an affair with Laura's father, Dr. Shelley.

Ten years later, Dominic and Laura's paths cross again and their union is inevitable, despite their history. Dominic has given up stealing cars and has become a history teacher. Laura discovers other things about Dominic along the way, and the relationship is complicated by her father's intervention and Dominic's indiscretions. By the end of the novel, Dominic is forced to make a decision: become a part of the Shelley family – which can trace its history on the continent back to the Mayflower – or escape and head west to reunite with his father.

As Dominic develops an intellectual interest in the westward migration, with a special interest in the concept of Manifest Destiny, he realizes that his path is not dependent upon societal trends but rather individual. And his decision in the end of the novel to steal a car and drive west fulfills a personal, manifest destiny.

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## CHAPTER 1

After his mother left, Dominic slept in more times than he or the truant officers could count, but he was awake before sunrise on the day he and his father were stealing a car. He could have rolled off the mattress then but he waited – as the line of sunlight emerged and descended the sheet over his window, as his father coughed the morning out of his throat on his way downstairs and the smell of coffee and cigarette smoke rose up to his bedroom – until he heard his father’s boots against the backs of stairs and the bang on his door.

“Wake up, Lucky, time to go to work.”

“Okay,” Dominic said, feigning grogginess.

Lying on two stacked mattresses, Dominic was close to the floor on which he did pushups and sit-ups, but he liked to stand and stretch first, reaching his hands high above him and touching the ceiling. The pushups and sit-ups were getting easier but he didn’t want to exceed fifty and tire his muscles before his workout later in the day. He flexed through his teeth brushing, cursed stretch marks he saw on his back in the mirror, got most of his hair into a ponytail; threw on jeans, a tee shirt, and socks. He reached into his dresser drawer for a stack of ten hundred dollar bills, folded and bound with a rubber band, and smelled it – it was beginning to weather with experience – then placed the stack in the inside of his left boot. He descended the stairs, sidestepping now that he was a size 13, outgrowing the house like he was his skin.



He leaped from the fourth stair to the bottom and just missed landing on a dumbbell. He stepped over the curling bar, walked up to the punching bag and jabbed once, twice with the left; it always hurt like hell when he threw a hook without the gloves but fuck it, he thought, swinging the elbow and keeping his fist close to the body. He jammed the top knuckles on his left hand and tried to hide the grimace, but it was too late, his father staring.

“You’re still off-balance on that left hook.”

Dominic poured himself a cup of coffee – his father made enough for both of them – and made a bowl of cereal and sat down. He father lowered the newspaper, the sports section of the *Daily News*.

“Seventy-one Mach One,” his father said. “A real cherry.”

“Three-fifty one Boss or Cleveland four-barrel?” Dominic asked, his mouth full.

His father sniffled a laugh. “Boss,” he said. “You’re finally putting that brain to good use.”

“Better than in school.”

“Well, you already fucked that up.”

“Maybe you could’ve woke me up once in a while.”

“What do I look like?” his father said, eyeballing him.

“I don’t think I’m going back next year.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” his father said. “I know school is bullshit but think about all that tail.”

“Like I’m gonna get laid in third period, Earth Science.”

“Feeling tough this morning, huh?” he said from behind his paper.

“It’s not like I’m going to college.”

“Nah,” his father said. “Your skills are in trades.”

Dominic rushed through his cereal, knowing they would leave for the garage once his father finished reading the sports section.

“Where’s the cherry?” Dominic asked.

“Glenside, near Chestnut Hill.”

Lucky nodded but didn’t recognize the name. His world was laid out in a grid, from Spring Garden to Wolff, 25<sup>th</sup> Street to Penn’s Landing, with Broad and Market as the central axes; he didn’t know anything beyond the Art Museum or the stadiums. But his father only worked the suburbs, where people worked in the day and there were no porches or lookouts.

“One of my old contacts put me onto it. I’ve seen the car before, at the show at King of Prussia last year. I talked to the owner, but I couldn’t get any information out of him.”

“Slipping in your old age,” Dominic said, before scooping another spoonful of Cheerios into his mouth.

“Yeah, you think so?”

His father kicked his chair behind him and Dominic jumped, causing a few Cheerios to lodge in his throat. As his father backed Dominic against the minefield of weights in the living room, Dominic swallowed too much of his cereal in one gulp. His father recognized Dominic’s disadvantage and dipped in for a body shot, certainly not his hardest, but enough for Dominic to spit Cheerios on the floor.

“You better learn to cover up,” his father said, walking back to the table.

Dominic coughed food and milk onto the living room carpet until he was able to swallow again. When he stood straight, he was as tall as his father, but he still felt small and narrow.

“Something about this one, Lucky, I’m all fired up this morning,” Jimmy said, punching at the air, but before Dominic could harness any hints of apology in the statement, his father announced that it was time to go to work.

There was nothing in the house Dominic or his father deemed valuable besides money, stored in the three hundred-pound safe bolted into the floor upstairs, so Jimmy never bothered locking the doors. On his way out, he let the wooden door hit the wall, where there was already a doorknob size hole, and slammed the screen door against the railing outside like a cymbal, delivered to the neighborhood like a punch line. Dominic shut the door behind him and decided not to catch up with his father this morning but rather establish his own pace. His father’s swinging gait would have looked inefficient to a physicist but had proven effective on the streets of South Philadelphia. Dominic tried to find his own swagger but became too aware of his steps and decided it was premature: he was still growing into his bones and muscles.

His father walked up the gut of Snyder, his body seeming to fill as much space between parked cars as a Ford Escort, Honda Civic, or Astrovan. People popped out of the brick homes and sometimes stared, at the man walking ten feet ahead of his son in the middle of road, or sometimes waved and called Jimmy’s name. On the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Snyder, Jimmy dipped into Lucinda’s Bakery for a coffee. Sometimes Lucinda had her daughter Bella working, and even though she was married with a kid, Dominic appreciated the eye candy so early in the morning and liked the way she attended to him,

with her head dipped, straining her eyes at the top of their sockets to look at him. He always ordered a coffee from her, regardless of his intention to drink it.

Expecting to charm the ladies inside, Dominic had to adjust his temperament when he saw Tommy Dolan, sitting in the corner in front of the glass case with cappuccino cups.

“Hey, Dominic,” Tommy said, his head down.

“Hey, Tommy.”

“You look jumpy for some reason,” Jimmy said from the counter, across the room to Tommy.

“Too much espresso,” Tommy said, again refusing eye contact.

Bella greeted Dominic but he fixated on a line of cleavage above her apron. When he looked up, her eyes were big and round, too big for their slots.

“I’ll take a coffee,” Dominic said.

“I already ordered you one, dickhead,” his father said, and then under his breath, nodding toward Tommy, “He’s paid up, isn’t he?”

“I think he’s two hundred light.”

“Fuck it,” his father said.

Tommy Dolan had lost over twenty thousand to Jimmy Rossi over the previous two years. Dominic had witnessed his bad luck personally after his Uncle went gimp, as his father called it, and couldn’t accompany Jimmy on Monday collections and his father asked Dominic to “tag along.” During football season, Tommy owed money two Monday mornings out of three. He was an accountant in Center City and Dominic knew there was a joke in that somewhere but had never been confident in his delivery. Jimmy

and Dominic's first stop every Monday was Tommy Dolan's, and he always acted surprised when they showed up like it was the first time he'd placed a bet, like he hadn't seen the game scores on Sportscenter or in the morning paper, his wife and kids still scuttling up the stairs. He always kept his money in an elephant-shaped cookie jar under the sink, and though it probably hadn't held cookies in years, there were always crumbs in the bills Tommy handed to Dominic. Dominic could tell Tommy hated handing the money to a sixteen year old.

Dominic didn't want paternal guilt or sympathy to be his primary force, but he didn't want to get rough with Tommy either. Because he couldn't go to the body without losing his fists in that mess of fat, he'd have to aim for the face, the bones close to the eye. He'd given guys black eyes before, but every time he tried to imagine clocking Tommy, his adrenaline kicking in, he imagined endless swelling. He could never tell his father, but he'd had dreams in which Tommy appeared to him as a black-and-blue ball of puss.

"See what he's got on him," Jimmy said.

"C'mon, really?" Dominic said. It had been three months since they last collected.

Dominic walked over to Tommy, the man still avoiding his gaze. "Hey Tommy, you're still a little light."

"I thought we were square, kid."

"You owe two hundred."

"I thought we were good," Tommy said, staring now at Dominic. Dominic looked over to his father, who was talking to Lucinda. Bella was staring again.

“What do you got on you?” Dominic asked, trying to make his muscles thicker with his arms folded on the table.

“Nothing, a few bucks for coffee, that’s it.”

“Hang on,” Dominic said. He got up and went up to the counter.

His father looked at his empty hands. “Well?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, nothing?”

Dominic shrugged his shoulders and nodded toward Tommy.

“Thanks, ladies,” Jimmy said. “See you soon.”

“See you next time,” Lucinda said.

“Thanks,” Dominic said to Bella.

“Wait outside,” Jimmy said, handing Dominic both coffees.

Dominic walked outside and sipped his coffee, the sun already over the row homes, warming his face. The neighborhood awoke with discussions Dominic could hear through open windows. Inside the bakery, Tommy Dolan opened up his wallet and handed Jimmy a stack of bills.

“Fucking amateur,” Jimmy said on his way through the door, in what could have been a harsher lesson, but both Jimmy and Dominic’s days of sports booking were over, and Dominic was proving his proficiency in other activities.

They encountered a few cars along Snyder, with barely enough room for a car and a man, but they avoided the foot traffic on the sidewalks heading over to Broad Street for the subway or bus. “Look at these sorry sons a bitches,” Jimmy said, repeating his refrain.

Dominic appreciated the value of being able to “work” in a tee shirt and jeans, and in going against the current. What kind of things could be gained in life falling into line? When he and his father turned onto the alleyway, Dominic felt as if he’d mislocated something significant this morning, then found it again in an image of Bella’s big, inviting eyes.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind giving that Bella a throw.”

His father surprised him with a backhand into the chest, taking some of the wind out of him, but the slap was louder than it was strong. His father stepped in front of him, like Charles Barkley ready to take a charge. “She’s someone’s wife.”

“He’s a douche bag.”

“She’s married. Off limits. Understand?”

“All right, yeah, Jesus.”

They started walking again. “Stick to that young pussy for god’s sake. I’m telling you, sixteen years old. They’re little fucking flowers ready to bloom.”

Dominic nodded, but he would have chosen Bella.

“Just don’t get too attached,” his father said.

“Oh Jesus no.”

“Or get anyone pregnant.”

“How old were you when you met Mom?”

His father was either ignoring the question or thinking about it.

“I keep forgetting she’s your mother.”

When they reached the garage, Dominic heard his father’s grunt of satisfaction. Jimmy was still impressed at how perfect it was, with an entrance on a dead-end, back

alley that hooked off the street, an old, rarely used service way behind a few restaurants on Passayunk Avenue. It wasn't like they could be unseen in South Philadelphia, but the only neighbors were the restaurant owners, and Jimmy, Uncle Louis, and Dominic worked during the day, with the cherry nicked and the garage door down before lunch. Besides, it wasn't like people – Lucinda, Bella, Pete, and Tommy Dolan – would ever ask questions. Jimmy called it the Barracuda Triangle, where cars mysteriously disappeared.

The door to the garage was up, and Uncle Louis sat on the trunk of his boat-like, tan '71 Cadillac, smoking a cigarette. The garage was tight with clutter; they still had some leftover parts from a '69 Charger and '72 Chevelle.

“What's up, gimpy?” Jimmy asked him.

“Got here before you with half a good leg,” Louis said.

“Hey Uncle Louis.”

“Hey Lucky.” Louis' walk over to Dominic was meant to be casual but was labored, so that his slap on the shoulder came off as more deliberate than he had intended.

“Ready to pop a cherry?” he asked.

“You bet.”

“Lucky charm,” he said to Jimmy, his thumb pointed at Dominic.

Dominic liked hearing the new nickname again; a second endorsement made it official. Dominic had been Fuckup and Fuckhead until he started paying close attention to football and the lines. He never put any money down, not after seeing the Tommy Dolans of the world reach into a cookie jar and his father's pile of money grow higher in the safe, but he was better than fifty percent, probably closer to sixty. People were making a living with that percentage out in Vegas, his father told him. But Dominic



always treated this talent lightly: what do you do with a canon arm if you don't like baseball or football? What he took seriously was driving, his father's old '68 Mustang Fastback, and eventually, stealing. The new nickname may have resonated with Louis because he'd been given a bad hand recently, injured at the docks. Or maybe the name sounded enough like Dominic's previous names to stick. But after Dominic's first nick, he was no longer Fuckup or Fuckhead; he was Lucky.

Jimmy didn't waste any time: "See you in about an hour," Jimmy said to Uncle Louis. "Don't go anywhere."

"Take care of her," Louis said, as he limped over to the lawn chair and television they had set up in the corner of the shop.

Jimmy and Dominic backed out of the garage and motored slowly down the alley. The Caddy took up all of Snyder, and the soft suspension gave Dominic the sensation he was floating at sea. Dominic was thrilled not only by steering a car but also the life associated with it, even if it was gimpy and unlucky.

"Uncle Louis seems to be getting around better," Dominic said.

"Ah, he's fucked. He didn't get half of what he could have for the settlement."

"That's sucks."

They squeezed onto Broad Street in the morning rush hour.

"What do you mean, that sucks?"

"All that shit that happened to Uncle Louis."

"You know why he's a cripple, right?"

Uncle Louis was pinned by a load of pallets at the docks, but Dominic knew that answer was too easy. "Those fucking owners paid off the inspectors –"

“Don’t listen to him,” Jimmy said. His silence afterward made it unclear whose turn it was to speak. His father was also navigating the Caddy around a moving truck, double-parked.

“I mean he’s not the sharpest tool in the shed,” Dominic said.

His father stared at him long enough that Dominic had to point at the car in front of them, urging Jimmy to brake hard. “You don’t have to be Einstein to make it in the world,” his father said. “Probably better if you’re not.”

Without anyone saying anything to Dominic he knew there was something wrong with his Uncle Louis. He stuttered and twitched just enough to make you nervous, didn’t understand why there was a stock market, or why the Phillies didn’t bring back Mike Schmidt at the age of 45 to play third base. But, like the rest of the Rossis, he was a galumph and had been valuable to Jimmy’s business ventures until he busted his knee. Louis accepted a settlement before Jimmy or anyone else could help negotiate, and he collected disability. Regardless of the size of the payout, it was the happiest Dominic had ever seen his Uncle.

“Louis never took a risk,” Jimmy said. “When he was nineteen years old, he joined the union and bought a house. He was the only son of a bitch in the family who got married when his wife wasn’t knocked up. The guy was born with a rubber on.”

“Thanks for that.”

“The only thing Uncle Jimmy *risked* was a good time. You know what risk is?” Jimmy collected his thoughts – Dominic noticed because the gesture was so rare – then spoke: “Good times, multiplied by chances of being caught, divided by years in the clinker.”

“I got enough of this shit in school.”

“This is better, applyable to real life.”

Dominic started to work the equation in his head.

“For you, it’s even better. If I get caught, I get five to ten in the clinker, you get a year or two in juvie.”

Dominic thought back to the formula again. “What if it’s not a good time?”

“Fuck you, ‘not a good time.’ You wanna talk about ‘not a good time?’ Wear a rubber.”

“More fatherly advice.”

“It’s not brain surgery,” Jimmy said. “Nick as many cherries as you can before you turn 18.”

Jimmy handled the Caddy in the tight lanes around City Hall, despite knowing he could have run amuck into any fiberglass or plastic Nissan or Toyota without losing more than a headlight. Dominic had always taken City Hall for granted, at face value from one of its four sides, but recently he had realized its wholeness, its size and intricacy, an entire city block of symmetrical stone design. Once beyond it, Jimmy wound the engine out on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Dominic liked this part of town. There weren’t as many houses around but he liked the open space once in a while. The engine hummed as Jimmy tried to make all the green lights. All the traffic was coming into town, for the 9 to 5, and Dominic couldn’t say he didn’t enjoy the other drivers’ inconvenience; he was able to place his arm out the window and catch the summer breeze. Like City Hall, the Art Museum at the end of the Parkway appeared bigger than Dominic remembered. He’d never been inside and didn’t have a clue as to what he would find. He had never

been to see any of the monuments in town, Independence Hall, the U.S. Mint, the old Battleships at Penn's Landing, or the Liberty Bell, and he wasn't apologizing for it. He knew enough about the real world in the present; why did he need to see someone reconstruct a Brillo box or draw some lady with three tits? What value was there in knowing all of that bullshit that was already in the past?

It may have been quicker to take the Schuylkill expressway across the river but instead of having to strain the engine and keep his middle finger permanently extended, Jimmy chose the slow, easy contours of Kelly Drive, easing past the boathouses and winding along the river. It was a different sensory experience out here; Dominic listened to the birds, smelled the trees, saw girls in spandex out for a jog or a bike ride. Even though they were still well within the confines of his own City, the jogging women were foreign to him. He wondered what it would be like to meet a girl who ran in the morning in spandex, and at the same time, wondered what the hell they were doing with men in the same outfit?

They left the river and Kelly Drive for Lincoln Drive, with even tighter lanes and turns. As '90s sedans broke into turns and accelerated out of them with ease, the Cadillac demanded that Jimmy drive it. Louis' Cadillac was too heavy for nifty braking, had too soft a suspension to take a turn at any speed above thirty miles an hour, and too old of an engine to accelerate every five seconds. These cars were built when Americans were thinking about big lawns and suburbs, a soft highway ride to work. But there was no rush; they were on time. And Lincoln Drive was the best throughway to Chestnut Hill, and not a bad drive to take slow.

When the turns evened out, the houses started to emerge out of trees, and then they were plentiful and large enough that the trees were only decorative. The homes were massive, with stone facades and peak-roofed gazebos, decks made of solid oak, and patios with vines running through grated pavilions. The smell of the trees made him sniffly but he enjoyed it. He'd always thought of wealth as an unnatural phenomenon, one engaged in complicated money schemes and office work, but Chestnut Hill was a case for the opposite: wealth apparently led people closer to nature.

His father startled him with an abrupt turn, squealing the tires.

"Streets all look the same out here," Jimmy said.

They drove past a quiet road labeled Main Street and continued past intermittent woods areas and lines of houses. "What do people do around here?" he asked his father.

"Sew, smoke pipes, drink champagne."

"A seventy-one Mach One?" Lucky asked.

"Believe it or not."

A 1971 Mustang Mach One Mustang seemed the most incongruous thing to refined architecture and farmer's markets. Dominic associated Mustangs with a raw form of power and strength consistent with his neighborhood in South Philadelphia. That '71 Mach Ones were kept in the garages of other parts of the country like this confused him.

"Here it is," Jimmy said, turning on the road labeled "Easy Street." Jimmy scanned their surroundings without moving his head, using his mirrors. He slowed the car to a stop on the left side of the road and pointed to the house.

It was risky to walk on the street but there was no access to the backyard without crossing through other properties. Besides, the street was as quiet as a countryside. For a

moment, Dominic pretended this was his street, and he was out for a Sunday stroll, before coming home for a home cooked meal and banging his hot suburban housewife. The idea excited him but seemed again incongruous. He was sure they had less sex in the suburbs than they did in the City but couldn't decide why. He looked across the street, trying to look as if he was simply taking in a beautiful day (meanwhile he was already sweating his balls off in the humidity), didn't see anyone watching, made an abrupt but casual turn into the yard of the house and snuck around back.

Though the task of breaking in used to make him nervous, he eventually felt excited about the possibilities like when he was prospecting what to drink or what girl to hit on. He had options. Most windows could be pried open; a surprising number of people never locked them. Three times out of ten, a key was left under the mat, in the closest plant or bush, or in a mail drop off. He could use a credit card on the door lock if there was no dead bolt. Worse comes to worse, he used force, kicked down a door, smashed the window. But in his break-ins to date, the entry had always occurred without force or sound.

Shortly after putting on his gloves, he discovered the bathroom window was open. Why don't they just donate their valuables? As he squeezed through the window, about to cushion his landing with his hands, he considered that he forgot to make sure the house wasn't occupied. A small or potentially big mistake. Always knock first, make sure no one is home.

"Hello," he called, from the bathroom floor "Anybody home?"

Nothing stirred. He checked the bedrooms to be sure. The first room was an office, with more books than anyone could ever read. The second was a child's room

with clouds painted on the ceiling and stuffed animals perched near the pillows of the bed. The remorse he felt was immediate but fleeting; he wasn't taking anything from the kid. He checked a bathroom, another room half-painted with a crib in the corner, and finally peaked into the master bedroom and bathroom that was attached. He aimed to walk out quickly but couldn't help but snoop. The bed was the biggest he'd ever seen, enough to sleep four people, and bedposts stood like pillars on the corners, touching the ceiling. The idea of a bed built into the frame of a house resonated with him briefly. An expensive dresser lined one of the walls.

Items on the top of the dresser caught his eye, but the Rossis weren't in the business of stealing wallets, checkbooks, or identities – it only complicated matters. Two of his friends had been caught stealing and using credit cards; people have insurance for cars but hard cash was irretrievable. On his first runs he was in such a rush but he was comfortable now with a relaxed pace. Necklaces hanged around a mannequin neck and bust; bracelets and rings were lined up beside it. One of the bracelets was a locket with a picture inside of a man with a long, narrow head and slightly crooked teeth. It was the same man in the family picture beside the jewelry, along with a sharp-cheeked, tanned wife with blonde hair that extended beyond the picture, maybe forever, and a small girl who, lucky for her, had her mother's complexion and hair color. The woman stood out from the man in the picture, glowing and leaving him in her shadow, and Dominic wondered if she left the same impression in person. He tried not to touch anything and felt invisible in his surroundings, allowing him freedom to peruse. He imagined this feeling extending to the hours when the family was home, maybe when the wife was getting it on. "Lucky son of a bitch," he said to the man, his own voice startling him as if

he believed he really was inconsequential inside the house. But he was leaving the room fully preserved in its immaculate state. There was no clutter except for a fluorescent orange spandex shirt, and black spandex shorts, set on a wicker chair beside the dresser. He briefly felt exhilarated by the thought of the woman wearing spandex, which was overcome by repulsion at the realization that the clothes belonged to the man. Always the libido to act before the intellect. He laughed at his own eagerness, but also at the farce out of outfit. Who wore that outfit and called it recreation?

He opened the door to the garage and saw the '71 Mach One, its grill facing him as if pouting about its existence in Glenside. The doors were locked; he checked to make sure there was no alarm and pulled out an instrument from his back pocket – his cousin worked for Triple A and let him “borrow” it. He opened the door and the smell of the interior billowed out to him. It wasn't necessarily pleasant but it allowed him to know the car intimately. With a screwdriver, he pried open the floorboard above the pedals. It was an electrical setup he knew well, but before crossing the final wire, he found the garage door opener, just above a yellow-colored road bike. Hanging on the handlebars was a helmet, one longer than any human head, perhaps for aerodynamics, or for an assignment on the Death Star. What would a man need out of a bike when he has a '71 Mach One for leisure, Lucky thought, then realized with a chuckle, that the man would have to make that assessment later that night.

The garage door clamored upward and the blanket of sunlight expanded to day. Lucky ducked into the driver side and crossed the wires, twice, three times a charm and the engine hummed to life. He looked outward to see if anyone was watching – he could run at anytime, he reminded himself – saw no one, got in the car, and backed it down the



driveway. Out of habit, he checked his pants to make sure he hadn't left anything behind, like one would in a house that he left everyday for work. He knocked the stick shift into first gear and eased her along, as his father pulled the Cadillac out like a ship into harbor. His father asked the question in his stare in the rear view mirror – what took you so long? Lucky gave him the thumbs up for assurance.

On his third or fourth run, Dominic's hands had stopped shaking and his breaths remained fair. He hadn't become bored with the activity; rather the adrenaline had been distributed evenly as if regulated. He was maintaining a mild but consistent high, until he hit the gas on the Mustang and felt the power beneath him in first gear, his arm hairs lifting again, his breath halted by a sore spot in the back of his throat. He had the opportunity to pass the whale-like Cadillac in front of him; he had the pace and open lane to do it nearly without risk, but he remembered lessons learned: consequences are dire when you push too hard. The one dispensation he allowed himself was to take off the gloves in 90-degree, humid weather. In second gear, the engine was anxious to jump and scream, so he settled it into third gear, at even pace with his father in the Cadillac in front of him.

He had been relaxed enough not to notice the cop car behind him until the lights came on, and he remained calm in his first reaction: he hadn't been speeding or blown through any stop signs. But he had stolen a car. He considered his options: outrun him, ditch the car and run on foot, give himself up. Dominic didn't know the roads well enough and the police edition Caprice Classics were surprisingly fast, but he wasn't going to make it easy for them. His father always told him to ditch it. He waited to pull off the road until a clearing on the right. His father had slowed so that Dominic found

himself ten feet from his bumper. He saw his father's hard stare in the rear view mirror. Dominic pled with big eyes – for what, for advice? – but his father faced stiffly forward. As Dominic pulled to the side and slowed to a stop, he watched the Cadillac slowly ascend a hill and disappear. It was to be expected: as much as he had hoped his father would pull over, maybe offer the officer an alibi, Dominic knew he would keep driving. As the officer pulled in behind him, Dominic still maintained hope, imagining himself telling his father and Louis the story back at the garage – I don't know what happened, the cop just drove off – with them refusing to believe it, finally asserting that his nickname would stick forever. But the thought of his father, especially a hopeful one, became sour. He was on his own and couldn't count on assistance from anyone or anything in the universe. Dominic had been associated with luck before but they never called anyone Miracle.

As if on cue, the cop's action behind him was swift and aggressive. He hid behind his driver's side door and screamed: Dominic had to keep his hands up and get on the ground. He saw in his side view mirror that the cop was pointing a gun through his window behind the open car door.

Afraid of one extreme, freezing up, Dominic indulged in the opposite, a convulsive exit from the vehicle and sprint into the adjacent field. They couldn't shoot you if they didn't see a gun, his father and uncle always told him, though Lucky knew everyone's sense of his rights were greater in the comfort of home. He lifted his hands to show his hands were free of weapons, zigzagged in case there was a first shot, in which case, he would drop to the ground. Less than two years in juvie. But there were no shots, only screams from the officer, first for him to stop, then into his radio: a series of

numbers, then “running...Bethlehem Parkway...70s Mustang, license plate number...” Lucky was grateful for protocol. He was a hundred yards into the woods by the time the cop – a small-town, heavy, middle-age man who probably hadn’t chased a criminal in twenty years – hung up his radio and jogged in pursuit.

Lucky sprinted through the wooded area beyond the field, his stumbles never severe enough for him to lose his feet, wondering if the cops could track him based on broken branches and footprints, but he remembered the image of the hefty policeman and knew he had a window of escape. Though his father knew Dominic was caught, could he have projected his run into the field and found the outlet? Would his father come looking for him, risk getting caught himself, or was he already accepting the two years in juvie for his son? As Dominic emerged onto a road, he half hoped the Cadillac would be sitting and waiting for him, his father standing against it casually with his arms folded. But the street was empty and Lucky couldn’t afford to wait.

He ran up the street, though as of yet without a plan. He needed another car, would have to risk breaking into a house that was occupied or being seen on the street. The thought of the house from which he’d stolen the Mustang gave him comfort – like he remembered a relative lived nearby – but there was no car left to steal. The fluorescent image of the yellow road bike arose in the same corner of his eye in which he had originally seen it. He liked that the idea was novel and absurd, figured they both worked to his advantage now that the odds were against him: stealing a bike and wearing that ridiculous outfit as a disguise, returning to the house that he had already broken into.

He turned down a street hoping it would lead him to the home, now a safe haven in his mind. The cops would stop by the house, but it would take another five minutes for

the cops to organize a search. Tubby was as good as lost, and Dominic hadn't yet seen another cop car. He jogged along the sidewalk, and the rare person outside watering the lawn or trimming the bushes stared. He was not in jogging attire; he was a hoodlum wearing jeans and a black t-shirt on the run. But he wasn't conspicuous enough for them to call the cops, was he? He waved. Everything would be fine as long as he reached the house. The street sign at the end of the road bounced with his steps. He needed it to be the one and it was, Easy Street.

His pace picked up as he saw that the block was clear, ran around the back of the house and inside, navigating its corners like a veteran race car driver on a familiar circuit. He ran into the bedroom, fell over, taking off his shoes, stripped down to his underwear and changed into the spandex. He knew it was meant to be tight but this was as stretched thin as the epidermis. He wasn't sure he could even mount the bike without tearing a big hole in his ass – now *that* might be conspicuous – but he was committed to the plan. He placed on yellow sneakers that looked like ballet slippers, picked up his clothes and shoes. He opened the garage door, half expecting to see the '71 Mach One sitting there peacefully, dropped his clothes and shoes in the garbage can in the garage. He put on the helmet, hit the garage door, lifted his leg over the bike, and ducked his head underneath the rising door. Not a soul around to see him. He was out for a Tuesday morning bike ride in Glenside.

He had to get used to the gears on the bike – he was either straining for a single rotation or spinning like a maniac – as well as the seating position, which strained his shoulders and back, not to mention his business. He nearly fell, adjusting himself, remembered that he needed to look like a pro on this thing for it to be convincing. He

looked and felt ridiculous, but his ponytail was in his helmet and the spandex covered his tattoos. His turn onto the next road was smooth and he'd found the right gear.

The development was mostly quiet. A neighbor waved and Dominic nodded without making eye contact. The lone passing car gave him a wide berth. He nearly lost it on the gravel beside the turn onto the main road but was able to keep his balance. The road was busier but there was enough room that cars passed him without blowing their horn or giving him looks. Usually, they waited until the other lane was open and passed slowly cautiously. Cars had been riding up behind him cautiously but he heard the sound of an engine accelerating behind him, a Caprice V-8, a police car. His reaction was not fear but self-awareness. He wasn't fooling anybody. He went out of his way to dress up like a queer in spandex but he still looked like a criminal. Though he wouldn't tell anyone, and neither would his father or uncle, Dominic knew these were the types of stories that went around police precincts and back into the neighborhoods of the guilty party. His pace slowed, as he prepared to give up, but he heard no sign of the Caprice slowing. Instead the engine continued to race as it came up quickly, gave him a few feet of cushion, and drove past.

As Dominic continued riding, there were other cops, some with sirens, some without, and all of them gave him ample room on the shoulder. Were he completely innocent and law-abiding, he may have yielded to the signs of sirens behind him, but he had built momentum ever since he bolted away from the Mach One and to slow or stop was to give up his lead. He continued riding, the cops driving around him in pursuit of a young, white male in jeans, boots, and a black t-shirt – worlds apart from a man in spandex with a ridiculous helmet.

For a while, he rode with no particular destination in mind, but eventually he realized he was heading back to Wissahickon Park, where bike riders and joggers assembled. He rode toward Lincoln Drive until he found a park entrance: first with a sign, then with a small parking lot and entrance onto a gravel road.

The road bike was not designed for the terrain. As he tried to avoid rocks, the wheels nearly slipped out from under him. He could have walked the bike but he was looking for a pay phone that could have been miles off. The trail extended down past Lincoln Drive to Manayunk, which was linked to Kelly Drive – also populated by bikers and runners. Suburban cops wouldn't have a chance finding him once he was in town. People in the neighborhood might not even recognize him. The trail gave him some comfort of protection; it was a safety rope extended out to him from South Philadelphia.

After a mile or so, he arrived at a main area where there was a restaurant, snack shop, parking lot, a small pond with ducks, and a pay phone. Though no one noticed him, he felt naked in this larger group, ten or twelve, of stationary people. Near the phone, he set the bike down and straightened his back, wondered how the hell anyone could enjoy riding the bike as recreation. He adjusted himself; his balls were practically hanging out. He was the next member of the Village People. But for now he was safe. All he had to do was call his father or Uncle Louis and find out the plan. Would they be able to trace him? He'd broken a Rossi cardinal rule, taking off the gloves. For now, they knew only that they were looking for a young male with long hair and Philadelphia was a big city. What would the prints tell them? He didn't remember being finger printed. He would be fine. He had money. If he got caught, he would take the brunt of it alone, spend the year in juvie. He sat down to take the money out of his shoes.

Hopefully the snack shop would change a hundred. A girl looked out from behind the counter, and she looked good from the waist up. Might as well make the best use of his time. The sneakers were like ballet slippers...

The sneakers. Along with his tee shirt and jeans, he had thrown away his boots at the Glenside home, with the ten hundred dollar bills inside. Without realizing it, the man who owned the house in Glenside had made money today, first getting his car back and now making \$1,000 bucks.

“Fuckup,” he said to himself.

The first man he asked for a quarter gave him fifty cents.

“Hello.”

“Dad?”

“Sorry kid. He’s busy.”

“Who is this?”

“Don’t worry about it.” It was his father’s cousin Ralph, a bail bondsman. “How much?”

“How much what?” Lucky never liked Ralph and felt like telling him now.

“Bail, meathead.”

“I’m not caught.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Lucky took a deep breath. “It’s a good question. What should I do?”

“You know they’re looking for you,” Ralph said.

“Thanks a lot.”

“Jimmy took off.”

“Where?”

He heard the Ralph take a breath into his fat lungs. “Don’t know.”

“Okay, listen...”

He was hoping for advice so the pause was both of theirs.

“I left my shoes at the house.”

“Who gives a shit?”

“With my money.”

“How much?” Ralph asked.

“Never mind. What the hell do I do?”

“I don’t know...” Ralph began, but the pause was too long. He was going to make his own decision before he listened to his fat ass Uncle. “Let me call you back,” he said, then asked for the number.

Again, he waited. He paced between the water fountain and pay phone until he realized he was attracting looks. He couldn’t tell whether the girl in the snack shop was interested or suspicious. He walked up and told her he was out of money and he was practically dying of thirst, wondered if she could give him a Snapple and he’d pay her back next time he was around. He smiled for punctuation but her grin was impolite; she directed him to the water fountain. Little, rich bitch, Dominic thought, must have had a boyfriend. He sat by the phone and waited, nodded at people who passed. “Just waiting for a phone call,” he said to a couple who’d arrived and returned from the bike ride. He must have been waiting an hour. He would have left but didn’t know where to go. He’d be caught at home and had no one else in South Philly. They would check his mother’s



house too if they were looking for him. Besides, he would rather be on the run than return to her.

The phone rang and he picked it up after the first ring. "Hello?"

"Can't find your old man," Ralph said. "Louis said don't call anymore. Go see Margaret." And he hung up.

"What else did he say?" Lucky asked, too late, and without considering volume, attracting the stares of riders and the girl in the snack shop. But embarrassment came and went – what right did they have, in their skimpy spandex and nut-hugging shorts – to stare at him? He flashed the middle finger to a guy who stared and the man turned away. Lucky mounted his bike. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew it was away from here.

Shortly after Lucky's first nick, Jimmy and Louis acknowledged that the garage was temporary and decided to establish an escape plan. Jimmy called around and finally found someone he could trust in his ex-wife, Margaret, who lived in Denver. Dominic didn't know his father had been married before his mother, but Jimmy said it wasn't a real marriage. They were together for the six months he was in the army. Jimmy, Louis, and Lucky started testing each other to see if they remembered her 10-digit phone number, along with a highway and exit number. Lucky remembered the information after a few days, but Jimmy kept mixing up the six and the nine in her phone number. Louis gave up after a day – he wasn't on runs anymore anyways. They referred to the phone number whenever they caught each other in the middle of a risky move – when Louis had mentioned a recent source of income to his unemployment counselor, when Jimmy admitted to not filing his taxes the previous year – and Margaret became

associated with chiding instead of utility after a month or so. After a few more months without any heat, they said fuck Margaret, stopped acknowledging it would end.

What was he going to do, ride his bike to Denver? Maybe if he turned himself in, the punishment would be reduced. How did “complying with authorities” fit into his father’s formula? Thinking of juvenile hall and three school meals a day – were there cells? were there group bathrooms? – he equated good times with survival. Survival, times by the chance of being caught, divided by years in juvie. He would survive for as long as it would take to go away, a month tops. His legs spun recklessly on the bike as people continued to stare, and he grinded the gears. The area between his penis and ass was sore. He needed a car.

He labored to pedal up the paved hill; it was possible he was driving in the wrong direction, out of the park, but he needed to leave the restaurant area. En route, there was a parking lot to his left, empty. The trail across from the parking lot on his right appeared as if calling to him. He dismounted the bike and carried it on his shoulder up the trail, found a rock, and sat down. He called it “recon” but more than anything he wanted to sit and collect himself.

He’d been sloppy on the nick of the ’71 Mustang: he must have been speeding and he took off the gloves, may as well have left them his driver’s license and social security card. He would take responsibility for the whole operation. He’d asked his father for a ride but didn’t tell him for what; Lucky and Jimmy used the garage for old fixer uppers once in a while. His sense of responsibility and integrity grew as he thought of taking the fall, but just above the recollected image of his bare hands on the wheel is the easy riding Cadillac, the pattern of the back of his father’s head unchanging, staring

straight ahead. Every man for himself. These things go away in a week or two, a month tops, his father once said. Dominic imagined a house in Denver – weren't there mountains in Denver – meeting his father and Uncle Louis on the front lawn, next to a woman with a smile as wide as the snow across mountain peaks behind her. Maybe she would have a daughter or a niece, Lucky thought, then realized she might be a cousin and that if he was integrating romance, the idea was a useless fantasy anyway and no longer a plan. A hardness took over the image of Denver and tossed it aside. Hunger merged with the idea of pure self-sufficiency and turned his stomach.

A new Toyota Camry pulled into the parking lot, and Dominic squatted behind a tree. A boy emerged first from the passenger side. He was a skinny runt in spandex pants and a pink shirt – what was with these people – who kept his measly arms out from his sides and his fragile chest out when he walked. He was biting off more than he could chew. The driver exited the car, presenting a view of her back to Dominic, as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Her entrance to the frame was subtle, as if backstage to the action, but she became the center of attention when she walked behind the car to help dismount the bikes. In her spandex, he could see she wasn't the curvaceous type that initiated stirring in the midsection, that allowed the brain to register attraction by way of residue. Instead, her impression was projected, like the girl knew a boy's interest would never run amuck, would be significant and prolonged. From a hundred feet away, everything about her was soft and innocent: the straggling hairs on the back of her neck, milky white arms and calves, an aloof gaze as she watched the boy struggle to take the bikes off the rack. She was bored by him. It would have been different if she were with Dominic. He wouldn't treat her like he treated South Philly girls, wouldn't have to be

directed by haste as he was accustomed: finishing up before her father got home, before whiskey dick, once or twice without even a kiss. With this one, he'd make sure they had enough time: start at the back of her neck, nuzzling his nose, and convince her part by part – back of the earlobe, collar bone, the bone near the hip, the inside of her thigh.

As the couple checked the items on their bikes, the girl was decisive in her movement. She moved through life graceful, fluid, uninterrupted. The boy fiddled with his bike, probably to impress her but she was looking away. The boy leaned over to peck her with a kiss, surprising her. He held his arms out self-consciously, and she waved him off. It wasn't fair that this guy had the chance to kiss her and wasn't making the most out of it, that he had grown up in Glenside or Chestnut Hill, close to her, and Dominic chose among girls who chomped gum with their mouths open, smelled like hair spray and cigarettes. The girl did not necessarily accept the kiss, but Dominic felt the pain again in his stomach when he thought about the two of them as a couple. As they prepared to leave, Dominic tried to preserve her in his mind, hoping her image would not be ruined by the invasion of the boy in spandex. They rode in the opposite direction toward a trail, the boy in front, leaving Dominic a view he enjoyed. The boy spun his legs quickly as she pedaled slowly and kept pace, as if she had found a more energy-efficient way of going through Wissahickon Park trails and maybe life in general.

When she was gone, Dominic recognized the sounds and smells of nature, those buzzing things and birds in the trees, ducks down at the pond, leaves blowing in the wind. It was as though he was returning to the world after all of his sensations were absorbed by the girl. He was refreshed by the collectivity of the senses, was eager to get inside the

car and see if there was any trace of her. He set the bike and helmet down and skipped down the hill and across the road to the Camry.

The driver's side was opposite the road, allowing him to be less conspicuous as his ass and legs dangled out of the car. But the first obstacle was picking the lock; he thought briefly of rigging the brake line from the bike or smashing the window, just as he checked the door and opened it. The girl and the boy had such trust in the world around them that it gave him another stomach pang. Three people on mountain bikes rode by without a glance. The inside of the car still smelled new; he had expected clutter but there was only a few books stacked behind the driver's seat, a rabbit's foot hanging from the rear view mirror, some cassettes in the console. He opened an Atlas to the full U.S. map page and found the marks the girl had made on it. Roads were traced in yellow and pink to cities with numbers and dates scribbled in. The dates were a year away, the following summer. Hearts were placed next to cities in bold letters – Seattle, San Francisco, Flagstaff – but they were drawn hastily and unevenly, probably the boy's work, Dominic thought, knowing girls took more care in drawing hearts symmetrically, overlapping the top crescents. The pink marker went through Denver but there were no numbers, dates, or hearts. It didn't look to be *that* far. He found a pen in the glove compartment and circled Denver, wrote the date over it, even though he didn't know how long it would take to drive there, a day or a week. In the back of another one of her books, maybe a textbook, was written her name and address: Laura Shelley, 38 Pine Lane, Chestnut Hill, 19120. The name registered vaguely, could have been a celebrity or some type of historical figure.

He felt barbaric ripping off the plastic underneath the steering column and fiddling with the wires, but regardless of her impression on him, this action was inevitable. It was she, in fact, who had somehow re-invigorated him, allowed him her company through avenues in his imagination. He had never worked on a Toyota and was confused for a time by the Jap wiring, but he took his time, no longer fearful of getting caught by the police and certainly not by the young couple. C'mon, we're going for a ride, he would say to the girl, Laura Shelley, pushing the boy aside and grabbing her arm. The wiring took him twice as long as usual, but after ten minutes, he had the Camry's four-cylinder revving, the cry of a child compared to the adulterous roar of the Mach One. He set himself in the driver's seat, reached behind him to grab the Atlas and set it on the passenger seat.

He put on his seatbelt and drove the car carefully through Chestnut Hill and again to the Schuylkill Expressway, finding comfort in the narrow roads that had been foreign to him this morning, but instead of driving home, South, to the city, he merged North, out of town, the road already unfamiliar, and then West. He looked briefly at the map and knew he needed to be on I-80, to I-70, exit 16 in Denver, but felt the pain in his stomach when he tried to figure out how to get there. What's the difference – he was going west. He had a tank of gas, which could get him through most of the state. When would cops start looking for the Camry? He'd have to keep his stops to a minimum. Dominic was too tired to think hard about anything. Thoughts related to Philadelphia and his father and mother were already complicated and unsettling but now there was the prospect of jail, juvie, and school. Knowing this car theft might be his last, he found comfort in an elongated journey to Denver, maybe his last for a while, and in ideas that were easy and

light like the snowy mountains in Colorado – maybe he would try to ski – a home-cooked meal with Margaret. These ideas were limitless, which was part of the problem, the possibilities were at once nil and infinite. Instead, he found himself returning to the image of Laura Shelley, still fresh in his mind, while maintaining the possibilities of the hypothetical. He was still dressed for the part, as he imagined riding in spandex along the Wissahickon Trails, pulling off the trail and laying down his shirt, or driving with her beside him, pulling off at an exit without services and hopping in the back seat. For a while these thoughts excited him, restricted in his underwear and spandex, but they also left him feeling empty. It was his habit when imagining the company of girls to speed ahead to the sexual fantasy, but even in the hypothetical, with Laura Shelley, the fantasy felt desperate and rushed.

The tank of gas got him to Altoona, where he found a self-serve gas station off the interstate. He had no money, found only 78 cents in the car's console. He had to steal the gas. Knowing it was risky but necessary – not really fun anymore – his father's math formula became complicated. He dropped good times for necessity. He filled up the tank casually and drove off, ready to see the sirens behind him, but there were none. The road and the almost untraceable hum of the engine, below the speed limit, sustained him through Ohio. He decided to listen to some of Laura Shelley's tapes, and his images of her renewed with singers he'd never heard of, the Indigo Girls and 10,000 Maniacs; they all sounded like they were dykes. He could only have prayed for Zeppelin or Floyd but found consolation in Bruce Springstein's greatest hits. He had never liked "Born to Run" but repeated the cassette until he reached Indiana.

He slept that first night at a rest stop, backing the Camry between the lines to hide license plate. He knew it was a risk but was resolved to say fuck it and woke up safe and clutching the Atlas. When he got up from his seat, he smelled the odor contained already in his spandex. He walked inside to go to the bathroom and air out, used 75 cents to buy Pop Tarts out of the vending machine, then bummed a dollar for a granola bar.

Throughout the second day, his hunger and the car's need for gas occupied him. He actually looked forward to city traffic in Chicago and Des Moines, relished his dine and dash at a Perkins with a bitchy waitress. He flicked off anyone who noticed he was stealing gas, pulled into rest stops front end first and parked on the lines. He ignored his seatbelt and started to speed. How bad could juvie be anyway? Was it worse than sitting in a car for hours on end in a sweaty set of spandex, driving to see a women he'd never met before, in Denver?

To say he thought of Laura through the middle states would treat his ideas of her as episodic; rather she had not left his mind since he left Wissahickon Park, and the variability in his thoughts of her occurred by degree: sometimes he focused on the subdued, realistic notion of looking her up when he got home and getting to know her through a couple of dates, if that's the way they did it out in the suburbs; other times, when he grew bored with reality, he imagined sharing a bed built into the frame of a house on a quiet, easy street that smelled like elm trees. It was unordinary and absurd for him to think about her but she had been the last thing that thrilled him before he embarked on a cross-country trip, and frankly he was bored. So much of the country looked the same.



He expected to see the mountains when he crossed over into Colorado but when the sign welcomed him, he was still on a rolling, empty tundra. At just past midnight, he pulled off the empty highway at a stop without services to sleep. He couldn't just call Margaret in the middle of the night. Did she know he was coming? He had no reason to be scared – there was no one around for Chrissakes – but in the pure darkness, the engine gauges still illuminated on his irises, he needed company before sleep, and as he allowed his mind to float, it came ashore on Laura again. But the idea of her tormented him as much as it thrilled him, and neither mood was agreeable with sleep, so he imagined Margaret as a Brady Bunch mother who would take him in and feed him a hefty meal, introduce him to friends his age, ask how his day was.

Dominic awoke to the sun reflected in the rear view mirror over the hills behind him. The crisp chill shuddered him awake and he walked outside the car to take a piss. There were still no cars on Rt. 70, only the sound of the wind and his piss hitting the ground. He followed the line of the sun until he noticed a trace of the abutment to the west, the Rocky Mountains. The darkness and overcast sky had prevented him from seeing them the night before, but there were the tips of snow peaks or perhaps the bottom of clouds. He started up the Camry and didn't feel fully calibrated until he was cruising at 70 along the highway. Like a shark, his natural condition was movement. The ground began to ripple with hills, a gentle wake at sea, and the Rocky Mountains took over the Midwestern sky. He was driving toward them forever; they continued to climb even as he hit Denver morning traffic, and he was able to make out the pine trees individually on the mountains when he reached exit 16.

The slowing of the car seemed to interrupt his own motor, which he had considered in sync with 3,000 rpms and rapid movement. He didn't *have* to stop in Denver; he could run the Camry up the mountain. He snickered at the idea, as it contradicted everything he had been thinking past two days. After driving thousands of miles in what he considered the wrong direction, he was thinking of driving west, driving up, farther away. He recalled a story on television about a group of people in the old days who were unable to cross the mountains and had to eat each other to survive. He liked the idea of a landscape being treacherous on its own and not because of La Cosa Nostra or gang wars. Maybe his getaway was meant to continue on Rt. 70, but to where? West, to California. The Rocky Mountains were only a physical thing, but their massiveness intuited something emotional in Dominic; they were a physical barrier, a refuge from his past. How long would it take to get to the top? Margaret had waited a year for him to call; he could call her on his way back.

As he pulled into the gas station, he was brought back to his current circumstance. He was lucky to have made it this far with no money or clothes and might as well call the police on himself if he decided to take it further. He had reached the first point of his destination but was no more relieved by it. In a way, the drive had been something fixed but anything could have happened in Denver. He was trying to forget his past, focus on the moment, but in the parking lot of the Shell gas station was an ominous reminder, a brown '72 Cadillac just like the one his Uncle Louis owned. He was foolish for even considering his father had made it out to Denver in the Caddy, but he had to pull beside it and take a peek. When he did, he saw his father staring ahead, so consumed that Dominic had to beep his horn to announce himself, as if they were neighbors pulling up

next to each other at a traffic light on Washington Avenue. His father's slow turn of the head was slow and disturbing, his eyes wide, his face cautious or what could have been construed as fearful. But when he recognized Dominic, a chuckle shook his body and a grin surfaced on the corner of his mouth. Dominic got out of his car, perhaps too eagerly – if they were the hugging type, this would have been the time – but his father remained casual, lit up a cigarette, looking away from him first.

“Nice outfit,” he said. “Where'd you get the Camry?”

“I rode the bike out to Wissahickon, stole this off some girl.”

His father lifted his eyebrows, impressed.

“Laura Shelley,” Dominic said.

“Who?”

“That's the name of the girl. Her name was written in one of her textbooks.” He was rambling. He hadn't talked to anyone in two days.

His father took a puff on his cigarette and stared off at the Rocky Mountains. The ascending cars looked like bugs crawling a hill. Dominic heard the collective buzzing of the engines, the burly hum of tractor-trailers in lower gears.

“I can't believe we're here,” Dominic announced.

His father nodded generically, preoccupied, probably with a plan.

“I mean I can't believe that we took the same road from Philadelphia – ”

“I know, Lucky. I got it, relax.”

“Sorry, but it's fucked up.”

His father seemed unimpressed by randomness, or maybe he had seen enough of it to know life wasn't all that random. They had left within a couple hours of each other for the same exit off Rt. 70, probably both eager to arrive but careful not to speed.

"I didn't think you'd make it," his father said. The statement could have been bouncy with hope and praise, but instead it came out flat. His father stared at the mountains and rarely looked at Dominic.

"C'mon, after everything you taught me?"

Jimmy allowed a chuckle, and a quick look at Dominic.

"Would have been nice to run a cherry up those mountains," Dominic said, standing closer to his father, staring west and up.

"Like the Mach One?" his father asked.

"Right," Dominic said.

"They got Uncle Louis. Busted the garage." Now it was his father staring and Dominic unable to meet his gaze. From the beginning, they had expected it would be Jimmy going to jail or Dominic to juvie.

"You were speeding," his father said. Not a question, a statement.

"I don't think I was."

"And they identified you. How the hell did that happen?"

Dominic kicked at the sidewalk, littered with gum and cigarette butts. "I took off the gloves."

"There you go," his father said, walking away from him.

"I'm sorry."

"Fuckup."

“I’m sorry.”

“Tell that to Louis.”

The moment wasn’t registering as actual: he was standing beside a stolen Toyota Camry at a gas station in Denver wearing three-day old spandex, and he was the one apologizing.

“You left me,” he blurted to his father.

Jimmy stared hard. Dominic knew from experience that he couldn’t win in a fight with his father, but sometimes it was worth it to stand up for himself and suffer the beating.

“You’re not a kid anymore,” his father said. “Didn’t we agree on that?”

Dominic tried to be quick in his response – was it his decision whether to become an adult – but he was too tired and worked up for anything clever. He simply nodded.

“I could have left you with your mother a long time ago.”

“Yeah, you could’ve.”

“It was your decision to live with your old man. You could’ve chose your mother.”

Dominic was stubbornly agreeing, half-listening, but couldn’t make sense of the last statement. “When? What the fuck?”

“Anytime. I don’t know. Never mind.”

Their voices had risen and a couple pumping gas looked over.

“Now what?” Dominic asked.

“I don’t know,” his father said, arms folded, staring at the mountains. “They’re going to prosecute Louis for the whole thing, eight to ten years.”

“He was hardly involved,” Dominic said.

“The only way they’ll reduce it is if we get caught. Or if I get caught.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“You know, Lucky, you should get out of here.”

“Why, did you call Margaret?”

“Yeah, I called her.”

“And?”

“She’s married to a cop.”

“No shit.”

“I didn’t think you would make it here, Lucky,” his father said.

“I know, but I did, so now what?”

“Listen,” his father said, digging his boots into a crack in the sidewalk. “Take Louis’ Caddy and the rest of my money, about five hundred bucks. Go out to the coast, to California. California girls, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

His father had always been one to get his way, had never shown Dominic desperation. But now he seemed to be pleading

“Better yet, Lucky, you could go to Vegas. With a name like Lucky, Jesus Christ. You win your sixty percent out there, you’ll be a fucking millionaire.”

“Vegas?”

“Jesus Christ, there’ll be parking garages everywhere. Can’t be hard to rip off cars in those fucking garages. They’re massive. Vegas, Lucky. Why don’t you go to Vegas? Just up and go,” he said, gesturing up and over the mountains. “To Vegas.”

“I’m sixteen year’s old.”

“Right.”

“What about you?”

“I’m too old to be running.”

“What are you, eighty years old? We’ll get an apartment somewhere,” Dominic said. “Keep doing what we’re doing now.”

“Listen, I’m serious about this,” Jimmy said. “You go and check it out first. You know, the west. Come back and find me in a couple weeks”

Dominic stared at the mountains, excited about the four-lane highway heading west. But even he knew to continue was pushing his luck; and now that he had found his father, he didn’t want to be alone again. “Fuck it, I’m staying.”

“We might get caught out here.”

“What do I care? What’s a year or two in juvie?”

“Maybe. Hopefully.”

They sat on the curb, facing the grille of the Caddy, the mountains behind them. His father had been smoking since Dominic arrived, lighting one off the other.

“Why didn’t you just stay in school?” Jimmy asked.

“My skills are in trades.”

“Maybe, but you need some type of backup plan.”

“Fuck that,” Dominic said, reaching for a drag of his father’s cigarette.

Their heads lifted at the sound of sirens. There were several of them together, as off rhythm as a band warming up. But they had nothing to worry about, Dominic thought. No one beside the couple pumping gas had noticed them. Three cop cars

appeared in Dominic's line of sight on the expressway and he felt secure in the hiding spot behind the Caddy they had fashioned, just in case.

When the cop cars pulled into the gas station, his father stood up and held his hands high, urged Dominic to do the same. Dominic's heart raced but there was no fight or flight this time.

"I made you do everything, you understand?"

"What? No way. I got caught."

"I made you."

Cops emerged from cars with their guns drawn, screaming instructions Dominic couldn't process. Second time this week. He watched his father and followed his lead, raised his hands, turned around, and lay on the ground. Dominic watched the officers pin down and cuff his father, just as he felt a knee in his back and on the back of his head, his wrists yanked back and squeezed into handcuffs. They forced Dominic up and over to one of the police cars, a separate one from his father, who Dominic watched, intent for one last acknowledgement that never came. People at the gas station stared, formed a line of viewers. Traffic on the expressway slowed. He didn't have a view of his father from where he was sitting, but he could see the Rocky Mountains clearly, after the sun had burned away some of the cloud cover. For a brief moment, they could have offered refuge. Sitting in the back seat of the police car, Dominic's mind drifted away from his father or Uncle Louis and exactly what the fuck had happened in the past three days and instead found comfortable ground in those mountains, in the potential beyond. But as they drove off, the concept of an uncrossed threshold – especially while restrained in the back of a cop car – expired, pestered him. He deferred to the part of his mind in which



Laura Shelley had established permanent residence but even she could no longer offer emotional refuge. With his arrest, he had even betrayed the confines of fantasy. He was a fool, would never win over a Laura Shelley, even in his dreams. But with the prospects of his situation too dire – was he really going to end up in juvie, or worse yet, with his mother – in a last desperate attempt, he tried to merge the idea of Laura and the American West but his imagination stalled. For whatever reason, these two things, Laura Shelley of Chestnut Hill and the Rocky Mountain threshold, were in direct opposition to each other.

## CHAPTER 2

Dominic cut the yellow tape stretched across the railings and loaded his belongings in the pickup truck, while his fat Uncle Ralph sat in the driver's seat and smoked cigarettes. Family Court had given Dominic an address for his mother but the intersection off the Roxboro/Manayunk exit of the expressway was only vaguely familiar. Dominic chose a direction arbitrarily and didn't apologize for getting them lost; he even derived satisfaction in his uncle's complaints about running behind. Dominic wouldn't have minded driving back to South Philly and squatting at home until he was physically removed, but he eventually recognized his mother's street and decided to face the inevitable. As Ralph counted down the numbers, Dominic spotted his mother's house, the one without an address on the house or mailbox, the one with chipped white and green paint, overgrown weeds, and a crooked mailbox. Clear tape lined a crack in the front window. The porch was uneven.

Ralph waited in the car as Dominic dropped the tailgate, grabbed two 50-pound dumbbells, and walked along the cracked sidewalk up to the house.

His mother opened the door and squinted her eyes. "You're late," she said.

"I know," he said, walking past her.

"What the hell are those?"

"My weights," he said, remembering now the layout of the house, that there used to be an open bedroom past the living room and to his right.

“Make yourself at home,” his mother said.

He stared at her to challenge her sarcasm, then realized from her straight gaze that she had intended for it to be genuine, perhaps had even rehearsed it.

He pushed open the bedroom door and saw a room cluttered with empty boxes, a layer of filth and dust visible from the doorway, and an open sleeping bag in the corner. She'd never had a bed for him. He kicked some of the boxes into a corner, raising a cloud of dust, thousands of granules floating in the unimpeded sunrays. It would be a million degrees in the room by mid afternoon without any blankets or curtains over the windows.

“I cleaned up for you,” his mother said. “Want to sit and have a drink?”

He looked at the table, saw a glass of rum.

“I don't drink.”

“Even water or soda? You must not piss either.”

“I have a few more things to get out of the truck.”

His mother watched as he carried the weights past her, banging the weight bench on the doorway, dropping a forty-five pound weight on the soft wood, living room floor. By his next to last trip, she sat at the table, gnawing on her nails, trying not to take a sip while he watched.

He grabbed the last garbage bag out of Ralph's truck and said thank you out of habit.

“Here,” Ralph said. He held a stack of bills, which looked to be about five grand.

“Your father said not to let your mother see it.”

“Thanks.”

“Take care, kid,” Ralph said. “It could have been jail. Maybe you are lucky.”

“Thanks.”

It could have been jail for Dominic but his father had arranged to plead guilty and have Dominic’s punishment reduced to probation, which meant he was living with his mother instead of in juvenile hall. Jimmy couldn’t get Uncle Louis completely off the hook – his sentence was shortened from six to two-and-a-half – but Jimmy was assigned five to ten. When Dominic went to talk to his father in jail, on a phone and separated by the glass partition, he saw he had changed already; the scruff was gone from his face and he’d had a haircut. He looked cleaner and healthier but the man used to have a swagger even sitting down and now it was gone. All Dominic could do at first was apologize, but Jimmy told him it wasn’t his fault; the police had them marked. His contact sold him out. Dominic wasn’t sure whether to believe him but didn’t want to argue, asked how Uncle Louis was doing and his father said something about HBO; Dominic couldn’t hear the rest. When Dominic started on another question about the food, his father interrupted him. You should go back to school, he said, in a tone of voice Dominic hadn’t known from his father. His father leaned his neck to the side and Dominic heard the crack through the phone. Pussy might be better in Roxboro, he said, returning to the demeanor Dominic recognized. He asked Dominic if he had money, would see what he could do. Before they hung up, his father had one more thing for him – and with how he was acting, it could have been anything; he pointed at Dominic through the partition: if that money comes through, he said, you’d better stash it around that mother of yours.

Dominic carried two garbage bags of clothes past his mother at the table. He would have preferred to unpack and settle into his room but had no dresser; if his fatass

uncle hadn't rushed him he would have taken one from home, his old home. He checked the closet, cluttered with stacks of clothes and placed the stack of bills on the top shelf where his mother couldn't reach it. A bed would have welcomed him, but the sleeping bag betrayed his idea of comfort, of curling up and sinking into an old mattress like he'd had at home. His other home.

"C'mon and sit down, Dominic," his mother said from the doorway. There was a hobble in her step, difficult to tell whether it was temporary or permanent, a toe stubbed on a drunken stumble or a slipped disc.

A cloud of smoke hovered around the table at his eye level. When he sat, he remembered the descent through the clouds over Philadelphia on his return from Denver. It had been his first time flying; with the Marshall beside him, he was nervous but when the plane revved its engines and started down the runway, he enjoyed the plane's propulsion. His stomach dropped when they lifted but quickly caught up to him; he was used to it even as they were positioned at a thirty-degree angle upward. Cars below shrunk into ants. His view expanded until the clouds obscured everything and finally they emerged into blue sky. In the breaks in the clouds, he saw the last of the Rocky Mountains. He felt like he was cheating himself of the experience by seeing them from above rather than driving through them. It wasn't natural to be at thirty-five thousand feet, as the captain had said on the intercom. He was cheating. At least this was his feeling when the mountains were below them but when the ground settled into plains again, Dominic appreciated that he was covering distance at 672 miles per hour; he didn't care whether he was on the ground or in the stratosphere. He fell asleep to the hum

of the jet engine, and awoke as the plane shook, descending through the clouds to Philadelphia.

He tried not to cough but couldn't help it.

"I know, I know," his mother said. "I wasn't going to drink today either."

She insisted again that he stay seated and relax, but she hobbled around, grabbing and moving things. Dominic wouldn't have called it organizing. She moved an ashtray from a living room tray table to the kitchen table, moved a letter from the kitchen table to a tray table. She called the area where the table sat a kitchen; it was where the carpeting for the living room stopped and the old, moldy tile began. The stove was covered in silt, but he could guarantee the oven was as clean as the last owner had left it. He heard the sound of flies again, except this time they were collected around an open garbage bag without a can. As he took the kitchen in, he realized his mother was staring at him.

"What's new, Mom?" he asked.

"What's new with you, Dominic," she said, emptying an ashtray into the garbage.

She'd called him Nicky when he was younger but started to call him Dominic when his visits grew scarce, or as she liked to say, after he *chose* to be with his father. He doesn't remember making a choice, or his mother leaving. The irony of it was she was already a name behind. But he wasn't ready to discuss his new nickname, especially under the circumstances. He also thought it best to retire Lucky with the activity of stealing cars.

"How about a fresh start, me and you?" she asked, taking a sip of rum. She acted as though she was about to sit down but was too jumpy.

“Okay.” He got up to open the back door, and his mother looked at it like she’d forgotten its function.

“How was jail?”

“It wasn’t jail exactly,” he began, then started to fill in the details. “In Denver, they were just annoyed with us, wanted to get us back to Philly. We were in a holding cell for a while with this crazy son of a bitch – ”

“Never mind,” she said. “Tell me about something else.”

There wasn’t much to tell about his life outside of misfortune – a cross-country trip, on the run from the police, getting arrested, and flying home. He would have liked to tell her something encouraging but all of his stories were from the old neighborhood and he ended talking about Sully breaking and entering or Tommy getting in a fight. There were his own indiscretions too, which he tried to avoid. Finally, he deferred to talking about the Phillies and Eagles, even though the Phillies were in last place and Eagles preseason was just beginning.

As he rattled off statistics and trends, he was able to appropriate some of his attention on his mother. He tried to look at her steadily, but she was continually in motion and without grace. Instead of a slow, bouncy walk across the room, she zigzagged as if evading, as she looked for the lighter she’d just moved a moment ago or the remote control she’d set on top of the television. When she reacted to his explanations – her uh-huhs, really, and wows mistimed – her facial contortions exaggerated the moods of her words. Each moment was punctuated with a sip from the glass or inhale of her cigarette. She chimed in occasionally, but played with her hair while speaking, cut her sentences short when she found the attention had shifted to her.

In the rush back from Denver, through the courts, and into his mother's home, Dominic hadn't had time for anxiety. But his mother had been waiting and she was nervous.

"It's kind of nice to be here," he said, not because he meant it, but because he'd felt an onslaught of sympathy and it was the best start he could think of. He'd caught her gaze between the inhale and exhale of her cigarette, a stable moment. She showed the same beauty in high cheekbones and green eyes that he remembered, but it was more of an infrastructure than an essence. Her hair used to bounce when she walked but it was flat and there was less of it – it was gray at the roots, reddish brown on the top, dark brown on the bottom – and her skin had stretched and lost its color. The most accurate way to describe her was beautiful for a woman ten years her senior.

"You know you're going back to school," she blurted suddenly, instructing him.

"I know, but not because you say so." He couldn't help being belligerent. She had to earn the right to give orders. He may have had as many good memories of his mother as bad, more lullabies and trips for ice cream after church than smashing dishes or punching windows, but even a remote possibility of a bad incident teaches a child at an early age to keep his distance.

"I don't care why," she said, pointing. "It's what you're supposed to do." She emptied the bottle of rum into the glass and contemplated it. "We'll be what we're supposed to be. Sober mother. Good student."

He felt like a child assigning superhero identities.

"Starting Monday," she said, knocking back the glass of rum.

She handed him two letters addressed to him. On top was the letterhead of Chestnut Hill High School.



“I thought I was going to Kennedy.”

“Nope,” his mother said proudly, shaking her head. “My son is going to Chestnut Hill High School,” she said, and her smile erupted into coarse laughter, as if she were celebrating his acceptance into Harvard.

The letter indicated that the Roxboro neighborhood in which Lucky’s mother lived was re-districted as part of Chestnut Hill Schools, which meant his peers would be preps and snobs instead of scumbags and meatheads. The second letter indicated his classes, along with teachers and room numbers. “All I had to do was sign you up and they took care of the rest,” she said, proud of herself.

For Dominic, school was a daytime prison. In Lincoln High on 7<sup>th</sup> and Snyder, Dominic had never committed himself to learning, cramped into a desk at the back of the room of 35 students for four periods, moved into a crowded cafeteria with runny food, then back into classrooms for the remainder of the day, without anytime outside or even windows that stayed open. He’d passed most of his classes through the tenth grade by copying, guessing, and occasionally doing the work. The principal, Mr. Wall, knew him personally; once he told Lucky if he didn’t shape up he’d end up like his father, and Lucky told him to get fucked, earning him a suspension. He told his father it was for fighting. Only later did he realize that he was offended at the principal’s projection.

“Fucking school,” he said.

“Fucking sobriety,” his mother returned.

They sat and talked for longer than Dominic thought possible with his mother, but it was about nothing in particular, church gossip and Jerry Springer, airports and rest stops in Nebraska. They were stalling. They didn’t know what to do next, whether one

was keeping the other from attending to usual duties, exactly what the other wanted for supper, but after a couple of hours Dominic found that time passed with his mother as it would have anywhere else. She drank rum the rest of the day, but seemed to fair better as the day and her drunkenness wore on. She gave him a list of items to pick up at the corner store and some food stamps for supper – bread, roast beef, American cheese, milk, potato chips – and made him a sandwich. They watched a few sitcoms quietly together before Dominic announced he was tired and waved to his mother before going into his bedroom.

There had been an odd sense of satisfaction in him by the end of the day, as he curled up on his sleeping bag, that the day had gone well or at least without incident. But it was more than that, he thought, recalling the day's events, getting the five grand from Ralph, eating a fresh roast beef and cheese sandwich, finding out he was going to Chestnut Hill High School. Of course, this idea – of a school full of people unlike him, his opposites – made his stomach stir, but it also centered on the slim strain of hope, that he would be the classmate of Laura Shelley. He couldn't know anything for sure – there were private schools out there and the girl could have been a college student already, could have been ugly, good from far, from good – but no rationale could eliminate the prospect of him having access to the girl whose car he'd stolen.

Dominic and his mother moved through that first week one meal at a time. The shopkeeper at the corner store, Joe, with glasses thick enough to magnify his blinking, came to recognize Dominic and addressed him by name. After breakfast, Dominic worked out, then ate lunch and watched soap operas and talk shows with his mother; ate supper, then worked out again, watched sitcoms with his mother; slept ten hours a night

despite the heat and the hard floor in his room. Before sleep, he thought of Laura Shelley in new roles – cheerleader, priss, quiet girl – defining her as he went. He awoke before his mother and found himself waiting for her to get up. Sometimes she waited until dinner for her drink, but she smoked all day, and all Dominic could do was get used to it. Much of their conversations were about Felicia and Duke, Chastity and Trent. Dominic learned the garbage days, opened the blockage in the sink, fixed the flusher on the toilet with a paper clip. On his walks to the store, he saw classic cars that he wouldn't call cherries, would have been doing the owner a favor by ripping them off: an 80s IROC Camaro, a five-year old Mustang GT convertible, a Dodge Dart, a Ford Falcon. He tried to appreciate them without acting upon impulse. On the Sunday before school started, he peeked in the window of the Falcon to assess the interior and couldn't resist assessing the panel below the steering column, imagining his fingers working and crossing the wires. He checked the door of the Falcon but the door was locked. He exhaled the disappointment, then backed away from the car, not worth his while, he thought first, then improved upon it: he was done with the enterprise of stealing cars. As he continued his walk down to the corner store – Joe had a couple of hoagies and macaroni salad ready for him – he was relieved that the door to the Falcon was locked, that the world had certain safeguards to help him in his transition.

Monday morning came quickly. He didn't have an alarm clock but found himself checking for light outside the windows. His eyes were open when the sun came up, and was in and out of wakefulness as the shadows descended along the wall, before rolling off the sleeping bag and starting on his pushups. He decided on seventy-five this morning, felt the inflating in his chest as he rolled onto his back for his sit-ups. When his

mother's door creaked open, he figured she was probably headed to the bathroom – better for her to sleep through the day rather than rouse about – but her sliding footsteps continued beyond the bathroom to his door, and she knocked. “Dominic,” she said. “Get up and go to school.”

He coughed on purpose, wanted to commission sleep in his voice. “Okay. Thanks.”

She walked away slowly, and he finished the rest of his sit-ups. He pulled on jeans and a tee shirt, socks and boots, and pulled his hair back, smelled a little funk under his armpits and sprayed a little extra deodorant; he brushed his teeth with baking soda. His mother waited for him in the living room, watching the news. He was early enough but he didn't want to miss the bus, rushed toward her to drop a kiss on her cheek – good luck, he said – and was at the door, looking back for a moment to see her blush.

He was bigger and older than most of the kids at his bus stop, who seemed to assemble into groups to talk about him, but these were the Kennedy kids, his type. The bus route was loud and lively through Roxboro – a few Kennedy chants were started but didn't take hold – until they arrived on what looked like a college campus. The school was a massive structure of concrete, aluminum, and glass that looked more like a new concert hall than a school, too fragile to contain adolescents. One stiff wind would take off the aluminum awnings; a mild hailstorm would sound like the end of the world. The pavement was black and smooth and the grass was green and full. Beyond the gates of the entrance – gates keeping people out, he noted, compared to the high fences around Lincoln High keeping students from leaving – there were a football and a track stadium to the right, tennis courts beyond. A massive billboard on a small hill beside the school

read, "Welcome to Wildcat Country," with a portrait of a cat exposing its fangs and claws. The bus was silent as they passed the first parking lot, labeled "C," then "B" and "A," each with three long stretches of pristine automobiles: BMWs, Mercedes, Lexuses, Infinitis, a Porsche 911. Top of the line Toyotas, Hondas, Nissans, some Fords, Chevys, Dodges. Two dozen Jeep Wranglers, most of them the 6-cylinder, Rubicons, half a dozen pickup trucks, all new models, a few of what the yuppies were calling SUVs. A handful of older models separated the lines of new cars like bookends. He looked for a cherry but only saw an old MG; he wouldn't be caught dead in that puddle jumper. Before they made the turn on the one-way drive around the school – as if they wanted you to appreciate its wholeness before you entered it – one car caught his eye. Parked in the very first student spot was the teal Camry of Laura Shelley.

In all the ways he'd thought about Laura Shelley since he'd seen her in the park, she was his. On the sleeping bag atop an uneven floor, he'd been rubbing one out thinking of dumb, South Philly girls with big breasts and high-pitched voices, but most nights, when he was done, he thought of Laura Shelley, pedaling effortlessly in a middle gear. She had been a fantasy but was now a schoolmate. How much did she know about the car theft? Dominic would not have been named as a minor. Maybe she'd found out her father and uncle's names but there were a lot of Rossis in the world. As the bus circled the school, passing the tennis courts and bird feeders, Dominic reminded himself that this was a new start. Worse came to worse, he would excuse prior actions as those of another life, an entirely different person. Technically he wouldn't be lying if he said he no longer knew a Lucky Rossi from South Philadelphia.

Inside, he didn't know where he was going but knew from his experience in the City to keep walking rather than stop to look or ask. The school lobby was massive, with high glass ceilings, but crowded. He dodged circles of social cliques like they were minefields, but he wasn't making much progress. He spotted a hallway and turned toward it despite not knowing where it led. The hallways were wider and higher than he was used to, but with students already lining the walls beside their lockers, the world was closing in on him. The boys all had short hair and wore nice shirts, even dress pants, what did they call them – khaki? Some kids stared; a group of cheerleaders quieted as he passed; one girl on her way to the group walked in a crescent around him. Before he'd left for school, he saw his muscles as an asset but now they were making him conspicuous. When he reached his homeroom, he tried to slide past a group of boys blocking the entrance, but he bumped into one of them, the bigger one. He told Dominic to watch where he was going, or why don't you say excuse me, or something frankly Dominic couldn't remember as he took his seat, because he knew dwelling on these details would lead him into trouble. He waited for the bell, raised his hand when the teacher called his name, and accepted his schedule and locker number when it was assigned.

He was assigned six classes instead of five but didn't want to ask any stupid questions on the first day. He walked quickly to his first period History class with Mr. Curry in C18, despite accidentally taking a circuitous route. He expected to see some of the Roxboro kids in his classes and looked forward to being surrounded by his own, but he was the oddball in this class, underdressed and disheveled by comparison. Bad eyesight must have been a pre-requisite; everyone wore glasses. One guy had his pants

held high by a belt with a Wildcat buckle. When the bell rang, a group of jocks and cheerleaders walked in together. The girls huddled together and giggled as they arranged to sit beside each other. The boys deliberately swung their arms and stuck out their chests. The boy that sat beside Dominic was the one he bumped into before homeroom, a big boy, but not one of muscle, with a meaty face. Dominic had felt the give of fat and flesh when he bumped into him. “Jake,” he said, reaching out his meaty hand.

“Dominic.”

“Dominic what?” the boy asked.

“Rossi.”

“From Roxboro?”

“Kind of. South Philly before that.” He noticed the boys around Jake and the girls behind them were quiet and staring.

“That explains the grease in the hair,” Jake said, over his shoulder, looking for laughter.

Before Dominic responded, the teacher – a young guy also wearing khakis and a button down – announced himself as Mr. Curry and the class as Honors American History. A mistake had been made, but Dominic didn’t want to interrupt class by leaving, especially didn’t want Jake to think he’d scared the new kid from Roxboro. As Mr. Curry spoke, Dominic thought of all the things he wished he’d said to Jake. He wanted to be like guys in the movies who could engage in banter without getting into a fight, but Dominic only had two modes, off and on, ignorance or swift, extreme action. His first reaction to Jake was to stand up and reach for his throat, but it was only the first period of the first day of school. He looked around for a complexion that resembled his

own, should have listened for a vowel at the end of everyone's last name, but could only find light skin, blonde and brown hair.

With nothing better to do, Dominic listened to Mr. Curry. The teacher handed students a worksheet describing what they would accomplish that year. Dominic was glad his enrollment in the class was a mistake: Mr. Curry was asking for four papers throughout the course of the year, with the last paper being ten pages long, typed. Other requirements included memorizing names and dates of each President and American war, reciting the Gettysburg Address and the Preamble to the Constitution. Dominic looked upon all of these things as a crisis averted, confirmation that he was in the wrong place.

When he walked out of class, he checked his schedule. His next class was Algebra with Miss Swanka, A4. The class was on the other side of the school, which meant traveling through minefields of students and dealing with the likes of Jake Tallon. But the school's main entrance was nearby; perhaps he could find a way into a side door and walk around. The idea was the first bright light of the day. He walked quickly out of the building and felt the sunlight on his forehead. The landscaping around the school prevented him from walking around the school, directed him to the road, which would have taken too long. He walked back to the main doors, locked from the inside. He looked inside but wasn't sure if he wanted to be noticed. There were windows everywhere and the wrong person would see him soon, so he simply turned around and started walking, toward the gates, but before that, through the parking lot.

The first car in his view was the Camry, immaculate compared to the way he'd left it. He wondered if some poor soul must have had to drive it home along the same route he'd grown bored with, with the windows down after his stink of sweat and



spandex. More likely it was a car carrier. It was okay, he told himself, he wasn't going to steal a car. Besides, the Camry would be the last one on his list. Laura Shelley, who he had not seen yet in the hour of school he made it through, would know he was a car thief for sure; it was the first car in the lot, so he risked being seen; and there were cars worth three and four times as much in the lots. He quickly rescinded his last reason, walked quickly through the first parking lot, hoping he was far enough down the hill so that no one in school would notice him. He felt safer by the time he reached parking lot "B," because of the distance from the school, but it was the same landscape of high priced vehicles, with alarms and other preventive measures to keep him from driving away. Only as he considered the awkwardness of walking out the gates and along the main road with no pedestrian walkway did the prospect of driving trickle into his mind as a practical option. The feeling suddenly empowered him, as if he would once again be protected by luck. He had already crossed into the "C" parking lot, certainly out of sight by now, when he set his eyes on the MG. Simple wiring. No alarms. Worth double its cost for parts. The top was down so there weren't any locks to break. He ducked beside the car, opened the door, and popped open the panel. The Brits managed to complicate it, but it was still recognizable. He had the car started in minutes and eased it out of its space, nice and easy, yielded to oncoming cars on the main road, got a feel for the clutch, and drove it safely away from the Chestnut Hill campus. There was some pickup in it, he was surprised, but he stayed under the speed limit. Getting caught stealing a car now would land him in jail. In fact, he had to get to his destination as soon as possible and keep the car off the road.

Where was he going? To South Philadelphia, the Barracuda Triangle, his father and uncle welcoming him with the MG: where the hell have you been, his father would say, checking his watch. Louis brought you a calzone from Papa's. Sit. Eat. Enjoy. When the car was chopped and cleared, they would open up the garage and pull out three patio chairs and eat, the neighborhood buzzing with the sound of Phillies games, grandmothers and wives yelling, kids on bikes and motor scooters, the smell of a calzone or cheesesteak left on his clothes. Jimmy would talk about the girls he banged two at a time when he was stationed in San Antonio, loud enough for the businessmen to hear as they walked home in their nice suits and shiny shoes. Louis would ask Dominic for his picks on the baseball playoffs; he'd be counting on his lucky charm.

The fantasy sustained him for a mile or two before the truth settled: the garage was finished. And Dominic didn't have the contacts like his father. He couldn't show up to a garage with an MG. He thought perhaps the garage space was available but knew it was confiscated. It would be like driving the stolen car into the parking garage of a police station. He'd nicked a baby cherry and had nowhere to go with it. He imagined himself driving around endlessly until being pulled over by cops, scruff grown on his face. But if he were caught, he would go to jail, locked up with his father and uncle in a cage, spurning his mother to drink. Things in life can be temporary. He didn't have to be a car thief because he once was, because it was his greatest talent. He could be successful in other things, even if it meant starting with Algebra for retards. The MG had no balls anyway. He turned the car around, justified in his innocence, and drove to school. He despised Chestnut Hill High School in the hour he was there, but he had been redeemed by a strain of inevitability. He was not going to jail, which meant he was going

to school. And he'd learned valuable lessons in the short time he was there this morning. He'd already made too many compromises. He wasn't going to be harassed by a fat kid named Jake who needed football pads and a jersey to feel tough, would rather stare the cheerleaders in the eye and let them walk around him. He wouldn't start swinging at anyone recklessly; he would make them react, let them make the mistake. It was the only way he could succeed: Fuckup, Lucky, Dominic was going to be himself.

He drove the MG through the gates and into the "C" parking lot, meandered in first gear to the space he had left, and backed the car in, just like it had been before. He thought of fucking with the driver by turning on the radio and heater, along with the windshield wipers and blinker, but knew this was the kind of arrogance that came back to haunt criminals. He set the wires back and lodged the panel back into place, then walked through the parking lot with a swagger that finally fit him, not exactly efficient but alert and strong. He didn't need to steal cars to walk with a swagger, to feel strong. He flexed his muscle and watched the sleeve stitching stretch.

A kid from the Roxboro bus stop opened the door at the school entrance. Dominic carried the same walk through the doors and into the lobby, busy now with students changing to third period. He'd missed only one class, could use the excuse that he'd encountered scheduling problems. He took comfort in the idea that nobody missed him, but decided that was about to change. Though it would have been easier for him to make the immediate left to his locker, he walked straight through the lobby – chest out, head up – with the attitude that he was going to take care of his business and anyone who had a problem could go fuck themselves.

He had made a mistake on his first day of school, but it had amazingly gone unnoticed and unpunished. When he came home, he expected a similar form of failure for his mother, but when he walked inside and saw his mother lying on the couch in front of the television, her eyes closed and her face flushed, he knew her discomfort was the result of sobriety not drunkenness. “Hey Dominic,” she said, holding her forehead. “How was your day?”

“Good. Everything was good. How are you?”

“Don’t ask. Fine.” She held her stomach and massaged her temple.

“What did I miss?” he asked, nodding toward the television.

“I don’t remember, but you’re in time for General Hospital.”

He had been thinking about working out, or cracking the Algebra book, but his mother had had a difficult day already and he didn’t want to add loneliness.

“Meet anybody new?” she asked.

“A few people.”

“Any problems?” she asked, covering her eyes even though the room was dimly lit.

“Not really.”

“I don’t want to know. There’s some sandwich meat, some bread and potato chips from yesterday.”

“I have some homework I want to look at first,” he said, then walked to her and kissed her on the forehead. She squinted at him, waiting for the punch line. “I’ll put together some sandwiches in a little while for supper.”

On his way into his bedroom, his mother sighed heavily, let a groan slip that could have been pain or satisfaction.

In the next couple of days, Dominic found that learning could come easy to him, especially in the standard track, as long as he eliminated distractions. The Roxboro kids were already skipping out of class to smoke cigarettes and joints behind the Wildcat sign. He found that if he showed up on time and did his homework the teachers didn't single him out. His courses were English, Earth Science, Algebra I, Typing, Spanish I, and American History. Out of curiosity, he made an effort in Mr. Curry's Honors American History, despite not belonging in the class. He planned to ask an administrator about the enrollment mistake the following week, when things calmed. In the meantime, he was encouraged that he'd been able to follow here and there, respond correctly the one time he was called on in class.

A call down to the principal's office on Wednesday startled him, but Mr. Donovan was not like the principals he'd known before. He offered Dominic a seat and allowed him to enjoy the panoramic view of the grounds from the office. Instead of the background noise of an assistant principal's yelling or kids in the hallway, he heard the birds chirping. And Mr. Donovan looked healthier than other principals. His clothes fit him; he had his color and a full head of hair; his glasses were thin and transparent. He took care with his appearance, of himself and the school. Sitting in the leather chair across from him, Dominic felt underdressed in a tee shirt and jeans and a little outclassed. Not wasting any time, Mr. Donovan explained that he added Mr. Curry's History class to Dominic's schedule because he was trying to help him graduate in two years, rather than

three. He asked Dominic whether he could handle the challenge and because he put it that way Dominic said yes. There were a few other, smaller things, Mr. Donovan said. He rattled off rules about classroom conduct, cursing, fighting, and lunchroom behavior, and though Dominic was used to challenging authority he knew it was his turn to listen and behave. Thinking of his mother, he agreed.

He told his mother later that the principal had arranged for him to graduate in two years, and as hard as she tried to fake happiness, or even to feel it, her body was empty of the related chemicals; she was still squinting her eyes at him and groaning through headaches. He didn't like seeing her suffer those four days, wondered if it would have been better to wean off the stuff rather than quit cold turkey. He told her she could always get help, not that he knew how or where, but he'd heard it enough times on television and in passing that it must have existed. She always worked better alone, she told him. She tried waiting for him at the kitchen table when he arrived, her hand shaking the cigarette so that the line of smoke zigzagged, but he told her it was okay for her to lay down. She could lay down for another three months if she wanted. He would head down to the market for dinner after he started his homework.

It had only been three days but Dominic's transition to Roxboro and Chestnut Hill was in a way miraculous. The only problem that didn't have an immediate solution was Jake Tallon and some other students in Mr. Curry's History class. On Thursday morning, Dominic anticipated trouble, as Jake blocked the entrance to Mr. Curry's first period classroom while talking to one of the cheerleaders. He was a real oaf, about an inch or two taller than Dominic but heavy and loose. He wore clothes a size too big to conceal his rolls. There was loose fat on his chin and face too that would cut real easy. "Hey

Greaseball,” he said, with a slap on the back as Dominic passed, a refrain from yesterday, nothing original. Were the situation different, an observer could have said it was a typical adolescent greeting for a friend, but Dominic knew it would escalate. And as much as Dominic would have liked to come up with something clever in response, he had only his two modes, on and off.

Mr. Curry wasn’t through roll when Dominic heard a deep voice behind him asking if that was a grease stain on his white tee shirt. But for the time being Dominic was intent on another challenge. He had read the appendix to the textbook and Mr. Curry was giving a quiz. He answered three out of the five questions right but he needed four to pass. He would have to read closer the next time, or maybe twice. Jake, he noticed, had drawn a picture of a football in the upper right hand corner of a blank paper.

Though Dominic had failed the quiz, he had done better than half the class in getting three of the answers correct. He was also starting to follow Mr. Curry’s fast-paced lecture about American History, reinforced by a timeline of the world, beginning with Mesopotamia and extending to modern day. Whereas the world’s history extended across three blackboards, U.S. History was barely a hyphen.

He was starting to understand and even feel inspired by the idea that everything about America was new and fresh, even though his grandfather who came from Italy was dead and the house in South Philadelphia was a hundred years old. He’d always thought of Philadelphia as old, with cobblestone streets and talks of rebellions by men in wigs. Dominic had considered Philadelphia’s historical district ancient and irrelevant before Mr. Curry’s second day lecture in Honors American History. The recognition opening up in him was more than an idea now; it was an entire outlook, the arc of time and place

greater and more dynamic than the one he had once known. The outlook was vague and intangible but inspiration was related, for the first time, to his intellect. And it was starting to trickle down through Dominic, as he was both excited by the idea of a new America and humbled by the dash that represented its timeline on the board. We were all the center of our own universe, Dominic thought, but wondered if it was possible to demonstrate with the smallest dot of a piece of chalk, his personal significance on a board of the world's history. But he wouldn't have been worth the space as someone who stole cars and barely passed the tenth grade.

"Nick," Dominic heard, in a deep, mocking voice behind him. His heartbeat picked up as he thought about his response. He knew that his thinking about it was already a disadvantage. He tried to ignore it and elaborate on the ideas he'd had before he was interrupted, but the moment passed without a trace. That fat son of a bitch, Dominic thought; he'd been close to something intellectually. He stared at Mr. Curry's chalkboard timeline and tried to focus again.

"Nick," the voice repeated.

This time, he quickly looked behind him and stared but Jake was pretending to pay attention now, facing the board. The brief glance he shot toward Dominic was a sarcastic plea of innocence, as if to say excuse me, I'm trying to adopt a new outlook on history here.

"Is there a problem in the middle of the room?" Mr. Curry asked Dominic, then glanced at Jake. Dominic had noticed Mr. Curry targeted him primarily, but the meathead spoke too soon.

"No problem," Jake said.



Dominic nodded as if to concede a point, thinking a verbal response an admission of guilt. Mr. Curry accepted the gesture and moved on with the lecture, but Jake continued his harassment. He repeated “Nick” for a while before relying on what he probably considered wit, saying he could “really go for a cheesesteak...do they add grease to that?” “I wish I had enough money to buy tee shirts and jeans to wear to school but I just can’t afford it.” “Is that a pony tail or a pigtail. What’s the difference?”

Dominic’s stares only egged him on, and any verbal reaction may have earned him detention or suspension. And for what. All of the activity around him was below him. His classmates had never had to confront the possibility of being alone, of driving thousands of miles across the country en route to a new city and a new mother. They’d never been tested by breaking into a house and stealing a car. But quickly, Dominic dismissed this form of strength. It would be up to him to demonstrate strength in other ways, legal ways, in order for him to be a success in Chestnut Hill and beyond. He was never going to jail. And so the easiest response to Jake was to chuckle it off, in the same way you might watch a friendly dog run into a wall. But sometimes it was hard to find funny things that were threatening. And by the end of class, after enough comments from Jake, Dominic was no longer content with ignorance. He had reached the threshold that had become a sanctuary for him – the point of justified response. If he were going to be given a suspension, he’d might as well earn it. If everything happened as he expected it, he’d only have to fight once.

Jake stayed close to his friends and girls when he walked out of the class, but the numbers against Dominic wouldn’t matter; he would isolate Jake and the girls would scatter. Though Jake was taller, size and height were irrelevant compared to leverage,

skill, and adrenaline. Jake watched him Dominic approach and seemed more confused than alarmed, until Dominic squatted and jammed his open palms into Jake's chest, pushing him hard against the lockers. Dominic's subsequent stare at Jake was not as much for intimidation as strategy; he was the central focal point in order for Dominic to keep an eye on his friends on the periphery. He took a step back. The pattern of the circle would protect him. One of the guys, the tall, lanky type, probably a wide receiver, made a delayed response in trying to break it up by placing his hand on both their chests, but Dominic quickly knocked his hand away and pushed him back, pointed directly at him. The boy accepted Dominic's finger in his face and Dominic knew it was just he and Jake. But he had to work quickly before security intervened.

Jake's wandering eyes and slouching posture showed he didn't want to fight and usually it was difficult for Dominic to fight an unwilling party, but Dominic's motor was already revving; he was going to get a good shot in. A few more pushes against the locker got Jake worked up, and an open slap across the face prompted him to respond as if in a convulsion and drive toward Dominic like a bulldozer. Dominic stepped to the side and stayed low, threw body shots into Jake but they were absorbed into his fat. For a moment, Jake got a hold of Dominic's shirt, as if he was holding on for dear life, and unleashed a haymaker from so far behind him Dominic saw it coming yesterday and dodged it. Since they were aiming for the face now, Dominic threw a left hook that caught Jake just below the eye. There was a feeling of synergy in landing the punch, like hitting a baseball on the thick part of the bat or catching the clutch at the right point, but it was the response of the people around him that startled him, a collective hard "o" sound that signified surprise as much as terror. It wasn't until then that Dominic realized how

many people had been watching; the hallway was twenty deep in both directions. A few voices pleaded for them to stop fighting. Jake was protected by his football players now, some on the floor with him, another couple staring at Dominic as if they too were ready to take him on, but they were there for demonstration, to tell their girlfriends later that they would have fought him and won if not for this or that. He saw the reticence in their eyes too and knew the outcome so surely that it was useless to go through with something so scripted. And despite his adrenaline, he was feeling a degree of remorse about landing a punch so squarely above Jake's eye. He hadn't wanted to kill the guy, just put him back in line. Dominic felt the pull of people on his arms but it was a peacemaker's form of aggression and he was able to quickly push them off as long as he was walking in the direction opposite from Jake Tallon. He was somewhat amazed as he walked to the front of the not-yet-dispersing crowd, faces staring, that he had not yet been tackled by security. Maybe he was Lucky again. He felt a draft on his chest, realized his shirt had been torn six inches down from the collar. Jake had clutched it on his descent following the left hook.

The audience of startled faces split when he arrived. Mostly they stared as he passed; some clapped him on the back. He saw fear in some of the faces, which in a way was just what he wanted, including a girl who backed away from him. He looked twice because she looked familiar, perhaps from one of his classes, but she had not registered sharply enough to recall an image from a day or two previous. But it was her reaction above all else that stayed on his retina as he walked out of the crowd: a jerking on the left side of her mouth, as if Dominic had somehow shorted a nerve.

He made it through five minutes of his next class, English, before the teacher received a phone call and said the principal wanted to see him. Dominic could have represented innocence but he was still breathing heavy and his shirt was torn. He was probably scratched up too but hadn't been able to have a look at himself yet. Instead of innocence, he accepted guilt proudly and walked slowly out of class, without concealing the top of his chest exposed in the torn tee shirt. His action had been inevitable, he thought, walking with the same swagger he'd discovered after he'd stolen and returned the MG. He was willing to face whatever consequences might be handed down.

He announced himself to the secretary and she told him to walk into Mr. Donovan's office. He saw Mr. Donovan leaning back in his chair, talking to Mr. Curry. It was obvious Dominic had interrupted Mr. Curry in a dramatic pose, his arms reaching out in front of him in fists, his teeth showing in a representation of anger. The look froze on his face for a moment and then softened. Mr. Donovan instructed Dominic to have a seat; Mr. Tallon was on his way. Dominic didn't like the position of being seated when Jake walked in; he had received one too many cheap shots. He leaned to the side in his chair with his right hand already fisted. Mr. Donovan must have noticed the gesture and calmly told him it was okay – they were going to iron things out. What did that mean, Dominic wondered. It was obvious from Jake's entrance that he'd had enough of fighting with Dominic. He had an ice pack applied to his right eye, so his hand and the pack mostly concealed his face from Dominic, but Dominic had noticed the slouch in his demeanor when he walked in, and from a glimpse beside the pack, a pout that seemed to fit his baby face.

Mr. Donovan began by describing a theory called territorialism, and though Dominic was thankful that he was beginning indirectly – from his experience a strong lecture was a substitute for and rarely accompanied with a strong punishment – he quickly grew tired of the principal’s talk of pack mentality and aggression. He’d checked out in fact, thought about how strong his left hook had been, but remembered he was trying to be a success and checked back into Mr. Donovan to hear talk of resolution and cooperation. Mr. Donovan referenced Mr. Curry and said something about the teacher admitting responsibility for “not subverting the situation.” The situation was being turned on its head; was it possible Dominic was not being blamed? Mr. Donovan’s request that they shake hands and put it behind them came abruptly, so abruptly that even Mr. Curry, standing across the room, seemed to be surprised by it. “If that’s what you want,” Mr. Donovan asked. “If not, we’ll work out another arrangement.”

Dominic couldn’t see Jake’s reaction, but a thick, right hand rose and reached out to him and Dominic clutched and shook it too hard, his skin too soft and grip too loose for a fighter or a football player.

“Now this is over with,” Mr. Donovan added. “If anybody asked, I sat here and gave you hell.”

The four of them chuckled at the secret being assigned to them. Dominic had gotten away without saying a word. But he saw Mr. Donovan slowly pan to him and knew he would have to speak for himself.

“Any other problems, Mr. Rossi?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Next time, we’ll get the probation officer involved.”

“Okay.”

Mr. Donovan panned over to Jake, who once again spoke too soon. “Sorry Mr. Donovan, Mr. Curry,” he said. “Sorry, Nick.”

“Me too,” Dominic said, lying.

“So,” Mr. Donovan said, standing up. “I shouldn’t do this but I’m curious. Let’s see it,” he said, nodding toward Jake.

Jake lowered the ice pack with a look of anticipation on his face, hoping for subtle reactions, but Mr. Donovan was the first to react, cringing as if he’d bitten into something sour, making the “ooh” sound that Dominic had heard from the crowd when he’d first landed the punch. Mr. Curry came over to have a look and nodded: he’d seen the punch and had expected the damage. Dominic looked over and saw the swelling below Jake’s eye and knew better than Jake that it was only the beginning. It was going to be numb and inflated for a while. He still had more swelling to go no matter how much ice you put on it, and then it was going to get black and blue and ugly, before it finally started to fade away. It took about this long, as long for it to heal, to rationalize that it made you look tough. Worse yet would be the rationalizations that it hadn’t been that bad, that you would have won if not for this or that. Dominic had been through it before and felt a little sorry for Jake, but it was the type of pity attributed to the laws of the universe more than himself.

Before heading back to class, he had been instructed to tape his tee shirt from the inside. It didn’t hold well and that was fine; he didn’t want to conceal his chest. It was evidence, when people later pointed across the cafeteria or whispered about him in the halls, that he had been the one who gave Jake Tallon the shiner. As he walked to class,

he relished being able to slow the incident down and recall the details. Mr. Curry had been the one yelling: “This is not a resolution! This is not a resolution!” above a collective buzz that accompanied students’ yelling. Was it cheering? Against him, for him? How could a crowd cheer for someone whose name they didn’t know? It was probably better to stop remembering, lest he become discouraged. But as the day wore on, the whole incident became subservient to a moment afterward that only he had found significant. He couldn’t forget about the girl, familiar, and her grin. It was her: Laura Shelley.

The closest he had been to her at Wissahickon Park was a hundred feet away, and based on that loose sketch of an observation – a dot on the retina – he had been forced to create a detailed image of her up close like a police sketch. But in his mind, she retained the same softness he remembered from a distance. She was blurry and softly lit. Rarely are beauty and virtue attributed by being scrupulous. He had imagined her so much without seeing her, without believing he would ever see her again, that she had morphed into an image consistent with MTV models and singers, sitcoms’ girl next door. It was possible that, after leaving a mark on him from a distance, she could have been nothing special to him up close and in person, distinct but ordinary. It had happened to him before when he had been drunk but also when he had been too hopeful about a girl who he later realized wore too much makeup or talked too much about the gym. But if the girl he saw was Laura Shelley, she was no let down. Her figures were sharper than he had remembered, her eyes bigger and more hazel, long eyelashes, tiny perfect triangle for a nose, lips pursed but flexible, like rubber bands. Compared to the modifications she’d endured in his mind, she was nearly unrecognizable, but this real version was better: she

had fresh, magnified features. And he was happy to admit that his imagination of beauty had been inferior to its natural form.

Through the rest of the day, Dominic kept to himself but noticed fingers pointing at lunch, boys he didn't know nodding to him in the halls. A few of the Roxboro kids congratulated him on the bus ride home and asked him questions. Dominic felt a trace of adrenaline again as he told them how he set up his left hook. He would have loved to tell his mother about the fight as a quest of triumph but knew she would see it for the bigger picture, with its projections for future conflict, his resemblance to his father. On top of headaches and somersaulting stomachs, Dominic's mother got enough negativity about the world on the 12 o'clock news and the soap operas. In the past couple of days, he felt responsible for communicating good news, a passed quiz, new friends, gentlemanly acts toward women – antidotes to rapes, thunderstorms, and extramarital affairs. He figured it would foster a better attitude in his mother if, knowing the rest of the world was gone to hell in a hand basket, everything about her son was positive.

When he opened the door to his house, his mother was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a newspaper. Two plastic plates of sandwiches and chips were set to the side. He dropped his bag in the bedroom and changed the torn black tee shirt for another black tee shirt.

“Are you looking at the classifieds?” Dominic asked and sat down.

“What does ‘commen-sure-ate’ mean?”

“You won't collect disability anymore.”

“Goddamn government is always screwing me over anyway.”



Whatever color was left inside her was starting to resurface and she was taking care with her hair and clothes. Today she had applied makeup, albeit unevenly, with one eyelid darker than the other. Perhaps she had been compensating for a color discrepancy in the morning that dissipated throughout the day. Her hold on the cigarette was mostly steady.

“I hope your day was better than mine,” she said.

“It was,” he said, pulling a sandwich toward him. “I mean, it was a good day.”

His mother watched him as she slowly pulled a sandwich toward her. “Who is she?”

His fight with Jake Tallon should have been the highlight of his day, but he became preoccupied with Laura Shelley. He felt foolish saying the name of a girl he’d never talked to, but his mother was offering him the opportunity, for the first time, to entertain his union with her in public. “You know when you see someone and you think it will never work out?”

She thought about the question. “Yes.”

“But you do it anyway.”

“Maybe that’s *why* you do it,” his mother said, sipping her coffee.

“Maybe,” he said. He bit into the sandwich, aware of his silence.

“What’s the broad’s name?” she asked.

“It’s not like you know her. Her name’s Laura.”

“Laura what?”

“Shelley, I think.”

His mother shook her head and lit a cigarette, her sandwich hardly touched.

“You used to go to a Doctor Shelley,” she said through smoke. “You didn’t like him much.” She smiled as if she remembered a joke.

“I don’t remember him.”

“You were a smart kid.”

Dominic appreciated the compliment, then realized he wasn’t the subject of the commentary. “What was wrong with him?”

“Nothing in terms of being a doctor. Got rid of your sore throat.”

“So what was it?”

“He slept around a lot.”

“When?”

“When you were a kid, years ago.”

“With who?”

“Who are you, Ted fucking Koppel?” she asked.

“It couldn’t be this guy,” Dominic said.

“This was years ago,” his mother said.

“Probably a whole different guy.”

After dinner, Dominic went through his afternoon routine, lifting weights and hitting the bag, then homework, a snack, and television with his mother. He went to bed that night and woke up the next morning with a fresh sense of optimism, for both himself and his mother, one day at a time. Friday occurred without incident and he was able to pass Mr. Curry’s reading quiz and listen to his lecture about George Washington’s reluctance to become President. It was ten times better than the chop a cherry tree bull shit. Nothing spectacular happened at school but it didn’t have to; he was starting to

expect good results from his own efforts, not just luck. An uneventful day was a good one. He didn't see Laura but there would be enough time throughout the year. The day idled by smooth and without a sputter.

In the months following, Dominic would identify the first half of that day as one with infinite potential. Because when he came home from school, expecting the turkey sandwich and potato salad his mother promised the night before, he found his mother passed out on the couch, beside a broken bottle and a pool of vomit, blood, and rum. The blood streamed slowly from her hand. The small puddle beneath her had already started to dry up, and the wounds, though moist, had stopped bleeding. The vomit was more plentiful, the continental United States to the blood's Caribbean, no doubt replicated rum that was difficult to distinguish from the actual thing. But he was sure she hadn't let much get away. Jerry Springer was on the television. By the sound of the audience, they were reeling from a fight or revelation that had occurred the moment before Dominic walked in the room. Jerry Springer introduced a commercial, and Dominic sat beside his mother, checked to make sure she was breathing, knew after getting three or four feet from her mouth that she was by the smell of her breath, shook her gently to wake her. Not a groan. He shook her more eagerly but she didn't react. He checked her pulse but wasn't sure of his standards. Seventy-two beats a minute, at least a beat every second, he figured, but he couldn't tell whether the faint pulse was actual or a result of his inability to find an artery with his thumb. He checked his own neck and wrist but couldn't find the same spot on his mother. He wasn't sure what to do, who to call. He'd seen friends pass out drunk before but not from a bottle of rum. She'd grown more fragile in drying up and a wave had overtaken her.

He called 911 and explained the situation to the operator, who dispatched paramedics. “I think she’s okay,” he said into the phone, but his call was evidence to the contrary. He figured his mother would later scold him for calling an ambulance, she said she’d been through it before but wouldn’t say for what. He sat in the dry spot next to his mother, leaned against the couch, made sure to listen – or smell – for her breathing, just in time for Jerry Springer to deliver the closing to his show.

Dominic thought of his mother listening to Jerry Springer’s lessons everyday and shut off the television. But the sound of his mother’s breathing was not enough. Her pauses at the bottom of her breaths made him panic, so he turned on the television to a basic channel – he remembers when everything good was below channel 6 – and he saw a demolished car, listened to the reporter’s recitation of a death toll, two with three injured but in stable condition. He wanted something harmless so he changed to the weather channel, waiting anxiously now for the paramedics, as anchors discussed the onslaught of hurricane season, thunderstorms and high-pressure systems heading for the Northeast.

He rode with her in the ambulance but he found the accompanying paramedic as inactive as himself. He occasionally checked her vitals but said they would decide whether to pump her stomach at the hospital. Dominic sat down as soon as he entered the waiting room, by now already telling himself this was a minor hitch and not a pattern for his mother. A receptionist found him quickly and asked him to come to the window. He identified himself by name and relationship.

“Does your mother have insurance?”

“I don’t know. I think so. She collects disability...”

The woman took a deep breath, released frustration in the exhale. “Is she on any medication or drugs?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what they are.” Even he was struck with how little he knew of important details, but he was challenging the nurse too: I don’t know anything and what are you going to do about it.

“Is she on anything?” the woman asked Dominic, abandoning her script.

“Just rum and cigarettes, as far as I know. But I thought you guys were the specialists.”

He looked behind him around the room and considered she dealt with hundreds of him a day.

“You can go home now. We’re required by law to keep her overnight.”

“For drinking too much?”

“Any repeat occurrence in a year’s time.”

“How many times has she been in?”

“The record says she came in a few months ago, but I know she’s been in a handful of times before that.”

“How many?” There was something about the way she said handful.

“I don’t know exactly.”

“Check for me,” he said, indicating to the computer.

The woman softened, humbled by the chore of reporting to a son how many times his mother had nearly killed herself drinking. “Three,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the woman asked. Dominic was too tired and overwhelmed to try to decipher whether her question was sarcastic or heartfelt.

“I need a ride home.” It was probably at least one transfer from here, somewhere in Chestnut Hill. The nurse told him the 36 bus stopped in front of the hospital, connected to the 14 into Roxboro. But once outside, standing at the bus stop, he didn’t like the idea of enclosure and chose to walk. He was several miles from home but he had nothing but time tonight. He wasn’t going to get any homework done, prepare supper, or be strategic about reporting his day to his mother. He wasn’t ready to start considering the consequences of his mother’s actions, wasn’t prepared for difficulty after feeling content and satisfied only moments before he’d found his mother on the couch. And so in the two hours it took for him to walk home, he thought of close to nothing.

He had forgotten about the mess on the floor until he opened the door. The alcohol must have come up quickly; it maintained its own scent, as if the vomit was sanitized. He checked for cleaning agents under the sink but couldn’t find any, sacrificed a towel and threw it over the mess, then walked down to the corner store. When he returned he opened both doors first for a cross draft, tried not to breathe through his nose. There were three distinct liquids on the floor. The bile and alcohol smelled terrible but picked up quickly; it was the blood that he had to scrub at like the floor itself had been wounded. Once finished, he threw the towel in the garbage and took the bag out to the trashcan. It was another day until trash pickup. He came inside and washed his hands, changed his shirt hastily without bothering to turn on the lights. He knew the layout well enough by now, even where to step over and around his weights. He also found the punching bag with his first punch, struck it with his eyes closed, not exactly sure where it

was but swung at it anyway, sometimes a reckless miscalculation, other times a dead-on hit, until his grunts and the shaking of the chain combined with the darkness became familiar, opened up a memory like the onset of a dream: he a child, listening to his father hit the punching bag in the darkness of the basement, his mother standing in the light above in the stairwell, closing the door. Because he chose to be with his father.

His aggression prompted the memory but he tried to punch it out of his mind with everything else. When he was finished his knuckles were sore and his muscles burned. Still without a clock in his room, he didn't know the exact time but knew it was late. He found the sleeping bag and rolled into it, found sleep immediately and slept sound through the Saturday morning rising sun. He woke when he heard the front door open and close, heard her footsteps through the living room and waiting at his door.

“Dominic?”

“Yeah.”

“You're late for school.”

“No school today, Mom.”

“Why not?”

“It's Saturday.”

He heard the “oh” of her recognition. “Want some breakfast. I think there's cereal left.”

“I'll be out.”

She was waiting for him at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette and drinking a glass of orange juice. Her hair stood up on the left side and her breath still smelled

something awful, the same as the mess he'd cleaned off the floor. He lifted her drink to see if it was spiked.

"Oh c'mon," she said.

"How'd you get home?" he asked.

"Who are you, my old man? I took the bus."

He got up to pour some cereal. "You could have took a cab."

"You got twenty bucks to throw around?"

He did, but he hadn't told her about it. "So what the hell happened yesterday?"

"I had a lapse in judgment."

"Did it have anything to do with our talk the night before?" He had learned to dance around issues with his mother, but today he was eager to get to the truth.

"What talk?"

"About a girl, Laura Shelley."

"Her, no," his mother said. "It had to do with me and booze, maybe the devil, not you, not anybody else except me."

"Because I think I remember this Dr. Shelley."

"I really don't want to talk about it, Dominic."

"Fair enough," he said, before trying to compensate. "I didn't get a chance to tell you, I passed my quiz yesterday."

She took a drag of her cigarette and nodded. Her bloodshot stare was on him but her mind was elsewhere.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Keep doing what you've been doing," she said.



There was a combination of both exhaustion and contentment in her gaze, as if the only way she could be satisfied was by testing her limits. “Thanks, Nicky,” she said, reaching over to touch his hand.

Sitting across from his mother, he tried his best to channel his hostility away from her and apply it to another person or thing. The targets evaded him. His father hadn’t been parental but he’d never pretended to be, ended up keeping Dominic out of juvie and jail. The principals and teachers at Chestnut Hill had accommodated him more than he could have imagined. He had become friends with Jake Tallon in only this first week of school, a day after their fight, along with the rest of his friends. The girls were coming around too. He hardly saw Laura Shelley, it was probably better that way. Dominic felt hostility at this absence, but she was not to blame; this morning, thinking of her father, he actually remembered the part in the hair and the glasses, and all of his frustration seemed accurately pinned.

He wanted to ask again about his mother and Dr. Shelley but decided to defer to another day when she wasn’t recovering from alcohol poisoning. His mother may have sensed it – despite her limitations in the mechanics of being a mother, she did have that raw maternal intuition.

“Just out of curiosity, you’re not actually interested in that Shelley girl, are you?” she asked.

“No,” he blurted. “You know she’s not my type.”

### CHAPTER 3

Most of the memory had surfaced at once like an unearthed historical record, and gradually the rest had filled in: the day Dominic “chose” to be with his father.

That morning, his father’s boots struck the wooden stairs like a drum, and the smell of coffee and smoke told Dominic it was time to get up for school. But Dominic closed his eyes and waited, for his mother’s shoes click-clacking along the hallway until she reached his room, slid through the door, and sat on the bed next to him. “Time to get up, Nicky.”

His mother was dressed for work, with her hair high and her face dark with makeup. “Am I going to school today?”

“How’s your throat?” she said, feeling his forehead. He felt a long nail brush along his cheek.

“Good.”

“Open up,” she said, looking down his throat. “I’m not sure, kiddo. It looks pretty swollen to me.”

Dominic felt his neck. “It’s not swollen.”

“You might have to stay home.” She looked over her shoulder.

“I don’t want to stay home again.”

“Might be strep throat.”

“I don’t have strip throat.” He felt his forehead.

His father called upstairs: “Angela?”

“Ye-ah.”

“You walking the kid to school?”

“Shit,” she said softly, before yelling over her shoulder: “Yeah, I’ll take him.”

His father dragged his boots across the living room floor. Dominic heard the rattling of keys, and then of the wooden door and screen door creak open, the keys in the lock, the slamming of the screen door closed.

“So I’m going to school?” Dominic said.

“No, I’m staying home with you today.”

“I thought you said – ”

“Don’t worry about it. You want to stay in bed or come downstairs and watch *The Price is Right?*”

“I want to go to school.”

“Tomorrow you’ll go to school. Today we’ll watch soap operas.”

His mother took off her shoes and walked across the hall to her bedroom.

Dominic sat up in bed, looking down at the Phillies covers laying over him. Last time he missed school, his kindergarten teacher told him Mike Schmidt never skipped practice.

He was about to get up out of bed when he heard the screen door open, keys in the lock, and his father’s boots on the floor.

“Angela?” his father yelled up the stairs. “You still here?”

Dominic heard his mother’s feet in the hallway. “Hey Jimmy,” she said, opening Dominic’s door, and sitting beside him again. “What’s wrong?”

Dominic couldn't hear what his father said.

"It should be in the kitchen," she said.

"Lay down," his mother said, pulling the covers up to his neck. "You have one hell of a sore throat, you understand?"

His father walked up the stairs. "Angela?" he said.

"I'm in here," she said. She held Dominic's forehead until his father entered the room. He stood against the door well, with his arms folded, his muscles bigger that way. "Don't tell me," he said.

"This kid and his sore throat."

"He was okay yesterday."

"I know," his mother said, feeling along his neck.

"You're going to stay home *again*?"

"What else can we do? You want to stay home with him?"

His father walked around the bed and leaned over Dominic, his arms crossed.

"What's wrong with you kid, you don't like school?"

His father didn't know how to feel his forehead or his neck and never asked to look down his throat.

"He's sick, Jimmy. You can see pink spots in the back of his throat."

Dominic opened his mouth, but his father leaned back, stared only at his mother.

"You're not getting paid for these days, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Last time, Angela," he said. "And I don't want you going to that fuckin' free clinic today. If you have to see somebody, Dr. Colarusso's back from vacation."

“He should be fine.”

“Shoulda been fine a week ago.”

“I’ll make dinner tonight?”

“Yeah, you’ll make dinner,” his father said, walking around the bed and past his mother. His mother held Dominic’s cheek as his father walked into the hallway, down the stairs, and out the door.

“I hate the doctor’s office,” Dominic said, but his mother was already up and out of his room; she must not have heard him.

They took the elevator up to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the building on 13<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut, his mother shifting her weight and fiddling with her purse. Inside the free health clinic, the third door to the left, the lights were on but the office was empty and the door was locked. His mother peeked inside and knocked on the door, then brightened suddenly. The door opened and the doctor appeared.

In his first visit – two weeks earlier – and in the subsequent appointments, Dominic didn’t like Dr. Shelley. He wondered whether he was a real doctor, without a white coat. Dr. Colarusso wore a white coat, kidded Dominic about his big muscles, and told him jokes. Dominic didn’t even notice sometimes that the doctor was examining him. The first time Dominic saw Dr. Shelley, he tricked Dominic into opening his mouth so he could stick a big Q-tip down his throat. Dominic gagged and almost threw up on him. Instead of telling jokes to Dominic, Dr. Shelley told jokes to Dominic’s mother, and made her laugh too. His father never made his mother laugh.

“Are we clear?” his mother asked Dr. Shelley.

The doctor mumbled something about lunch. When Dominic and his mother were inside, Dr. Shelley turned on the lights, fiddled with a key in the door behind them, then turned around and put his hand on Dominic's mother's back. Dominic wasn't sure why but the doctor made him angry, maybe the smile that didn't show his teeth, greasy hair brushed to the side instead of back like his father's. He had glasses too and he knew from his father that only dorks wore glasses. If he could have beaten up adults, he would have started with this one.

"I'll be right in," his mother said to Dr. Shelley. In that moment, she was a woman, her voice slow, and her eyes large.

Dominic stared, but Dr. Shelley walked past him without looking down.

His mother kneeled down in front of him. "I'm going to talk to the doctor for a sec, then he'll have a look at that throat of yours, okay, Nicky?"

"Are you sick?" he asked.

"No, honey, I'll be right back. Play with the blocks," she said, slipping through the door.

In the next ten or fifteen minutes, Dominic aligned the blocks by numbers and then stacked them. Then he remembered that he hated blocks; he hated the office and Dr. Shelley. Dominic tried sitting down but started to sniffle, then jumped out of his chair. His father told him only pussies cried. He kicked one of the chairs and hurt the bottom of his foot, couldn't help finally but sit and cry. He wanted to punch something, was going to be a boxer just like his father. His father told him how to be a boxer, how to throw punches and cover up. He was strong, maybe he could beat up Dr. Shelley. He got up out of his chair, decided he was going to build a castle just so he could knock it down.

When the front door opened, he went back to his chair, and another boy and his mother walked in. Before Dominic realized he wasn't in trouble, as he feared, the other boy started playing with the blocks. Dominic sat and waited, his legs swinging off the chair, as the boy cleared the books from the table and meticulously stacked them on a chair and used all of the blocks to build a pyramid. When the boy was finished, he looked back to his mother with a smile. She said it was so wonderful she wished she had a camera. Dominic had waited long enough: he jumped up from his chair and punched the castle – its collapse sounded like a strike in bowling – until all of the blocks were spread across the table and the floor. The other boy pushed him, and since his father said he could punch any boy who pushed him, Dominic started swinging. The boy's mother screamed and pulled Dominic off the boy, spinning him into a chair, but Dominic bounced back and chased the boy around the room, hearing his cries and sniffles, seeing the blood on the boy's hand and nose.

The boy's mother screamed and chased Dominic; he couldn't decide whether he was chasing the boy or running from the boy's mother. The inside door flew open and Dr. Shelley put his hand on Dominic's chest. Dominic felt only a tug on his shoulder from the boy's mother when he stopped. Dr. Shelley told Dominic again to stay put. He obeyed, but he wasn't following orders as much as he was watching his mother shake the boy's mother's head like there was money inside.

When Dr. Shelley separated the two women, he had trouble speaking through his breaths. The other boy's mother heaved up and down, bent over with her hands on her knees, and his mother breathed with her mouth open and tongue visible like a dog. When Dr. Shelley started talking, in half sentences, he told Dominic's mother to get the fuck out

of the office and take her hoodlum child with her. Dominic didn't know what a hoodlum was but he knew it wasn't nice. Only his father was allowed to talk to his mother like that. His mother cursed back at him and pointed her finger. Blue tears ran down her cheek. It was the tears that did it: Dominic ran up to the doctor and punched him as hard as he could – one, two, three, four – just like his father showed him. The man bent over, stared Dominic in the face with his mouth open, leaving a wide open target, and Dominic's response was instinctual, what he'd learned a week earlier, throwing a left hook and landing it on the doctor's jaw, knocking him to the ground. He would have kept punching – even though it was a K.O. – but his mother grabbed him around the waist and carried him outside, down the hall, and into the elevator. She held his hand as they descended to the first floor, moved him along quickly through the lobby, along the crosswalk and down 13<sup>th</sup> Street, until she finally slowed her pace just past South Street.

Dominic and his mother usually stopped for gelato to soothe his throat after a visit to the doctor's but he was already tired of it from last week. His mother bought him one anyway, didn't care whether he ate it or not, and made him sit still while she ate hers. She talked a lot, not just about the usual topics of the *Price is Right*, *General Hospital*, and the lottery, but also about commitment and sacrifice. Dominic liked big words and tried to repeat them. His mother said a woman needed companionship. Dominic didn't know what it was but figured it was similar to makeup or jewelry because his mother and Aunt Paula needed those too.

When she was finished, she told him she was sorry. Dominic didn't know what for exactly but it made him feel better, made him want to cry even, but since crying was for pussies, he made a face. His mother laughed at the face, which made him want to cry



even more, until she hugged him and he couldn't tell whether she was laughing or crying, and when he finally saw she was laughing, he realized he could too.

At Bruno's grocery store, his mother bought pork chops, applesauce, potatoes, milk, butter, vegetables, gravy, and an apple pie for dessert, though it took her a while to find the stamps and money in her purse to pay for it. As soon as they were home, she ran upstairs to shower and change into her "jammies," washed the dishes, wiped down the counters, and looked for a number of things: a serrated knife, a beater, a wooden spoon. Some things she found and some she didn't. Dominic sat in a kitchen chair and watched; this was better than television.

"Are you just going to sit and stare at me the whole time?" his mother asked.

"Yes."

His mother stared and appeared as though she was about to scold him, but didn't say anything. After some more cleaning, his mother leafed through a cookbook, read the page she was looking for, and fiddled with the settings on the stove. She set out the food she bought along the counter in the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Dominic asked.

"Making dinner."

"Why?"

"Because it's what mothers and wives do."

"I never saw you make a dinner before."

He watched her the whole time as she moved from one end of the kitchen to the other, engaging in new activities: mashing potatoes on the counter, checking the pork chops in the oven, cutting vegetables.

“What’s that,” he asked about one of the instruments.

“A potato peeler.”

“What’s that?” he asked again later.

“Asparagus?”

“Asparagus,” he repeated.

She poured a drink from a bottle in the cupboard – though it looked like water – and set a pack of cigarettes on the table. His mother looked busy but she didn’t seem to be getting much done. She never spent more than a minute at one chore and often had to do things twice. Most of her time was spent cursing with her hands open in front of her, wiping the sweat off of her forehead. He usually liked watching his mother when she was reading to him – she always insisted on Cinderella – or watching television; she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But when she was like this – nervous, she called it – her hands shaking when she held a cigarette or a drink, her eyes red and her face flush, it was like she was her own ugly sister.

When the pork chops were in the oven, the potatoes mashed, and the vegetables boiled, his mother sat beside him and took a deep breath.

“You’re disappointed in me, aren’t you?”

“Disappointed?”

“Your pissed about the doctor’s office.”

“I don’t like the doctor’s office.”

“I know, Nicky. We’re not going there anymore.”

“No more strip throat?”

“No more, but listen.” She leaned in close to him, and her breath smelled strong of cigarettes and other things, like a balloon hitting him in the face. “Don’t tell your father about the doctor’s office, okay?”

Dominic stared. His father liked to hear about his fights. Today he’d won two of them, one against an older boy and another against a grownup. Even his mother was winning against the boy’s mother.

“You know, Nicky, how Daddy gets angry sometimes, and if you tell him we went to the doctor’s, he’ll be angry. Okay?”

Who would he tell about his fight?

“So let’s just pretend that we stayed home and watched the *Price is Right*, *Days of Our Lives*...what else?”

“Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.”

“No, that’s on too late. What do you watch when you’re home sick?”

“Sally Jesse.”

“Good. What else?”

“General Hospital.”

“Good, and don’t forget about Oprah,” his mother said, proud of him.

Dominic set the plates on the table, and the food was ready by the time the screen door creaked open and his father’s keys were in the door. His father dragged his boots through the living room and looked surprised when he walked in the kitchen, holding a pizza. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” his mother said. “I just had some time, so I decided to cook you a dinner.”

“Cook *me* a dinner?” he asked, setting the pizza down on the counter.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” his mother said, nervous again.

“Either way, I’m going to eat it,” he said, sitting down.

They were quiet for the first few minutes of the meal, his father chewing loudly and grumbling. It was hard to tell whether he was disappointed or satisfied; he pulled a bone out of his mouth and showed it to Dominic’s mother, then grabbed for a second serving of pork chops.

“What’s wrong, kid?” his father asked. “Not hungry.”

Dominic had been so interested in watching his mother and father that he forgot to eat. His mother stared at him like he was in trouble again.

“No,” he said, sticking his fork into a piece of pork chop his mother had cut up for him.

Dominic didn’t look but he knew his father was watching him. “What did you guys do today?” he asked.

His mother responded: “We started by watching – ”

His father held up his hand, stared again at his mother. “I’m asking *him*.”

Now Dominic was nervous. His father never asked him questions unless someone was in trouble. He forgot the names of the shows he told his mother earlier.

“What’s strip throat?” he asked his father.

“Strep throat,” his father said. “Streptococcus. It’s a bacteria that causes sore throat. All that time you’ve been spending with your mother you’d think she would have explained it.”

“Stripcocus,” Dominic said in an attempt to repeat it.

“Streptococcus,” his father said.

“Companionship,” Dominic said.

“Okay, Dominic, good job,” his mother said.

“Streptococcus,” Dominic rattled off, the consonant sounds sharp.

His father set down his knife and fork and leaned over toward Dominic. “Open up,” he said. He held Dominic’s mouth up toward the light and looked at it from a few angles as if trying to see the depths of an engine under the hood.

“So you stayed home all day today, no doctor’s visits?”

His mother shook her head no, and Dominic followed her lead.

His father cut and ate three pieces of pork chop before saying anything.

“And?” he asked. “How are you feeling?”

Dominic had been focusing mostly on his father, but also noticed his mother fidgeting, her hand in her hair, staring at her plate.

“Fine,” Dominic said, aware that he was not lying.

“That doctor you went to must have been a big help. What’s his name again?”

Jimmy asked Dominic.

“Dr. Shelley.”

“Oh, you remember his name? What can you tell me about Dr. Shelley?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Is he...*handsome*?” He looked at his mother as he asked the question but it was meant for Dominic.

“I don’t know.”

“Let me ask you another question,” Jimmy asked, the plate pushed away from him now. “How many times have you visited this doctor?”

“I don’t know.”

“More than one time?”

Dominic looked at his mother but her head was turned away. He felt his father’s cold, hard hands pull his face toward him and squeeze.

“Yes,” Dominic said. His father released his grip but kept his hand on the table.

“More than two times?”

He nodded.

“How many then?”

“A lot.”

“And did you go today?”

Dominic stared at his father’s hand, completely still. “Yes.”

There was a moment of quiet following Dominic’s response, as his father, the vein in his temple thick, stared at his mother and she stared at her plate, paralyzed.

Dominic scooped a small mound of mashed potatoes onto his fork because he knew it would be the last for the night. His father’s actions were predictable – he was either subdued as he was the minute before or a complete madman – but Dominic knew all of the discussion was a prelude to this: his father rising and lifting the table with him,

sending his mother back in her chair, leaving Dominic in a seat with a fork in his hand and potatoes in his lap. He knew what to do next; he ran – but this time his father wasn't after him. He felt his mother's hand on his back, shoving him aside, but when Dominic emerged into the living room and had the chance to look back, he saw his father clutching his mother by the hair, with his teeth clenched and the vein in his temple as thick as an asparagus.

He'd watched it enough times to know that it couldn't be stopped. The only grownups he could beat up were doctors with glasses. Dominic ran upstairs instead and tried to cover his ears and sing a song. He sang loud until his throat really did become sore and stopped because he knew the doctor's office was where the trouble started. He hummed though for another half hour or maybe half the night until his mother touched his arm and told him it was over. She was wearing her jacket. He listened for his father's boots, smelled for his cigarette, but nothing registered until he heard the rattling of the chain on the punching bag two floors below in the basement.

“You want to live with your father now, Nicky?” she asked.

“No.”

“You must want to live with your father now, since you couldn't keep our secret.”

“He made me.”

She waited, nodded. “I made you too.”

She made him get out of bed, squeezed his hand and dragged him down the stairs and to the top of the basement steps. The basement was dark except for a line of light through the opened door. Hearing the rattling of the chains and his father's punching and grunting, Dominic backed away from the doorway into his mother but rather than

cushioning him into an embrace, she stood straight and pushed in the middle of his back. “Go ahead,” she said. He took each step slowly, squinted his eyes to see better. When he neared the bottom, he looked up, into the light that surrounded his mother like it would for an angel. Then she closed the door and Dominic tried to blink the darkness away. It took him a while to realize the room was silent.

“So you’re staying with me,” his father said.

“Where’s mommy going?”

“Somewhere else.”

“Where?” The room brightened a little, and Dominic saw the ghost of his father approaching him. He winced and squinted his eyes, then the lights came on and flashed.

“I don’t know,” his father said. He took a deep breath. “Come here and let me show you that left hook again.”



## CHAPTER 4

Laura rode her pink bicycle with the yellow banana seat three days a week to her internship at the Philadelphia Zoo. Despite the spectacle of it, with a yellow flag, a blinking light behind the seat, and a horn that quacked on the handlebars, the bike was a necessary alternative to walking, taking two bus transfers, or accepting a car from her parents. She looked absurd on the bicycle but there were few passersby to notice on her route along the northern edge of Fairmount Park, where weeds lined a wide, pothole-ridden road. She had amused herself when she bought the bike at a yard sale, despite the 12-year-old girl watching a relic of childhood ridden away by a grownup. Her boyfriend Derrick, who she had met in her graduate taxonomy class, named it *oxyura obnoxious*.

On the morning of July 11, there was a rhythm to her ride. The night before, Tuesday, was dollar draft night at Mulligan's. She and some peers who had stayed in West Philadelphia for the summer had become bored with the limited options on the jukebox – Skynard, Bob Seger, Bee Gees; even the hair bands were too contemporary for these people – and her friend, Alan, found “Rapper's Delight.” At first there was a group of Black West Philadelphians in the bar so Laura and her friends were reticent about enjoying it. As soon as the group left, dragging their pants legs on the beer stained floor (Laura never understood the fashions that included inconvenience), Alan repeated the song twenty times. They all tried to master the first verse but the owner pulled the plug on the jukebox and called last call. It was only 1:00, but there was no arguing with

Thomas, no mulligans, the golfers among them complained. He was a heap of Irish grit and bones, a former police officer. By 1:15, he was standing over them as they laboriously chugged their beers, eyes looking up toward him. Laura figured a bar owner would have far worse shenanigans to deal with than she and her UPenn friends – namely neighborhood residents and underage kids – and wondered exactly why he didn't like them.

Even after twelve attempts, they had all failed to master the first verse of Rapper's Delight, but it found a beat in her mind overnight and some of it had stuck with her on her morning ride – "I said a hip hop, the hippie to the hippie to the hip hop..." – and she was keeping the beat with her pedaling – "...a you don't stop, the rock to the ban bang boogie" – when she saw the man step out of the bushes and into her path on the sidewalk. It was difficult to assess whether he saw her coming. He remained stationary, fixed at a focal point between her and the road. He had not given her ample room – all this space and suddenly she was confined – so she quacked her horn and swerved away from him. But as she passed, her gaze rigidly forward, he grabbed her handlebars with hands like talons, pulled the bike with him off the road. She somehow stayed on the bike, then dismounted on the opposite side from him. She was protective of the bike because of the principle of ownership – the fifty dollars was interchangeable – so she pulled the bike toward her. Her momentum led them into a twirling tug of war. She continued to fight for the bike until she yanked on it stronger than either of them anticipated and he landed on top of her. Even he seemed surprised by it, orienting himself to the horizontal position and the weeds extending above their bodies. Birds chirped in the tree above them. A car drove by slowly, but they were behind a tree and beneath the line of weeds. Her first

action was to scream but for whatever reason she began with a jerk so that he was able to anticipate her action with the struggle and cover her mouth before the words came out.

“Don’t scream,” he said. “Please don’t scream.”

He squeezed around the edges of her mouth with hands that tasted of shit and dirt. There was desperation in his eyes too, a look she wouldn’t have been able to resist had he asked for a dollar. Laura had taken self-defense classes and knew she needed to scream now and knee him in the balls, but without a car passing, without being able to gain position and leverage, her body went limp.

“I’ve been watching you,” he said, showing gaps in his teeth. “I like your bike.”

She turned away from his breath. He tightened his grip on her arms but she wasn’t fighting. His face was browned by the dirt and sun, and his beard was clumpy and discolored. Beneath it, he had once been a boy and a man. She wasn’t sure whether to plead with him or threaten him. She’d been taught in self defense classes to act quickly and decisively but they never addressed what happened after the quick and decisive action failed, never addressed what to do when you were startled out of a hangover and all of a sudden pinned down by a man twice your size, in weeds, in Fairmount Park in North Philadelphia. The problem was she had learned to act quickly and decisively in the contained learning environment of the self-defense class, feeling protected by padding on the walls like they were training inside of a mattress. They should have trained them out in real world situations, hired men to approach them on the street or in the park, to emerge out of bushes and yank them and their bikes behind a tree. Then she would have known what to do. Her only real world experience had been fighting off her brother Pierce when they were kids. Her one effective strategy from age six to sixteen had been

to concede; he always gave up when he saw she wasn't interested in fighting or in him. He had always been playful but the man on top of her was staring and panting, rubbing his midsection against her leg. He wanted her to fight, she reasoned, so she decided to stay silent, that her quick and decisive action was inaction.

He licked his lips and leaned in slowly, and she turned her head away. Before working around the gorillas at the zoo, she had been trained in the case of a mishap, when confronted by a gorilla, to act casual and uninterested. He froze for a moment and Laura tried to avoid looking at him, thinking it was the provocation he was waiting for, but after several moments, she glanced at him and saw that recognition showed on his face. His head dropped from her gaze and he exhaled into her face, his breath like a cloud around her, the scent so strong she closed her eyes, a body's response to poison. He released her arms and she opened her eyes to watch him prop himself up and stand above her, even gesture to lend her a hand in getting up. She pulled her knees into her chest and looked toward the road. The rules of handling attackers, she would tell her lesbian self defense instructor, were not as effective in Fairmount Park as those in response to gorillas. He walked away as if embarrassed, rubbing his hands on his pants, picked up her bike and rode off, coasting with his left foot before awkwardly swinging his right leg over the banana seat and kicking the flag. He sounded the horn and echoed the quack with his voice.

She stood up and watched a car pass. The driver stared emptily at her. She walked into the road. An oncoming car blew its horn and swerved around her. She looked down to see her clothes were dirty. Her hair had half come out of her rubber band on the left side. People didn't stop for others in the middle of the road in this section of

town. Cars were capsules of protection and she didn't have one. The gorilla was out of sight but she was vulnerable to another attack. She pointed home, but she was closer to the sanctuary of work. She turned around and started running. She was out of breath by the time the entrance of the zoo was in sight. She looked behind her and saw no pursuers. The appearance of the zoo allowed her thoughts to emerge out of a haze, allow problem solving. She must have looked like a mess, dirty and disheveled, and now sweaty.

She felt protected behind the zoo gates, convinced that she would be able to compose herself and fulfill her menial tasks. It was the right thing to do: one of the habitat managers was away for the week and it would have looked suspicious for her to call off. And the last thing she wanted was to be alone. Because they were short staffed, an office manager asked if she wouldn't mind making copies and answering the phone, after she cleaned up. The woman paused to examine Laura. Are you okay, she asked. It's a long story, Laura said, excusing herself. I just fell off my bike. She borrowed a uniform shirt with a collar, washed her hands and face, and pulled her hair back again. Good as new, she told herself. Making copies was therapeutic but she was caught staring into space twice by other staff and found answering the phone a chore, her pleasant voice not her own. What exactly had happened to her in the park: had he meant to assault her from the beginning, to have sex with her, or simply to steal the bike? "Sure I can connect you to her extension, please hold." Had he fallen on her when they wrestled for the bike or had he really intended to pin her down? "I'm not sure but I'll connect you to someone who can help you." Candace, the supervisor who hired her, thanked her for being flexible and asked if she could come in an extra day this week, the following day, then after a pause, commented on the grass stains on her shorts. Laura realized Candace asked

a question before a pause. "I think someone...stole my bike today," Laura said. She tried to tell Candace what happened, but all she could say for sure was that her bike was stolen. Candace placed a hand on her shoulder, investigated her, and told her she'd give her a ride home at the end of the day – six hours from then. Laura thanked her, waited until she was gone, then walked out to the main entrance and caught a cab. She begged the Indian cabbie not to drive past Fairmount Park and he said okay but drove that way anyway. She stayed on the right side of the back seat, shielded her view of the park, stared at dilapidated row homes across the street. A few pedestrians were out; where were they earlier? She looked forward when they were past the park and caught the cabbie staring. This time, physical action would be quick and decisive. Her hands hurt from clenching her fists. But he looked forward the rest of the time, didn't budge when she handed him money and got out of the car. She walked into her apartment hastily, locked the door and dead bolt behind her, tried to prop a chair against the doorknob but nothing measured right.

She called Derrick. It took him a half hour to arrive and when he did he was dressed in a collared shirt and nice jeans, his good boots. There was gel in his hair. He was going to a study group and then to trivia night at Tomlinson's. Didn't he understand she'd had an emergency? Hadn't he picked up that she had been crying? He listened to the whole story, including the moments the monster was on top of her and she thought she was going to be *raped*. It had taken her an hour just to say the word out loud. Derrick held her when she needed him to, told her she was going to be okay. He started problem solving, helped her to evaluate her options. Did she want to call the police? "They might not get the bike back," he warned, "but they could try him for some type of

assault.” “Was it an assault?” she asked, looking at only slight discolor on her wrists. After a while, she was tired of talking about it. They had only been together for a month, and here she was, laying all of this on him. He had a study group to get to and he’d been attentive to her, without ever reminding her once of the group, so she told him he could go if he wanted and come back later tonight. Maybe she insisted because he eventually acquiesced. He told her to think about calling the cops, that she should take the bus the next time she went to work. She thanked him, locked the door behind him.

She couldn’t go back to the zoo. She couldn’t go anywhere. She thought to run after Derrick but as she faced the deadbolt, she imagined unlatching nightmares behind the door. She didn’t see him out the window; everyone outside of her building were strangers, predators circling. Her apartment was smaller than she remembered it; the floor was unsteady. She believed the walls had not been erected in perfect vertical lines; they met the floor and ceiling at awkward angles. She feared this might compromise the floor structure, allowing her to fall through. Though she might fall the floor below, the fourth, without major injury, her momentum might carry her down through two more floors of apartments before crashing on the hard marble of the lobby. Just when she decided to lay down, her body made the decision for her. She was crawling on her hands and knees. The phone was in her hand. She dialed her father’s practice, demanded that the secretary interrupt whatever he was doing. “Daddy,” she said, “something bad has happened.

When he arrived, her father convinced her to open the locks. She took a step back to examine him when she opened the door, but the steps toward him and into his open arms were easy for her. He shut and locked the door behind them and sat her down,

allowed her to tell the story once again except it had become simpler in her mind after going over it with Derrick. He listened to her summarized version and told her she would be okay. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, and even though he was working it out as he went, she felt better at the conviction in his voice. He could have talked about his baseball team, the Yankees, making a big trade, or about the economic state of the pharmaceutical industry, and she would have felt assured by it. She hadn’t been able to make a decision. First, they would call the cops. Then she was coming home. Then they were going to get her a goddamned car. His voice had cracked when referencing the car.

“Now wait a minute. I’m not *going* anywhere. I just need some comfort.”

“What you need is a car,” her father said. He was speaking matter of factly, arranging the pillows on the couch behind him for comfort.

Her father had always been a stickler for making a point, regardless of the context, explaining to her the reason that she had finished second and not first in the homecoming voting in high school was because she was not as “sociable and striking” as Katrina Peete. He’d told her mother that her performance in a musical at Chestnut Hill College last Christmas season was “so so.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault?” She’d meant to say it without tears, remaining as calm as possible, but her breath quivered and her eyes watered up.

It was this demonstration – and not her argument – that prompted him to backpedal and tell her of course it wasn’t her fault. Though she hadn’t wanted to win the discussion – and resist moving home and getting a car – with tears, she was happy that her father was relenting and offering his chest again for her to lay his head on, rubbing



her back and telling her everything was okay. She'd had enough trauma induced by a scraggly, homeless bum that she didn't want to worry about contending with her father.

She may have fallen asleep there for a while because she became startled with a rap on the door. Her father welcomed two policeman inside, shook hands with them as they entered. She hadn't wanted to fall asleep. She wanted to be prepared for the meeting with the cops, but she had been dreaming of bike riding along a ledge and had just skidded off the precipice when the police arrived. She was already on the verge of tears and the uniforms made her additionally uneasy. She got up and went into the bathroom and washed her face, emerged to see the cops sitting on the couch waiting for her. They were two men, one younger with a military style haircut, and the other was older, rotund with thick, disheveled hair. As she approached, the younger man rose quickly and introduced himself – Officer Crane. She saw the other policeman consider whether getting up was worth the effort, finally half standing and waving, as Officer Crane introduced him as Officer Lambert.

Though Officer Crane and Dr. Shelley, started talking at the same time, the young officer deferred to the father of the victim. Her father held her close to him as he insisted that Laura wanted to press charges to the fullest degree, of “rape, assault, battery, or whatever term you use.” Laura shuddered when he spoke the words so recklessly and effortlessly. The younger officer looked at her and asked her to explain to him what had happened. The older policeman stared aloofly; she thought she may have seen him out of the corner of her eye checking his watch.

It was no wonder incidents like these were traumatic for the victim. She had to live it once and relive it three times in four or five hours explaining it to the men in her

life. Though she knew everyone would tell her the incident wasn't her fault, she could sense the skepticism among all of them, Derrick, who had accused her last week of being overdramatic; Officers Crane and Lambert, who would forget about her once they were off the clock; and her father, who would be on the phone tomorrow with his friend who owned the Toyota dealership.

Each day passed but wasn't any easier than the previous. It was difficult to identify whether the incident sent a ripple through her life or whether it was simply, and irrelevantly, preliminary to chaos. When it rains it pours: she and Derrick didn't break up exactly, as much as their relationship was reduced to friendship. She told Candace she needed to quit her internship, and her supervisor commiserated but begged her to stay, offering to pay personally for three days a week cab fare. Laura appreciated the gesture and accepted, rationalizing that it was more important now than ever to refuse a car purchased by her father. Also, she came to appreciate the routine at the zoo, achieving success in mini-tasks, cleaning and sanitizing the habitat, organizing food for the gorillas. In addition, her thesis committee – unreceptive to the world outside of the UPenn Biology Department – moved her defense date up by a month, and she was already behind on her lab work.

Of course, the prosecution of the man – David Hogeboom – who had assaulted her, in its bureaucracy, was performed like a series of unrelated chores. She had picked him out of a lineup, met with Officer Crane and Lambert again, accompanied by a Detective Leandra Schwartz – with a wide nose that made her face look pouty, manly, and with as much distance to a woman's plight in the world and in times of need as Crane

and Lambert. Laura had met with attorneys from the District Attorney's office twice, and though the meetings were difficult, she was assured by their seriousness. They told her she would have to wait another two months, then she would have to take a few days off from school when the trial started in order to take the stand. She had recovered from the initial shock that the man was pleading not guilty; in a way, it was Laura's worst fear, not because of how heinous the idea was, but because there was the slightest part in Laura's memory and mind that suspected he may have been right. She would allow the court to decide.

In addition, her father and mother were calling two or three times a day, sometimes separately. They would introduce conversations with small details about their day or questions about hers – how did your exam go today, her father asked; I'm having so much trouble with my lines, her mother said – gradually working up toward an inquiry into her well being. But she was okay. She had been going over the incident with a therapist. Laura's reluctance to fight, Dr. Randall said, was probably what prompted him to get off of her, even gesture to lend her a hand to help her up. Life was about changing speeds, knowing when to act, from the drastic to the moderate to not at all, and as far as she could tell, Laura Shelley had made excellent decisions, both with David Hogeboom and in life.

On a Wednesday in September, Laura Shelley's morning began with a dream in which someone was entering the unlocked door to her apartment but her arms and legs were paralyzed. When she awoke, she shook her arms and legs to realize their utility, then lay in bed, allowing her heartbeat to settle. It was 6:45 a.m., early yet for a day that

didn't start until 9:00 at her internship, but remembered the dream and thought it better to wake and act rather than submit to sleep. She put on her running gear, grabbed her sneakers and hand weights, reminded herself of legs and arms, that she needed them for a morning jog. By the time she made it back to her apartment at 7:30, she felt refreshed, enjoyed the fatigue that she shook out of her limbs.

Though she was scheduled to put in a full day at the zoo, she had something to look forward to at around noon, a photo shoot to be taken of her and the newest addition to the zoo family, a baby gorilla named Jefferson. The name was her idea, chosen out of a hundred or so entrants – mostly children – who had submitted their idea for a name for the new baby gorilla. Officially they prohibited zoo employees from entering the contest, but Laura would be the first one to tell you that she wasn't being paid. Also, Laura figured someone, probably Candace, had felt bad for her and the attack she'd suffered on her way to her no-pay internship. Word had gotten around among zoo employees and though Laura occasionally received stares, she mostly felt warmth from the people around her, as if she had just had her wings clipped or been separated from her mother.

Laura had to adjust to leaving only fifteen minutes before work began. She had given herself forty-five minutes for the bike ride. Though her therapist mentioned that bike riding might help her to recover from her fears, she pledged she would never ride her bike past the park again. She didn't even like driving past the park, but Fairmount Avenue was the only Main Road without a stop sign every block, that went from West to East, so this morning, like every other morning, she sat on the left side of the cab and stared at the row homes when they passed the park. The cabbie – a quiet Black man, too quiet for Laura to be completely comfortable – drove by extremes, pedal or break to the

floor, and Laura didn't mind the pace. In fact, when she knew they were driving close to 60 miles per hour, in a 35, she had the illusion of invisibility and looked to the right into to park. They were moving so quickly that she couldn't even say exactly for sure where the incident had occurred. She took comfort in the blanket of weeds that passed so quickly, also that Daniel Hogeboom's residence was not nearly as green and earthy anymore.

The zoo beyond the gates was an escape from the world, and today, she was going to enjoy success in mini-tasks: cleaning the gorilla habitat, managing the food and water supply, feeding the flamingos, and making sure children weren't feeding ice cream to the emus. She felt comfortable in jeans and a jacket, associated the fresh chill in the air with productivity. Her mood changed when the customers started to appear, more plentifully than Laura expected. She couldn't say she enjoyed standing behind glass in which people from the other side stared in expectation. Though most of the adults understood – the gorillas had been moved – children stared in disbelief. The gorillas look just like humans, mommy. What did that woman do with Betsy? The funny thing was they occasionally still searched, looked behind her, to see if the gorilla was actually in the habitat with her, and this was sometimes the ignorance fostered by cartoon characters and parental assurances that animals were inherently friendly and only attacked when threatened. They fed bears from the cars in Yosemite. They swam with killer whales. Laura had always been fascinated with animals and was very attached, but she could never say that she fully trusted a gorilla with her safety.

She was busy enough today that she didn't pay attention to the onlookers. There had been a late season surge in attendance at the zoo because of the baby gorilla. Just as

she was preparing to leave for her photo shoot with Jefferson in a half hour, on the other side of the zoo, she saw a group of high school students looking casually through the glass at her. They appeared to be from the city: mixed races with stylized hair and hats yanked uncomfortable to the side, jeans and shirts two sizes too big. She could never place herself ten years ago in a similar class; didn't everyone else in Chestnut Hill look like her? There may have been a few exceptions but she didn't really know anyone well outside of her social realm, like those students from Roxboro who invaded her school during her senior year.

She realized that she was staring too, back at the students, because she must have seen a ghost. Just as she tried to remember the specific faces of those students who were exceptions to the typical Chestnut Hill appearance and mold, she saw the face of one behind the glass. But her memories of him had been one-dimensional; he had been one of her staples when she was bearing down for an intimate moment with herself before falling asleep.

He had cleaned up since high school. He was rougher then. His hair was always in a ponytail and he wore tee shirts and jeans, like when he beat up Jake Tallon and walked past her, staring. Laura always preferred to remain inconspicuous but it was that proximity, his stare calm but out of eyes still bloodshot with rage, his veins running like rivets through his arms, a tattoo of a dragon on his shoulder, that had left an impression. It had been important to handle this image carefully in the years since high school, so she didn't abuse it, so that it would always be available to her in the bath, in the bed, or frankly with someone she wasn't too excited about. Dominic Rossi had done half the work and Laura had done the rest herself, imagining the perfect sexual caricature, and

she'd discovered that she had to be careful with it in real life too. Whenever she saw a man with a ponytail or a tattoo on a guy's shoulder, the association was overwhelming; were she more outgoing she would have approached him every time. Instead, this image remained personal, confidential, and protected.

The ghost staring across from her had changed since high school, but it was certainly Dominic Rossi. She couldn't say she was disappointed with his appearance, but she was forced to adjust her recognition quickly. His hair was short and styled, and he wore a white button down shirt tucked into dark khaki Dockers. He had filled in since his high school years, in the chest, back, shoulders, and middle thighs. His face had once looked too old and experienced for high school but time had outpaced his aging process; he looked the same. Her first impression of him had always been ruggedness, but in the years since, his eyes seemed to have softened, as if he'd been kicking ass reluctantly. She felt slightly threatened by the appearance of him, recognizing her entire system of personal, confidential sexual escapades would change. But she was assured by his acknowledgement of her with a wave. Did he really remember her?

She was staring, and the children – on a tour with Catherine, a part-time employee and former intern – were staring back, wondering where exactly was Jefferson. She could see Catherine explaining something to the children and the disappointed faces they wore in response, just as Dominic caught her attention with a wave – to come inside? – and she made a half circle with her finger, indicating to meet her on the side. He walked through the doors to meet at the fence to the gorilla habitat. The fence shielded him, and she was frustrated without clarity. The seventy-five percent of him she could see looked

great and she wanted the entire picture, if nothing else, to initiate another fantasy image, Dominic Rossi ten years later.

“Laura Shelley,” he said.

“Dominic Rossi.”

She was responding to his prompt. She would have been embarrassed to show she remembered his name first, but there was no reticence in his voice. He remembered her.

“I had no idea,” he said, referring to the gorilla sign.

She softly patted her fists against her chest.

His smile came quickly.

“It’s an internship,” she said, before finally admitting: “Sanitation crew, half the time.”

“Aren’t we all,” he said, waving to the tour guide to continue without him.

All day she had been working slowly toward noon, and now she had a conflict – talk to Dominic Rossi or walk over to the medical unit for the photo shoot. She considered that in a way, she had been provided with a fresh, updated image of Dominic Rossi and there was only potential to ruin the fantasy by talking to him, discovering that he talked like a hoodlum or was some kind of creep following high school students around the zoo. But she had been encouraged the moment he spoke, with an adult’s ease and composure, so that he was becoming more attractive moment to moment as she saw beyond the caricature.

They were interrupted by the sounds of children, his class, fascinated by the vine hopping of the rhesus monkey. To Laura, all of the children seemed genuinely



impressed, but Dominic lowered his eyebrows, a disciplinarian. He walked through the doors and called a student over, stood up straight over him – the boy slouched and avoided eye contact – before he sent him back into the group.

“Sorry to interrupt. He was gesturing toward the tour guide’s hind quarter,” he said, then added: “We weren’t like that, were we?”

Had he referred to them in the first person plural as if they once had common ground? “*I* wasn’t like that,” Laura said.

She blushed, kicking at the dirt near the fence, and the floodgates opened; she became flushed with red and was afraid she would have to excuse herself. She had absorbed his statement instead of turning it back to him: you were worse than any of those kids. It was too late now.

“I guess we missed Jefferson,” he said, allowing her to focus on something practical. He may have been staring but she was looking in the other direction, appreciating that the blood was leaving her face.

“Not necessarily.”

Laura didn’t have the authority to bring a guest with her to see Jefferson, but she wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Dominic, and it was the only way she could think of staying with him a little longer. They watched as the tour guide tried to gain his student’s attention, admitted to Laura he needed the break. “I guess I have to get going,” he said.

“Do you have a minute?” Laura asked, almost at the same time – too quick to be a response but it came off as desperate. So what if he knew.

She had two obligations – a newspaper photograph with Jefferson and a conversation with Dominic Rossi – that were so contradictory it was probably a mistake

to commit to both of them. She considered it reckless abandon, offered to show him the gorilla if he wanted to walk quickly with her. Looking at his class being led by the tour guide, he shrugged his shoulders and accepted.

Once she emerged from the cleaning facility, she led him across the zoo to the medical unit, apologizing for her pace. She moved hastily, but he kept the same speed with a composed gait of long steps, swinging arms, and dipping shoulders. He was proof that we are primates, compared to her UPenn peers with oversized cranials and their meandering stumbles. There was hardly any foot traffic as they walked past the grizzlies, giraffes, and rhinos. A stiff breeze of cold tinged with exhaust came off of Fairmount Avenue. Leading the way, Laura felt obligated to direct the conversation in silence, deferred to asking Dominic if he remembered classmates but he admitted that it was difficult to remember them without seeing a face. In a way, she tested him. If he remembered everyone else, she was nothing special. But he couldn't even remember the principal's name, Mr. Donovan, let alone any of the students like her – popular in Chestnut Hill but outside of the small Roxboro circle. She felt pressured to keep the conversation going but when she glanced at him – she'd been looking forward most of the time – she saw that he was comfortable and composed in silence. She slowed down and allowed him a chance to talk. With no apparent haste, he asked questions about Jefferson, and Laura was impressed with how much he knew about the baby ape, the genus and species, the projected lifetime, the regions of Africa in which the species resided. Maybe this was why he was following her, an intellectual pursuit rather than an interest in her.

“So,” he began, “how did they get Betsy and Jefferson to mate?”

“The old fashioned way.”

“Dinner and a movie?”

She could feel her face filling with red again.

“Seriously, I want to know the details,” he said.

She decided to answer him genuinely, seriously. “There’s a whole theory about how to approach this thing in habitats. Some leave it up to nature but in a way, they’re no longer natural creatures. They have lost the ability to hunt, and likely, the propensity for…”

“What?” he said.

“Copulation.” She shouldn’t have paused. Was he smirking? “So what we decided to do was separate them and show them videos of other gorillas mating. Once they were beside each other, they didn’t stand a chance.”

“Sounds like college.”

“Maybe *your* college experience,” she said, accidentally drawing the lines between them again. They reached the door to the medical unit, and Laura rang the buzzer and awaited entry. He enjoyed watching her squirm with his questions. She waited for the door to open, but his stare relented. He wasn’t preying on her, she told herself, but what would she do if he made a move?

Leading Dominic inside had brought an additional pressure to her, but it helped her to remain at ease, introducing her friend Dominic while absorbed in her surroundings. A vet’s aid pointed her down the appropriate hallway and into a large medical area in which Dr. Singh held the adorable baby gorilla. Apes looked most like humans when they were born, with hair sticking up, eyes too large for the head, heads too large for the

body, baby sneezes. They were like armored children, their skin tough and muscles already toned. Two other doctors stood and appreciated the image of doctor and baby ape. The newspaper photographer stood to the side, checked his watch.

“Here she is,” one of the doctors said to the photographer, as Laura approached the ape and asked politely if she could hold him. The doctor gave her instructions on how to hold him but she was a natural. Women always know how to handle babies, and men tuck them on their arm like a football. She found herself oogling and making faces like she would to a human child, when she saw the first flash of the camera go off.

“You’re not going to use that one, are you?” she asked.

“Can you hold him a little closer?” the photographer asked.

Over the course of the next ten minutes, the photographer made a few requests of Laura but eventually he and his flashing camera were inconspicuous. It may have been a mistake to ask Dominic to come along. When she told him it would only be another five minutes, the doctors and photographers both looked at him as if they hadn’t noticed him. With the attention now on Dominic, Laura asked him if he wanted to hold Jefferson. She sensed the alarm in one or two of the doctors, but what were they afraid he would do with a baby gorilla? He wiped his hands on his pants and sat beside Laura as she instructed how to hold him. She handed Jefferson gently over to Dominic and placed her right arm behind him for support, wearing the most endearing look on her face.

When the shoot was over, Dominic rubbed his hands with excitement. How about that little face, Laura said, isn’t it adorable? She surprised herself with the bounce in her step now, that she was simultaneously walking and pointing her body in his direction, even once, when she was making a point about Jefferson’s little butt, grabbing Dominic’s

forearms, which in its striated muscles felt like a sack of snakes. When they exited the medical unit, Dominic said he had to meet his class at the patio dining, and Laura offered to walk him there. Their approach to the dining area came too quickly, and Dominic stopped her when he spotted his class from a far, informing her that if the class saw him with her, he'd never hear the end of it.

“Thank you,” he said, extending his hand, then pulling her softly toward him and planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you,” she said. “For the company. It was nice to see you.”

“Want to do it again sometime?” he asked. “Are there any baby hippos to hold around here?”

He assured her he would remember her phone number rather than write it down, but she knew he would forget it, or perhaps he hadn't intended on calling her at all. He was being polite the entire time or maybe he had used her to get to see the baby gorilla. Maybe this was his M.O: meeting vulnerable women in zoos and amusement parks in order to get freebees. But he had remembered her name, so she knew it was her responsibility only to say the numbers clearly, perhaps lyrically, treating the last four digits, 1490, like a year – “fourteen ninety” – could have added something about Columbus but didn't want to appear desperate.

“I'll call you,” he said, starting to walk away, and she told him to wait. “What's yours?” she asked, and he rattled off the digits.

Sure enough, she was the one to run to the pretzel stand on the other side of the dining area to get a pen and napkin to write the number, while Dominic emerged to his

class and immediately began tracking their day, the number, she was a 99.9% sure, not yet firmly planted in his mind.

All of the things that were once variables in her life had become constants – graduate study, friends at UPenn, David Hogeboom, even the prospect of the trial and the discussions with her therapists – but meeting Dominic encased a prospect of renewal. When she came home from the zoo, she placed the napkin on the refrigerator and read a book about cells and mammals on the couch. As she prepared dinner, she made sure each time she opened the refrigerator that the napkin didn't fall. When she was tired of reading, full from supper, and tired of talking to her parents, she checked her watch and it was only 8:15. She stared at the pretzel stand napkin. Knowing attention to the action would only lessen the chances of her going through with it – it was in any reasonable sense ill advised – she kept her mind blank and dialed the number recklessly. She punched the numbers quickly and it took her three times to get it right. She was determined by the third time to hear a voice on the other end, though she had no idea what she was going to say.

“Dominic?” she said. “It's Laura Shelley. How are you?”

To her astonishment, they moved quickly, talking on the phone for an hour and a half that night and arranging to meet in days following. Dominic came over her house the next day and dropped a kiss on her lips on the way out. Laura spent most of Tuesday on campus working on her research and thesis, responded to a quick question from the D.A.'s assistant that turned into a half hour phone call. She missed calls from her parents in the evening as she talked to Dominic for another two hours; she wanted to see him

again but didn't want to overdo it. Toward the end of their call that night, she decided she wanted to see him the next day but wanted to disguise it, talked about a movie night at the Art Museum, a movie she really liked was playing. He said he'd never heard of it, and she joked that there must not have been any car chases in it – she'd already learned that about him, he loved car chases – but agreed. They met the next night at the Art Museum and then went back to her apartment. They sat and kissed on the couch, fidgeted and emitted heavy breaths and moans once in a while before Laura pushed him away with her hands on his chests. Everything about him was meaty, but his lips were liquid and his chest was rock. She thought of the creation and of clay and then of her clay-molding course taught by the same professor she'd enjoyed in art history. She remembered Picasso and his early cubist pursuits of simplicity and perfection. An artist need not complicate dimensions. Dominic was simple but perfect. Before he left that night, after 1 o'clock a.m., he said she had to come to South Philly to his place; he'd been appalled that she'd never had Pat's or Gino's cheese steaks before, and so they set that night up for Friday, with Laura left disappointed that she wouldn't get to see him the next day, Thursday.

On Friday, she met him at his apartment. It wasn't like there were candles lit but he had cleaned. They walked along the Italian market. Dominic swore by Pat's over Gino's, mentioned the name of another place that had the best cheese steaks, but baby steps, he said. She'd never had Lorenzo's pizza either and Dominic assigned them another night. She wanted to tell him she'd never really been anywhere or eaten anything. She felt assured she had at least another weekend with him, hopefully longer. The order he placed with a large man with scraggly facial hair didn't make sense to her,

but she had to admit she really did enjoy the sandwich. Dominic advised her on how much hot sauce to add to it; he had a whole formula he was promoting and she accepted, she would have accepted it if she was allergic to everything on it.

Just as Dominic was about to take his first bite, someone called out Lucky, addressing Dominic. The man, who appeared a few years older than Dominic but could just have been overweight and bald at 25. “Hey Lucky, who’s the piece of tail?” he asked, as Dominic bit into his cheese steak.

Dominic stopped his chewing and stared, then stood up. The man backed off with his hands up, laughed as if this was the reaction he’d expected. “Take care,” he said.

“Sorry about that,” Dominic said, took another bite of his cheese steak. He explained that the man had been a classmate of his before he moved out to Roxboro. “The fat fucker will never grow up.”

Until Dominic apologized, Laura hadn’t known the man was referring to her.

“Looks to me like he’s grown too quickly,” Laura said.

After a moment – a horrifying moment for Laura in which she waited for his acknowledgement – Dominic allowed a laugh through his nose. It was a brief but significant moment between them. He had stopped censoring himself around her; and her humor came out of security, like a person who avoids a car accident and giggles secretly. For the first time, she had seen him transition to the boy she once watched beat up Jake Tallon. She had seen the chin lift and eyes open wide and though the guy had expected it, he still backed away. He protected her.

They walked over to the Broad Street line, holding hands, to get to the Vet for the Phillies game. On narrow sidewalks, people veered into the street; when she wanted to



release in order to let someone by, he gripped her hand tightly and held their course while explaining exactly how to cook a cheese steak. Most men, Laura reasoned, were serious about their confidence, perhaps too deliberate – arising in arrogance – but Dominic’s confidence was casual. People deferred to him and his swinging gait, and to Laura by proxy. She found she started to loosen up her own stride, allow her posture to loosen and swing her hips. When she was with Dominic, she didn’t have to worry about anyone looking, or saying anything, certainly not touching. When they were sitting idle waiting for the train in a line of mostly men and boys wearing Phillies gear, she asked, “Why do they call you Lucky?”

“My father and uncle gave it to me,” he said, looking for the train.

“But how did you get the name,” she pressed, comfortable now.

He first look at her was firm with irritation, but it softened eventually, before he spoke. “My father was a bookie, a bookmaker.”

“Wow, that’s really cool,” she said, thought he meant that he made and bound books.

His look investigated her, made her defensive. “It was just a side business, taking bets on sports.”

“Oh,” she said. “Right.”

The train was conspicuously absent. She realized she still didn’t have the answer to her first question and decided to press; she had come far enough that she was entitled to continue.

“So, why exactly did they call you Lucky?” she asked.

“Right,” he said, laughing. She had feared resistance and was consoled by his sincerity. “I had a good record of making the right picks.”

“Do you still bet on games?”

“No,” he said. “Those days are long gone.”

“You were a bookie,” Laura declared, as the light from the train shone on the far wall.

“My father was a bookie. I was Lucky,” and he squeezed her hand as they boarded the train.

Late September games were important for contenders so the games rarely counted for the Phillies, but they were playing the Braves and Dominic said he always loved to root against the Braves. He bought two watery beers and handed her one. He answered her questions patiently throughout the game, surprised her occasionally with his boos of both teams. When the Phillies were losing by five runs in the eighth inning, he explained to her that he couldn’t stand when people left the game early. It was chilly but he spread his shirt over her and leaned in close. She didn’t mind watching the Phillies lose the game by seven runs if she had him to keep her warm.

Afterward, they went out to a neighborhood bar and had a few more drinks before going back to his apartment. They didn’t bother with the preliminaries on the couch; there was no idle conversation as a placeholder before kissing. In the bedroom, he stripped down to his boxers and a tee shirt and gave her a pair of sweatpants. She was nervous about saying no even just to touching, but he respected her, seemed to be motivated to make her suffering equal, finding her weak spots with his fingers and lips and exploiting them.

She said she had to get back to her apartment the next day so he took a shower and walked her down to a Toyota Camry just like the one she'd used to own. It was the same model and color but it was difficult to recognize with the damage on the passenger side door that required Laura to enter in the driver's side and climb over. Dominic apologized but she was nimble, didn't he like that she was nimble? She told him she had a car just like this one and asked him about its history. He said he'd had it for about ten years, since high school. There was no reason to get anything else for puddle jumping. It didn't smell like hers, smelled generically of old fabric. He said he purchased it from a dealer. Her father sold her Camry but she couldn't remember to whom. She looked around for identifying features but eventually gave up: it was like trying to find recognizable traits in the elderly when you knew them from infancy.

When they arrived at her apartment, he took off his jacket, sat down, and watched television, admitting he had nothing to do. He waited at her apartment when she walked over to the lab to pick up copies of her most recent data. When she got back to her apartment, they lay down to watch a movie and both fell asleep. Laura heard the phone ringing a couple of times but didn't answer it. She hadn't talked to her father in two days, hadn't talked to the lawyers since Thursday even though the trial was only nine days away. Let them do their jobs without her, she thought. She was comfortable and protected.

They went out again that night with some of her friends near campus. Her girlfriends were threatened but impressed by Dominic, she could see, and she saw that night that Dominic was able to adjust from South Philly cokeheads to UPenn medical students, could converse about medical ethics, private ownership, and access to health

insurance as well as the Phillies or cheese steaks. She could see in her male friends that they looked for a reason not to like him but he couldn't give them one. In the end, anything they said would have been between them, and probably out of jealousy.

It was important for her to resist him again that night, just in case that was the reason he had spent the entire day with her. But he knew her already, hardly tried a thing with her in bed and left her wanting more. He challenged her, saying he could hold out longer than she could. She knew right away what he was doing, but she liked it, took the challenge and maintained her ground. She could already see that despite being completely different they were equally stubborn. They hardly slept that night, kissed and rolled around for over an hour the next morning, complaining about the pact they had made, unified by it despite their opposition. They speculated how long they would last, joked that they had met only a week ago, had only been dating officially for *five days*. I'm not going to make it to ten, Dominic admitted, giving Laura the upper hand.

She ignored Sunday morning phone calls – no doubt her mother and father – and lay in bed with Dominic. In the afternoon, he announced he had to leave. He said he had to grade exams and prepare his lesson plans and even though he'd planned to leave in the morning it was already three o'clock. She walked him down to his car because she said she needed a Sunday paper. He delivered a kiss abruptly and got into his Camry. She tried to occupy herself rather than dwell on the emptiness, walked quickly to the corner market to pick up a newspaper and treat herself to a candy bar or ice cream, but instead she ended up having her hands full with five copies of the Sunday newspaper; because it was she on the cover in a six by six inch color photo, behind Dominic holding Jefferson.

She opened her door to the ringing phone and she caught it before the voice mail picked up. "Hello?"

"Who's the gorilla?" her father asked.

"That's Jefferson."

"I'm not talking about the monkey."

"Daddy," she admonished. Regardless of judgment, a father's protection of his daughter was endearing. "Sorry I've been missing your calls."

"Have you been spending time with this guy?"

"A little."

"How did you meet him?"

"We went to high school together."

"Where?"

"Chestnut Hill."

"Dominic Rossi?" he said.

"Do you know him?"

"Do I know him," he repeated. Her father had a way of avoiding "ums" and "ahs" through conversational cues, such as repeating the words addressed to him. "No, of course not, his name is in the caption."

"He's sweet," she said, only because she was still enamored with him. It was the most laudable word she could think of to tell her father though she'd never apply it accurately to Dominic.

"So you two are an item now?"

"I wouldn't say we're an *item*."

“So you’re anticipating being an item?”

“Perhaps.” She was smiling, kicking at the carpet.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Her father usually wanted to have a look at her boyfriends before she started dating them. But she preferred to hold off on a meeting between her father and Dominic; despite their momentum, she and Dominic had only been together for five days. And someone like Derrick, UPenn pre-med, or even her ex-boyfriend, Jared, a financial analyst pursuing a master’s in liberal arts, was more agreeable to Dr. Shelley, both in appearance and character. But they didn’t impress Laura as much as they impressed her parents.

“I’ll be fine, Daddy,” she said confidently. “Besides, you can meet him soon.”

“Let’s take it slow.”

Usually, he was rushing to meet them. “You don’t want to meet him?”

“Hopefully you don’t reach that point.”

His concern was aggressive. Usually, it was reminder of love without being an inconvenience, but he was fixated now on Dominic, or more specifically, on her protection.

“What’s new with Hogeboom?” he asked.

She noted how casually he was on a last name basis with her attacker.

“Same old. Paperwork. Trial preparation.”

“Hang in there, he’ll get his.”

“Thanks Dad. Is Mom around?”

An overwhelming sense of futility settled into her emotional state, moment to moment, beginning Monday, a week before the trial. On the phone, her voice sounded different, as if hollowed out by the hole she was feeling in her stomach. She was uneasy, and her vocal cords felt like they were calibrated too tight for the day, shaking her entire body. Yet it was important to keep the trial secret from Dominic, to keep the old and the new separate. When he was over, he asked her why the hell the phone rang so much and she simply shut off the ringer, said she was popular, then admitted that she'd been involved in a small bike accident and the insurance companies were working on a minor settlement. When he pressed, she emphasized that it was minor, she'd rather not talk about it. Her stomach pain eased when she was with Dominic, as it did Thursday night, after another long, futile day, but returned as soon as he left and kept her from sleeping at night. She was too tired and distracted Friday morning; she simply lay on the couch in her quiet apartment. She didn't feel assured until Friday afternoon, when she took the deepest of breaths and released everything cold and hollow in her stomach in an onslaught of quivering and tears, called the lawyers, and dropped the charges. Then she called Dominic.

That night they went to see a movie and when they emerged from the theater, Dominic held his arm around her and she leaned into him, making it awkward to walk. He asked her if she was okay, and she said she was fine. They went out to dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant in Chinatown, then went back to his apartment – she reasoned a change of scenery would benefit her. But the foreign surroundings only highlighted her restlessness. She told Dominic she wasn't feeling well and turned away from him but didn't fall asleep. She heard his breathing ease and his throat settle into a light snore.

She got up for milk and thought of watching television in the living room, but didn't want to be alone and returned to the bedroom. For the next two hours, closing her eyes was like pulling a curtain in the middle of a circus. She fell asleep only long enough to settle into a nightmare about being inside a City Hall without exits. She was awake for another half hour, before resigning to sleep and a more vivid dream in which she was required to hold a yellow flag over her head and walk through Fairmount Park, where she saw hundreds of David Hogebooms emerging out of bushes. She hadn't seen Hogeboom since the sentencing hearing, had only seen his face up close once when he was on top of her, but he had obviously left the impression because in the dream, when one of the men approached, she saw him as clearly as the first time, his teeth stained, beard clumpy, his breath smelling of shit.

She had already been sniffing when Dominic shook her awake, and she quickly curled into him and was unable to control her crying. Hogeboom had even impressed a smell upon her brain that she was reliving in her dreams. He was already haunting her: she would never forget her experience with David Hogeboom, and worse yet, she had let him get away with it.

She told Dominic everything, and though he challenged her on dropping the charges, he eventually sympathized with her blindly, assuring her she had made the right decision. Wasn't this what she needed all along, assurance, from her parents, from her therapist? Weren't relationships about supporting people and keeping your mouth shut even when everyone knew you'd made a mistake? The important thing was his reaction. Just his listening, as light slowly came through the windows, was enough, but he also told her everything would be okay; and for the first time in a long time, she believed it.



The following Friday they went out for dinner and a few drinks and Dominic stayed the night; that way, he could drive her to her internship on Saturday morning. Laura knew he was going to make a move, and she knew she was going to resist him. But at the end of the night, when he started rolling kisses along her neck, hardly touching her at all, she was being tested. She let him take off her shirt and pants; she helped him with his, and for a moment, could have been his. But instead of recognizing the small window of submission she allowed him, the moment in which he could have taken her violently and she would have submitted, Dominic continued at his same plotted pace of escalation; the moment passed, as he massaged a tender area of her shoulder, intent on a steady application of finesse.

There was amusement in her recognition that he had missed his moment when she returned from a brief moment of ecstasy to concrete sensation, his tongue on her stomach, the television buzzing, an itch at the tip of her nose. She guided his face back up to hers and give him a kiss. Though we want men to know us genuinely, she thought, we are nothing in relationships without our private moments, feeling leverage by the thought, as she said, "Wait."

He stared at her and then fell onto his back, a gesture as much in frustration as in admiration. "I'm never going to make it," he said.

"You lost," she said.

When she awoke the next morning, he didn't budge. She emerged from the shower and he continued to sleep. He awoke when was careless about slamming dresser drawers. She could have called a cab but she preferred Dominic. He still had sleep in his

eyes even when they got into his car; she was starting to get tired of climbing in through the driver's side but it had to be difficult too for him to have to stare at her cute little behind every time. The console in the car was a division she didn't want. She could see how the single bench-style seats in the old cars were romantic. He reached over and ran his fingers up her shorts. Whenever he touched her, it seemed like all nerve endings in the body led to her midsection. Distracted by his 70s rock, she impulsively pulled out Beethoven's greatest hits from his list of CDs and put it in. "Try some culture for once," she said jokingly.

"Tell Bob Seger he ain't cultured," he said, half-mocking.

She liked classical music but rarely listened to it as her primary stimuli; rather it had been background music to her lab work or studying, or even to drown out the sounds of West Philadelphia. It was a mistake to put it in now because in the moment before, she and Dominic had been floating through the morning and now Beethoven's heavy chords were demanding attention. Worse yet, her timing had been poor, as if lending a score to the traversing past Fairmount Park.

In opposition to Beethoven, he broke out into song. "You know I'm still running, running against the wind." She turned off the CD and returned to a commercial on the radio. When they arrived at the zoo, she told him what time to pick her up.

Inside, Candace told Laura to enjoy her last day; all she had to do was give the habitat a once over, say her goodbyes, and eat a little cake. "I'm glad you stuck with it," Candace said.

"Thanks."

The family, of course, was Betsy, Franklin, and Jefferson. The nomenclature had turned from the “couple” when it was just Betsy and Franklin, to the “lovers” when they were having a hell of a time getting them to copulate, now to the “family” with the addition of Jefferson. That morning she spent wandering around the habitat, realizing that all of the work that was necessary was done. She’d done a hell of a job for the zoo, for free, and was going to take advantage of them on her last day. Around noon, she moseyed across the empty zoo, holding her arms to her chest as the October chill settled in.

She joined a circle of staff near the gazelles for a while, then, without a thing to do, decided to stop into the new indoor habitat for Betsy, Franklin, and Jefferson – who was not so little anymore. He was unrecognizable from the photo on the wall of her apartment just by his size alone, grown from thirty to a hundred and eighty pounds, but his look had changed too, from the soft reticence that resembled a human child’s – she remembered thinking he was “gurgly” – to the aggression of a primate intent on discovery of his surroundings. His brows grew along thick furrows of muscle – like quadriceps in humans – beneath his forehead, constructing a look not just of contempt but backed by power. He was testing his surroundings and winning; knowing he would only be aggressive, Laura thought of avoiding the new habitat and Jefferson but figured it was part of the closure she was looking for in an experience she was proud of. A partition had been established already between Jefferson and his parents. She looked into Betsy and Franklin first, who looked over at her like she was a neighbor passing. They lifted their heads up, then went about their business, slowly, methodically. The onlookers – zoo staff – were all coalesced in front of Jefferson. From the side, Laura could see the

occasional jerky reaction, as if the ape – completely contained – had startled them. When she looked inside, she saw the fury of a three hundred-pound gorilla; a great fury in its own right, but only a precursor, she knew, to fury of a six hundred-pound gorilla, which was only a year away.

She felt assured by the idea but couldn't figure out why right away, that aggression and violence were parts of nature. Of course, it was because she was thinking about David Hogeboom, had never really stopped thinking of him. The group of staff – no longer entertained – moved on, leaving Laura alone in front of Jefferson, which pounded his chest in triumph when the group left. She made the realization when Jefferson squatted and stared at her, his teeth showing and brow furrowed, the same expression she remembered from the monster on top of her. And yet despite the fear of a beast in fury, despite the reminder of all senses related to the assault – he on top of her, hurting her, pinning her down...yes of course it was an assault – she felt assured because what had happened to her was not her fault. She could attribute it to nature. What she regretted in that moment though, was that the violence of one – of Jefferson, of Hogeboom – might never have been met by that of another. It wasn't fair that she had been a victim of aggression yet was not able to apply it herself.

She arrived early at her own party inside a small banquet area in which the zoo executives conducted fundraisers or class instruction. She noted that the party was a combination of end-of-the-year celebration and a thanks to Laura Shelley. Senior employees who Laura had seen but had never spoken to came up to her and thanked her for being a wonderful intern; they had heard all about her, they said. What they had heard, Laura knew, was that she was assaulted on her bicycle en route to her unpaid

internship at the zoo and she finished out her obligation anyway. Their gestures could have been artificial, but among people working around animals, maybe it's like working around children, there's a streak of sincerity and a low tolerance for adult contrivances. Candace stayed especially close to her, and on more than one occasion, Laura thanked her for encouraging her to finish her stay. She hadn't allowed David Hogeboom to get the better of her. Candace noted that she had emerged from the incident almost without a hitch. Laura immediately agreed but couldn't be sure that she was right.

A few employees discussed a happy hour option, but Laura deferred. Dominic arrived five minutes early and she released a deep breath when she saw the Camry. She conducted her final goodbyes quickly and exited abruptly, startling Dominic when she climbed over him.

On the drive back to her apartment, she rubbed her arms and asked him to turn the heat on. The leaves were just starting to turn and there was a crisp distinctness to the night falling early but autumn didn't strike Laura until the car vents released summer's warmth onto the goose bumps in her arms. In the absence of conversation as they neared the park, Dominic turned up the radio: Beethoven. Now she'd done it. He turned it up before the escalation in the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony and though Laura wanted everything at that moment – her last passage on Fairmount Avenue past the park – to be subdued, she couldn't help but feel that sometimes life takes on a momentum of its own and as a human being it was your responsibility, regardless of pain or sadness, to go with it. Beethoven's 9th escalated in perfect timing. The composer had made the trek an epic one – her protected journey past the place where that dirty son of a bitch had assaulted her.

She was sensitive to the pace of the car, so she noticed when Dominic took his foot off the gas.

“What are you doing?” she asked, watching him.

His face was fixed on the park.

“What’s wrong?”

She held the dashboard when he hit the brakes and appeared to be pulling over to the right shoulder. Instead, he whipped the car around – thrusting Laura against the window – and downshifted for a moment, before slamming the breaks and pulling the car to the side of the road. This was some cruel attempt at resolution. She wasn’t ready for it; she didn’t want it. But it was too late. He was already out of the car and running over to her side. She locked the door, anticipating his stare in the window. But instead of coming over to her door when he rounded the front of the car, he sprinted into the park, and her hyper concern yielded to an alarmed form of confusion. Where was he going? She couldn’t tell until she looked at his projected path and saw an object emerge in her view between trees – no bird could have been that steady – it was yellow, a yellow flag, from her bicycle. She didn’t need to look closely to figure out who was riding it, struggling to find the pedals and move quickly. He’d already had a week’s worth of growth on his face, ratty clothes. She watched him between two trees as if in a frame, so that she was shocked by the abruptness of Dominic entering the picture. He leapt – was horizontal for a point – and struck with an impact that Laura thought she heard even behind closed windows and an escalating 9<sup>th</sup> symphony. She placed her hand on the window handle but remembered the richness of sensation of the assault that continued to haunt her in her nightmares; there was no harm in security behind closed doors and

windows, underneath Beethoven. Dominic's movements were violent and extreme while Hogeboom's were ragged, arms and legs flailing. In one of the positions, they looked like they were part of the same mythical beast, with Dominic serving as the sinewy, muscular center and Hogeboom the flailing limbs. They moved violently, but Dominic's moves were planned, smooth, and balanced, and Hogebooms were erratic and helpless.

There was an incongruous moment in which Dominic seemed to relent and the music continued but it was brief, before Dominic swaggered back to her almost perfectly to the rhythm of the descending crescendo. He looked over his shoulder only once, to survey his work. His fists and forearms were bloody and the rest of him was speckled with blood but mostly clean; it looked as though he'd been dipping his hands in pools of blood rather than fighting.

He got in the car and pulled off the emergency brake, leaving blood on the handle. He checked his side view mirror and yanked the car again into another u-turn. The blood on his hands and forehands must have been Hogeboom's, but as he went through the gears, Laura saw his knuckles were opened like craters. He drove through the stop sign, revving the engine to high rpms.

"You feel better?" he asked.

She realized she was staring, hadn't even considered yet her own reaction.

"I guess so. I mean yes, Jesus."

She worried for a moment that her indecision or surprise might offend him, but what she realized on the ride home and upon returning to her apartment, was that she felt more than better. When Dominic walked without a word into the bathroom and turned on the shower, still in his own shell of physical aggressiveness, she felt a burden gradually

lifted and a settling of euphoria. Pheromones replaced nervousness and were unrelenting. She went into the bedroom to lie down, allowed her body the chance of progress unabated. She reached a point alone when the lifting of her spirit actually made her fearful – like the time she had smoked pot and been more stoned than she wanted – but she soon became comfortable and sat and basked in it until Dominic emerged from the shower in a towel.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked.

She didn’t respond, didn’t even hear him. Instead she crawled out of bed, keeping his gaze, placed her hand gently on his chest and guided him to a seat on the bed. But instead of pursuing, instead of crawling on top of him – their physical union inevitable – she leaned back, tossed her hair, and stared. There was a moment, not of hesitation, but of recognition, before he jumped toward her and lifted her on the bed, her skirt already yanked up, their heavy breaths barely audible in the buzz of the euphoria. As he entered her, she couldn’t help but smirk at being right; whatever happened, she could wait for him to act and take control.

\* \* \*

Laura and Dominic would have spent the weekend together if not for her father insisting on picking her up at 11:00 the next morning. She hated saying goodbye to Dominic but once she was in her father’s Mercedes, she felt another brand of comfort. It had been months since she was home. What her father and mother never realized was that she wasn’t avoiding home because she didn’t like it there; she avoided it because of



how comfortable it made her. No adult should feel too comfortable staying at home, and she had to remind herself sometimes that she was an adult, that she had a home of her own. But since her father had arranged to pick her up, she felt relieved at the speedy drive along Rt. 76, and then onto Lincoln Drive, into Chestnut Hill.

He hadn't spoken to her yet about the trial. She figured the discussion was a planned one that would occur with her mother present. But her father told her they would have to wait to eat dinner until her mother got home from her singing lessons and her brother was finished with work. He pulled into a Rita's Water Ice stand that used to spoil their dinners every Saturday after her ballet lessons. There was a chill in the air now that October was here and the sun was setting. Laura already felt the difference in the shorter days and futility had overcome her so that she wondered if they would ever become longer again. He gave her his sweater to wear when he saw her folding her arms, ordered without asking her and they sat down at a picnic table.

"So," he said. "Tell me what's going on."

"Did the lawyers call you or something?"

He nodded. "They wanted me to convince you not to drop the charges."

"What did you say?"

"I told them it was your decision."

He first impulse was to begin at the beginning, to articulate her feelings during the incident with David Hogeboom, then the overwhelming process of prosecuting him. Maybe it was a mistake to drop the charges, she thought, consoled by the vanilla cone. But she believed at the time it was the expedited route to closure. (Of course, it wasn't: she didn't feel satisfied until Dominic held Hogeboom up and the man's tears merged

with blood on his cheeks.) She couldn't find the words. She'd spent so much time explaining herself to everyone, not to mention the hours of internal monologue and personal obsession, that even the thought of justifying her decision exhausted her.

"In a way, I'm glad it's over," he admitted.

His smile perplexed her. The conversation hadn't yet reached the complexity that warranted an adulthood visit to Rita's.

He continued. "It just scares me that there are these guys out there who can take advantage of you..."

This was the part where she listened and agreed. "I know."

"...gaze at you a certain way that is superficial, no reflection of their character..."

Laura nodded – he was getting philosophical again, but this was much better than she anticipated.

"...yet he *interests* you, almost like a novelty act, long enough before he shows his true colors and does something stupid or worse yet, gets you into trouble –"

"Who are you talking about?"

He investigated his ice cream cone. "That Hogeboom trial may be over and done with, but don't think you're not still affected by it."

Laura shook her head and asked for clarification in lowered eyebrows.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But your relationship with Dominic Rossi scares me."

"You're sorry?" she began, then stopped. He continued to lick his ice cream but hers was making her feel sick. On the car ride out to Chestnut Hill, she wanted nothing more than to be done with Hogeboom, but she was furious now that her father had dropped the subject to privilege Dominic as a greater threat.

“Who knows you better than me?” he asked.

Ten years ago, the answer would have been him. “You need to meet him first.”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“Have you met his parents yet?”

“His father lives out of town. His mother’s sick.”

“You mean drunk.”

“No, he said sick.”

“He doesn’t live with her?”

“No, why would he —”

“Those South Philly boys never leave their mothers.”

“Whatever.”

She waited to speak until she organized her thoughts. At that moment, the next thing she would say wouldn’t be argumentative; it would be a quivering rant. She waited, hoping he was planning an apology because it was already dangerously late. She heard her father inhaling deeply for long, philosophical sentences, was disappointed when only breath came out. But after a five-minute silence, not uncomfortable as long as they were finishing their ice cream cones, he really did know his daughter better than anyone because his apology came in two words and a hug. “I’m sorry,” he said finally without complicating it with an explanation.

At Laura’s insistence they stopped by the farmer’s market off of Main Street, where Laura felt comfortable with their regular conversations again, talking about her coursework. Dr. Shelley tried to identify professors that were young when he was in

medical school that she may have encountered but Laura didn't recognize them. On the drive home, she told him about Jefferson, how prodigious he was, at first, for a gorilla. They were chuckling by the time they pulled up the drive. Laura's mother was already home and preparing dinner, stuffed peppers and artichokes, Laura's favorite. Dr. Shelley and Laura didn't tell Laura's mother, Francine, and brother, Pierce, about the ice cream but Pierce spotted the stain on Dr. Shelley's shirt and accused him playfully of favoritism.

After dinner, they played Scrabble and Laura won with a triple word score by adding "bole" to "hyper." When she announced she had to leave to catch the last train into town, her mother groaned and urged her to spend the night, pled with Dr. Shelley to convince her. It's her decision, he said, surprising her mother, but she followed his lead. Laura felt better about dropping the charges; things were back to normal again, and the normalcy came naturally tonight when she had expected it to be forced. On the drive to the station, she thanked her father for everything, assured him not to worry about her but didn't mention Dominic. They waited silently on the platform and he held his arm around her. His protection was endearing. Though he thought he knew her well, she knew him equally well: he was overprotective. Her father had only been able to judge him from the picture. How much information was there in a caption? The idea came around the corner with the light from the train, and when he looked at her to say goodbye, she asked: "How did you know he was from South Philadelphia?"

He opened his mouth to speak but waited for the train to slow. "With a name like that? Where else would he be from?"

She could have challenged him but the train was already stopped. As she rushed to the steps of the train, the first syllable out of her father's mouth was desperate, the rest of it rushed: "I don't know what I'm worried about. It's not like you're going to marry him."

## CHAPTER 5

The plan had been for Dominic and Laura to stay in Berkeley with Dominic's friend and his girlfriend over a long weekend before Laura cancelled at the last minute. She had just started working at the primate center, and though she had requested Thursday and Friday off to accompany Dominic, she had to renege because of something that came up with the orangutans. A relationship was still a novel concept to Dominic so he wasn't sure how to respond. He had saved up to purchase both tickets at three hundred dollars each. He had reluctantly gone to New York and Boston to stay with Laura's UPenn friends before. But the trip was not as monumental for Laura as it was for him. Dominic's friend, Todd, who was pursuing his PhD in American History at Cal-Berkeley, was Dominic's only friend living outside of Philadelphia, and the only person with whom he could stay for free without bleeding integrity and money like a tourist. Laura, on the other hand, knew people in Berkeley, New York, Boston, and L.A., not to mention London, Senegal, Tuscany, and Dubai. She had backpacked through Europe and been to Asia and Australia. Dominic had never been north of Boston, south of Maryland, or West of Harrisburg. He could count the number of mornings he woke in a city other than Philadelphia. And he was starting to wonder whether his native city was smaller than he had realized, with a backward gaze over cobblestone streets. He suspected it was different in other places.

From the plane, cloud cover prevented most of his view of the Midwest. What he did see was land in parcels, in squares for farms or diamonds for baseball fields. But between dozing off and reading from a Chester A. Arthur biography, through clouds that layered most of the view beneath them – like the abandoned houses on 7th Street he and his friends used to explore, with holes straight through the floor to the basement – he occasionally caught a glimpse of the jagged mountains below, searching for the line of pavement running east to west.

They descended from the blue sky through a white and gray rug into San Francisco. Philadelphia had been a humid 85 degrees when he left – the city had a way of collecting the heat between the rivers – but the San Francisco air was mild when Dominic was greeted at the passenger pickup by Todd and his girlfriend, Darreth. She leaned the passenger seat of the jeep forward and he threw his bag inside and squeezed past. There were greetings but little more; they were pressured to leave the passenger pickup and with the top of the jeep down, the back seat was like a wind tunnel. He had hoped to catch up with Todd before arriving at his apartment, but newly arrived, he was already the third wheel.

The apartment included an outdoor patio in the back, which was reason enough for Dominic to deny Todd's offer to take him out in Berkeley. Instead, they grabbed a case of beer, ordered a pizza, and sat outside. "What do you think?" Todd asked, holding out his hand.

"Of what?"

"Of Berkeley, of the apartment..."

Todd had relied on acceptance in college, especially from Dominic. “Very nice,” Dominic said, and Todd seemed to be relieved.

“So,” Todd said in recognition, “Hurricane Rossi returns.”

“Hurricane,” Dominic repeated. He hadn’t heard the name since college, after he had moved into apartment at Temple University with four strangers, including Todd. He was only 20 years old and prone to judge; he was sure he was living with a bunch of dorks. But something changed in him during those years – it may have been called adulthood – so that he stopped making people aware that he thought he was better than them, and eventually stopped thinking of himself so centrally. He appreciated that his roommates were nice guys, good guys, and even felt a little submissive when he realized they had their own areas of expertise that were not immediately evident. Whereas Dominic knew when to throw a left hook, deliver the take-home line to a girl, and flaunt swagger he’d adopted from his father, his roommates were smart, interested in politics and history. When they were friendly enough to exchange laudatory remarks, Dominic joked about Todd’s big brain and Todd joked about Dominic’s robust ego.

“You know who I was thinking about the other day,” Todd said, “that girl Karen that you went out with.”

Dominic tried to remember.

“She was beautiful,” Todd said, watching Dominic struggle to retrieve the image.

“Big, blue eyes, huge rack.”

“Right,” Dominic said.

“You never did, did you?” Todd asked.

“Why do you think I broke up with her?”



“How about that girl, Alysse?”

As Dominic tried to remember, looking above, Darreth walked outside and lit up an herbal cigarette without acknowledging Dominic and Todd. Todd, Dominic had seen, had tightened up when Darreth entered, and would have retrieved the question if it hung close enough in the air in front of him. Dominic considered answering him to get a rise out of both of them but was tired and still sober. Darreth sat and smoked. He wasn't sure what to make of her yet; it was difficult to get a sense of her figure in a long, free-flowing dress, two sizes too big and without any cut at the top. She had a pretty face, a proportional face with a narrow nose, brown eyes, and razor-thin lips, even a sweet childlike quality in her appearance that she was gradually defeating with distance. Darreth never looked at him, never even examined him, and her ignorance of him was suspiciously deliberate. Dominic didn't distinguish much between arrogance and confidence, had been called the former more than the latter, but in the most objective sense possible, if a 6'2 attractive man enters a social setting, people notice.

“What do you do, Darreth?” he asked.

“What do I *do*,” she responded. “As in my identity as a career professional?”

There was material there for attack, but Dominic chose brevity. “Yes.”

“I'm a student.”

“What are you studying?”

“Women's studies.”

Dominic responded with an “ah” that he carried through enough measures that it put her on the defensive. He studied women too, he thought, but chose an alternative:

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Work for a women’s relief organization?” she said, as serious as a wartime general.

“Relief from what?” Dominic asked. “Guys like Todd?”

She nodded in mockery of his comment, then stabbed out her herbal cigarette.

“I’ll leave you two manly men alone,” she said and walked inside.

Dominic showed her his empty bottle. She saw him and ignored the gesture. Funny, she was the type of girl he would have chased all night, and then, when she gave into him, fell the hardest and screamed the loudest. She reminded him of a girl in college who had told him he was setting the women’s movement back 20 years in what he was saying to her, or as she acknowledged later, in how she responded to him. Or maybe it had nothing at all to do with Darreth but he was playing around with Todd, who was obviously wound too tight around Darreth’s finger.

“You look good, man,” Dominic told Todd, knowing he would appreciate the comment. More accurately, he looked the same, which Dominic realized in the past two years was a complement. Dominic had always been a little sympathetic toward Todd’s appearance. He had a thin torso perched on stocky legs. The difference was so pronounced that Dominic and his roommates used to laugh if he walked by with his shirt off in his boxers. They posted a picture on the refrigerator of a boy with elephantiasis with a cutout of Todd’s head pasted above the boy’s. Todd said his build was a result of playing soccer and hockey in high school, but in brief stints, Dominic had seen Todd play sports and knew anyone with that little coordination could never have a body determined through physical activity. Dominic tried to encourage him to lift weights, but Todd didn’t care how much weight he could lift, never tried to squeeze in a few extra reps. He

wasn't ugly; in fact, minus the body, his face and demeanor would have been attractive enough. In purely heterosexual, good faith, Dominic had to admit Todd could be considered handsome by the right woman. By a smart woman, he always figured. In a way, his physical awkwardness was insurance against the bimbos. But not insurance against the Darreths.

After Darreth left, Dominic talked about the woman Todd asked about, looking at the house to make sure the windows were open. He heard the sound of running water and dishes. "You know that Alysse," he said loudly, "was kind of overweight but you wouldn't believe how solid she was. Her tits didn't even sag that much, and she was game for anything, probably a self esteem thing."

The clinking of dishes stopped and the flow of faucet water slowed.

"You know," Dominic said, "that was the thing about college, a guy could always get a girl as long as he wasn't too picky. There's always a girl uglier than you who thinks you're a prize."

Todd nodded while examining the window.

This was the way Dominic used to talk in college, but it felt unnatural coming out of him now. It was partially the beer, a reunion with a college roommate, Laura's absence, and especially, the knowledge that Darreth was listening.

Darreth announced that the pizza had arrived but, Dominic noted, took no pains to cover the charge or take it out to them. Instead, she waited for Todd to retrieve the pizza and platooned between the patio and the apartment, eating half of her pizza slice at a time. Dominic thought at first that when she was leaving she was reacting to him, but eventually he saw her exits and entrances as arbitrary, an actor who walked on and off

stage depending on her whim rather than the rehearsed order. Todd stopped asking about the specifics of Dominic's college conquests, but Dominic saved the racy parts for Darreth.

"You know that girl Candace had just the hugest vagina..."

He was aiming at absurdity and expected vehement reactions but both avoided his gaze, staring at the ground.

"Guys, I'm kidding."

"So she didn't have a huge vagina?" Darreth asked.

"Actually she did."

"Or was her vagina huge relative to scale, you know, to the things beside or inside of it."

"No," Dominic assured her. "It was huge. Don't make me prove it to you."

"Jesus Christ," Todd said, his hand covering his eyes.

When they finished eating the pizza and Darreth seemed to be done with her second, half-eaten slice – Dominic had finished the first one she'd left – Todd broke out a joint and they started to reminisce without it feeling like an agenda. They went through the list of roommates and lost friends; Dominic listed the people he recognized at the Irish Pub or McMullen's, envious of Todd's geographical distance from the people of his past. Their playful reminiscing and comments slipped into a discussion about Todd's seminar in Andrew Jackson's politics, and Dominic's biography of Chester A. Arthur, which somehow led to leading to a presidential comparison between Chester A. Arthur and James K. Polk.

Dominic's aim in a social sphere had always been to make a physical impression, to get wasted and chase tail, but eventually he became bored and hung out with Todd and his other roommates, spending the first half of a night – before the attempts at conquest – bull shitting about the tenants of socialism or Clinton's approach to welfare. Dominic read about Gingrich's Contract with America so he could converse with Todd about it. Todd listened to Dominic's advice on how to get a girl, Lisa, to go home with him, after he introduced him. The girl was in love with Dominic and probably screwed Todd as a plea for attention, but it loosened Todd up. If people are supposed to thrive in friendships, the bond between Dominic and Todd was utilitarian; one's strength was the other's weakness and they were willing to humbly make the exchange. By the end of his junior year, Dominic felt confident speaking about the Articles of Confederation in contrast to the U.S. Constitution, or engaged in classroom debates about Mexican independence. Todd started using gel in his hair and learned how the give and take of courting a college woman: according to Dominic, a simple balance between complements and banter, cutting a girl down and propping her back up, until if nothing else she was fatigued and confused into going home with you. In truth, Todd may not have been Dominic's best friend but was no doubt his most valuable. It was Todd who had shown Dominic that knowledge was a better gauge of self-worth than the number of fights won or girls taken home, wasn't something you had to wear like a tattoo or carry like broad shoulders.

“I like Arthur's commitment to the spoils system,” Dominic said, “and reformation of the civil service system. But it was administrative progress. Polk's expansionist ideas were far more critical to the development of the United States.”

“It could have been anyone with the Democratic nomination in 1845. As long as Jackson supported him he was going to win.”

“He deviated from Jackson a little on how aggressive he was about the expansion.”

“He was in the right place at the right time.”

“Yes, but he guided the process.”

“He had no idea. Thousands of people were killed.”

“So you think the westward expansion was unjust.”

“Absolutely.”

“But it didn’t stop you from living in *Berkeley, California*.”

“That’s different. It’s much more complicated than –”

“Each individual case is different,” Dominic said.

“Right,” Todd said, then corrected himself. “I know what you’re doing.”

Dominic had become confident as in his intellect during his senior year when not only did he find himself arguing with Todd but he was engaging him with his arguments and even seeming to challenge him occasionally. It was partly a façade; whereas Todd had learned his communication skills within the confines the rules of high school debates, Dominic had learned them on the streets of South Philadelphia and no doubt dipped low occasionally for leverage, preferred standing over Todd instead of the other way around, reminding Todd of his failure to get laid in the middle of a discussion about the Battle of Gettysburg. But what they eventually discovered was that they were directly opposed in their perspectives of history. Todd believed history was a fixed thing, should be viewed objectively, and uniform in its instruction. Dominic believed the historian couldn’t avoid

being subjective and so it was important for history to be personal, adjusted as the ideology of the country as it changes. It was the most democratic notion of history that Dominic could conceive of, a history tailored to the individual, fluid on the whole, but more relevant than any fixed system.

It could have been the pot or the beer, or sometimes even in their sharpest moments, they exhausted the conversation completely, after they had conceded points and recognized strengths and were just digging themselves deeper into the fixed points from which they would never deviate. One of them pledged they'd had enough and Dominic yawned and was about to propose going to bed when Todd spoke.

"So what do you think?" Todd asked, again, this time nodding toward the apartment, referring to Darreth. Though Dominic respected Todd more than any of his other friends – he wasn't sure if Todd knew this – he also knew he could take advantage of him, say anything he wanted.

"I don't know, I'm old fashioned," Dominic said.

"Which means what?" Todd said, with a calm smile.

"I don't know," Dominic said, knowing the beer and the pot was preventing him from articulating.

"You didn't have to show off in front of her, I already told her about you," Todd said.

"About what?"

"About the way you were in college?"

"Which way was I in college?"

"Horizontal, mostly."

They had a good enough laugh at the line that it could have punctuated the talk about Darreth, but Dominic – knowing he had three days left in their house – modified his view: “I like her. I do. How’s this living situation working anyway?”

“Good. Fine.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s like having a roommate who you have sex with.”

“Laura’s moving in next weekend.”

Dominic delivered it as matter of fact, but Todd’s eyes grew big. “No way.”

Dominic nodded, although Todd’s unabated reactions were starting to annoy him.

“A domesticated Hurricane Rossi?”

“I guess so.”

“What’s she like?” Todd asked.

“You’d be surprised,” Dominic said.

“Really.”

“She’s pretty, I mean beautiful,” – he was drunk now – “not like you’re thinking.”

“So it’s serious?”

“She’s great but...” – he realized the “but” was on his tongue since he started thinking about her; he allowed the word to hang between them and disintegrate.

“So no more Hurricane Rossi for the weekend?”

“Nah,” he said, the name his roommates labeled him senior year for his prowess.

“You’re telling me that Hurricane Rossi is out of commission, is *slowing down*?”

“I’m not telling you anything,” Dominic said, hoping that would be the end of it, but Todd was preparing to say something confidential. Dominic could tell by the way he



was looking over his shoulder, leaning in, and speaking low. “I figure one night we can go out on the town, see if we still have the old moves.”

“What moves did you have?” Dominic said, nodding toward the window – which had been understood between the two of them as the physical reference to Darreth.

“Same ones as you, except yours work.”

Even in silence, Dominic could tell Todd wasn’t going drop the topic.

“You know, there’s this friend of Darreth’s, Jennifer, who really needs to get fucked.”

The line was incongruous from an older Todd, a futile attempt to recreate the past, even – to Dominic’s surprise – a little obscene.

“See what happens,” Dominic said, because he was expected to say it, but until Todd mentioned it, he hadn’t even considered cheating on Laura.

The next morning, Todd and Dominic walked down the street for a cup of coffee, then returned home for an hour or two so Todd could tie up some loose ends before a tour of the City. As they prepared to leave, Dominic saw Darreth was also freshening up, applying some lotion that was supposed to smell like flowers but smelled like lotion. Dominic figured she was heading her own way, opposite from the men, but when the three of them walked outside, he could tell by her casual pace she was coming with them. Dominic opened the door for the car and moved the front seat forward for Darreth to climb into the back.

“Go ahead,” she said to Dominic.

“It’s all yours.”

“Todd,” Darreth began, “would you remind your friend what it is to be a gentleman?”

Dominic looked to Todd, welcoming the lecture, and Todd averted his gaze. “C’mon guys, you can switch off.”

She waited, and the only reason Dominic finally climbed into the backseat was because he pledged secretly that he didn’t like Darreth and was going to tell Todd by the end of the trip, maybe tell her too. It didn’t help matters that he had been geared up for a couples’ weekend and Laura had left him solo, also that she had sounded upset with him when he called her drunk at eleven o’clock the night before – two o’clock on the East Coast, he’d forgotten – to tell her that he missed her and loved her. “Okay,” she had responded. “Me too.”

Darreth’s belligerence and Laura’s absence compounded to make Dominic bitter, but on the drive across the Bay Bridge with the open top, he decided to replace the romantic void with a fulfillment of place. They parked in North Beach and walked to City Lights, where he bought a book about the beat poets, then crossed the street for a shot and a beer – Darreth ordered cranberry juice – at Vesuvio. He closed his eyes and knocked his head back, setting the glass down and fixing his eyes on pictures of Ginsberg, Dylan, and Kerouac. Compared to the people and events that had largely expired in Philadelphia, he was thrilled by the lingering sense of the beats in San Francisco.

After rejuvenating their buzz from the night before, they walked down the hill to Pier 49 and the sea lions, and gazed out at Alcatraz. It didn’t look that far but of course it was miles away, two point six to be exact, Darreth clarified; it was good to have her

around for something. He could have said it to her but he didn't. Proximity has a healing power all its own and Dominic sensed the tension between he and Darreth dissipating. He bought the three of them ice cream cones along the peer, and the walked up the hill to the car, appreciating a late breakfast of champions, tequila, lager, and ice cream. They drove to a restaurant for lunch, then crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, thought of pulling into Sausalito, but the day was perfect – seventy two degrees and sunny – so they agreed on the hour drive to Sonoma. They chose Todd and Darreth's favorite Sonoma winery and purchased a red wine, pinot Todd called it. They drank at a table in back and even fired up another joint without anyone saying a word, talked about nothing in particular for a long time. Todd explained San Francisco in chronological terms. Darreth's great, great, great grandfather migrated West in '49 and found gold. The city was rebuilt after the quake and fire in 1906. The Golden Gate Bridge construction provided jobs during the depression. The country was young, Dominic knew, but Philadelphia felt ancient compared to this place.

Dominic enjoyed Darreth more after the wine loosened her up, took away the stiff veneer intent on reparations for women's oppression, on women sitting shotgun. But when they got in the jeep for the drive back to Berkeley, Dominic and Darreth both insisted on the other having the front seat, until finally Darreth pushed Dominic aside to get into the back seat. When she rose, he saw she had a nice figure below the waist, tighter than he'd thought. Dominic demonstrated his approval to Todd with raised eyebrows.

They were cold in the open air in the mountains and across the bridge but rather than put the top up, Dominic borrowed a sweatshirt and Todd turned on the heat. Once

returned to Berkeley, they ascended winding roads to find a hidden spot overlooking the bay and the city and smoked the rest of the joint. Dominic registered the panorama of the city – a biblical assembly of land, sun, and water – and the warmth from the heater blanketed the memory. He had been missing something in Philadelphia, not only San Francisco, but the rest of the country, the rest of the world. He had been missing so much, he realized, then suppressed the idea because he was trying to concentrate on the moment. In Laura’s absence, he fell in love with the city. The 49ers quest for gold reaped more than the obscure metal; they were all gold diggers and had found something special.

They returned to the apartment after the sun set, talking about naps as a missed opportunity. Dominic and Todd opened a couple of beers while Darreth was in the shower.

“We’ll have to set something up for you tonight,” Todd said.

The statement was vague but Dominic knew what he was referring to. “I’m fine – I’m having a blast.”

“The hurricane is now a category one tropical storm.”

“Fuck off.”

Dominic was entitled to tell him to drop the subject, but the truth was the city had left him insatiable. “What about that Jennifer you were talking about?” he blurted.

“Darreth always calls her when we go out.” Todd said.

That night they went out to a bar with dim lighting and patrons dressed in black, but there was also a back patio area in which they could smoke cigarettes and play pool.

At first, it was just the three of them, then a married couple arrived, then a couple of Todd's peers. Todd's guy friends were the type Dominic would have dismissed as dorks in his early college years. One of them talked so nasally it was as if his tonsils had been mis-located in his septum; the other stood around and laughed nervously and loudly, smoking the entire time. But Dominic had the chance to talk with them about their academic focus and after a few drinks he was convinced that he wanted to continue his graduate work and maybe go for a PhD himself. It seemed like a novel and realistic enough idea at the time, spending five years in graduate school, sleeping in every morning and grabbing a cup of coffee before graduate "seminars" as they were calling them. Laura could join the faculty at Berkeley while he was in school. Todd and Darreth were only paying a total of \$1100 a month for a two bedroom with a patio; he and Laura could afford it. He and Laura could be happy there.

The idea of Laura disrupted the idea. All of his dreams and projections for the future – beginning with his fantasies of playing third base for the Phillies or strong safety for the Eagles, through a weird stage in which his fantasies just involved him being a normal adult human being, then archaeologist, anthropologist, Indiana Jones type of shit, and then being a teacher and now a professor – all of these dreams were focused on him alone. They were fantasies and yet he had no accompaniment, no girlfriend or wife, just bimbos two at a time. But in his dreams of Berkeley, he had included Laura in his best estimations of happiness.

Alcohol only increased his infatuation with the place and his bitterness at Laura's absence. He was fatigued and drunk, but with a full tank of adrenaline, close to midnight, when Darreth's friend Jennifer arrived. As she hugged Darreth in greeting, Todd looked

over and raised his eyebrows. She wasn't Dominic's type, but any port in a storm, his father would have said. She was slender but without curve or much of a figure. Her hair came down over her ears and she wore pointed-rimmed glasses and a subtle stare that six or seven beers made charming. Darreth didn't introduce him; neither did Todd after all of his talk. And Jennifer, like Darreth, was indifferent to him – they must have taught this kind of thing in the Berkeley women's studies program – except in Jennifer's case, he couldn't take offense. She extended indifference to the greater world around her: to the bar, to the drinks, certainly to Todd's dorky friends, to his own stories about being a teacher, his questions about her studies, and finally to his question at the end of the night as everyone was calling it quits, if she wanted him to walk her home.

“Sure,” she said. “Whatever.”

Reminded of pursuing a PhD and sharing an apartment with Laura, he told Todd and Darreth he was just being a gentleman; he would be back to the apartment in twenty minutes.

He continued to belabor small talk – do you like your neighborhood, any trouble? – on the casual walk to her apartment, but when it started to rain, they ran the final two blocks. From Jennifer's porch, Dominic contemplated the heavy rain, an obstacle in an already delicately balanced plan to get away. Maybe if Jennifer had stopped at the door of her apartment and said thank you, had challenged him or given him an opportunity to escape, he would have wished her well and turned away. But when she opened the door and held it for him, he apologized to himself for the act because it was inevitable.

Inside, they sat idly on the couch. This was the way she lived her life, Dominic thought, waiting. He was tempted to be rough with her but started gently, still

rationalizing that the kissing would not do anything for him and maybe he would turn away, but the day had generated too many endorphins for him to resist even a touch as generic as hers. Eventually her breaths increased – a sign of life – and she got up and walked into the bedroom.

He took off his over shirt and lay on top of her; her arms curled around him and moans slipped into her breaths, acts of nature so understated that the raindrops nipping at an awning were violent acts in comparison. Now committed, they struggled to shed wet clothes and separate the covers before sliding under them. He tried everything – everything that Laura liked, he realized. Despite a flash of excitement on the couch, he was getting nothing out of the experience now that his mind had centered on Jennifer. It was a wonder to him that he was even able to stay erect; it wasn't her as much as the day that had stayed in him and funneled to his midsection. He had a hard on for San Francisco and the Sierra Nevadas. He sped toward the finish line and, recognizing that he could stay hard forever but never finish, emitted a false groan and rolled aside.

He hadn't achieved the clarity an orgasm provides, the settled sensation in which a heart pumped thoughts and fears back to the surface. Instead, his mind was cluttered, and unable to direct him, a captain jumping ship. The feeling was incongruous as the beat of rain picked up and his heartbeat sank. He brushed her curtains aside to watch the splatter of raindrops on the pavement.

"It's soothing," Dominic said. "Isn't it?" The second part of the question sounded desperate.

Her eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. "It's just rain."

His inhaled with the intention of a sigh but released the breath with urgency. He got out of bed and started to dress.

“I have a girlfriend, you know.”

“Well, I’m not surprised.”

Because they would never achieve understanding or resolution he thought to take the opportunity to further antagonize her – do you know that you’re boring and unattractive – but he’d had enough regrets already and walked out without a word, staring at the blanket of rain coming down in front of him.

As he walked the streets, squinting his eyes, telling himself to ignore the cold through gritted teeth, the rain running off his wet clothes like they would off of rubber, a ball of regret pressed against the inside of his stomach. His pace picked up but there was nothing to distract him, only to make him feel cold and miserable, and the ball in his stomach only became larger and more abrasive, as if it were growing spikes and stabbing his insides. It only continued to grow as he told himself what he’d done was innocent. He and Todd had gone out without a transition, a shower or a nap, without allowing Dominic a chance to distinguish between the euphoria of discovery and the temptation of the libido. The ball of pain increased and seemed to initiate another dimension of torture, an emission of nausea beginning in his stomach, sliding up his trachea, and reaching his head with the spins. He walked over to the edge of the sidewalk and threw up in some bushes. It was a clean projectile and the rain washed it away. He felt better at first, but the pain only became more persistent as if it had cleared its territory and was about to make another attempt at expansion. Dominic was starting to think the pain was intolerable – in a way, it was pain that brought about his resolution – because he found



that the only way to allow the pain to subside was by admitting that what he'd done was a mistake. This made him feel better immediately so that he temporarily associated not loving Laura with pain and loving her with relief. The pain subsided further when he convinced himself that Laura would never find out. It would be his secret, his sense of irony, something protected that would initially grow vines and weeds but someday be rooted in his feelings and fortify his relationship. He had made the mistake, but why couldn't his recognition be personal instead of collective? Why should he allow it to destroy them? The important thing was not what happened in history but in how it was presented: all history is subjective, each perspective individual and distinct.

Todd and Darreth were asleep when he arrived home. His first instinct was to be quiet but he hadn't even spent an hour at the girl's house and he thought about the integrity of his secret, walking harshly with the heels of his feet on the soft wood, leaving the bathroom door open when he ran the water and brushed his teeth. He wanted them to know he was home; nothing had happened.

He considered himself prepared the next morning when he saw Todd and Darreth walking into the kitchen. Todd peeked out to him when Darreth went into the bathroom.

"So what happened?" Todd asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Nothing, I walked her home and got stuck in the rain."

"Got stuck in the rain?" Todd asked. "Is that what the kid's are calling it these days?"

"I'm serious," he said, making eye contact.

It was frustrating that Dominic was having trouble convincing him. What if Laura somehow became suspicious? Sometimes people wore the knowledge all over

themselves and their denial was almost delusional, like a clown who asks a person to trust him. When he saw Darreth in the morning, intent on her orbitals around him, he decided to test her.

“Did you hear that storm last night? I walked Jennifer home and got stuck in that rain. Took me forever to get home.”

“I heard it,” she said, on her way into the kitchen. She stayed in there as Dominic collected his bags and took a shower, where he thought about what he should tell her. It was one thing for Todd to know about his activity but it was another for Darreth – who inevitably would have a heart to heart with Laura if Dominic stayed with her. But when Dominic came out of the shower, he saw Darreth had made it easy for him; she was gone, for a change.

Over lunch with Todd, Dominic loosely insisted that nothing happened, but Todd seemed to be only inspired by his resistance. When his beer was not halfway gone, Dominic admitted the truth. Todd clapped his hands and reached over to pat him on the back. Dominic couldn't help but snicker but the pain in his stomach was returning. “Let's drop it,” he said to Todd. “It wasn't worth it.”

“Don't worry about it,” Todd assured him. “It's not a big deal.”

“I told you Laura's moving in next weekend.”

Todd waved the sentiment away. Sometimes friends were such bad counselors, disregarding the obvious and significant, thinking they were being supportive. Dominic appreciated Todd, but he remembered why the two of them had never been close. His friends didn't try so hard to impress him.

“How good is Darreth with secrets?” Dominic asked.

“You don’t have to worry about her,” Todd said, looking down at the menu.

\* \* \*

Laura awoke at her apartment on Sunday with a headache. Usually when she had a hangover, she took a Tylenol with a glass of orange juice and watched television for an hour or two, but her apartment was hardly livable. She had packed a week early and was paying the consequence, living out of boxes and garbage bags. She hadn’t been to the grocery store in over a week for fear of wasting food. The television was taped tight in bubble wrap in a box in the corner of the living room behind her bags of clothes. But the keys to Dominic’s Toyota were set on the counter and slowly, rigidly, her mind processed the associations with Dominic’s apartment – a bed, television with cable, frozen pizzas. She could pick up some Tylenol on the way, then take a nap, before picking Dominic up from his flight back from Berkeley at 8:30. She decided to take only one box with her – the one with the coffeemaker, filters, coffee, coffee cups, and saucers – down to the car. She didn’t want to clutter the place before the move-in date and even the three-floor descent, with or without the box, made her tired.

It was Dominic’s car but she was just as sure that the car had once been hers. Driving home from the airport, the high idle and whining suspension were new sounds but when she heard the clickedy-click of the blinker and felt the worn section at the top of the gearshift – in addition to the car being the same year, make, model, color, and transmission type – the combined sensory experience transported her ten years into the past and she knew she was driving the car she once owned. She found a burn hole in the back seat from Bonnie Kranford’s cigarette and even the faint surrounding stain from

when she poured Coca Cola on it. There was no car lighter: her brother Pierce had thrown it out the window as he was messing with it and burned his fingers. Inside the glove compartment was the webbed residue of duck tape, from when her boyfriend Alan broke it, then claimed to fix it with duck tape and a folded piece of paper.

At first, Laura could not help indulging in the idea that there was something in the universe that tied her to Dominic but these were the types of coincidences of which Laura had been trained to be suspicious. If you were to isolate these two variables – a person selling a car and a person buying a car – the prospects of a match were unlikely but not impossible, considering they lived within ten miles of each other. Add another factor, that she had sold a car to the dealership and he had purchased the car from one, and perhaps the likelihood was high. As much as she had been excited about a karmic explanation, she was disappointed to admit: despite the vastness of the world, there were bound to be colliding ions, atoms, molecules, substances, people.

The car idled high when she started it, in the same key she remembered but louder. Market Street was mostly clear, and even though she was not altogether sharp, she engaged in a little mischief with the Toyota, winding it out to four thousand rpms in second gear to get through a yellow light. She knew this car; it was hers. The drive around City Hall could have been tortuous but Laura was able to zip around without worrying about lane changes, with hardly any traffic again on Broad Street. She caught a series of green lights, made the left on Snyder, and found a parking space only a block away from his building.

There was something to be salvaged in the coincidence of his purchase of her former car: she would correct Dominic; his car was a '94, not a '95. But the idea of

rubbing it in made her feel guilty and compounded her headache. He didn't understand the importance of her work this weekend, the attempts she made to delay the swapping of the orangutans male and females. Her boss, Roberta, cited a tight funding schedule and insisted she work through the weekend. The one fortunate circumstance was that enough had transpired over the week to make Sunday less important, and Roberta – in what she considered to be generous – told Laura at the end of the day Saturday she wouldn't need to come in on Sunday.

Though relieved, Laura questioned too whether her presence over the previous three days had been necessary, whether her excuse to Dominic had proved to be legitimate. But because she had been planning to come into work Sunday she considered it a free pass and thought of her Saturday night as a gift. Roberta had also excused the British intern, Tom, at the same time, and his offer to go out for a pint and a bite to eat seemed at same the time to be fortuitous and harmless. She had enjoyed working with him at the primate center despite his questionable seriousness, arriving with his hair styled by its position on the pillow, powdered sugar and donut crumbs around his mouth and on his shirt. She considered on the walk to the bar that an observer might have considered them a couple. She hadn't even considered the possibility and therefore relieved herself of the guilt when they sat down in a booth together, but the night had somewhere taken a turn; she became drunk, he became charming, and she accepted the offer for him to walk her home at the end of the night. She had redeemed herself with her refusal to his offer to walk her up to her apartment, but she was fearful this morning that her night could have easily gone the other way.

Laura entered Dominic's apartment, set the box down in the kitchen, and walked directly into his bedroom and fell onto the bed. It was going to be a day to herself, without work, without anyone – a day of sleep, maybe a pizza and a movie before Dominic arrived home that night. She would save leftovers of pepperoni for him. She was welcoming sleep, knowing that she would be able to have as much as she liked for the rest of the day, and that she would not be alone later. She held Dominic's pillow close and appreciated the smell of his hair left on the pillow, despite her guilt at the throb of her headache.

The afternoon and evening floated by. She woke up from her nap to eat a pizza and caught the second half of *Urban Cowboy* on the Oxygen network, then the beginning of something with a young Julia Roberts, before laying down in the bedroom for a second nap, her guilt and hangover dissipating. The ringing phone woke her and though usually she waited for Dominic to pick it up, she embraced the phone as she would her new residence. "Hello," she said, sure she was going to have to explain to someone that Dominic was not home, maybe stir that moment of mystery: who was the woman answering Dominic's line?

"Laura?" the voice said. "I'm sorry, is this Dominic's girlfriend, Laura?"

She responded in two syllables: "Ye-es."

"Hi, this is Darreth, Todd's girlfriend."

"Todd?"

"I'm sorry. Did I catch you at a bad time? I just need a minute."

"No, sure. Just give me a minute." Laura held the phone away from her and sat up, tried to rub the sleep out of her face, cough the sleep out of her voice. She never slept

as soundly as she had been in Dominic's bed a moment earlier. "Is everything all right?"  
Laura asked.

"Yes and no."

"Okay."

"I just wanted to let you know, I'm not sure how to say it."

"Okay."

"Your boyfriend is a bit of a creep."

"I'm sorry – who are you again?"

"Dominic spent the night at a girl's house last night."

"Okay." The word was more for self-assurance, but it may have sounded to Darreth as if she was waiting for more.

"You mean that's okay with you?"

"No, God no," Laura said. "Jesus."

"I know this is awkward but I wanted to tell you."

"Right. Awkward." Why did she pick up the phone?

"I hate to say it but I saw it coming a mile away. All he talked to Todd about was his college *conquests*."

Laura could have been thankful but she genuinely did not like this woman. She asked: "Do you like delivering this type of news?"

"No, not particularly."

"Do you have a thing for Dominic, are you some type of stalker or something, making the whole thing up?"

"Maybe I better go."

“Wait,” Laura said, feeling the impulse of tears but knowing she had time before recognition opened the floodgates.

“What if I wasn’t here?”

“I know, I just thought I’d take a chance.”

If only she had let the phone ring, she thought, she might have never received the call. But even as this fantasy lingered, she felt the force of having to move forward, to ask questions.

“Who was she?”

“That I’m not sure of.”

“Can you find out for me?”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“What can you do, Darreth?”

The question was mocking but Darreth answered nonetheless. “I can give you some advice. Get away from this guy. You don’t need him.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m just saying...I’ve seen this situation hundreds of times.”

“What situation?” Laura asked.

“Infidelity, misogyny, disrespect.”

“Okay, smarty pants,” she said, then covered her eyes. It was the word her mother used to say to her when, as a precocious child, Laura started giving advice.

“I’m sorry, Laura.”

“Whatever,” Laura said, then hung up the phone.



“Bitch,” she mumbled, as the raw intensity of feeling, molding into hostility, was directed immediately to Darreth. Then the name and image of Dominic returned and all of her hostility channeled then to him, and there was enough feeling throughout her – in her core emotions and on her sleeve – that the release was collective. She cried in his bed for an hour or two, immobile, knowing this place – suddenly his place again – was only making her more sick and upset, and it took her another hour just to work up the strength to get up off the bed. Fuck him, she said, when her tears were starting to clear up and her breaths lost their convulsive hitches. Fuck this dump. She grabbed the box of things she brought over this morning, walked out the front door and threw it in the trunk of the Camry. It was her car in the first place.

Sunday evening, the traffic was equally scarce, but she drove recklessly, getting everything that she could out of the four cylinder, and she was entitled to every rpm. She blew a red light on Market Street, heard a car horn alert her to her offense, got onto Rt. 95 to the airport. She was on time, but she wasn't there to pick him up; she was going get the story straight. Her action was no longer inaction. She enjoyed the strain of the engine on the highway; the car screamed above sixty-five and she maintained a speed of seventy, even as she weaved in and out of lanes and heard the tires squeal. She wasn't afraid of the cops – they could go fuck themselves – or even an accident. She wasn't afraid of anything. She perused the passenger pickup area, then stopped the car, yanked the brake, and left it running. If some son of a bitch wanted to steal the car he could have it; if they wanted to tow it, no problem, she would make it easier for them. They could drive the goddamned thing to the dump.

The arrivals screen showed a plane from San Francisco landing ten minutes earlier. She was overwhelmed when she saw the flight numbers listed above the baggage claim belts, had already forgotten the flight. Why couldn't they list the source city instead, who remembers flight numbers, she thought, when she heard Dominic's voice: "Laura," he said, from far away, and then she heard him getting closer. "Is everything okay?"

"I know what you did," she said. It sounded louder than she had intended. Several people glanced over.

"What?"

"I already know that you did it, so you might as well admit it."

"Admit what?" he said, with too much lightness, touching her shoulder.

She wiped his hand away violently. "I know what you did" – she didn't care that she was repeating; it was as if she had taken time to carve the words out of her tense emotional state and couldn't be sure other words would come off as strongly – "I just need to hear it from you."

"What?"

"The girl. In Berkeley. Darreth told me."

"Darreth?"

"You don't know a Darreth?" She meant it to be interrogatory but she couldn't help but feel the hope in this question. He was looking around now, perplexed, and in this moment, their lives were on a fulcrum. She couldn't tell whether he was an insincere prick who was stalling or was genuinely confused. She didn't trust her ability to read him now that she was so caught up in staying strong and composed. Laura tried to

conceal her hope but she was already projecting. Maybe he didn't know a Darreth, maybe he would suddenly remember an ex-girlfriend who used to make up names and stories.

"There's Todd's girlfriend, Darreth," Dominic said. "But why would she be calling you?"

Everything was crashing and Laura was losing the ability to reason and converse. "Dominic," she said. "Everything will be better if you just tell me that you did it."

"It was nothing," he said. "Hardly anything at all."

Laura had expected some degree of satisfaction in the truth but she immediately relished the moment earlier when she had been unsure, along with the afternoon she slept away in what was to become their shared bed.

She awoke out of a daze when he tried to hold her; she slapped him away and started running. She heard his calls for a while even as she was running, louder but more distant, and then she was through the doors, emerging into another world of people waiting to be picked up by loved ones. A couple to her left hugged and kissed. The world suddenly overwhelmed her. She was in it alone.

With security standing beside the car, she got in and drove away. She had the option to take the highway back to the City or the Blue Route to the suburbs. She couldn't stand the thought of sleeping on a hard floor in a half-lived in apartment. She certainly wasn't going back to Dominic's, didn't want to explain herself to friends who may have had an extra bed. She had to make a decision. She was driving quickly but not sure to where. If nothing else, it was easier to take the road less traveled, the Blue Route expressway, heading almost directly into Chestnut Hill.

She slowed to a moderate pace and stayed in the right lane, allowed her mind to slide into the picture of Dominic with another woman. He had used his silky skills to pick up a girl and have drunken, raucous sex with her. He probably had her in positions Laura had been hesitant about. Not that she wouldn't have tried eventually, if the son of a bitch had been patient. He didn't have to screw sluts in Berkeley to prove himself; he didn't have to put their ankles up on his shoulders. She needed a distraction but couldn't listen to the radio; what she needed now was to be moving, away from Dominic, closer to a safe place, closer to home. She encountered little traffic, looked down at the fuel gage and realized she was nearly on E but decided she would make it. She never had a full tank of gas in it when she was in high school, even though it only cost twelve dollars to fill it up. Dominic called her cell phone but she hung up and turned the phone off. She drove the car along Main Street, the car jumping over cobblestones. Turning off, she remembered winding out second gear on the ascent to their private drive and house. Here she was, 16 again on her way home at midnight, except she had been able to avoid social turmoil and distress when she was an adolescent. It had only been in her adult life that she called her father to attend to her, or – as she was doing now – allowed herself to start crying as she drove up the drive. She sobbed in gasps, then released the remainder in perfect time for her father to greet her at the door and wrap her in a hug. At first he held her, probably not yet sure what to say, and with the cacophony of her thoughts since Darreth's phone call, she noted the silence of her surroundings and the stalled state of her mind as she leaned into her father's chest. The only sound was the ticking of the strained Toyota engine, like a miscalibrated clock, which reminded Laura that she was now 27 years old and single, the seconds rattled off in urgent bunches.

Her father spoke first: "I knew he was going to hurt you."

## CHAPTER 6

After school, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Dominic drove out to Roxboro and stopped at Joe's Market to pick up a holiday dinner. He carried the food in two trips: a turkey in aluminum foil; Tupperware containers of corn, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and gravy; an apple crumb pie and ice cream; and as he ascended the hill to his mother's house in the Camry, he held the bags upright in the passenger seat. The engine strained in second gear; it could have had something to do with the intake manifold or with time. The car was ten years old and had been through a lot with Dominic, not to mention the two years of wear and tear when Laura was the owner.

She had been right about the car. Dominic purchased it from the same dealer her father sold it to a month earlier. He paid with the five grand his Uncle Ralph had given him, plus wages from a part-time job at the Giant Market. Of course, that was ages ago, another life: in the eight years since, Dominic associated the car more with city mobility and reliability and less with a cross-country trip or Laura Shelley. He had only remembered the association one night before picking Laura up but figured it for a harmless irony. And when she asked him, rather than explain a half-truth, he deferred to full denial. In his mind, the theft and the purchase of the car were closely related and symbolic of an evolution Laura would never appreciate. But when he returned from Berkeley and attempted to retrieve the car from Laura, she made him admit first that it

was once hers. In their conversations since, she occasionally reminded him that her first instincts were correct, about the car, not to mention fidelity, maturity, and commitment.

Twenty minutes late, Dominic carried the entire Thanksgiving dinner from the car to his mother's house in one trip and knocked at the door with his foot. His mother answered the door quickly: "Lazy man's load. Could have made two trips, you know."

The living room was cleared of the tray tables and the kitchen table was set with a tablecloth, new plates, glasses, and silverware. The carpet was soft and stain free.

"Did you vacuum or something?"

"Guy at the church has a carpet cleaning business. I played the organ at his wife's funeral."

"The organ?"

A box of wood had been located in the corner of the living room since before Dominic moved in as a teenager, but for lack of use, it blended in with the wall; the only appliance in the living room worth noticing was the television. But he could see she had cleaned off the dust, maybe even polished it. The keys shined from the light off the lamp above it. "You are taking this church thing seriously."

"It's more than just salvation. I get paid, under the table too."

He set the food on the table, but his mother asked him to move it into the kitchen. "I hate eating out of containers," she said.

In the kitchen they poured the food into bowls and onto plates. His mother said they had to have the food in front of them, family style, for a real Thanksgiving dinner. Dominic had been overwhelmed at the prospect of dinner with his mother Wednesday before flying to Vegas early on Thursday morning, was concerned haste would subdue

hunger. But when he sat across from his mother, with steam rising from the food after a short stint in the microwave, his appetite returned and he even felt at home.

“First time I ever celebrated Thanksgiving on a Wednesday,” his mother said.

“Sorry again about that.”

Dominic was flying out to Las Vegas on Thanksgiving for the bachelor party of an old South Philly friend, Dooley. He had made the most critical error in scheduling his flight, booking his departure on Thursday instead of Friday morning. He called the airline to reschedule but flights were full and tickets were twice as much money, so he kept the reservation, and booked a room for the night off the Strip at the Super 8 next to the Ellis Island Casino.

“Tomorrow, on the actual Thanksgiving,” his mother said, “the church is having a big get together in the basement. Supposedly it’s for the poor but I’m going to get a meal out of it.”

“Good, I was wondering what you were going to do.”

“Still worrying about the old lady?”

“Not *worried*.”

“It’s not a *bad* thing.”

Every time he’d stopped in to see his mother over the past year, he told himself he needed to see her more. She had cleaned up, substituted this church business for the booze, and passed along a rosary and a crucifix to hang in his apartment. The jerky movements had lingered even in sobriety but today her fork and knife were steady. She had dressed for the dinner in nice pants and a blouse, applied makeup, and done her hair. He had seen the gray in it before but her die-job was consistent. Looking at her, steady



and colorful, Dominic considered whether she had regained some of her lost years. But even today, before arriving, he expected the worst when she greeted him. He could have used a little more Catholic belief himself; what was that bit about turning the other cheek?

“So that girl you were seeing, is that over with?”

“Yeah, it’s done.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing really, it fizzled out.”

“What was her name again?”

“Lisa,” he responded.

He could have used some forgiveness as well, lying to his mother. But he saw it in relative terms; it was a half-lie. When his mother asked him months earlier, before he went to Berkeley, whether he had a girlfriend, he couldn’t tell her no. Instead he told her yes he did, she was from Newtown, past the Northeast. And he’d been accommodating the lie ever since.

“Who broke up with who?”

“I don’t know. It just fizzled, Mom.”

His mother showed her palms in submission. “Just trying to be a mother is all.”

“Thank you.”

He would have liked to talk to her about Laura and Berkeley – he even thought about sticking with the Lisa lie and inserting the actual Berkeley incident – but he knew once he deferred to honesty with his mother the floodgates would open. He would have liked to talk to someone about it, someone beside Laura, who was still giving him hell but

not avoiding his phone calls, but the impulse to talk to his mother about Laura Shelley was rescinded by more than logic; he would stay away from it like a shark-bite victim avoids the water.

She waited until after dinner for her first cigarette of the day, and Dominic made two plates of apple pie with a scoop of ice cream. When they were finished, his mother's posture – sitting back, her legs crossed – showed she was receptive to settling into a conversation, but Dominic cleared the table and his mother packed the leftovers into their original containers and bags.

“Maybe I could stay around a while,” he said. “What’s on television tonight?”

“You don’t have to do that, Dominic,” his mother said, handing him the bags. “I’m okay.”

“I know I don’t *have* to.” It was another half truth: he liked being with his mother on good days but he also feared the worst, that she would buy a bottle and end up passed out on the couch. He used to check the cupboards for a bottle when she was in the bathroom or out on the porch, but he had to allow himself to be encouraged by her recently.

“Besides, you still have to pack,” she said.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“I know you better than anyone, Nicky,” she said. There was little room for stalling; he told her he would see her next weekend and she said a phone call would suffice if he was busy. He had to dispel the suspicion that she was forcing him out, and the thought that he should wait for her to go to the bathroom so he could check for a

bottle. Instead, his mother walked him out the door and waited and waved in the cold as his car heated up and he drove off.

Dominic waited at the Philadelphia airport for his plane to board next to disgruntled fathers, flustered mothers, running kids, and screaming babies. In overhearing their conversations, he could tell most of them had been delayed yesterday and had stayed at an airport hotel overnight. He had hoped for an empty plane but saw the holiday crowd at the gate. He tried not to abandon optimism: this trip was an adventure, his Thanksgiving in Vegas.

Dominic knew nothing about the layout in Las Vegas, and certainly nothing about the Ellis Island Casino and its adjacent Super 8, but the previous Christmas, Dominic had received a postcard with the Ellis Island Casino as the return address, without a word written on it. Dominic knew who it was from based on the picture: a circle of slots below a '68 gold Camaro, illuminated by spotlights, sparkling with chips of gold in the paint. Beneath the image was the caption: "GOLDEN CAR COULD BE YOURS TODAY! ELLIS ISLAND CASINO."

His father was in Las Vegas.

After his father had been released from jail when Dominic was in college, he moved back to South Philadelphia and started taking bets again. His father didn't even entertain the idea of going straight, not after four years in jail, taking his brother down for two, forcing his son to live with his mother. But Dominic wasn't bitter – he dropped by to see his father once in a while – and his Uncle Louis eventually got over it, even though he was on his deathbed. Everyone else's needs were subservient to Jimmy's aversion to

employment, hell on earth. Jimmy talked then about moving out of town, but the parole board kept him in town for two tenuous years. At about the time Dominic graduated from college, Jimmy Rossi skipped town, except this time, it was legal. He had talked about maybe heading south to Florida, for no other reason than the sun and the ocean, or going west to Colorado or maybe Arizona; he knew a guy in Tucson who was selling boats. If he were going straight, he said once, it would be temporary and only involve something with a motor. He had expressed this information casually to Dominic over a slice of pizza, or maybe even over the phone; it wasn't like he ever announced he was leaving town or said goodbye. One day he was just gone; the phone line was disconnected; there was no car in front of the apartment, nothing inside. Even when his father talked of leaving, Dominic never thought his father could live anywhere beside South Philadelphia. Dominic remembered discovering how vast the country was when he drove to Denver when he was 16; he extended the same discovery to his father, and couldn't help but be a little jealous.

Of course, Dominic had already started to make his bed in Philadelphia and knew it was not a bad place to be. Not only was the history of the country's founding grounded in Philadelphia (he liked Boston too for the same reason), but the place contained his own history, from South Philadelphia to Center City historical district. He had been enamored with Berkeley and the Bay Area but his images of the place were quickly abandoned when he returned. He had become cynical about Philadelphia in that long weekend out West, but had since learned that people always reduce the value of home, anything that is routine. Rarely was Dominic able to focus on living anywhere else beside Philadelphia,

and he expected the case was the same for his father. Though jealous, Dominic also admired his father for leaving.

The first postcards and short letters he'd received from his father were from various parts of Florida, always a different return address. For a while, he was installing pools. In the first letter, he said the job was tolerable only because he knew the supervisor and liked him. In the second, he had been fired for trying to strangle the supervisor and was planning to flee town if they decided to press charges. Dominic didn't hear from him for about a year after that, and then received postcards and letters from Tucson. He never mentioned a girlfriend but Dominic suspected it. He had mentioned women generically in Tucson, ones he was just fucking, but the references eventually stopped and Jimmy never talked when he was interested in a woman. The last letter, before the postcard from Vegas, read: "Hot as a camel's ass out here. Back in the business. Good times. What did I use to say about risk? I never liked math anyways. Take care. Jimmy."

Given the randomness of his correspondence with his father, Dominic couldn't say for sure where his father was living, but there was a revelation in that postcard, foreshadowed in his previous letter from Arizona. The post office continued to list Tucson as his official address, but Dominic knew his father was stealing cars again and living in Vegas. There was a kind of inevitability to it. And despite his transient life and questionable devotions, there was commitment in that postcard; he wouldn't leave Las Vegas until he could figure how to steal a classic car from a platform above slots in a 24-hour casino.

When the plane left the gate, Dominic had an open seat beside him and the ride in the air was smooth. He ordered a couple of drinks, balanced his time between a book about the San Francisco quake in '09 and naps. The view changed from flat to mountainous to red to night, and finally, to the light of Las Vegas and the Strip. Dominic was impressed with the spectacle of the city, but he was also intimidated by the vastness of lights, extending away from the Strip to other hotels, restaurants, clubs, wedding chapels...off the strip to the illumination of homes, windows into family dinners and preparations for Thanksgiving. People live here, Dominic thought. His father lived here, and it was going to be impossible to find him.

After securing his bags, he hired a taxi for a ride to the Super 8 next to the Ellis Island Casino. He hadn't seen his father in over five years, but the last postcard had carried more than a greeting; it was an invitation. There had been a comfortable stagnation in their relationship to that point, no obligation except to alert the other once in a while that he was alive, but the postcard Dominic received had disrupted it with downhill momentum. His father was stealing cars again, and because they had worked best together, he was goading Dominic to join him.

Dominic arrived at the Super 8 and was admitted at the door by buzzer. His room was not superficially dirty, but in places like this they can never conceal the separate scents of thousands of people before him. It felt like 10 o'clock but it was only 7. And it was his first night in Vegas. He at least had to have peace of mind in asking around about Jimmy Rossi next door in the Ellis Island Casino.

He had expected the Ellis Island casino to be desolate, but it was buzzing; he could hardly walk in a straight line past the blackjack tables and to the bar, and the low

ceilings only made the room smokier and smaller. He saw signs for turkey dinner specials at \$12.99, including pumpkin pie, offered all night. It reminded him of Atlantic City, the ringing of the slots and the expectancy on people's faces, a holler here and there, the cloud of smoke. At a bar in the rear of the casino, a hefty woman sang karaoke, "I Will Survive," but the place was too crowded and intent on karaoke. He walked out to the Main Bar and ordered a dollar draft, ordered another as he waited for a seat to open up. When the bartender returned with his beer, he held her attention for long enough to ask: "Do you know a Jimmy Rossi around here?"

"What does he do?"

"I'm not sure. I just thought he might be a regular customer."

"Not regular enough for me to know him."

He a beer from the other bartender the next time, but she didn't recognize the name either. On his way to the bathroom, he asked a dealer without any customers if he knew a regular named Jimmy Rossi. He even asked a group of guys behind the blackjack tables in suits if they knew him. He asked whenever he managed to strike up a conversation at the bar. But no one knew a Jimmy Rossi, and Dominic was surprised to discover his disappointment.

The combination of beer, displacement, and disappointment prompted Dominic to aim for the alternative: whiskey, excitement, and inclusion. It wasn't going to happen around people twice his age and size, and half his lung capacity, so he decided to finish his beer and walk up to the Strip. On the walk West toward illuminated pillars that he later saw was Caesar's and Bally's casinos, he expected heavy foot traffic on the walkways and inside the casino but when he reached the Strip, there were only a few

briskly walking groups and cars zipping through the intersection. He walked into Caesar's, an elaborate structure aimed to entertain masses but now empty. The reaction to him was uniform: bartenders, dealers, and vendors stared at him, disgusted at their presence, blaming him.

Caesar's emptiness only exacerbated his restlessness. He didn't gamble and the football games were over, so there was only one outlet available to him, booze – he had changed to whiskey – but he would get sick or arrested on a night like this without any limits, so he decided to exercise other option and asked a casino employee out hailing taxis if he knew a good strip club. Without hesitation, the man called a taxi over and reached in his jacket in the same motion, handed him a card for the gentleman's club, "Illusions." Dominic tipped him and repeated the name to the cabbie. It was all he needed; he drove off the Strip and across the highway. Always be skeptical of roads adjacent to highways, Dominic thought, seeing small industrial parks along the route, U-Hall moving and storage, an auto parts, generic warehouses. They passed a few other strip clubs – their blinking neon begging to be noticed – but the parking lots were nearly empty. Dominic hated to avoid situations because of potential for trouble, but he was starting to wonder if this was a bad idea. You had to be in the mood for trouble for a night like this.

The neon sign above Illusions was high enough that it projected its light outward and hardly even illuminated the door to the club. A host, a large man with a bald head dressed in black, opened the car door. Dominic paid the taxi driver and walked inside, handed them the coupon from the employee at Bellagio. He still ended up paying twenty bucks, but what was he going to do, walk away and say no thanks? The thought



reasonable as he walked into the club and counted only eight people: three men together, another two, a single man in a business suit, and a man and woman together. The woman on stage glanced at him with indifference just as her song ended.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” a DJ announced. Dominic took a seat and a waitress in stockings and a low cut top came over to him and asked him for his drink order. The waitresses were always hotter than the strippers, but she heard the complement all night.

The whiskey on the rocks cost him sixteen dollars. The woman on stage climbed the pole and spread her legs over her head before the lyrics in the song started, in what was an impressive maneuver but spoiled so early in a routine. Dominic had experience in strip clubs but also trusted basic instincts that distinguished a performer from a poser. Shouldn't there be some type of narrative, he thought. It was like watching a spinning top.

“Wanna dance,” he heard beside him, and looked up to see the woman who had been on stage when he came in. She held her chin up and stared down at him past her nose.

“No thank you,” Dominic said.

“C'mon,” she said, rubbing his chest. The move was artificial and deliberate. Someone, a mentor maybe, had told her about rebuttals and rubbing a man's chest.

“No, really,” Dominic said. “I want to get settled first.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, almost thankful, it seemed, for the second rebuttal.

What was sexy, Dominic thought, staring at the waning routine of the spinner – she was getting tired now – was not aggression or projection, but reticence. The girls in his South Philly neighborhood, had they once been hesitant or shy, learned their lesson

quickly and kept their insults and open-handed slaps at the ready. Laura Shelley was an obvious antidote. But her sincerity proved to be both appealing and heart wrenching. Since their breakup, Dominic longed for Laura's innocence, but he also considered himself responsible for taking it away. Maybe what he'd done to Laura was dirtier than anything performed in a strip club; he was attracted because she could be spoiled.

His ideas about Laura disturbed him, so he took a larger swig from his whiskey, but his throat was already numb and he was drunk. The woman on stage collected dollar bills, three of them, along with her gear, and walked off the stage sucking air with her hands on her head. The DJ announced the next dancer, Margaret, and Dominic moved up to the stage. But he was not sure he could tolerate another dancer like the two before her. The goal of the stripper should be intimacy, Dominic thought, as the next woman strolled onto the stage, her eyes searching the room and landing on him, as she slowly circled the pole. Dominic was embarrassed at her attention to him, but the three guys across from him were drunk and punching each other in the arm; the couple were engaged in each other; and the light concealed the looks of the other people behind him or beyond the edge of the stage in darkness. Her eyes were golden. He decided she had contacts. But her intensity only grew, as if she were trying to communicate something explicit, like a concealed hostage might to a would-be rescuer. He allowed his eyes to slide away from hers. He had expected bone thin with fake breasts, but he saw she was natural with meat on the hips and a natural C cup. She performed slow but quickened time. He held a five-dollar bill at the end of her dance, which she looked at but ignored, picking up two dollar bills from the men across from him. As she walked off the stage, she was forced to turn left, and when she did, he saw two flashes of gold.

The next woman came on stage only to disappoint. Her enormous breasts seemed to be sloped upward in defiance of gravity, and the rest of her was a product of the gym: abs, tight legs, no ass. Dominic decided to test her gaze, but she stared through him, offered her corset for a tip request. The only thing that kept him from leaving was the tinge of curiosity associated with the previous stripper, but he might be waiting over an hour just to see her again.

The waitress approached him. "Would you like another?" she asked.

"No. Thank you," Dominic said. He was drunk enough that he had already become fixated on a stripper, was falling in love for fifteen minutes and vulnerable to going broke. One of his pet peeves in life were guys who thought strippers were interested in them.

The waitress walked away and Dominic liked that she didn't have to follow with a rebuttal. He was sipping against the ice of his drink when he saw golden hair and the glittering bikini walk out of the dressing room and around the opposite edge of the stage. She ignored one of the patrons who called out to her when she passed and walked around the bar toward Dominic. She dodged his chair and skirted past, showing her ass as if about to sit on his lap, then reached down his forearm to his hand and guided him away. He followed because he would have done anything she wanted, as drunk as he was, because he was alone in Las Vegas. When they reached the door to a back room, the bouncer demanded twenty dollars, and Dominic pulled his hand away – regardless of how hot she was, he wasn't going to be taken advantage of...he could go down to Ellis Island and fuck some fat lady singing karaoke if he was that hard up – but in a single motion, she reached up and set a bill in the bouncer's hand and pulled Dominic closer to

her. She led him, leaving him a view of the curve of her back, the darkened skin at the top of her neck, and the seesaw motion of her ass. There was something in her grip too, a searching, a slight caress that was of course contrived but he couldn't help but be touched. He would blame it on the whiskey.

They passed a series of cubicle-like settings with padded benches, almost like exam tables, Dominic thought, then erased the thought. She walked him into a private room with padded benches and mirrors all around. "I'm sorry," she said. "I needed a break."

"It's okay," Dominic said. "I did too."

Dominic examined her eyes again. She smiled – he wasn't sure if it was prompted in any way by him – and he noticed a chipped tooth on her top row. It was at the edge of her smile and immediately made it authentic. She offered him a cigarette and he accepted because he was drunk and in Las Vegas and in the back room for free with a stripper named Margaret.

"Those aren't real," Dominic said.

She looked down at her chest, and Dominic corrected by pointing to her eyes.

"They are," she said.

"I've never seen that color before."

"My father was a leprechaun."

"And your real name is Margaret?"

"No, actually. It's Venus."

"That's funny."

“It’s true, I wanted it to be funny. You wouldn’t believe what a lack of sense of humor there is around here.”

“I can imagine. Margaret.”

“Please,” she said. “Call me Venus.”

“You don’t have to dance for me,” he said.

“You don’t want me to dance for you?”

“I want you to dance for me,” Dominic said. “But not because you have to. And I know if you do it, it’s because you have to.”

“We don’t have to do it here,” she said.

“Take as much time as you need,” Dominic said, wondering what other rooms the place offered, sure since the recognition was taking hold, that he was being taken advantage of. But he liked watching her.

“So how long are you in town?” she asked.

“Till Monday.”

“When did you get in?”

“Today.”

“Thanksgiving?”

“Long story.”

“You don’t have to explain to me,” she said. “It’s my first night. They figured a dead night like this would be like practice.”

“How’s it going?”

“Terrible.”

“Well,” Dominic said, trying to come up with a solution. Laura had always said that women were content complaining but men always felt the pressure to act and solve, or something like that.

“Where you from?” she asked.

“Philadelphia.”

“Never been there.”

“What about you?”

“Everywhere and nowhere,” she said.

“Like where.”

“I was born in Spokane, but I’ve been in a lot of places since, Cheyenne, Denver, Flagstaff. My father was with the railroads, which for some reason made us move around. I always said, you’d think the trains would come to us.”

Venus sat with her legs crossed, looking away from Dominic as she inhaled her cigarette. But with the room mirrored on four walls, they could not escape each other’s stare. He found her gaze in spots all across the room, a constellation of the same pair of stars. When her leg started to jump, he wanted to break the silence but was feeling tired and unequipped; he didn’t have his best stuff tonight.

“My Dad died on the job when I was about nine,” she said, “then my Mom wasn’t as interested, so I ended up with my aunt and uncle in Salt Lake City of all places. That didn’t last long. I started running away, felt like a grownup at fourteen, moved back in with my mother and her new husband in Sacramento. Can’t tell you how much fun that was.”

He was curious of her and of all strippers, but of course couldn't ask the question: how did you end up here, nearly naked, prepared for anonymous intimacy with me.

"Then what happened?" Dominic asked.

"When?" Venus asked.

"After Sacramento? Where did you go to high school?"

"I didn't really."

"How old are you?"

"You have to be twenty-one to work in a place that serves alcohol," she said.

"You should check out Philadelphia if you ever get the chance," he said, sitting up straight, trying to get it together. "There are some hokey touristy things but Independence Hall is still pretty neat."

Neat, he'd said neat.

"Independence Hall, is that like a club or something?"

"No, it's an old building, where they signed the Declaration of Independence."

"Oh," she said. "I know nothing about history. Ask me anything about history, I guarantee I don't know the answer."

"Who was the country's first president?"

"George Washington?"

"Okay."

"Am I right?"

"Yeah."

She clapped her hands and celebrated. There was a knock on the door shortly afterward. Dominic wondered whether the mirrors were two-way glass.

“Another minute,” she said. “You want a dance or what?”

“Not here, I don’t.”

“C’mon,” she said, leaning over to breathe in his hear, “twenty bucks.”

“I’ll give you twenty bucks not to,” he said.

“You’re not attracted?” she said. She looked straight at him, as if pitching her greatest strengths – her golden irises – and smiled to the extent of her crooked tooth.

“Just a little bit,” he said.

“I need practice.”

He felt like he was being watched behind the mirrors, with the added complication of watching himself in the mirror talk to a stripper. Venus sat with her left leg crossed over her right, showing her the top of her ass. He would hardly have to rearrange her position, just take off the glittering inch of fabric and slide right in. Leaning forward, he concealed his excitement. It all came at once to his midsection, when he was able to focus on Venus for a moment over all other distractions. Now he would have liked the dance, right now, he thought. But he had been to enough strip clubs to know that you just end up paying for a halfway lay. He could offer her practice but not in lap dances.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Don’t ask,” she said. “Somewhere with not enough deadbolts.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I need money.”



“Not this bad you don’t.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Let’s just go.”

She stared long enough for him to forget what he was asking. “Okay.”

He was right to ask. With her refusal, he could have gotten away from her, out of a lap dance, and with acceptance, she would be his for free. He was surprised by her willingness to leave but reasoned it was a larger pattern for her. A runaway who lived in fifteen different cities was not likely to have job integrity. Though Dominic had nothing to lose, and was certainly not the best influence on her, he felt liberated by her willingness to leave.

“What are we going to do, just walk out of here?” he asked.

“There’s another exit,” she said. “Grab a cab, and I’ll meet you on the side.”

She walked ahead of him and into a private area without acknowledgement, and as soon as he was on his own, away from her eyes, smile, and thighs – walking past strippers, patrons, and finally the bouncer – he decided she wasn’t coming. There were other reasons as well to leave without waiting: Illusions parking lot wasn’t the safest place to wait around, he had already given her the cold shoulder, his pride would remain intact. But instead he set a limit of five minutes and told the cabbie to wait in a parking spot where he could see the side entrance.

In staid, daily moments since his breakup, Dominic’s mind magnetically diverted to Laura, and while sitting in the cab, he could feel the hollowness in his stomach. He had stretched five minutes to seven and a half and was ready to tell the cabbie to start up the cab and take him to the Super 8 when he saw the side door open, and Venus emerged,

running over to him on heels. The big man who'd been at the door peaked his head out and yelled something, and Venus flipped him the finger.

"Sorry," she said, sitting next to him in jeans and a tee shirt. "Where are we going anyway?"

"Let's grab a few drinks."

"I don't really like clubs."

"No," he said. He wasn't going to pay fifty bucks for the both of them, especially now that he'd already won her over. "Let's get a few drinks first." He told the cabbie to drive them to the Ellis Island casino.

"Oh, c'mon," she said.

"It's next to my motel."

"Fair enough," she said. "As long as it's not the Mountain Highlands trailer park."

Dominic thought she had been applying makeup but when he looked closer he saw she was wiping tears. He reached a hand across and caressed her knee.

"Home sweet home," she said, at the Ellis Island beside the Super 8. "Okay if I stay with you tonight?" she asked.

He nodded. For the first time that night, there was vulnerability and, perhaps – it had only just occurred to him – youth in her voice.

"How old are you, Venus?" he asked.

"My ID says twenty two."

"And how far off is that?"

“I’m nineteen,” she said. “But I already got fired from the eighteen and older strip clubs where they don’t serve alcohol. Aside from them, you can’t really do anything in this town unless you’re twenty one.”

“I thought you said it was your first night.”

“In that place.”

“What did you get fired for in the other places?”

“Basically for telling people to fuck off.”

Venus leaned into him on the ride, and they were mostly quiet. The silence, the darkness away from the Strip, allowed him contemplation, and gradually a sympathy and realism took hold of his interest in Venus. He was taking advantage of her, instead of the reverse. But she was with him temporarily, as she was with all things in her life.

The Ellis Island Casino still housed a handful of people gambling and sitting at the bar. Dominic and Venus sat down and the bartender, Dominic noticed – a woman other from the one he had spoken to earlier – took a second look at Venus and asked them both for IDs. She looked closely at Venus, and Dominic wondered what he would do if she was refused, but the bartender handed it back and took another look at Dominic’s. She looked twice, probably because it was out of state. She glanced a third time, looked up at Dominic. He was two or three years beyond the age when there was a still a concern about his being over 21.

“Dominic Rossi,” she said. “From Philadelphia.”

“That’s right.”

“Oh my God,” she said, holding her hand over her mouth, in recognition.

“You’re Jimmy’s son.”

“You know Jimmy Rossi?”

“Do I know him?” she repeated. “I’m married to him.”

“Jimmy Rossi. From South Philly.”

She nodded.

“I’m Dominic.”

“I know,” she said, laughing and pointing at his ID. “He talks about you.”

She extended her hand and introduced herself, Francesca. He started to focus on the curve of her lips but stopped himself. “I guess I’m your stepmother,” she said.

“Who the hell is Jimmy Rossi?” Venus asked, like a student who blurts out in class without raising her hand.

Dominic asked Francesca how his father was doing but she affectionately deflected: you’ll get a chance to ask him yourself, she said. She got off at 4:00 – she was filling in this weekend for double time – and insisting on driving Dominic and Venus over to her and Jimmy’s house after that. Francesca reached across and held Dominic’s face delicately at the chin, and he blushed. When she walked away, Venus rubbed her hand on Dominic’s knee and stared up at him. He could see it in her eyes: whether it was for that moment alone or for an hour, certainly no longer than a day, she was falling for him.

“Are you guys hungry?” Francesca asked. “I’m bringing home Jimmy a Thanksgiving dinner from the restaurant, and they said there’s extras.”

“Are they hot?” Venus asked.

Francesca nodded.

“Got to have a hot meal on Thanksgiving,” Venus said.

Dominic didn't want to argue with anyone even though it was four hours past Thanksgiving. Fifteen minutes later, Francesca came out with two steaming plates of food – no doubt the work of a microwave – and set them in front of Dominic and Venus. There was more than enough of it. Eating passed the time; none of them spoke to each other as Venus and he were intent on eating and Francesca closed out her bar and register. Dominic kind of liked it that way, because everything would have been preliminary. He just wanted to see his father. But he didn't want Venus to leave, so he extended the invitation for her to join him and she said sure, I'd like that, staring into his eyes as if they were the ones that were gold. She would do anything he asked.

Francesca drove Dominic, in the front seat, and Venus, dozing off in the back, away from the Strip and past strip malls until she pulled onto a street nestled between a Circuit and a Target. After a few quick turns, she pulled into a driveway. The house was a small, one-story, the address concealed from the road by trees in the front yard.

“Is he home?” Dominic asked.

“He's home,” Francesca said.

The lights were off inside.

“Is he asleep?”

“If he's not, I want to know what he's doing.”

Though he had corresponded with his father at least once a year for the past ten years – even though the last, almost a year ago, had only included the image of a golden '68 Camaro and no words at all – he hadn't seen his father in five years. There must have been a reason for this, Dominic rationalized, and his presence at the house was betraying a universal pattern. Francesca and Venus waited with anticipation: all women want

fathers and sons to get along but love it when boyfriends fight over them. Francesca held her hand out to him and Venus slid her arm inside his.

Inside, Francesca had obviously taken the full responsibility of decoration, with white matching curtains and a leather couch and chair, a big screen television, a fireplace, and beyond in the next room, there was a nice dining room table and chairs – the kind with the plastic over the cushions – and a cabinet with liquor inside and pictures in frames on top. Dominic, with Venus still attached to his arm, walked closer and stared at the pictures, relieved, he discovered, at each picture of Francesca that did not include Jimmy. But on the end was the biggest picture, of Jimmy Rossi, almost unrecognizable in a suit, beside Francesca – she really was a pretty woman – in her wedding dress, dwarfing the chapel behind them in the background. Dominic imagined them ducking to get inside the chapel, as if they were getting married in a playhouse, a hypothetical wedding, Dominic thought – still drunk, or hung over, he couldn't tell. Francesca's words in the back room were careful in attempts to wake someone, initiating a voice that rolled deeply from sleep. His father's.

“He'll be right out,” Francesca said. “Can I get you anything?”

“No thanks,” he said. He should have been uncomfortable with Venus beside him, but he appreciated her attention to him. There was something he didn't want to let go of, held harder, in fact, her hand growing sweaty like his.

The door to the bedroom opened and he heard his father clearing his throat violently – prompting Francesca and Venus to laugh – and the clang of a belt he was probably trying to secure. Jimmy emerged in a tee shirt and jeans, sleep still in his eyes, squinting slightly toward all of them. Though Dominic had seen his father since their

years living together in South Philly, before Jimmy went to jail, that impression – from ten years ago – was still prominent in his mind. He had seen him on occasion afterward but the change was never significant enough to note. Now, his hair was gray at the edges and there were hard wrinkles beside his eyes and on his forehead, as hard as ridges on desert mountains. The muscles still filled out the tee shirt, and his forearms were strident with muscle, though darkened as if to a burn. “Lucky,” he said, without looking at him directly. “You in trouble or what?”

“Just stopping in, I guess.”

“Not alone though,” Jimmy said, nodding toward his companion.

“This is Venus,” he said. He felt guilty that he wasn’t introducing Laura. “We just met. I’m in town for Dooley’s bachelor party but I’m a day early. Francesca saw my ID and...” Both women were beaming, watching them. Until then, he had forgotten it was anything special. His father had a way of diffusing any possibility of sentiment. “...she brought me here.”

When Francesca saw Dominic noticed her, she offered to give Venus a tour of the house. Venus accepted, the two of them walking arm in arm like they had known each other for years, or had conspired to bring him and his father together. But of course it was coincidence, again. He was lucky.

“So you were just hanging out in Ellis Island?”

“Don’t get me wrong – I was looking for you, you wily son of a bitch.”

“Well, you found me,” he said. “Sure you weren’t looking for anything else?”

Dominic was groggy and the question required him to be sharp.

“Loosen up, kid, when did you become a stiff?”

When you were in jail, he thought, but didn't say it, never would have said it. "I guess it was college," he said.

His father walked past and Dominic was ready for a hug or handshake but should have known better, watching his father's swagger, different now, maybe compromised by an aging back or knees. His father confirmed it in his grunt to pick up his shoes.

"Nice house," Dominic said.

"You *sure* you weren't looking for anything else?" he said. "You sure you weren't looking for gold?"

Tired, still on Eastern Standard Time, and already hung over, the first thought that came to mind was Venus, because she was the immediate image of gold, beginning with the two flashes he saw as she walked backstage. The second thought was historical, of San Francisco, of Darreth's stories of her ancestors striking gold in California and prompting the Westward migration. But when Dominic's mind landed on the third, he knew it was the right one.

"Did you nick it?" Dominic asked.

"No, I didn't nick it. But I've been looking into it," he said, grabbing his keys and a stack of bills in a money clip.

His father had had a plan since he walked out of the room and started putting on his shoes.

"I figure now's as good a time as any," Jimmy said.

"Now?" he asked. It was close to no, a cousin of I can't, but it wasn't a refusal. His father was waiting with his shoes on, keys in hand. "You're saying you need a hand?"



“I need more than that. You have no idea what kind of perfect timing this is.”

His father was already answering for him, opening the door, and yelling back to Francesca.

“Yes,” she said from the back bedroom.

“Me and Dominic are going out for a ride.”

“Of course you are,” she said. “Be careful.”

Dominic thought to check on Venus, but his father interrupted his concern. “Take care of the little lady while we’re gone.”

His father waved him along, and Dominic slid past into the garage. A 70’s Cadillac occupied most of the garage space, leaving only a few inches in front and behind.

“Does she know?” he asked. “Francesca?”

“Yeah, she knows,” he said. “Her brother makes the runs to L.A. for us.”

What if Laura knew, he thought. What if she knew he stole cars ten years ago.

Dominic waited for the garage door to lift, orbited the Cadillac, and settled into a cushy, front seat that was familiar to him. “Just like Uncle Louis’,” Dominic said.

“It is Uncle Louis’,” his father said. “You know he’s dead, right?”

“I was at the funeral,” Dominic said. His statement posed the question: where were you?

“I hate funerals.”

“Whad’ya steal it?”

“The son of a bitch never forgave me for him getting caught, but he knew I loved the car. I had a hell of a time getting it across the country. Nebraska is a terrible state.”

“I know,” Dominic said. “I remember.”

“Right,” his father said, out of recognition. You could have stopped, Dominic could have said right then – a perfect opportunity – but he had never been sure firm in his hostility. He had a vague sense of the world’s chaos more than bitterness toward his father. He couldn’t compare him to fathers who stuck up for their sons against bullying principals or faulty umpires. Dominic had only connected with his father when Jimmy considered him an adult, and he asked adult things of him, which didn’t include stopping when he got pulled over by the cops.

The garage door opened and Jimmy revved the engine, straining but surviving. His father brushed his shoulder as he put his arm back over the seat to back out, just like he used to onto Passayunk Avenue.

Dominic had expected the sun to be up – when they pulled in he could have sworn he saw the light of dawn to the East – but the light was coming from West, from the Strip, a haze hanging over the City. It must have been 5:00 a.m. – he had been up for 24 hours. His father accelerated onto Tropicana Avenue, but it took a moment for the engine to catch. Otherwise, the engine hummed like he remembered.

“Timing belt,” Dominic said.

“Been too busy lately,” he said. “Business is good.”

“The car business.”

“No – the fuckin’ horse business.”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Dominic said. “I figure you’d be spending some time in the sports books, on one end or the other...”

“That was the plan,” Jimmy said. “But other opportunities presented themselves.”

They made a right turn on Eastern, which ran beside the airport. When he arrived in Vegas, he expected to see a desert landscape, but in two car rides, he had yet to see one cactus. The road became illuminated in front of him, and Dominic wondered if it was the Caddy's high beams, until he saw a plane overhead – was it a hundred feet or a thousand – screaming past on liftoff.

“Yeah,” his father further explained, “I'd been legit for a while. I saved up a bankroll and planned on betting, but I got tired of throwing money down on those fucking cokeheads and steroid freaks. I asked around about jobs in the sports books but you have to know somebody out here.”

“How are the cops?”

“It's a beautiful thing,” he said. “They got bigger things to worry about. Cops don't get paid dick, have too much shit to worry about. They retrieve five percent of cars, and most of those are kids on joyrides or crackheads. They chalk it up as a loss as soon as it's filed.”

“So, are you using Francesca's garage?”

“*Our* garage,” his father said. “We split the mortgage.”

“So what do I call her, stepmom?”

“You call her Francesca. Don't make it complicated.”

As they drove South, Jimmy consulted the street signs. The houses were more sparsely set apart, individually distinct, compared to the track homes he'd seen earlier.

“What the hell kind of a name is Venus?” his father asked.

“I thought it was a stripper name.”

“Why did you think that?”

“Because I met her in a strip club.”

“She didn’t come out with you?”

“I just met her two hours ago.”

“Maybe you’re not as stiff as I thought.”

“I had another girl back home,” he said and then wanted to take the statement back. Laura Thompson, he would say if his father asked, not Laura Shelley, just in case he remembered the last name.

“Serious?” his father asked.

“Nah.”

“Good – you’re too young. What are you, twenty five?”

“Close,” he said, but not for a father. “Twenty seven.”

“You got a lot of time.”

“You were married when you were twenty-seven.”

“Exactly.”

“Mom’s doing good,” Dominic said.

His father looked over at him, puzzled. “Anyway,” he said, “I wasn’t finished explaining.... Insurance premiums are through the roof but nobody can do anything about it. People leave rentals just sitting everywhere with keys in them. People leave their cars running, hoping to get the insurance money, or they’ll contact me or a colleague and set something up for a nominal fee.”

“Colleagues, huh?” Dominic asked. His father had made a career choice.

“We’re number two in the country,” he said. “But we’ll be number one in a year or two.”

“And you’re not worried about getting caught anymore?”

“Shit no, less now than ever.”

“You’ll do some serious time.”

“If I’m caught,” he said. “You really have gone stiff.”

“How do you calculate risk now?”

“I’ve reduced it or whatever the fuck. Risk equals good times.”

His father spotted a road and drove for another mile into emptiness. Finally, dessert, Dominic thought, but it was mostly manicured lawns and trees concealing mansions. They drove along a high white wall for a time until Jimmy pulled it in beside a tree on the opposite side of the road.

“Are we really going to do this?” Dominic asked.

“I need you on this,” he said, surveying the wall across the street.

“The gold Camaro?” Dominic asked. “This rich guy was in the Ellis Island, playing slots?”

“No, Fuckhead. This rich guy bought the gold Camaro off the schmuck who won it. A hundred grand, or something like that. I’m going to get at least fifty for it.”

He got out of the car, opened the trunk, and pulled out a ladder. “You in or not?” he asked.

“Where the fuck are we?” he asked. “Whose house is it?”

“I was going to tell you later,” he said, “but since you’re playing Ted fucking Koppel.... It’s Timmy Sloan’s house.”

“The singer?”

“He’s on tour back East with his family. I know a guy who knows one of the guards – he was bragging about doing nothing and playing cards all night.”

“You’re sure about this?” Dominic asked.

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

“Fuck off,” he said. “I want to.”

They crossed the street with the ladder. “This is the back side of the property,” his father said. “Garage is on the other side but this is less noticeable. There might be some silly business but it’s the best way.”

“What kind of silly business?” Dominic asked.

He followed his father up the wall and pulled the ladder up. When Dominic extended the ladder on the other side, he heard a grunt, which nearly set him toppling off, and then a snort. Guard dogs, Dominic thought, but the sound was more robust. Horses, he decided, before looking up and seeing a field of animals. There were two giraffes twenty feet away staring indifferently, a handful of zebras like white and black striped hills, a few big-horned sheep, some flamingos, tucked into sleep position near a small pond, deer sitting and watching, two cows lying down; what looked to be a pile of sticks was a group of sleeping gazelles, an elephant as of yet undisturbed, and a rhinoceros, Dominic saw, below them. It was the rhino’s snort that startled him.

“A fucking rhino,” he said.

“His name’s Fred,” Jimmy said, walking along the wall, to separate himself from the animal. “I was reading an article about him. He’s friendly.”

“To who,” Dominic asked. “Timmy Sloan?”

Jimmy backed halfway down the ladder and stopped to examine the rhino, which already had lain down again and seemed to be snoring. He continued down to the bottom and started to step slowly in a direction that would have avoided a direct line with any animal. Jimmy's careful steps gradually galumphed with his heft, into the swagger Dominic recognized.

It was Dominic's responsibility to carry the ladder. Animals rustled as they passed but never were surprised or flustered. They had adapted to a lifestyle of sleep and three squares every day. Dominic and Jimmy stepped softly past the elephant. It was gaunt and maybe a little jaundiced, Dominic noted, but there wouldn't be a contest if he decided they were a threat. Dominic could allow his breath to be regular only when they were within reach of the opposite wall.

Jimmy examined the layout from the top of the wall – the massive house to the far Northwest of the property, the horse stables and barn behind it, a guest house, and the large, industrial looking building that was the garage. They walked down the ladder and set it behind a tractor.

Just like the day earlier when Dominic saw Caesar's and anticipated it being near, he expected to reach the garage quickly, but even with a hurried walk – his father's swagger in fast forward – it took them what seemed like ten minutes to get across the property to the massive garage, with small windows every fifteen feet. They walked the length of it, looking for the door, but as they did, they found the window beside the glistening gold 1968 Chevrolet Camaro.

They looked like two kids outside a toy store peeking through the tiny window. Dominic craved seeing the car in the full light – in the dessert sun – but he had only

floodlights to watch now, and what appeared to be light peaking in from the East, the sunrays peaking over the mountains and through the far window.

“Fifty grand,” his father said. “And I’d do it for nothing.”

They walked around to the entrance of the garage, Jimmy ready with his old picks and gadgets out of his back pocket. But when he peaked around the edge of the garage, an alarm sounded – like a siren – and red, white, and blue lights flashed around them. Censors, his father said, but didn’t interrupt his fiddling. What were you expecting, Dominic thought, starting to walk away, but Jimmy grabbed his arm. He was crazy: they would have to open the garage in less than a minute, hotwire the Camaro in even less time, and they hadn’t even figured out yet how to drive off the property. He and his father stared at the locks on the garage – all electronic and digital, nothing to even pick or jimmy – and now it was time for Dominic to urge him. C’mon, he said. Fucking A. His father threw his hands up in the air, and Dominic started running back to the ladder. His father peaked in at the Camaro one last time.

Dominic was about twenty feet ahead of his father in the open lawn when he heard the first shot fired. Covering his head, he ran to a nearby oak tree, then figured the shots were coming from close to the house, and ran toward the wall while keeping the tree between him and the house. His father figured the same; Dominic saw the age in his father when he ran in his path, the product of a delicate back and knees. He considered that the guards were trying to put a scare into them, until a shot hit the wall only five feet from his father.

They hid behind the tractor to catch their breath, set the ladder, and scuttled up. Maybe the guards were waiting for them to stay still in their scopes. Dominic felt a



moment of relief when he climbed the wall, until he realized he was once again in an enclosed habitat with animals capable of tearing him and his father apart. It might disturb the animals to run past but it was equally risky to slow down and leave a bull's eye on their backs. They zigzagged passed the gazelles, the clanking of the ladder and the heaving of their breaths startling the animals, and for some reason, prompting the gazelles to follow, like dolphins beside a ship. They heard another gun shot over the top of them and into the trees beyond the far wall. The guards didn't have an angle on them, though they might have when Dominic and Jimmy reached the top of the wall. But there would be another challenge before the escape, Dominic realized, when he saw Fred, the rhino, staring at him, his nostrils flaring.

They stopped, the gazelles scattered, and they faced the once docile and now angry rhinoceros named Fred. Dominic bumped into his father, urging him to his right, but as they did, the rhino moved along with them. A bullet whizzed overhead.

"Give me this," his father said, holding the ladder like a spear. As he slowly approached, the rhino backed into the wall and his nostrils settled. Before it could scutter aside, Jimmy slammed the top of the ladder into its forehead. The rhino blinked and cowered, and sauntered off.

Another bullet streamed overhead.

Jimmy set the ladder, climbed, and hesitated for a moment before straddling and going over the wall without prompting a shot. Dominic planned to use the same technique. He waited for the next shot to come before going over. But his action was forced by the rhino, which Dominic could see was about to make a charge. He moved as quickly as he could up the seven rungs – one misstep and he wouldn't reach – and just as

he was to the top, already falling on the other side, he heard the rhinos collision with the metal ladder and felt the wall shake and crack along cinderblocks. His feet hit the ground unevenly. He tried to roll but buried his shoulder into the ground.

A bullet passed, hitting the tree. A sense of relief came and went during Dominic's sprint to the car. Encouraged by his first collision with the wall, and perhaps only now aware of a world beyond it, the rhino struck the wall and half of his body emerged through the other side – he was birthed into the world – just as Jimmy started up the Cadillac and put the car in drive. The rhino pushed through, shook its head of the concrete and dust, then fixed on the Cadillac and probably the prominent scent of the two sweaty wops inside. The rhino started toward them, and though Jimmy's reaction was immediate, the tires spun in the rocks. When Jimmy found grip on the pavement, he maneuvered the Caddy and dodged a head-on collision; the car jolted with a graze of the rhino. The car's body may have been knocked off the frame but the car was running. The rhino chased but wouldn't catch them. Jimmy powerslid around a turn and floored it in a 35 mph zone, then bottomed out while roaring through a stop sign at 70. He drove out to a main road, blew a red light, and made another few turns, until they ended up on a highway, part of the Black Friday early morning highway traffic – among schmucks stuck going to work or already shopping for Christmas.

They had said little beyond an occasional grunt or curse through the escape; the bullets, rhinoceros, and squealing tires were too much circumstance for conversation. But as they slowed down in highway traffic, there was an obvious need for someone to speak. "Nobody saw the Caddy," Dominic said.

"Probably not," his father said, both hands still on the wheel.

“You don’t think they were actually aiming for us, do you?”

“Who knows, you pay a guy minimum wage and hand him a rifle...”

“That was a close one,” Dominic said a moment later, realizing he was just repeating himself and looking for recognition in his father.

“That might not have been a good idea,” his father said.

Dominic’s laugh came in a snuffle, which prompted his father to look over at him and see him grinning, and then breathe a laugh himself, accompanied by a punch across the seat into Dominic’s arm – his knuckles still like rocks – and Dominic’s short jab into his father’s meaty shoulder.

They coasted along in traffic until their exit, Tropicana Avenue, driving East into the sun, now prominent and unabated. Dominic squinted as they coasted past the Strip and the airport. As they neared the turn into his father’s development, Dominic felt unsatisfied, not in a failure to nick the cherry – he had been hesitant about the activity from the beginning – but in the realization that he was going to have regrets about his time with his father. Before coming to Vegas, Dominic had been preoccupied with finding his father and didn’t anticipate what they would talk about. They never had a momentous, father-son conversation, at least not without a partition, rarely mentioned Dominic’s mother or any other relatives, never talked about jobs or life plans, beyond the immediate issue of the day. Do you want a pizza with onions and peppers or pepperoni? Is Randall Cunningham the real deal at quarterback for the Eagles or what? Can you believe these fucking chinks taking over the Italian Market? Dominic never complained; he may have had things to talk about when he was 16, but instead his father showed him a central truth: every man for himself.

Despite this recognition, the issue of Laura Shelley became urgent in Dominic's mind. She and him were apart for the time being but Dominic had been aggressively seeking forgiveness. He would have liked to talk to his father about her and Dr. Shelley, if Jimmy were that type of father. But of course, he wasn't. He was the type of father to leave his kid to be corralled by the cops after stealing a car, take him out ten years later and nearly get him shot. Maybe, Dominic thought, it was time to allow the relationship to drift, the concept consistent with the soft, steady ride of the Cadillac with a shifted body; they were riding a current home on soft seas in a yacht. They coasted through three green lights in a row and into the residential development. Jimmy pulled the Caddy into the garage, and released a breath bigger than Dominic expected from him.

It had never been his place to advise his father, but he was an adult too now.

"Maybe it's time to start being a little more careful."

"That's college boy talking, not me."

"I'm not saying to stop nicking," Dominic said. "But that was sloppy today."

"Maybe," his father said, surprising him. "But you're still a pussy."

Jimmy walked down the short drive to pick up the newspaper. Before he bent over, he stretched his back, pivoted with his hips, holding his lower back, and stared up at the mountains beyond. Dominic approached his father, startling him. In his ten steps down the driveway, he had thought this would be a moment to open up, but when he looked at his father, another set of words came out.

"I guess I'm outta here." Laura Shelley wasn't someone he could mention in passing. "Good luck with everything."

"You too," his father said, and was about to offer another kernel of advice,

probably hollow but a gesture nonetheless, when the garage across the street from them opened and a man in black Volkswagen reversed into the street. They both utilized the opportunity to stall whatever was coming next. There was also suspense in the lifting of the garage door to reveal the Volkswagen sedan and its reverse lights, emerging out of the shadow. Beside it Dominic could see the rear end of another car, all metal and chrome.

“Is that a Fifty-eight Fairlane?” Dominic asked.

“Fifty nine.”

Dominic shot his father a look of confusion, held his hands up.

“He’s only had it three weeks. He’s a really nice guy.”

“Now who’s getting soft?”

“He’s some type of reverend.”

“Good, he’ll forgive easily.”

Jimmy looked at his watch and then over his shoulder, taking the garage door opener and shutting it. “You got somewhere to be?” he asked.

“In about three days.”

There was nothing surreptitious about their walk across the street. They glanced up and down the street and also around the neighbor’s house. Dominic climbed the back gate and picked the lock on the glass, sliding doors with his driver’s license – he still had it, these skills that had gone unappreciated in his adult life. He greeted his father at the gate, welcomed him as if into his home.

The body of the Fairlane was pristine, shining even under a dim garage light. Jimmy looked under the hood and whistled as Dominic got it started from underneath the

steering column. Surprised at his son's quick work, his father skipped to the driver's side, but Dominic was firm in place. He set his arm on the seat as he backed out and yielded to a car passing without notice. His father nodded to him, indicating there was something worth seeing behind him. He saw Francesca and Venus peering out the window, Francesca shaking her head proudly, Venus smiling wide, the golden irises and cracked tooth hardly visible but prominent on his mind.

"You better not keep that girl waiting too long," his father said, but was interrupted by Dominic's punch on the accelerator and the car's lift in the front, squealing the tires around the turn. "Here we go," his father said.

He took it slow once he was on Tropicana Avenue, listening to his father's directions. Though he discovered later that he was bound to get caught nicking the '71 Mach One – the police were watching the car and expecting him – he had equated his acceleration in the car with recklessness. Even though the association was mostly negated in his mind later, it had still taken a place in his mind besides lessons learned and the value of restraint, next to the use of condoms and dangers of drinking and driving. In theory, he wished he could have been perfect, but today was different.

At first, Dominic was content driving in silence, sustained by the Fairlane's hum. He eventually started plotting conversation, but his father was the one to speak first.

"How's teaching?" his father asked, out of nowhere so that Dominic had to pluck it out of the air before responding. He figured the drive for a long one.

"Good. Pays the bills. It's union, you know."

His father nodded, though seeming uninterested.

"Summer's off too."

“No serious prospects yet, huh?”

He wasn't sure whether his father was talking about life or relationships but knew his answer for both, especially this weekend, was the same: “Nope.”

“How about that girl you said something about before, she a teacher too? Every teacher I ever had was married to another teacher.”

“No, actually, she's a scientist.”

“Really?”

“Kind of, she works with monkeys and shit.”

“No wonder why she liked you.”

“There's something about her, Dad,” he said, trying the word with his tongue on the top of his mouth.

His father was silent for a long stretch of road between lights. “Turn right here,” he said. “Good for you,” he said, misunderstanding Dominic's last statement for sentimentality.

They were heading away from town again, on a single lane road through the desert. No cacti, just little bushes sprinkling the area beside the road and blanketing the mountains beyond.

“Her name is Laura Shelley.”

“Okay,” his father responded. Dominic watched him as the name rattled around.

“And...”

“And her father is Dr. Shelley.”

“Okay.” After a moment of vague recognition, the name registered with a dismissive grimace. “Not your Mom's Dr. Shelley?” he asked.

Dominic nodded, even though he didn't like thinking of Dr. Shelley in the possessive related to his mother.

"Jesus Christ," he said, and then, "wait a minute."

"I know, it's totally fucked up."

"Didn't you steal her *car*?"

"I know."

"To get out to Denver."

"Right."

"What the fuck?"

"I guess it's a long story," Dominic said.

"You fucking said it."

"Where's my next turn," Dominic said, seeing only one traffic light off in the distance.

"There are no more turns," he said. "Stay on this for another eighty miles or so."

They drove beyond the last industrial buildings with railways cutting through, the last gas station – the reverend had left them a full tank – and took on the desert mountains with the 59's straight eight cylinder, between ridges of rock cut. Dominic talked about Laura, about his first reaction to her when he saw her getting out of the Toyota Camry with that douche bag boyfriend of hers, and how her image had lingered in his mind from Philadelphia to Denver. He had avoided the discussion of his escape before but was relieved to be able to talk about it openly – he wasn't asking for an apology. He described the cross-country trip and was surprised at how much he remembered, wearing that spandex, watching the gas gauge slowly creep down to E, knowing he was going to



have to steal gas and food along the way. Dominic became so immersed in the memory that he forgot his father had a story as well, except he'd had money to stay in hotels and get a hooker in Chicago. He reminisced with his father about the feeling he had in Denver before being caught, of looking up at those mountains and wanting to take a run through them. His father admitted that he missed that sorry son of a bitch brother of his.

Dominic liked that he was the one driving, steering more than the cumbersome Caddy. Because the topic was in front of them in an open desert, Dominic asked about Dr. Shelley and what his father remembered. Of course, Dominic remembered everything: his mother's mashed potatoes, his father's silence and subsequent inquisition, the screaming, his mother in her jacket, the rattling of the chain on the punching bag downstairs. And so there might not have been revelation in his father's explanations but the subject was out there in the open between them. Then at once, Jimmy was finished, brushing his hands of the topic, and Dominic knew he'd reached his limit, even in their one and only father-son moment. Aware of lost momentum, Dominic tried to structure the discussion when they were out beyond the mountains into nothingness, flatness, and power lines, but the conversation eventually reached its bookend as they approached their destination. Wherever the hell that was. All there was out there was dirt, dust, and sun.

"Turn left here," his father said. "You can drive as fast as you want from now on."

"No cops out here I guess."

"No white cops out here," his father said, then pointed to a sign: "It's an Indian reservation. Not even the states have jurisdiction out here."

Fucking brilliant, Dominic thought, though it was another case of taking advantage of Indians, basing a chop shop on a reservation. But as he pulled into a desolate garage with two defunct gas pumps in front, there was no chopping. A massive Indian man in jeans and a cotton flannel emerged to greet them.

“We were wondering if you were working today,” he said to Jimmy.

“Had a little trouble this morning,” Jimmy said, dwarfed by the man in front of him. The man looked to Dominic and he introduced himself. “Whaddaya think?” Jimmy asked.

“Fifty-nine Ford Fairlane,” the Indian said. He rattled off numbers and measurements of the engine, transmission, and wheelbase, down to the radiator, steering column, door handles. He opened the hood and continued as if for a second chapter. Two men, Dominic noted, sat beside the garage, watching, bored with the old Indian’s assessment. They had seen it enough times.

“How’s ten?” the Indian asked.

Dominic expected his father to haggle, even though ten was a good price, considering all the middlemen involved.

“Ten’s good,” Jimmy said.

The old man whistled to the two boys behind him. “Ten,” he said, then looked again under the hood. Jimmy walked over to the boy to get paid. Only then did Dominic see a gun in a holster at the boy’s side.

“Don’t worry, son,” the Indian proclaimed.

Dominic nodded, attempting to be coolly accepting. The man fiddled with distributor and spoke into the mini-cavern of the Fairlane’s engine under the hood.

“You like cars?” the Indian asked, analyzing Dominic’s face with the same look he’d had investigating the fuel line. The ridges in his cheeks and forehead registered as similar to the dry, ridged mountains they’d passed; like a chameleon he was camouflaged in his surroundings.

“I do,” Dominic said.

“Americans love cars.”

Dominic nodded, wondering how long his father would be.

“What would Americans do without cars?”

The question was rhetorical enough but Dominic could see in the Indian’s stare that he was waiting for Dominic to answer. This was the first Native American he had ever met, and frankly the man was being vague.

Dominic attempted to blink himself awake. “Ride horses.”

The Indian looked beyond the car, to the plains beyond. “A horse is a horse. You can’t change a horse, you can only improve upon it, and the automobile...this was your greatest gift, your greatest prize.” The man pointed to the sky as he spoke the last sentence.

Dominic looked upward before realizing the gesture was meant to make a point.

“He will not think of his car as so reliable when his most prized possession,” he said, indicating to the Fairlane, “is taken away from him,” the Indian said, challenging Dominic now.

“He preaching to you?” he heard from his father, emerging from the door.

Dominic took the opportunity to step back as the Indian turned. Once the Indian found him again with his eyes – cloudy from cataracts or perhaps transparent to craziness

– he smiled, as if to say, you wily bugger. Dominic didn't like to walk away from anyone who challenged him, but there were firearms present and sometimes you just knew about a person his ability to harm others. Whereas Dominic thought of physical conflict almost as recreation, the big Indian would have conducted a war, lent it significance. Dominic attempted to get back into the car, until his father corrected him.

“Don't we have to deliver it?” Dominic asked.

“They got runners for that,” his father said, as one of the Indians started the car and pulled it into the garage. “They take the back roads to L.A. Francesca's brother will take care of it when the sorry son of a bitch wakes up and gets his ass out here.”

“We need another runner, Jimmy,” the Indian said.

“I know,” Jimmy said, then looked to Dominic. “He says he's going straight with the new year. Might be a position open if the big Indian is up for it.”

Dominic was concerned about his father calling the big Indian a big Indian, but he saw the man was comfortable with his father. “Your boy,” the Indian said. “What about him?”

“He's got a life somewhere else,” his father said.

“Too bad,” the Indian said, addressing Dominic again, then waving his hand.

One of the boys gave Jimmy and Dominic a ride into town on the reservation – a gas pump, a bar, and general store – and Jimmy recognized someone with a pickup who agreed to take them back to Vegas. Jimmy and the man were chummy, but on the highway they were all silent, sitting three across. Dominic thought of dozing off, but was never one able to sleep in cars. He never felt safe with someone else at the wheel, even in the middle of a desert with no one else on the road. The late morning sun made the

right side of his face warm and swollen. The man knew the way to Jimmy's house without asking for directions, and when he dropped them off, Jimmy peeled off two hundred dollar bills for him. Jimmy opened the garage and inspected the Cadillac, then hesitated, and pulled out a stack of bills and handed it to Dominic. "Forty-nine hundred each."

"That's okay," Dominic said.

"What's okay?" his father asked. "I owe you." He shoved it into Dominic's chest until he accepted it.

"You owe me more than that," Dominic said, about to clarify: his father used to give him only a quarter or so of the profits when he was 16, when it should have been half all along. But before Dominic could elaborate, sincerity wrinkled his father's eyebrows. By accident, Dominic had reached him.

"I'm sorry about Glenside," his father said and walked inside.

It was a simple but definite apology. The specifics were implied: he was sorry for leaving Dominic to run off into the field away from the cops, break into another house, dress like a douche bag, ride five miles to the park, steal another car, and drive to Denver in spandex. Or perhaps Glenside was symbolic for a wider arc of parent responsibility. Content with it, Dominic followed inside.

Several steps behind his father, Dominic walked in to see his father embrace Francesca. They rocked in place, the embrace not quite contained, and Dominic saw both friend and lover in Francesca's face as she stared at Jimmy, the assurance in the hold and the attraction in staring while she rubbed her hands through his hair. For some women, Dominic thought – those most unlike Laura – risk was a part of the attraction, with

immediate reward each time the man returned without harm or arrest. No wonder why the old man couldn't give up stealing cars, Dominic thought. The observation of them made him jealous, and Venus' absence struck him as inevitable.

"She's in the guest room," Francesca said. "Third door to the right."

Realizing Venus was there was an incredible boon, as if he'd re-discovered her; he was the unreliable protagonist who reaped the reward despite himself. He walked into the room intent and desperate, but reminded himself to be delicate, sitting down beside her and petting her golden hair. Golden roots. He saw a smile nudge at the edge of her lips, her opening eyelids like eastern mountains lifted in the morning.

"Hey," she said. "I waited for you."

"Good," he said. "You want to get out of here?"

"You're a bad boy."

Like Francesca and unlike Laura, Venus was turned on by risk. If Dominic were to take a relationship with Venus seriously, she would have added intimacy and sexuality to a continuum of temptation. The rush of the nick was difficult enough to resist; Venus' encouragement would erase maturity and discipline. Of course, Laura could have never been his one night stand; she had been good for him. She reminded him that risk had an underside beside good times; it was a more complicated form of division in which a zero nullified each result.

Though he had made significant progress with his father overnight – more than in the rest of his years combined – he knew to stay would only be hoping for the impossible. He escorted Venus into the kitchen, where Francesca sat on his father's lap, and

announced he was leaving. Francesca, who was heading back to Ellis Island for a noon to eight shift, offered them a ride back to Dominic's motel.

In the car, Dominic wanted to talk about the night but knew for risk to be a part of attraction, you had to keep it to yourself. When they arrived at the Super 8, Dominic thanked Francesca and she held his chin again for another look, fortifying his image for another five years. When he grabbed his bags, still packed, from the room, he secured a taxi and found Venus and Francesca embracing. They had bonded in a very distinct way that may or may not have had to do with romances with car thieves. Dominic and Venus took the cab to a trailer park across from the airport. Dominic paid and Venus excused the arrangement; she didn't technically live alone, she told him. A woman kind of took her in but wasn't going to be around in the next two months, before they cleared the park and developed the land. She gave him the tour of the kitchen and living room with a wave of the arm, then led him to the bedroom. She opened a drawer and pulled out a bowl, lit it and handed it to him. He smelled to make sure it was marijuana, figured he was at the end of his line anyway. "It's dangerous," she said, "living in the trailer park." She pulled out a nine millimeter. "But I know how to use one of these." She surprised him by pulling back on the action to make sure it was loaded – and Dominic thought that this would be the end for him – he had been foolish enough to think that a stripper would come home with him when she was waiting to kill him all along. He was the guy in the movies who the audience deemed a fool. Venus gently set the safety and put the gun back in the top drawer, and sat beside him on the bed – a transition so quick the excitement came in a rush. When she sat beside him, her shorts came up. He concealed his erection with a fetal-like pose on the bed. He was stoned and he was tired. There was

a larger force arising in him, something gaining momentum, and the outside world seemed to be affected. There was the roar of an engine, a plane passing overhead. The trailer shook, the headboard bumping slightly against the wall, the engine above them screamed and then dissipating.

“What was that?” Dominic asked.

“The twelve twenty Delta out of Seattle,” she said.

He listened for the next one. She checked her watch and told him they had another twelve minutes, until the United 12:32 out of Denver. He became excited by the exercise, too much probably for Venus to remain impressed, but she used the discussion of planes departures cities as a segue into the cities she had left behind, like they were all separate sections of the same metropolis. She pointed to the pictures standing up beside the bed or taped to the headboard of her bed. Dominic fixated on a little girl with curly hair that matched the wheat field behind her, her eyes beaming, and a man with a handgun holstered at his side. In the background was a cabin with a line of smoke leaning out of the chimney. The snow-packed peaks rose above them like a wave crashing.

Nothing about her was contrived.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“It could have been anywhere,” she said.

Dominic imagined the man in the picture composing a serious stare, but looking closer, he saw him walking out of the shot, his face unchanged.

At the bottom of the headboard was a postcard of Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, with a note, “thinking of you, Shanty.” She said her mother loved the painting, named her



daughter after the goddess of love even though she had conceived her in the back of a pickup truck. Her mother had also fixated on a bright light in the sky when the man was on top of her, what they identified later as the closest planet on the sun side.

Dominic held the picture close. He had written a paper on it in his Renaissance Art History seminar, and explained the period's neo-classicism. The Italians believed that a profound and greater truth could be found in the ancient myths. Botticelli painted Venus because she represented beauty, the spring and fertility, but the Catholics wanted the painting to reinforce the sanctity of marriage.

"You're ruining it," she said.

Changing course, he described the painting in mythological terms, the significance of Venus rising from the sea, the form through which divine beauty came into the world. The painting was a perfect, harmonious pattern. The ruddy Zephyr puffed vigorously; the trees contained a flowery orange grove, and each white blossom was tipped with gold. Around them fell roses, each with a golden heart, that came into being at Venus' birth.

She squinted the whites out of her eyes, so they were dominated by gold, and slithered to him like the dessert snake that she was. He watched and stared, avoided a kiss to hold her, tried not to press his midsection up against her. In holding her, he felt a violent uprising, and once again it was above him too, the roaring of a jet engine. Suppression only exacerbated the need to set free, he thought, why should he deny himself this liberation? Whatever happened one night would be inconsequential the next, he thought, but the idea prompted another in his head, associated with remorse. He recognized the thought as one he'd had in Berkeley and remembered the pain in his

stomach. There was another form of liberty in restraint. The mistake was yet to be made. And so he closed his eyes as the sound of the plane receded and held Venus while ignoring his excitement. But even as he heard her soft breathing connoting sleep, he was unable to impede his internal force, more powerful than the 12:32 out of Denver and the unidentified planes that followed.

He slept, somehow, waking intermittently to the sounds of planes above him and the rattling dishes in the sink, surprised in the first afternoon awakenings at where he was – in Vegas, in a stripper’s trailer, the thought prompting him to take a grin back into sleep with him. He eventually awoke to darkness, with Venus shaking him, out of a sleep so deep that he could not have identified the time or place within a reasonable range. The shaking reminded him of how his mother would wake him in the morning, or perhaps out of nap when he lived with her in Roxboro, but there was an illumination outside – almost radioactive, apocalyptic. He saw the Strip’s light behind the window blinds. Venus apologized for waking him. She had to go to work. She got her job back. It was ten o’clock. He was in Vegas. It was Friday night and his friends had already arrived. He walked into the light in the living room, as Venus put on makeup in the bathroom, and sat down, exhausted. I thought you quit, he yelled to her. She talked to Jack on the phone and got her job back. That’s good, Dominic said, he guessed, feeling a little offended that she had gone back on his initiation of rebellion, but of course, he was leaving in ten minutes probably to never see her again. He was proud in that moment of his restraint the night before, until she appeared in shorts and a tee shirt.

I guess we’ll split a cab, she said, intent on indifference, and because it was rejection he addressed it. As he approached her, she backed away. Maybe it was fear

that fueled her attraction because he pinned her against the trailer door and kissed her. This was his compromise. She wiped a tear from her eye when they were done and they stayed there for a while, until the cab announced its arrival with a horn, prompting Venus to collect her belongings hastily. His bags were still packed; he just had to make it a mile north with them to his next destination before he could sleep again.

He paid the cab and could say nothing more than good luck when he left Venus. He could only glance at her eyes because she was already missing him. He had to leave her. Every principle of the life she lived was based on transience. He refused to turn back, walking to the registration desk. She was gone. It was for the better. He and Laura were broken up but he was committed again. Despite her bitterness, in the long run it was this variable on which they depended, regardless of what had happened in Berkeley.

The guys had left him a room key. He assumed they were out for the night and was relieved at the prospect of sleep, but when he approached to the room, he heard their short bursts of banter and laughter. They hadn't seen each other in months, since the summer, so when he appeared, he fielded fierce grips in their hugs and sharp insults. He told them only that he'd had a long day and before he could describe his need for sleep, they laughed at him and pleaded: they were in Vegas for Chrissakes. He drank a beer caught a second or third or fourth wind and felt better after a shower. At about eleven thirty when they were heading out, Dominic was convinced he could make it a couple of hours. "Okay," Dooley the bachelor said, "Are we ready for a little fun or what?"

## CHAPTER 7

Laura is on the phone with her mother so Dominic changes the channel from *The Christmas Story* to *Bullit* on American Movie Classics. She says she is making holiday arrangements but he expects its more complicated; she's speaking softly and turning from him abruptly. It's okay – she's not complaining. She complained to her parents about him for a full year and a half without realizing she would later have to repair the damage. She's making the case again, speaking intensely but quietly: he's a respected teacher, smarter than you think, loyal since.... He has turned the volume down on the television so the change from children's dialogue to roaring, unabated V-8 engines is meant to be subtle; but he's tuned into the car chase scene and watching it on low volume is impossible, sinful. When Laura paces into the hallway toward the bedroom, he raises the volume and the alternating sounds of the car engines lifts the hair on his arms. He hums along to the engines of the cars, a '68 Mustang Fastback and Dodge Charger. A vein in his neck pulsates. Steve McQueen is ascending San Francisco's hills and power sliding around buildings, but it's Lucky's memory supplying the richest images now, generating adrenaline as if he's breaking inside the garage, picking the lock, crossing the wires.

Laura stares at him from the edge of the kitchen, her hand over the receiver. He's not sure whether she's addressed him or not. "Can you please turn it down?" she asks.

“Hold on a second,” he says, upset as if woken out of a dream he knows he’ll never retrieve. He turns up the volume another two notches.

Laura says something quietly into the phone and walks over to him, determined. She’s wearing his pair of blue boxers with white poke dots against a tight, white tank top. Her hair is still wet from a shower. She’s going to be firm with him, perhaps rationalize with him, but he knows ultimately the shorts and shirt come off quickly. He holds the remote control underneath him as she rests a knee on the couch and presses her hands on his chest.

She speaks softly in his ear: “I’m so close. Dominic, please.”

She spoke in heavy breaths in his ear and he’s melting. He’s not sure what she’s close to exactly but he knows it’s a process and processes are responses to conflict; and she’s talking to her mother about him.

“First car chase in a movie,” he pleads, pointing to the television.

She stares at him – her habit of thinking before she speaks gives him the advantage in banter – then dismissively holds out a fist. Rock, paper, scissors. His game. He watches her. If her eyes are fixed instead of wandering, she always chooses scissors. She attributes his success to luck, to the name she refuses to call him by, but he takes the game more seriously than she does.

When Dominic wins, rock smashes scissors, she tells her mother she has to get off the phone. He’s still amazed at her honesty; out of remorse, he grabs her hand and turns down the volume. The car chase is almost over anyway.

Laura’s most beautiful moments occur straight out of the shower, hastily dressed, without the subterfuge of preparation. She is more appealing to him than to others.

When they started dating, his friends from South Philly were bringing around the curvaceous and cosmetically enhanced, faces darkened with makeup. They said Laura was okay – they'd *do* her – but they were unimpressed. Laura's beauty was subjective and came down to something subtle in her features: hazel eyes, light brown hair, perky breasts, sinewy legs; frankly, everything in perfect proportion – the eyes, nose, and mouth each with a comfortable amount of space, each piece of skin breathing freely without ever bunching with greed. He has always preferred meaty lips on women, thought thin lips a handicap like a race car on bicycle tires, and Laura has a little of both: thick in the middle, recessing into thinness, anchored by dimples in her cheeks. When she smiles, her skin slides with ease along a crescent track. About a year earlier, when they got back together, he decided her beauty trickled down from fairness and innocence; he and she were degrees apart from each other but on a firm axis of attraction.

As she apologizes to her mother, he reaches out to smack her ass. She knows its coming – the gesture alone was the point – and scoots away from him without a hitch in her voice. “Trust me on this, mother. It's time.”

“Time for what?” Dominic asks, but she doesn't respond. He projects a higher volume: “Are you finally telling her we're engaged?”

She looks at him with squinted eyes as if he has shouted a profanity.

He flips through the channels again, only to return to *Bullit*, and reminds himself to rent movies over the Christmas break from school; he will go crazy channel surfing for eleven days. He is comfortable without holiday plans, with a television, a David McCullough book, the gym, maybe a special dinner out at Mamma Maria's with Laura. But she has her social schedule filled from Christmas to January 2. She'll be in and out

of Chestnut Hill for the holiday week, attending charitable “events,” then she’s off to Times Square with her parents for New Year’s. Laura has spent every Christmas week with her parents since graduating from college, and Lucky wonders at what level of adulthood the pattern will break. He’ll stop in to see his mother in the middle of the week, on Wednesday, the day most distanced from both holidays while remaining part of the holiday week, when there is the greatest likelihood of calm and sobriety. He will send his father and Francesca a letter. Otherwise, he’s on his own and not unhappy about it.

But today he feels like one of Laura’s subjects. She must be in the bedroom, perhaps she’s off the phone. He is about to turn off the television and watch it in bed when she emerges slowly out of the kitchen wearing a smile hardened in the cheeks with nerves. He presses the mute button on the remote control.

“My parents want to invite you to Chestnut Hill for the weekend.”

“For the whole weekend?” he asks. He has never been to the Shelley house for more than an afternoon; he never liked sleeping in a bed other than his own. “*They* want to invite me?”

She nods slides in next to him on the couch, bending her legs over his, resting her head on his shoulder. They have an amazing ability to coalesce, her small, pliable frame and his big sturdiness. “This is supposed to be good news,” she says.

“For who?” he says jokingly. As much as the Shelleys’ gesture represents progress and forgiveness, he feels inconvenienced by the prospect of spending time with her family, asking her father about pediatrics and her mother about community theater; answering questions – on his vacation no less – about teaching, expressing interest in

things other than what he intends to enjoy this vacation: television, movies, the Flyers, beer. Not one moment will be sincere.

“Why the change of heart?” he asks.

“This is a good thing,” she says into his chest.

“Did you tell them we’re engaged?”

She sits up and faces him but he’s fiddling with the remote control. “It’s delicate.”

“Did you tell them?”

She shakes her head no.

“It’s bullshit.”

Dropped in that instant is anticipation in her posture and facial expression. He is about to let her off the hook before he hears, “You know...”

He faces her again.

“...what you call an *engagement* is tentative at best.”

“Tentative?”

“Do you even remember my answer?”

“We hugged...we *embraced* and then —”

“Do you even remember if I said yes?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to be engaged?”

“No, I’m saying. You know how people renew vows?”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Well, we’ll just renew our engagement. Like a re-engagement.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”



“It’s not that uncommon, you know.”

“Was it the ring?”

“No, Dominic.”

“I told you I was planning to get you another ring.”

“So why not another engagement?”

“What’s wrong with the old engagement?”

Her look is a mix of sympathy and contempt. He can tell already from her expression that she is mostly right.

“You proposed in an *airport*. You were so wasted you could hardly even see straight.”

“Still.”

“You forgot what you did with the ring.”

“I told you – ”

“Dooey pulled it out of his pocket and held it out in his palm next to casino chips and cheetos.”

He still can’t remember why Dooey had the ring.

“You *fell* in front of me,” she says.

“I was taking a knee.”

“You were falling over and I caught you...”

“Yeah, you caught me.”

“...and you mumbled something that may have been ‘will you marry me’”

“And what did you say?”

“You didn’t give me a chance.”

“And what did you say?”

“I’m just saying...”

“If you’re not happy with my proposal, then maybe we’re not engaged.”

She takes a breath, covers her eyes with her hand. He has taken it too far.

“We just have to handle this...”

“Okay,” he says.

“...delicately. What’s okay?”

“We have to handle this.”

“Del-i-cate-ly. I wasn’t finished.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you always apologizing?”

“I’m *sorry*.”

Lucky smiles at her and makes it ironic, then wraps her in a hug. As she nuzzles into his chest, he sees the *Bullit* credits rolling with the ’68 Fastback skidding through the background in slow motion. He breathes a laugh through his nose.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he says and wraps her tighter. His laugh had not been exactly about the finely felt recollection of stealing cars as a teenager in South Philadelphia, or the apologies to Laura Shelley with perfect posture from Chestnut Hill, but at everything in between.

Dominic proposal to Laura, upon his return from his second annual Las Vegas trip with his South Philadelphia friends, was not necessarily planned or conventional but it was official. After a good first year in Las Vegas, in which all of them left winners

(though Dominic's stash of money was a reward for the Ford Fairlane), Dominic and his friends quickly became discouraged with the Blackjack dealers and Roulette wheel and, by Saturday, settled into their comfort zone, the sports books, cursing horses and twenty-year old football players. By Saturday night, his friends were betting on horses at a track in Oklahoma and a women's lacrosse championship game, taking the over on Boise State and Cal-Fresno. Dominic had the best record among them, down six hundred.

At the breakfast buffet the next morning, after Happy complained he hadn't won a bet in two days, Dooley offered him a winner, betting him fifty bucks he couldn't eat fifty shrimp from the buffet. Bill, at 250 pounds, took the bet and won. The method took hold. That night they avoided the table games and sports books and went out to a club, bet Billy Gallagher that he wouldn't chug a martini (he did), that Dominic wouldn't dance the Roger Rabbit or the Re-run (he didn't). In a cab ride to the strip club, Billy said he was planning on getting his wife pregnant again. Dooley bet him he wouldn't get it done in the next three months and Billy shook him on it. On the cab ride home from the strip club, the three married men told Dominic that marriage and family was a gamble. He hit the jackpot with Laura though, they told him, a tight piece of ass and a trust fund to boot. When was he going to make an honest woman out of her anyway? She was more than that, he said; soon. Until then, he'd failed to take them up on their bets and was feeling the pressure of camaraderie. But when they bet he wouldn't propose to Laura, he figured it was easy money or the ridiculous bets wouldn't hold; he would propose eventually. But after he shook on it, his friends focused not on Billy getting his wife pregnant or on Dooley getting a promotion, but on Dominic's proposal. It had the potential for a public spectacle. It wasn't like they could witness Dooley's promotion;

they couldn't stare and watch as Billy dumped a load into his old lady. For the bet to clear, and for Dominic to make the six hundred dollars and break even for the weekend, he had to propose to Laura in the airport at the baggage claim so his friends could witness it.

He looked at the jewelry shops in the Venetian on Monday morning but the prices were laughable. He found a pawnshop downtown and made it to the airport in time for his flight. Dominic's friends saluted him on the plane with drinks until they were cut off by the flight attendants. When they arrived at the gate, his friends made him exit the plane last. Dominic had been comforted by the newly married Dooley beside him and Billy and Happy shooting him a thumbs up in the aisle over, but when the plane cleared, he was alone, tired, and drunk. He considered slipping away, leaving his baggage on the belt until his friends became impatient and left. But he suspected they were already priming Laura up, and his failure to fulfill the bet was a twelve hundred dollar swing. Besides, the proposal was inevitable – the bet was simply helping him along.

He emerged in the baggage claim and locked his eyes immediately on Laura before she saw him. She was nervous, never was at ease with his friends and their wives, so he moved briskly toward her, catching his foot on someone's luggage and falling forward. He had enough wherewithal to save it and take a knee rather than face plant. He could have recovered but she spotted him in that pose, still six or seven feet away from her. Already feeling self-conscious about his cognitive impairment – he knew she would challenge his state of mind later – he tried to cover up his misstep by continuing with the proposal, extending the ring out to her so that she would come to him. But he didn't have the ring; he had been afraid it would fall out of his pocket and had passed it

to Dooley. Dominic, stubbornly kneeling, found Dooley in the crowd and pointed to his finger. Recognition showed on Dooley's face. He skirted over and pulled out of his pocket two casino chips, three cheetos, and a diamond ring. Dominic plucked the ring out of his hand and rubbed it on his shirt, then held it up to Laura – unsure exactly which hand and which finger was appropriate – and delivered the question. But before he finished, she lifted and embraced him. She spoke definitively into his ear: “Promise me you were good.”

They were worlds apart in that moment, he proposing a lifetime bond and she seeking assurance that he'd remained monogamous. It may not have been the most prospective moment for an eternal union, but Dominic's friends understood the embrace as confirmation of the engagement. They grappled and hollered with Dominic in celebration, as the women, Dominic saw, congratulated Laura: Dooley's fiancé careful with her hug because of the pregnancy, Bill's wife leaning in for a kiss, despite the children in both her arms, Happy's wife smiling with wide eyes of warning.

Dominic and Laura decide to go to bed but he must wait first for her to finish in the bathroom as there is room for only one person in front of the sink. A midget must have designed the place: they cannot pass in the hallways without turning to the side; the refrigerator door bumps the cabinets; and Dominic has to wipe his ass standing up after he kept hitting his knee on the toilet paper dispenser mounted beside the toilet. They could have rented a bigger place only eight or nine blocks south, past Washington Avenue, for half the price, but Laura wanted a place in Queens Village. Technically he's in South Philadelphia but it certainly isn't home; the closest place for coffee is a

Starbucks, and he can't walk around the neighborhood without nearly stepping on yip-yip dogs wearing sweaters. For Laura's sake, he likes that there is little crime or conflict, but his head has always been on a swivel and frankly he's bored. Laura has pledged to never move back to Chestnut Hill but Dominic has heard about people being drawn home after marriage; despite being only a mile or two from where he grew up, he already feels the momentum moving in her direction.

Dominic is just beginning to imagine his interaction with the Shelleys – Daniel, pediatrician, and Francine, local thespian; financial man Pierce and his wife Kendra; the poodle, how could he forget about the poodle – when Laura walks out of the bathroom. She's shed his boxers for her own underwear and is following her routine, checking the thermostat, setting the alarm clock, without noticing that he's watching her. He's still thinking about her climbing on him and breathing her words into his ear. When she slides under the covers, he startles her by rolling over to her quickly, clutching her ass. It's Thursday and she's tired but there's something beyond hormonal that is incessant in him. When he kisses her neck, he can't tell whether her soft moans are genuine or contrived; he drops his boxers and helps her off with her underwear, then rolls on top, his arms flexing beside her head. Sometimes he'll catch her staring at his tattoo of a dragon and he swears she's gotten off that way, but this time her eyes are closed. They open and look toward the headboard when he's inside. He gives her his ear again but she's not taking it, and really that's all he needs, one nibble on the ear, a tongue kiss, a genuine moan or squeak or squeal to take him home – a gesture for god's sakes – but she's somewhere else. The sex is as routine for her as brushing her teeth and checking the thermostat. He tries faster, harder, but the sex is coarse and his rhythm is choppy.

Laura has spread her legs as a thank you for his agreeing to come to Chestnut Hill; she's using sex as a tool of relationship management. Staring at the pillow beside her head, he's discouraged by how easily the thought of the Shelleys' dinner burdens him. He was hoping to remain casual about the whole event but he can see already that it has lodged in the back of his mind, will torment him tonight, and make him anxious at an otherwise easy workday tomorrow through the holiday until they arrive on the 27th. Not only will he have to confront her father and contend with Pierce; he'll have to somehow earn their blessing. He'll have to smile wide at her mother and sister in law and then he's actually going to propose in front of them. Imagining himself taking a knee with their approving faces is as distant as imagining himself dunking a basketball in front of thousands of fans. Worst of all, he'll have to pretend that his association with the poodle, Berkeley, is innocent when everyone in the room knows the full history, thanks to Laura's complaints before she knew the damage would make a family dinner an epic challenge.

He slides away uncomfortably and Laura asks what's wrong.

"Nothing."

"You're tired, that's all," she says, rolling over.

"Right, *I'm* tired."

She looks over her shoulder but he's done arguing for the night. He lies on his back hoping the restless stirring around his midsection settles back into the rest of him; his heart beats quickly, still prepared for rigor, but he's finished. He looks down at the dragon on his arm and flexes. He quickly tries to avert his mind, compensating with the image of a woman he saw jogging today, but she is fleeting; to a fellow teacher who is exciting for the moment before he remembers her eating a chicken salad sandwich with a

line of mustard across her lip, then back to his staples, Linda McMullen and Christy Baker from college – both missed opportunities – Candy Francis from the old neighborhood. He no longer allows himself to think of Venus. He's starting to come back but it's academic now; Laura's breathing indicates sleep. The sexual stimulation fantasy isn't practical, nor exactly comfortable, so he switches quickly to something non-sexual. He remembers the interior of a '71 Mach One, the one that got away, big round gauges on the dash, silver round ball for a gear shift, black interior, but the image is empty without the challenging terrain, more than a straightaway or even a curvy road. He's winding out the engine on an ascent through the Rocky Mountains. But he has only seen the Rocky Mountains from afar. Despite his desire to conquer them they are vague, but the Mustang is rich. In his mind, he has perfect control over the car and will never be caught. He's going through the gears again when he hears Laura clear her throat.

“You'll get a chance to see Berkeley again.”

He has the opportunity for hostility or agreement and his choice of the latter is purely selfish. It is easier. “Right.” He repeats the word to re-commission his voice.

“Right, how's she doing?”

“She's still alive, if that's what you're asking.”

He speaks gently. “That's not what I was asking.”

Dominic's resolution at his mistake in Berkeley was immediate, but for months Laura remained fixated on the woman he had been with. Dominic remembered her name, Jennifer, but pretended not to, had hoped generality would make it easier for Laura to let go, but being a scientist, she only fixated on the lack of precision. She started calling her “Berkeley,” conjuring an exotic image of a woman with free flowing breasts and flowers



in her hair. She insisted Dominic provide the contact information for the girl but he held firm to his lie; it was for her benefit. She tried to call Darreth but Todd answered the phone and told Laura they had broken up and he didn't have a number for her (perhaps his one act of redemption). Dominic hoped the matter would eventually go away but time had failed in its job; before Laura could begin to turn the corner, she had to believe that both Dominic and Berkeley were genuinely sorry. Dominic apologized but no one could speak for the girl.

He was no psychologist but Laura found an alarming degree of comfort in the puppy poodle she accepted as a gift from her father and named Berkeley. The plan had been to bring the poodle to the new residence – Laura refused to move into Dominic's old place and advocated for living in a better neighborhood – but part of the reason Dominic agreed to the place in Queen's Village was because dogs were not allowed. Laura loved the place and talked of sneaking the dog in when they signed the lease but Dominic knew she wasn't a rule-breaker; Berkeley got sick at the same time with a rare dog disease and remained at the Shelley house under the full time care of Laura's mother. For a while, the Shelleys were afraid the dog would "expire," as they called it, or that they would have to "put her down," but the numerous cutting-edge medicines they purchased started working, or at least kept the dog alive.

Dominic never likes to see anything suffer, but he secretly hopes the dog will die, kick the bucket, head to the big dog kennel in the sky...or that the vet will finally gas it.

"Do you know how long we've had Berkeley?" Laura asks.

"Gotta be what, two years?"

"It'll be fifteen months, tomorrow."

## CHAPTER 8

Dominic has double-parked the Camry outside of his and Laura's apartment and made seven trips with Laura's baggage to the car, even though they're only spending the weekend in Chestnut Hill. Some of the stuff is only going one way; she has decided to store some clothes at her parents' house, allowing Dominic a full third of the apartment closet. From Chestnut Hill, Laura's going with her parents to New York to meet with friends and celebrate New Year's at the Radisson Times Square. Despite Laura's apparent excitement about her vacation, Dominic has told her more than once that she is trying to do too much on her time off.

Dominic has distributed her baggage evenly but the car sits low. He trusts the Toyotas' durability, but his Camry is ten years old with a hundred and thirty thousand miles. It isn't worth it to invest in a new suspension, nor does he think it cost-efficient to fix the damage to the passenger side door, even though Laura would be the first to disagree.

"Are we ready?" she asks from the sidewalk.

Dominic looks at the gym bag he's prepared, dwarfed by her luggage. "Yes."

"Okay," she says, walking carefully around the car. The ground is wet and she's wearing heels. For once, he is appropriately dressed, in a good pair of khakis and a collared shirt. He sees her underwear line through a black skirt when she climbs into the car on the driver's side. He has stopped apologizing for the passenger side door, stopped

explaining the limitations of liability insurance. Besides, she has mastered the opposite-side entrance: crawling in, straddling the shifter, and spinning to land her ass perfectly in the seat. If Detroit were to propose a car with one door, she would be the best choice for a demonstration of how to enter it.

“Shit,” she says, already asking a favor of Dominic with her gaze. “My cosmetics bag. It’s already packed. It’s in the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

Once inside the apartment, out of habit he shuts the door behind him and imagines locking it and holing up without ever having to drive out to Chestnut Hill. He reminds himself on his way into the bathroom that confining himself to the apartment is a feasible option – there is no limitation in what he can and cannot do – and quickly allows the thought to disintegrate. Dominic knows that his natural impulse is rebellion, which is only encouraged by resistance. Besides, he has learned his lessons about rebellion and, when it comes to Laura, has thought of sacrifice as a more satisfying quality.

There is a purse on the bed, but it’s empty; a small, red bag teeters at the edge of the sink. He opens it to make sure. Inside there are instruments and chemicals – lipstick, makeup, lotions; tubes, pads, applicators – all unnecessary. He also sees the corners of photographs in a zippered compartment. The first is the picture of Dominic, Laura, and Jefferson the gorilla. She sent to the paper for the negatives. The second is a picture with Laura and four apes, all smiling. They must have been the orangutans because he recognizes the shirt as part of her wardrobe. She poses with her family in the third, Laura and her brother Pierce taking the photographer’s bait and smiling, Francine holding firm with a practiced smile, Dr. Shelley forever composed.

The fourth picture strikes him as misplaced in her cosmetics bag, part of another group; she poses cheek-to-cheek with a pale-faced guy with the type of hairstyle that requires a great deal of work and product to appear natural and disheveled. She extends her arm to take the picture herself. She has done the same with Dominic when they were alone. There is a blurry form behind them that Dominic figures for a beer. It must be from her college years, he thinks – he’s seen albums of them – but he sees another shirt he recognizes, glances over to the open closet and sees it hanging among her work clothes. He pulls the picture out, carries it separately from the cosmetics bag.

He hears a car horn and realizes when he’s locking up that the Camry is holding up traffic. He stares at the driver behind him, a fat wop in a Camaro. Laura holds her hand over her eyes, and for some reason, Dominic sees the car as one in a line for a funeral. The day is overcast but mild, threatening rain instead of snow. When he opens the door, she presents him with an abrupt smile. He starts the engine, and heads toward Washington Avenue.

“Who’s this?” he asks, handing her the picture.

“Where’d you find this?”

“In your cosmetics bag.”

“I forgot it was in there.”

“So you didn’t want me to see it?”

She analyzes him, has to recognize that he’s serious. “Oh, c’mon, Dominic.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s this guy I work with.”

“Doesn’t look like you’re working.”

“We went out a few times after work.”

“Is that right?”

“It was when we were broken up, Dominic.”

“So I’m not supposed to be pissed.”

“Honestly? No.”

“Did you do anything with him?”

“What does it matter?”

“So you did?”

As they wait for the stoplight to change on Washington Avenue, Dominic shifts his body to accommodate his stare.

“Hardly anything,” she says into her lap.

The light turns green. “So you fucked him?”

“A kiss, that was all.”

“One kiss?”

“That’s all,” she says, punctuating it with laughter.

He examines her levity and deems it genuine. As much as he fears the alternative, he remembers how she held out with him.

“It was one kiss, and to be honest with you – ”

“I don’t want to know.”

“It was boring and stupid.”

In an experience of the miraculous, Dominic catches three lights in a row and is careful to avoid potholes. There is a lingering infrastructure of Christmas cheer around the Italian Market on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, even though the holiday is three days past. They reach

Broad Street quickly and make the turn toward City Hall, the Christmas lights along the street poles dully lit.

“You can’t be mad at me for this after Berkeley,” Laura says.

He had been poised to ignore the picture but when it comes to their relationship, all roads lead to Berkeley. “So much for putting that behind us.”

“I’m just saying, there’s a timeline to these things. Actions and reactions.”

“You want to talk about actions and reactions?”

The line is delivered harmlessly, the rhetoric of banter, but there is an agitation in Dominic that has not been quelled. He allows it to escalate, to fixate on the idea of a timeline, and to land on one incident, the first between them, since they were talking about actions and reactions.

“Remember when your car was stolen?”

“Ye-ah.” It could have been a change in subject but Laura recognizes its aggression.

“And they never found out who it was?”

“No.”

“Did they say where he was from?”

“Where are you going with this, Dominic?” she asked.

“I stole your car.”

Driving thirty miles per hour, he stubbornly matches her stare.

Her grin slides upward into dimples, and she bursts with laughter, so concentrated and pronounced that Laura excuses herself. “You stole my car? What about the money you *paid the dealer*?”

“I’m talking about before that.”

“You stole the title too I guess.”

“You think I’m kidding?” He stares again to demonstrate seriousness, but her giddiness causes his frown to quiver.

“Okay,” she asks, “how did you do it?”

“I waited for you in the park and when you were gone on your bike, I hotwired it.”

“You *hotwired* it?” she asked. “Okay, go ahead and explain how you *hotwired* it.”

He had spoken out of the rebellious impulse that led him to trouble and not the newfound tact he was finding beneficial in the long run, but he’s been given a second chance. She doesn’t believe him. He focuses on a single breath, then laughs at the dispensation allowed him, and Laura seems relieved to have her mood finally matched by his. “It’s easy,” he says, playful now. “You just open up the hood and cross a few wires...”

“Open up the hood?”

“...and then there’s this big spark and *vroom*.”

“Vroom?”

“Vroom, vroom.”

“Yeah, you hotwired a car,” she said. “You couldn’t even set up the cable.”

Her incredulity is so complete that even he is convinced of the mood, feigning embarrassment at her last response. “The cable man said it was a *systems error*.”

“I’m sure it was, Dominic,” she says, leaning over to kiss him.

When she reaches over to caress his hand, he sees that her fingers are bare. The absence of the engagement ring is explained by logic – her parents know nothing yet of the engagement – but it is still ominous as it confirms the ridiculous plan Laura has requested of him.

“So,” he says, “is there anything else I should know?”

“About what?” she asks.

“The engagement.”

“I think we’ve covered everything. Just be yourself.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“Trust me. It’s time.”

“Can’t we just tell them we’re engaged?”

Dominic immediately regrets the question.

“You can tell them.”

Since their engagement in the baggage claim of the Philadelphia airport, Laura has been working her parents over to invite Dominic to dinner. It would have been simple enough to simply make an announcement, Dominic thinks, but Laura insists on “managing” the situation, leveraging their generosity. She is going to include them in the engagement by staging Dominic’s proposal, replete with a request of her father’s blessing.

“If my father heard that you proposed to me in an airport...” Laura says, trailing off.

If you only knew about your father, Dominic thinks – talk about actions and reactions – but he censors himself and defers to her. “I’m a terrible actor.”



“Then don’t act.”

“When do I get to hold the ring?”

“I’ll give it to you when we get there. In a case this time.”

Laura looks out the window at the hotels on Broad Street. Her mind is somewhere else. In that moment they are galaxies apart but Dominic knows they always return to each other. For Dominic, there is no better source of comfort than a week off from work, but Laura is the type to be stressed on vacation because of inactivity. Which is why she is staging an engagement, followed by a few days in New York. She’s amazing; even her flaws arise out of ambition.

“Maybe you should stick around for New Year’s,” he proposes. “Just lay around and relax with me.” For moments at a time, he has been able to lure her into leisure, to sleep in on Sundays and settle for a nap later, to watch two movies in a row, before the arousal of her panic impulse. He loves her a little more in moments of temporary indulgence and would like to extend them over a weekend or perhaps over a few days on vacation, but the attempt has proven futile so far.

As much as he is looking forward to the relief of getting the engagement over with, he thinks it will be awkward spending the following few days without her. This is the first week Laura has taken off in the past year and a half working at the University Primate Center. Whenever Dominic has tried to plan a trip that required a few days off – or to get Laura to go to Berkeley, which would have helped him avoid a travesty – Laura cited some critical stage of development in the orangutans. One of them was going through puberty when he wanted to make a trip north to Fenway. Another was being treated for depression when Dominic asked Laura to call in sick on a perfect Friday to

drive out to Valley Forge. Dominic knows that Laura is an overachiever but whoever is running the center is taking advantage of her.

“I haven’t seen Megan and Alan in over a year,” she asserts. “Are you sure you don’t want to come to New York?”

“There isn’t much worse than missing you,” he says, proud of his ability to think quickly, “but it ain’t as bad as hanging out with *them*.”

She slaps him playfully. He does not enjoy New York or her New York friends, who know too much about wines and talk too casually about mutual funds and cubism. It was worse to try and direct the conversation. A male friend of hers referred to Derek Jeter as the best shortman in baseball. One step at a time, he has been telling her, about New York. Let’s see what happens in Chestnut Hill first.

“Well, maybe we’ll work something else out,” Laura says.

“Like what?”

“Berkeley’s going to need a dog sitter.”

“Dear God.”

“It would win you major points.”

Traffic is surprisingly scarce down Broad Street and around the mess they’ve created of streets beside City Hall. He is stricken whenever he sees City Hall, white since the renovation. It is going to take him some time to get used it, like when his father brought home the ’68 Fastback with a new paint job. Maybe this is a larger character flaw, he’s not comfortable with renewal. Dominic opens up the engine on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway out toward the museum, hearing a strained cycle of revolution in the engine, like the stride of an aging jogger who favors a leg. Green lights all of the way –

on the day of course when, if anything, he needs time to prepare. Warm air slides out of the vents and he has to turn the heater down. It must be fifty degrees outside. Rather than take the Schuylkill Expressway, he chooses Kelly Drive, the windy, scenic drive across the river from the expressway; even if it takes longer it feels shorter. He's relieved at having emerged from the prospect of congestion and decides to leave it in third gear and drive casually, but just beyond boathouse row, they encounter the red haze of brake lights. Their forward crawl is equal to that of the eager drivers along the Expressway. The river mocks both lines of cars with its comfortable pace.

"How's Berkeley doing anyway?" Dominic asks.

"Hanging in there," she says, staring out the window.

"Wouldn't you need a handler or something to take care of her?"

Another new word in his vernacular: handler.

She twists her neck back to him. "You don't think you can handle it?"

"I'm not saying that."

"You don't have to dog and house sit," she says. "I just thought, given the *circumstances...*"

"I know, I'm just saying..."

"...that you might want to make an *impression...*"

"I'm just saying..."

"...on my parents who housed me after you decided to have your little *fling* in *Berkeley...*"

"...one step at a time."

"...just when I was supposed to *move in with you...*" She trails off, finally.

“One step at a time.”

The plan for the staged engagement seems ridiculous enough – and still in Dominic’s mind quite unlikely – and now she is amending the plan with a follow-up, mentioning the prospect of Dominic house and dog sitting when she and her parents go to Times Square. Dominic is fairly sure the staged engagement won’t go as well as she hopes, for reasons she cannot know but Dominic and her father know well. It was obvious upon first meeting Laura that she is used to getting what she wants, especially from her family. Dominic grew up in another universe, but he also knows as a general rule that family complicates matters.

But Dominic recognizes too that anything is possible with Laura. She possesses the makeup of those who – with fortuitous circumstances around them – can accomplish great things. Interestingly, she sees her capabilities and achievements as consistent with her class and colleagues, but Dominic separates the quality of her greatness from her family name, Chestnut Hill, and finances. Her friends may earn exponential wealth as doctors, lawyers, and business professionals, but their accomplishments are often marginal on a grand scale, the result of being in the right place at the right time. If Laura were in the right place at the right time, she could achieve great things. He thinks to tell her this but isn’t sure how to say it without sounding trite, like his uncles who recognized him as a preppy because he completed college. And he isn’t sure when it’s appropriate to tell a partner you think they are destined for greatness, especially when she blushes at a complement over a casserole. By contrast, Dominic has found success in mediocrity – in avoiding crime and its consequences. He is a good teacher but has always believed that he has a latent capacity for greatness and simply has not found the proper avenue with

which to showcase his talents. Laura's path, by contrast, is more defined. He is careful not to be jealous; he should complement her.

"I'm really proud of you," he says to her finally.

"For what?"

It has been so clear in his mind but now that he's started to speak, the ideas became fleeting and abstract. "For everything. I don't know. You're amazing."

Now he is blushing. What he had said was melodramatic, the opposite of articulate, but in its rawness is probably more effectual.

The traffic dissipates as they pass a minor accident and exit onto Lincoln Drive out to Chestnut Hill. He remembers riding with his father in his Uncle's Cadillac along the narrow, winding, two-lane road, sure that they were going to clip a car or a concrete barrier. The drive, Dominic notes, is another thing entirely for Laura, who associates Lincoln Drive with the return to home and safety from grueling semesters and work hours, with getting anything she wants. It strikes him at this moment how well he knows Laura. Yet she knows little about his past – his intersection with her father, his criminal tendencies – things that if she does not know before marriage, she will never know at all.

Laura fiddles with her phone, making calls to her New York friends, delivering directions to Dominic after he has already made the appropriate turns.

"I guess you know the way by now," she says. "I keep forgetting you lived out here too."

The funny thing is he doesn't know the streets from living one town over in Roxboro; he knows them from stealing cars, including hers, including the one they are sitting in.

On Main Street, Dominic finds a groove on the trolley tracks with his left wheels as the right ones tumble over cobblestone. Laura points to a street, instructs him to make a left. She dials someone on her cell phone. “We’re almost there,” she says. At first, Dominic thinks she’s giving him instructions, but he realizes she has called home to announce their arrival.

“I wish you wouldn’t have done that,” he says, then takes a deep breath. He is anxious enough without an announcement of their exact time of arrival.

“It’s okay,” she says. “Trust me. It’s going to be a piece of cake. Left here.”

“I know,” he says.

“Oh, take this,” she says, handing him the ring case. He slips the case into his pants pocket, before changing gears. He wonders how to keep it from being conspicuous. He thinks of asking her to keep it in her purse, but realizes he would be relinquishing a semblance of control. They emerge from a line of trees into an open field of a manicured lawn and bushes and trees professionally trimmed. The landscaping offers scale to the massive house they are driving toward, constructed with a rock façade and robust concrete pillars. Three cars are parked in the driveway, a Mercedes sedan, a Lexus sport utility vehicle, and a ripe, red Shelby Mustang GT, a new model that Dominic has only seen pictures of until now. It stands out against its backdrop, the black Mercedes and white Lexus book ending a color spectrum Dominic has never understood, but he knows red is first, ROY G BIV, its rugged body style at odds with the serenity of the Shelley property. He’d love to hear that engine, but there are other orders of business to take care of first.

The Shelleys – Dr. and Mrs., Laura’s brother, Pierce, and his wife Kendra – stand in front of the house, waving, as if a security line prevents them from leaving the porch. Laura slips off her seatbelt and waves in anticipation of the greetings. He’ll have to present himself to them first and hopefully Laura will slide out of his side quickly. The Shelleys walk off the porch and slowly progress to the car – the dog Berkeley he sees in tow beside Mrs. Shelley – so he stops abruptly five car lengths short of the Mustang to buy some time. He shuts off the car and fiddles at the seatbelt for a beat longer than he wanted, then abruptly exits the car, waiting for Laura to follow behind him. Instead, she’s waving and fiddling gently with the car handle on the passenger side. Laura, Dominic calls surreptitiously, this way, you have to come out this way, and she shows the realization dramatically. My boyfriend drives a car in which the passenger side door doesn’t open, she communicates in the shrug of her shoulders, then labors to exit the vehicle on his side. She has mastered the entrance and exit from his side, but this time she slowly backs out of the car, catching her skirt on the seatbelt, hitting her head on the roof, and bumping the stick shift with her knee so that for a moment Dominic thinks the car has slipped out of gear. He holds his hand out to her, expecting to wave her around and allow her to confront the family first, but their voices are beside him. He gently backs away and they make room for him to pass. He mumbles quietly without anyone reacting, “Going into the shop soon.”

His eyes find Dr. Shelley first, a young Dr. Shelley. No, this is Laura’s brother Pierce. His eyes shift to the older of the two men in front of him. He recognizes the facial structure from long ago, but even after several meetings, Dominic is still startled by the gray in his hair and beard. He is still amazed at the resemblance of Pierce to his

father as well. Give him a set of glasses and a beard and it's nearly the same picture. Dominic has acknowledged the power of association and rather than trying to remain objective, his aim has been to hide his contempt for Pierce.

Mrs. Shelley is plump but carries it well; the robustness in her stature is consistent with her personality and warmth. Dominic likes her. Laura says her mother sometimes loves too much and Dominic watches as she stares at her daughter in adoration. Pierce's wife, Kendra, stands beside her with a more subtle appreciation of the scene. She wears a vest over a shirt that is probably too tight for a family affair but she has admitted her troubles shopping, fitting clothes to a petite body and large breasts. The first time Dominic met her he deemed her a champion in the bedroom, even though she wouldn't have to do a thing with all of her raw goods; he watches her breasts squeezed against Laura's when they embrace.

This is the last of the hugs and Dominic can see from Dr. Shelley and Pierce's averted attention that they are waiting for Laura to be greeted fully before acknowledging Dominic. They present the same pose, hands in pockets, staring downward, that gives Dominic the sensation of leverage as he puffs his chest, keeping his arms back and hands open. But his attempt at a demeanor is abruptly defeated, by the distraction of a moist coldness against his pants.

It is Berkeley, the sickly miniature poodle, who resembles so perfectly the manicured hedges and bushes in the yard that Dominic wonders whether the gardener, after finishing with the hedges and azaleas, applied his craft to the poodle. Berkeley reminds him of the toy dogs he sees in the neighborhood and can't help from imagining kicking into the street when they start yipping at him. She is also the central symbol of



his infidelity but the dog can't know this, he thinks, as Berkeley stares at him with the most submissive of stares. As he leans down, she dips into his hand.

"I'll have you know, Dominic," Mrs. Shelley says – and he looks up to see all of them staring – "that Berkeley hasn't ever warmed up to *anyone* so quickly."

Laura has warned him of her mother's obsession with community theater, and Dominic hears her line as if it were delivered on stage, or coached for the past week and a half.

"Figures," Laura says.

"Come here, girl," Dr. Shelley calls.

Dominic gives Berkeley one last pat on the side before she wobbles over to Dr. Shelley. Dominic wipes at the hair on his pants, but most of it sticks to his hand. The dog is more than shedding; she's sick and losing her hair. He clasps his hands; they are past the moment when the lack of greeting to Dominic started being awkward.

"Nick," Pierce says, and they shake. Dominic does not apologize for the exchanged dog hair.

Dr. Shelley emerges from behind his son. Pierce, Francine, Kendra, and Laura watch intently, but Dominic maintains eye contact with his former pediatrician.

Dr. Shelley extends his hand. "Hello, Dominic."

"Dr. Shelley," he says, in the way old friends greet each other. Even Dominic is surprised by the inflection, by the realization that flashed, that Dominic and Dr. Shelley are closer because they share secrets. The feeling has caught him off guard so that he has to remind himself to be tough on his future father in law.

Meanwhile, Pierce examines the Camry. He had hoped to avoid the discussion about the car, but the Shelleys outside greeting has screwed everything up. “What year is this?” Pierce asks.

“Ninety-five,” Dominic admits.

“Recognize it?” Laura asks.

“It looks exactly like Laura’s old Camry,” he announces, then interjects before anyone could explain: “But who can tell. It looked new last time we saw it.”

He laughs toward Laura. The joke was intended for her, perhaps innocently, perhaps not. The lack of her explanation is conspicuous – maybe a part of her was concerned about his confession earlier – instead she abandons the topic and stands beside Dominic. Dominic reaches his arm around her and the Shelleys stare before dispersing.

“Your bags,” he reminds her, opening up the trunk. “Which ones?” he asks.

“Just bring them all in.” She looks toward her family, plants a big kiss on his cheek, and taps his pants pocket to find the ring case. He is happy to see the ring is not too noticeable, no more than his wallet in the other pocket – actually it provides an illusion of symmetry.

It has not been a perfect road but the path is clear, Dominic thinks, carrying Laura’s bags down a long hallway with a wooden floor and Oriental rug, antique cabinets and paintings lining both walls, chandeliers hanging tentatively by thin, glittering chain. Carrying a lazy man’s load, Dominic feels like a bull in a china shop. Had there been so much fragility in the place when Laura and Pierce were growing up? One game of tag, a misstep, could mean impalement, crashing into the glass cabinet, hitting that chandelier

with a ball. He supposes they had enough room outside, but Dominic wonders how you can live in a house that does not allow children to play inside.

He emerges with the bags into the generic open space in which the Shelleys have gathered. It is a room they have admitted they are not sure what to do with, Dr. Shelley's documentation of family history competing with his wife's celebrations of theater. To the left are paintings of the Mayflower arriving at Plymouth Rock, portraits of Shelley ancestors, and a finely penned family tree Dominic has examined previously. It begins with Thomas Shelley, Duke of Manchester, and branches through generations to Daniel Shelley, M.D, and Francine Shelley near the lower left hand corner, with another two lines below. One line contains the names Pierce and Kendra Shelley; on the other the name Laura Shelley occupies less than half the line.

Dominic waits to be instructed on where to go with Laura's bags. It has taken a year but they are no longer watching his every move. Dr. Shelley and Pierce talk separately from the group of women, who hover around Mrs. Shelleys' latest purchase: an original advertisement for *Cats*' Broadway debut in 1982. He is surprised by her voice when she breaks out into song. "Memory, turn your face to the moonlight. Let your memory feed you..." The rest of the family looks at the floor, waiting for a train to pass. Francine is impressive in the single verse she sings, or perhaps it is the acoustics in this empty room with high ceilings and wooden floors. Dominic taps the end of his fingers together at the end of the song but the load is getting heavy.

"Where are these going?" he asks from behind a mound of garbage bags.

"Upstairs," Laura says, pointing. "Third door on the left."

Though Dominic is nervous about the variable inserted into this dinner at the Shelleys – his request for a blessing and subsequent engagement – he knows what to expect of Shelley dinners. He is surprised with how little has changed over the past year; a year with his family was a century in Chestnut Hill. His mother went from sober evangelical Catholic to drunken atheist overnight; his Uncle Louis always had crutches or a cast or story to tell. When the Rossis got together, usually for a funeral or shotgun wedding, or on the miraculous holiday when money wasn't owed from one to another, there was always a tally taken, like attendance, to see who was in jail, when he or she was getting out, who was going next. But in Chestnut Hill, nothing has changed. Dr. Shelley remains the stoic authority. Francine's dramatic nature extends beyond the holiday revue at Chestnut Hill College; she treats the house like her stage. Pierce is the overachieving son who gets away with endless teasing among Shelleys and probably extends it to the office or country club regardless of whether his comments are not welcome. Pierce's wife, Kendra, has the soft voice you expect to hear from makeup saleswomen, but she talks mostly to the Shelleys about her residency.

When the bags are unloaded, Dominic returns to the open room and Laura catches his eye, then nods to her father and brother, as stiff as business associates. He can see already that she is going to be directing traffic this evening. It is at first comforting, but Dominic doesn't like to be in any position where he is told what to do, or worse yet, where he is supposed to be thankful for it.

Laura opens the door to the basement and addressed her family with words Dominic doesn't understand, in French, and a number, seventy-nine. Francine speaks first: "I do think it appropriate, don't you, Daniel?"

Laura glosses over Dominic's gaze to fix on her father and brother, who look at each other for a time before Dr. Shelley agrees. Francine claps in celebration; there has been some type of accomplishment in the decision. Laura arrives with the bottle and sets it on the dining room table. Dominic is receptive to the movement in the room, Dr. Shelley and Pierce gravitating to the dining room table and the women – Laura, Francine, and Kendra – walking into the kitchen to help prepare the salad, soup, and dinner.

At a house other than his own, Dominic ordinarily waits to be assigned a seat, but he knows his place at the table: in the foldout chair in front of the different place setting. Francine apologized to him last Christmas: she had only five sets of matching china and place settings. She promised him a matching setting for their next gathering but the style of the other five, she explained, had expired the previous season, and she hadn't yet decided on another set. Actually Dominic doesn't care much about the place setting difference; it's the chair that annoys him. He sits several inches below the majestic chairs around the rest of the table, their high backs extending beyond Dr. Shelley and Pierce's heads like the tops of thrones. Francine's treatise last year on the purchase of place settings was addended with an explanation of the chair discrepancy; she had split the purchase of a dozen chairs with a friend of hers, who needed seven, and of course that was before Dominic was in the picture.

He could have sat in one of the other chairs, he realizes, after he's seated, but he is unfamiliar with the Shelley type of order, whatever it is that holds things together in the house.

"As you know, Dominic, I don't usually drink," Dr. Shelley says. "But I can't resist the '79 Meursault."

He pours a half glass for himself, then one for Pierce and Dominic.

“My father,” Dr. Shelley says, “bought a case of it for us when Laura was born. We save it for special occasions. I wonder how much is left...we had a case of '75 Montrachet for Pierce but it's gone by now.”

Pierce took his cue: “We made the mistake of opening one for my first million and each million after that. Needless to say, it was gone in no time.”

“My modest son,” Dr. Shelley says.

“I'll tell you what,” Pierce says, “I'm just glad I was able to navigate this market without taking a hit. What do you think of tech stocks?” Pierce asks into his wine, then looks up at Dominic.

“I couldn't say.”

“Sure you could, what do you think?”

Dominic has the same disarming feeling his students feel when he asks a question they are supposed to know the answer to. “I'd think they're pretty good, but I have a feeling –”

“They're garbage,” Pierce insists. “That Mustang you were drooling over outside?”

Dominic's lack of response is meant to discourage but he knows Pierce is unabated, at the dinner table and in life.

“Last quarter's dividends. I'll take you for a ride sometime. You'll see the difference between the old four point six liter and the new one. I'm telling you, you can't stay below four thousand rpms.”

So the special edition Shelby Mustang outside is Pierce's, certainly too much horsepower for the old man's refined tastes. Dominic is sure Pierce has earned the right to buy himself the \$45,000 special edition, but from what Dominic can tell from his conversations with Pierce over the past year, his primary responsibility is counting the family money. It was there when he started to handle it and it will be there when the next generation picks up. They call it old money, in Chestnut Hill. Dominic can remember hearing the term for the first time as a kid, wondering what value there was in torn and pasty bills and rusty nickels, but he understands now. Pierce can talk all he wants about interest rates and dividends, but a monkey could make money with millions of dollars already safely stored away.

Dominic coughs the irritation out of his throat and leans forward. His stature is reduced in the fold out chair, and the stitched tablecloth and fine china in front of him makes him nervous. In a casual setting, Dominic could lean forward and set his elbows on the table, or standing, he could step in closer to Pierce. Then he could have been an authority on any topic the Shelley men wanted to bring up, dividends included.

"My father used to own a sixty-eight Fastback," Dominic announces. "They're saying the new ones were designed to look like the old Fastbacks but the engines, of course, are a lot different. How do you like the new intake manifold?"

"You should hear it purr, I'm telling you," Pierce responds, unimpressed, and refusing to give up leverage. Maybe he does have a unique talent, Dominic acknowledges, in bullshitting. "I'd let you take it for a spin but afterward your Toyota might feel like a lawn mower."

"I have a good history with that car," Dominic says.

“They’re good cars, the Toyotas and Hondas,” Dr. Shelley says, swirling a small amount of wine in his glass. “*Are* you invested at all, Dominic?”

“In the stock market?” Dominic asks. It’s a foolish question. He needs to take it easy on the wine. “Well, kind of, to a degree,” he says, but he should have known the response is not sufficient, the two faces waiting patiently. He has always seen the stock market as an uninteresting gamble, not nearly as fun as watching to see if the Eagles cover. Besides, Dominic could never allow someone like Pierce determine the fate of his money. “I have my pension through teaching.”

“Is that it?” Pierce asks.

“That’s a nice thing to fall back on,” Dr. Shelley says. “But you should be looking at the market seriously too. We can put you onto pharmaceuticals. Can’t lose with them right now.”

“Things are a little tight right now,” he says to his future father in law.

“We’ve all been there,” Pierce says. “I remember those goddamned ramen noodles in college.”

Ramen noodles, cheap beer, and clothes from goodwill: Pierce had no doubt been a consumer of all things faux-poverty at the private college in the Northeast that Dominic forgot the name of.

“I’m actually trying to do more pro bono work right now,” Dr. Shelley says.

“Managed care is a mess and there are a lot of people struggling out there.”

The comment was directed at Dominic. Dr. Shelley had brought up the subject some time last year, and the statement registers as something that has been weighing on him.



“Why?” Pierce asks, frankly.

“A public service. Responding to a community need.”

Pierce shakes off the comment and takes a sip of wine.

“I envy you in a lot of ways, Dominic,” Dr. Shelley says. “Being a public school teacher. How do you like your job, teaching?”

“I love it,” Dominic says. It is his common response, but his love of it only occurs a few seconds at a time, when he sees student’s recognition or interest. Most of the time, it is work and he is hard pressed. “I love history. And the kids keep me sharp.”

“I’m a big fan of history too,” Dr. Shelley admits, sitting back now in his chair.

“Did I mention that my ancestors were Dukes in England?”

Dominic points and nods. Everyone traces their history to royalty and never to plebeians and criminals. Dominic’s father’s side is from Naples. His mother doesn’t know where she comes from. Ireland, Italy, Greece, she once listed with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Do you know a lot about the Mayflower?” Dr. Shelley asks.

“Some.”

“Charles Shelley was on board, was one of the first settlers here, one of the first to step foot on Plymouth Rock.”

“That’s really something.” Dominic is interested in the history but annoyed at the privileging of original settlers over those who came in the 1800s out of poverty; or worse yet, over the indigenous Americans. And what has changed: the Shelleys remain established and wealthy, with net worth in the Philadelphia blue book, and the Rossis are documented by police departments, lawyers, and credit agencies. “When my father’s

ancestors came over, the Ellis Island immigration employee shortened his name because it was too long, to Rossi.”

“Fascinating,” Dr. Shelley says.

“Everyone has a story I guess,” Dominic says.

“History is a great thing to specialize in, son.”

“I couldn’t teach anything else.”

“All of our lessons are laid out for us.”

“It’s a great job except for the pay,” Pierce says.

“There’s a balance somewhere,” Dominic says, intent on a quick response.

“Between financial earning and...”

“Individual return,” Dr. Shelley says.

“Individual return doesn’t balance my checkbook,” Pierce says.

Dominic grins out of politeness and senses Dr. Shelley is doing the same. His amusement with his son is somewhat sympathetic. The moment has allowed Dominic a glimpse into their relationship, into his father’s greatest fear for his son, that he has become shallow as a result of a massive inheritance and an emphasis – with the house alone – on things. How does Dominic fit into this mix, he wonders, realizing gradually over the course of the glass of wine that his place at the table, though tentative as of yet in a fold out chair, can be permanent. By the end of the night, and officially following his wedding to Laura, he’ll be identified in the continuum of Shelley men in the lower left-hand corner of the family tree dating back to the Duke of Manchester.

From the dining room, the commotion in the kitchen – across the massive, generic space – is collective, voices jumbled with the arrangements of dishes, bowls, utensils, pots, and pans. The women’s absence is conspicuous until Francine emerges with a large glass bowl of salad, her steps short and steady to compensate for the weight, and sets it down in front of the men. She holds up a finger when she arrives, asking for them to wait for the women, or perhaps she’s preoccupied with another thought; the men oblige, as Pierce is talking about the financial sector and government intervention. As Francine scurries across the generic void, her deep breath is audible and she wipes sweat from her forehead. Kendra walks past her with one foot in front of the other on the hypothetical line a model would follow, her gait pronounced enough that her breasts bounce. After a glass of wine, Dominic cannot help but peek for a glimpse as she leans into kiss Pierce. The financial analyst hardly misses a beat in his discussion of government intervention, and Kendra’s not even fazed by his ignorance. When Laura emerges from the kitchen, Dominic is tempted to get up and greet her, but in a moment of weakness, he wants what Kendra has given to Pierce, catered attention. But Laura’s too busy planning and plotting – he sees it in the way her eyes dart over the seen in front of her – and when she is sure her father is not watching, she gives Dominic an eager thumbs up and he tries to be subtle by winking to her. She turns, nearly running into Francine, behind her with a bowl of dressing. Francine exhibits seasoned domestic agility in dodging her daughter without spilling. “Come and get it,” Mrs. Shelley says.

Dominic has made a mistake in showing up with an empty stomach as the wine has hit him quicker than he expected. He has been mostly quiet in the past ten minutes. The salad will help to fill him but what he’s looking forward to is the tri tip roast wafting

from the kitchen with the draft of women's perfume, or perhaps stuck on their clothes. The women sit down and Francine scoops out salad. No one is quite sure what to talk about. They are a family that is comfortable with silence but his presence has changed the mood.

"It's nice to sit down for a family meal," Laura begins. "God, things have been so busy down at the center."

"A lot of monkey business?" Pierce asks, and Dominic can see from the reactions around him that the joke has been made before, perhaps repeated for his benefit.

"I worry about them," Laura says. "All they have is a janitor monitoring them, but if something happens..."

"There's nothing you can do about it," Dr. Shelley says. "Don't worry about it."

"They get lonely."

"It's not like they know it's Christmas," Pierce adds.

"Nevermind," Laura says.

"I know you've been busy, dear," Francine says. "Believe me I'm empathetic. We're doing a matinee and eight o'clock show for four days straight this week." She has spoken to Dominic so that he is obliged to be curious.

"Her revue," Laura says. "Rogers and Hammerstein's A Grand Night for Singing."

"I'm a singer, not a dancer. You should see the things they have me doing."

"Like what, somersaults and cartwheels?" Pierce asks.

“No, like a lift,” Francine says. Dominic remembers the padding he noticed in her shape, wonders who is doing the lifting, then tries to abandon the thought. He likes Francine.

“You both have to get out to see the show,” Dr. Shelley says to Laura and Pierce.

“I’m going to get so drunk at New Year’s,” Francine says.

“One glass will do it,” Pierce says.

“She does it every year,” Laura says.

Dominic has taken a valuable lesson from Kendra across the table. Make eye contact and nod, ask questions and answer when it is expected. He doesn’t enjoy falling into line, could have never been a soldier, but the nervousness about the engagement has made him rigid; and the wine has made him self-conscious. Another line of silence breaks when the doggy door flap from the kitchen unlatches and Berkeley’s head pops through with droopy, curious eyes.

“There she is,” Francine says, getting up abruptly from the table. “Where did everyone go?” she asks the poodle, who arduously extends one leg at a time through the doggy door, allowing it to slide across her back. Dominic expects that Francine is going to pick Berkeley up but her intention is to guide and encourage her.

The generic room has never been as large as when they watch Berkeley traverse it, and though it is probably better to hold his tongue, Dominic decides to confront the situation head on. “She looks good,” Dominic says, “all things considered.”

“You wouldn’t believe how *resilient* she’s been,” Francine says.

“You really should put her down,” Pierce says.

Kendra slaps him playfully, with the chorus of disappointment from Francine and Laura. Dominic is the only one who has noticed that Dr. Shelley does not seem to disagree. Of course, Dominic wouldn't mind seeing the poodle go either but this is a secret he'll conceal.

"Maybe it's all downhill from here," Dominic says, meaning to encourage. He notices Laura's surprised gaze and Pierce's enjoyment of his misstatement. "I mean, you know, she's on the road to recovery."

"I agree with you, Dominic," Francine asserts, making a show of support for him. "She's only a year and a half."

"Fifteen months," Laura clarifies, before forking a scoop of salad into her mouth.

Fortunately, no one else at the table has taken the bait, and ignorance, he realizes, is a necessary component of the functional family. Were a comment like that sprung at a Rossi or McDermott family table, it would have initiated a barrage of insults, several lines of attacks that would eventually be untraceable to the initial prompt and exist collectively as aggression. So this is what functional family dinners are like, Dominic thought last year at his first dinner with the Shelleys, letting conflict settle or disintegrate, changing the subject. Or maybe, to be fair, it is respect.

When they transition from salad to dinner – the women once again leaving the men and shuttling salad bowls and plates of food away – he thinks about the dinners on *Little House on the Prairie*. The tri tip is like nothing he's ever tasted before, so tender it slides off the fork. He tells her how wonderful it is; he is suddenly the friendly neighbor invited to dinner, Eddie Haskell on *Leave it to Beaver*. It is television, he realizes, which has directed him on exactly how to act at a family dinner.

Dominic is startled by something brushing against his foot, thrilled for a moment as Kendra happens to focus on him, but when he looks down he sees the pile of soft, scraggly hair he sees at his feet.

“Would you look at that?” Francine says. “She’s usually a *terror* when it comes to strangers.”

“Dominic’s not a stranger,” Laura says.

“Of course he’s not.”

The poodle is staring up at Dominic with anticipation. “Can I give her a potato or something?”

“No,” Francine protests, as if reaching for his arm. “Absolutely no starches. You can give her meat...”

“No starches,” Pierce repeats. “What a little princess.”

Dominic hands her a piece of tri tip – his last – from his plate.

“Starches conflict with her medication and diet. She’ll *expire*, Pierce.”

“Put her out of her misery.”

The conversation changes quickly to Laura’s work, and the subject of orangutans somehow allows them to segue to childhood memories between Laura and Pierce, when Laura used to ask Pierce to be a pony and Pierce ran her into the walls. The reminiscence is playful and light. Pierce is allowing himself to be disarmed. Dominic’s immediate contempt for Pierce – beginning irrationally, with his resemblance to Dr. Shelley, and reinforced by his aggressive talk of financial management – eases in these moments as Pierce complains about his times as a donkey.

Kendra – only after making sure no one was taking a breath before speaking – talks about her rotation in the emergency room, treating her first gun victim. As she describes the image, the opportunity for a segue surfaces in Dominic’s mind – I’ve been shot at – before he subdues the thought. He listens to Kendra’s description but she defers because they are all eating, and without a transition, Dr. Shelley talks about a subject they can all stomach, managed care and financial management of hospitals. Though it is a leap in subjects for Dominic, he sees how the two topics are of a similar strain for Dr. Shelley, for Kendra who talks about underwriting, and for Pierce who talks about privatization. Dominic waits for his moment to interject, but it has taken about ten minutes for the conversation to wind down. Mostly everyone is finished with their meal; he sees the bottoms of plates and hears deep breaths and concealed burps.

“Did he die?” Dominic asks, hoping the interjection plants quickly.

He is careful with his stare at Kendra, doesn’t want to challenge her necessarily, is just curious.

“The victim, the guy who was shot,” Dominic clarifies. “Did he make it?”

“You know,” Kendra says, and Dominic is embarrassed that he has put her on the spot. “I don’t know. I became occupied with a real bad case of pneumonia, elderly woman, and ended up leaving at the end of a twenty-four at eight in the morning. And the next day, he was gone.”

“The volume of patients must be *unbelievable*,” Francine says.

“Absolutely,” Kendra confirms.

He is about to apologize when Dr. Shelley jerks abruptly to his right, sneezes and excuses himself, transitions quickly back to his previous stature. There seems to be a



collective suspense around the table, a watchfulness, and it occurs as if in slow motion: Dr. Shelley's head rears back and his face condenses, before releasing another sneeze, this time high pitched and woeful, the sneeze you expected out of a sixteen year old girl. "Excuse me," he says, holding his napkin.

"Uh-oh, here we go," Pierce says.

"It's the wine," Francine says, then holds her mouth. Dr. Shelley shoots her a contemptuous look before his face crumples, and he emits a punctuated squeal like Dominic has never heard before. The amusement, from what Dominic can gather, is derived from watching him trying to compose himself after each sneeze. Laura reaches for Dominic's leg and then holds his hand. They are united in this disarmament of her father's authority. By the seventh or eighth sneeze, the man is red in his face and has steady stream of mucus coming out of his nose. Francine moves the wine away from him, and he reaches to move it back. The bottle is nearly empty, Dominic realizes, on account of Dr. Shelley's thirst for the special '79. He and Pierce had one glass each and the women have been drinking water.

Laura squeezes his hand underneath the table. "Okay, I think it's time to prepare dessert?" she says.

"Prepare?" Pierce asks. "The pie's already made. It's not like we have to grow the peaches."

He has said something wrong, but Dominic, as a novice in etiquette at family dinners, isn't sure what, even considers commiserating with Pierce; but Pierce fields the message in the stare from his wife, which for all Dominic can tell, has something to do with peaches and cream pie. "I can help prepare," he says.

“It will take a little while to brew the coffee,” Laura says, and her mother, brother, and sister in law enthusiastically agree, rising abruptly from the table. Dominic has only recently eaten his last bite of the tri tip, had been contemplating another serving, and Kendra still has half of the food on her plate. But Laura is already clearing the table. This prompts Kendra to follow suit, along with Francine, and even Pierce, who Dominic has noted is usually perfectly comfortable with letting the women clean up. “You just relax,” Francine says. “You gentleman can talk in the study.”

He assumes she’s referring to the three of them, but Pierce is off into the kitchen before Dominic is out of his seat, startling the dog he forgets has been at his feet. He waits for the cue from Dr. Shelley, who still has not fully recovered from the sneezing fit, the redness still lingering in his cheeks. “Damned wine,” he admits. “Has to be some type of allergy.”

When they stand, Dr. Shelley approaches him and sets his hand on Dominic’s shoulder. “Go ahead into the study. I’ll be right in,” he says, then walks toward the bathroom.

In childhood and young adulthood, Dominic liked having everything out in the open, preferred a fight to snide remarks. He *liked* fighting. Only later did he learn to debate without the threat of violence. His father never told him there would be conflicts he couldn’t bulldoze through with his fists, and he considers himself a novice in formal argument. Anxious, Dominic peruses the study. He feels comfortable around books despite their absence in the first eighteen years of his life. They are a novelty he associates with adulthood, maturity. Across the room, he notices a fake Christmas tree, decorated symmetrically with red, silver, and green ornaments and tinsel speckled on

every third branch, and a star perched evenly on the top. With the space available to the Shelleys, he wonders if the tree was ever disassembled, if there was a seasonal ritual in decorating the tree. When his parents were together, they always had real trees in the corner of the living room, decorated hastily each year, including the year his father rigged light bulbs with wire and half of the tree caught on fire. His father simply turned the black side to the wall, and they kept it until New Year's. There was the tree too that Dominic "watered;" he was so excited when his father arrived with the tree that he jumped out of his mother's grasp in the tub and stared in wonderment without realizing he was emptying his bladder. Best tree we ever had, his father said that January. Nothing could discourage his father from getting a real tree, except, apparently, his divorce from Dominic's mother. He and his father never had a tree, never really celebrated Christmas, after that. A tree appeared at his mother's house like a leap year, one season sober out of four.

There is a picture on the bookshelf behind him of Laura and Pierce in childhood, Pierce with one of those bowl cuts Dominic hated. Dr. Shelley's framed degrees hang on the wall. Harvard. UPenn. UPenn again. Dominic can't remember what he's done with his degrees. He has transcripts from Philadelphia Community College and Temple University but never paid the fifteen dollars for a diploma. In the picture, Laura must be about 13 years old, with the faintest hint of maturity in her eyes, not altogether different. She is mistaken for younger all the time. He investigates the picture a little closer and realizes the obvious, that Laura has lived a full eighteen years of life before ever meeting Dominic Rossi – arguably a full twenty-five years if you gloss over their previous interactions – a part of her that Dominic knows by proximity but can't know intimately.

He wonders whether he really knows Laura at all. A father knows his daughter, Dominic thinks, but he rescinds the generosity afforded to Dr. Shelley and reminds himself to be firm and even aggressive with him just as he hears Dr. Shelley's greeting behind him.

Dr. Shelley takes a chair that seems to have his outline in its cushions and Dominic sits across from him on the love seat. Berkeley apparently has been following him, many steps behind. She approaches Dominic and looks up at him, hoping for food, and Dominic opens his hands to show they are empty.

"Okay, Dominic. I guess we have a few things to talk about." The red rush of blood in Dr. Shelley's face has dispersed and his composure is returned.

"Maybe we can discuss the events in chronological order," Dominic says, hearing the eagerness in his voice. It is a teaching line Dominic uses when a class has difficulty understanding the material.

"Fair enough," Dr. Shelley says. "What do you want to know?"

"What happened between you and my mother?" Dominic asks though he already knows the answer. He is on the offensive.

"To what degree can I be open with you?" Dr. Shelley asks.

"Completely."

"I'll expect the same in return."

He agrees with a nod.

"I'd like to give you a complex and thorough explanation but I'm afraid it's pretty simple. Your mother was a beautiful woman and in a moment of weakness –"

"She still is a beautiful woman."

"Of course, I'm sure she is."

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"I'd like to give you a complex and thorough explanation but I'm afraid it's pretty simple. Your mother was a beautiful woman and in a moment of weakness –"

"She still is a beautiful woman."

"Of course, I'm sure she is."

“It was vodka then.”

“And you still...”

He nods.

“Can’t you lose your license for that?”

“Yes, indeed.”

Dominic suppresses the stirring in his stomach – things once hibernated are being roused – and allows a deep breath to nourish a small sense of satisfaction in what is being done here, a sense of relief that Dr. Shelley is forthcoming. Dominic hates indirection, over-explanation, and the last thing he wants with Dr. Shelley is a competition in the creativity of their denials.

“What else can I tell you?” Dr. Shelley asks.

“Did you love her?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“That was a stupid question.”

“Not unwarranted.”

“Have you been with other women since?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“I know it sounds convenient, but I learned my lesson. What I realized later was, as beautiful as your mother was, it wasn’t worth it. It had little to do with your mother, Dominic, in the end.”

“It wasn’t worth it,” Dominic repeats.

“I’m not saying –”

“I know what you’re saying.”

Dominic is in the position of directing the conversation but isn’t sure where to go next. He has accomplished his goal of putting Dr. Shelley on the defensive – there is nothing by way of details that he needs to clarify – and he knows what Dr. Shelley’s relationship with his mother was. It was a fling for him, another moment of desperation for his mother.

“She never loved you either,” Dominic says, but isn’t sure it’s the truth.

“I know, Dominic. I’m sorry.”

Dominic could feel satisfied at the words coming from him, but his nerves have already assembled for the attack: “The last time, after my mother and I...fought against that kid and his mother...”

“I remember the fight.”

“That night, my mother moved out of the house.”

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Shelley says, his palms facing upward, as if his hands were clean of the situation.

“My father kicked her out that night.”

“I don’t know what to say about that.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t come down and beat your ass.”

“Well,” Dr. Shelley responds. “Looking at you, I doubt I would have had a chance.”

Dominic nods, subdued somewhat by the man’s composure. “And that was it for you? You were done with her?”

“I was done with all women except my wife.”

“And did my mother ever talk to you after that? Did you ever help her out in any way?”

“I never saw her again,” Dr. Shelley says.

“Never offered to help her get on her feet?”

“There was nothing I could do to make it better. Your mother wasn’t interested in me after that, after those two weeks. Understand...,” Dr. Shelley says, and for the first time, Dominic can see that the man is flustered. He’s not sure what to do with his hands. Dominic makes sure to remain still. “It was a mistake.”

“It’s all right,” Dominic says, only because there is no more progress to be gained, and the man’s fidgeting is making him uncomfortable.

“You look good, Dominic,” Dr. Shelley says, composed again, a doctor.

“Healthy.”

Dominic has never been sure what to do with complements, especially now.

“Thank you.”

“You were quite a physical specimen even back then.”

“It’s my father’s genes.”

“You really outclassed that boy.”

“I remember, believe it or not.”

Dr. Shelley yawns, or perhaps it is a sort of sigh, and says, “So okay, let’s get down to business,” as though all of the discussion, about Dominic and about his mother, has been preliminary to things that mattered. “Speaking of lessons...” Dr. Shelley says and regains his composure, his hands folded in his lap. “What would you like to tell me?”



Dominic takes the time to compose himself, rubbing his chin and Adam's apple as if priming them for a soliloquy. "I'm sorry too," he says. "I made a mistake, and I've learned my lesson."

"Fair enough. So now what?"

Dominic has prepared to say more about the weekend in Berkeley, and about the pain he went through afterwards, but the apology alone is enough for Dr. Shelley. Once a doctor makes his diagnosis, he doesn't need to be versed again on the symptoms. He is more concerned with the prognosis.

"So now, I don't screw it up again."

"So you're serious about Laura?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"And there's no other agenda here?"

"God no."

"So you're saying that it's pure coincidence that you're dating the daughter of the man who...was with your mother?"

"To be honest," Dominic says, "I forgot about you and my mother until Laura and I met and started falling for each other."

"So your intentions with Laura are sincere?"

"Listen," he says, clenching a fist out of habit. "I'm happy to forget the past if you are." As much as he's progressed in argument, he'll never learn to be on the defensive.

"Well, there's something else," Dr. Shelley says. "That is Laura's old car you're driving."

“I know.”

“Okay, you admit it.”

“I admit that’s her old car.”

“That you purchased?”

“Jesus, what did you think?”

Lying like riding a bicycle.

“Just give me peace of mind here,” Dr. Shelley says. “Who did you buy it from?”

“A dealership out in Conshohocken, used to be Kranlon’s, now it’s something else.”

“Okay. I sold it to him, the owner, Gary.”

“Why?” Dominic asks.

“I don’t know. Somebody stole that car once – I’m not sure if Gary told you.”

“No, he didn’t mention it. Laura did though.”

“I guess it didn’t affect the title.”

“You think I stole the car or something?”

“I’m not saying that,” Dr. Shelley says. “Give me the benefit of the doubt here. I just need some peace of mind. There are a number of coincidences I’m working through.”

“You said it.”

“Is there anything else *I* can do?” Dr. Shelley asks.

Placating stubbornness, Dominic recognizes a firm, balanced resolve being reached; when both ends of a fulcrum are balanced, the base is immobile.

“I don’t think so.”

“All you can do is take care of her,” Dr. Shelley says.

Dominic thinks about describing his mother’s vacillating dependency between alcohol and Jesus but realizes he is referring to Laura.

“I will.”

Dr. Shelley nods, and Dominic does the same. In a period of restless silence between them, Dominic is afraid they will have to get up and hug. Instead, Dr. Shelley breaks the silence. “Well, anyway, yes, I give you my blessing,” he says, getting up, and extending his hand. “Best of luck.”

Dominic forgets about the dog and kicks it when he stands. He and Dr. Shelley ignore the dog’s yelp and shake hands. Dominic feels closure and in the gesture. It is time to move on; he will communicate this to Laura too so that there are no more snide remarks at dinner tables.

Dr. Shelley walks to the kitchen, waving for Dominic to stay. Dominic feels for the case in his pocket. The dog stares at him, its eyes hollow and black, already a void. Though Dominic has made a compromise by apologizing, he has successfully earned Dr. Shelley’s blessing, without even asking for it. Without even asking for it, he thinks, as Laura emerges from the kitchen, pushed from behind by Kendra, Francine, and Pierce. “What’s this all about?” she asks.

The statement strikes him as false. Initially he had thought the proposal was his and Laura’s act for an unsuspecting audience, but once he realizes Dr. Shelley gave him the blessing before he had asked, he remembers the Shelleys’ abrupt exit from the table to do dishes and prepare dessert, including Pierce. There is no utility in his feigned response. He feels slighted in a way that tempts him to spoil the whole plan, maybe play

dumb or announce that he and Laura were engaged a month ago in the airport. But if Dominic has learned anything about relationships, it is value of efficiency and simplicity and the pitfalls of pride. He will continue with the plan and address the issues with Laura later when they are alone. His transition to acceptance is abrupt and aided by the image of Laura, now in front of him, tangible without a touch. He's no hippie but he believes in something of an aura around them. It lifts the hairs off the back of his neck and the beat of his heart. He loves her. There is such a dramatic swing in his approach, from spoiler to soldier, that he is embarrassed about the ring bought out of a pawnshop in Vegas. How will he explain himself, he wonders, as he takes the knee, opens the case, and asks the question, stiff and dry. Laura's eyebrows have risen with anticipation. Her yes is quiet but cracked with feeling. She holds her face and cries. Dominic feels inadequate as an actor, then realizes Laura is not pretending. He takes the ring – sharper, bigger, and shinier than the one he'd purchased – and slips it onto her finger. When he stands he holds her, and the Shelleys surround them in a hug so gentle he can hardly feel them.

They eat the peaches and cream pie as promised, along with some coffee. When they finish, Dr. Shelley calls for another bottle, the second to last of the '79, for everyone else, he says, pouring himself the first glass. It is only 7:00. They finish the bottle Laura has retrieved from the basement, and another one after that. They're arranged in a half circle around the fire, talking this time without reservation: Kendra grosses out Francine with descriptions of a liver with cirrhosis and everyone encourages her; Pierce talks about the affairs in his office; Laura's describes her interactions with the local deli owner in South Philadelphia, who had initially offended her by calling her sweetheart until she

admitted it had become kind of endearing. It was not only Dominic and Laura who had been rigid at dinner. They had all been anxious about the proposal, some for different reasons than others. But over the course of two bottles of wine beside the fire in the study, Dominic senses a release beyond intoxication. They have been able to let go of something, accept an inevitable fate.

The discussion of where Dominic and Laura would sleep could have been awkward, but Francine admits she isn't going to be checking on them if Laura was to mosey down the hall into the guest room, which has been prepared for Dominic. They are three couples when Francine admits this, latching onto her husband's arm, Pierce and Kendra whispering in each other's ear, Laura sitting on Dominic's lap. Dominic hasn't thought about it -- it would have been ridiculous to spend the night of his engagement alone. When Pierce and Kendra leave, and Dr. and Mrs. Shelley retire to bed, no one makes a note of Dominic and Laura walking upstairs arm in arm and entering the guest room together.

There had been a lingering unity in the couples' condition in the study, and Dominic is drunk with it, as he and Laura settle into the room and prepare for bed. He had been naive in his expectations of confrontation. As a youth, fearing the worst had often led to the worst; expecting a fight had resulted in one, in the same way that staring at a pothole while driving was a sure way to hit it. The adult world is of course different, and though Dominic had been dealing with an older man, a doctor no less, he had still expected fireworks. Even as an adult, he is still caught off guard by conciliation.

Of course, it is equally naive to think he can abandon his resentment in a single day. In a way, he would be lost without it, the most significant of many chips on his shoulder.

As Laura brushes her teeth, Dominic becomes increasingly eager to confront her, so that his question probably comes off as an attack.

“Why didn’t you just tell me they were expecting the proposal?” he asks.

“I wanted you to sweat it a little,” she says, more playful than he is.

“Where did you get the ring?”

“At a *jewelry* store,” she says mockingly.

He is irritated but she doesn’t sense it, in and out of the bathroom. When she’s finished, she shuts off the light and snuggles in next to him in bed

“Your father gave me his blessing before I even asked,” he says to her in the dark.

She is silent, then he feels the vibration of her laugh through her body and hears the breath. She laughs loudly and he for some reason shushes her. It is the only sound in the house, and he has the sensation of the house as a chamber of echoes. I’m sorry, she says, and her laughs have reached him now, prompting his own. She recognizes this cue and slides in closer to him, rubbing the top of her leg against his.

His irritation dissipates and seems to reassemble in his midsection. He rolls on top of her and delves into her neck. He is already in second gear at five thousand rpms, but he knows from Laura’s hands on his chests that she is resisting him.

“We have to be quiet,” she says. “Go slow.”

She has committed but not in the abrupt, aggressive way that Dominic has made his move. She touches her lips to his delicately, as if afraid of matching positive to

positive, and rolls her lips along his neck like a snail's motion, which only heightens his aggression. He knows she'll give into him eventually, the way he wants it – the overt always overcomes the subtle. But soon her hands are on his chest again.

“Dominic. Slow.”

He releases his excitement in a long sigh, as if he is deflating his erection. He rolls off of her and stares at the ceiling.

“I can't go slow,” he says, massaging himself. “Not tonight.”

“Ah, that's sweet,” she says through a yawn. For whatever reason, she is not in the mood for sex, but she rolls in close to him.

Dominic is left with a predicament that he cannot abandon for sleep. His mind is hyper-prone to the sexual, thinking not of lesson plans but the senior Marsha Banks who sits in the first seat and always wears skirts in his Honors American History course, not of the Eagles' upcoming Christmas game against the Cowboys but rather the line of cheerleaders he remembers from the last broadcast. His erection only goes away when he stops addressing it, but there is an uneasiness that lingers. His first proposal to Laura may have been inappropriate, but it was still an engagement. He thinks of sharing wine with the family in the study and feels like a fool. He should have addressed the issue in these critical, early hours of his integration into Shelley family. If he had been quicker to realize Dr. Shelley's snafu, he could have called attention to it. But instead, he mostly nodded and agreed, even apologized and thanked him.

There is an obvious disrespect that has been committed, he convinces himself, now sober and awake. He'll take it up with Laura in the morning, make an announcement at breakfast that the Shelleys are one primo group of bullshitters. He is

comforted by this decision but still awake, trying to find non-sexual outlets into fantasy and sleep, which brings him back to the image of the Shelby Mustang in the driveway. He dissociates the car from Pierce and his peaches and cream wife and imagines driving the car, going through the gears. Where is he going? West, to Denver, winding out the engine through Colorado's mountains. The road is already paved into his subconscious. When he was sixteen years old, returned from his cross-country run from the police, he identified the Rocky Mountains as a barrier to be crossed in powerful cars. Since then, the images of driving cars through the mountains were epochal, responses to suppression. There was nothing he hated more as a teenager than obstacles and restraint: the City curfew, a teacher's scold, driving cones; he reverted to the image when reminding himself that it was possible to not just overcome obstacles, but overwhelm the world around you past its redline, pushing the engine to a steady hum through mountains with white peaks and crisp air. The fantasy of driving the Shelby Mustang is therapeutic – he has been a soldier today but neither Chestnut Hill nor their house of chambers nor the Shelleys themselves can suppress him forever – so he stays with the image, trying to remember which state is West of Colorado. He has introduced the conscious, logistical part of his brain and draws freshly from recent experience, knowing that if this is a fantasy the road leads to Vegas. The landscape changes from sharp, winding mountains to open dessert and now the Mustang is interchangeable with any classic car of choice, a '65 Mustang, the '68 Fastback, the golden '68 Camaro. Dominic isolates the image of gold, sees Venus' eyes, and the rest of the reel changes to her inviting look, the trailer and hum of jet engines, pictures of unknown frontiers and Botticelli. A rhinoceros, an Indian, and a stripper. A horrible or excellent joke. The image of Venus is spotlighted as



everything else fades. The fantasy has gone beyond therapeutic and become a disruption, more than sleep could contain. He startles Laura by rolling on top of her, moving her hand away from her stomach. He has anticipated working her up but for some reason she is wet. She has been touching herself. The faint smell of her reaches him and he is hasty entering her. Her eyes open large and then soften. She has insisted on slow and quiet but he refuses to conceal his grunts. She bites her lip but her voice squeaks through and the headboard lends percussion to their rhythm. You can't just stay in the low rpms. His eyes are closed and everything about her is golden and fresh, immediate and current. He is reaching climax quickly but so is she; if not slow and long, short and loud. When he finishes he opens his eyes to a reality he has left, reminds himself of Laura, but when he looks for hazel he sees that her eyes are closed and she is somewhere else. Come back, he thinks. I'm back. They embrace – his face in the pillow – and after he rolls off of her and tells her he loves her, he tolerates the silence because he knows it can be broken. At the end of the day, he tells his students, your documents will be deleted from the computer's memory. In the same way, everything he's thought of since lying down will be erased, leaving only his engagement to Laura.

## CHAPTER 9

The pervading feeling the next morning as he rolls over and wraps around Laura is that Laura is his. No, he thinks, Laura was his when she asked for his phone number at the zoo. Or maybe after he beat the shit out of Jake Tallon and saw the quiver in her lip as she stared at him; he knew what the quiver meant but had not been able to explore it until ten years later. He decides finally that Laura was his after his vigilantism against Hogeboom, when she invited him. During their first few months together, she had unraveled slowly, beginning with a non-confrontational confidence. She knew she had something he wanted but deflected his gaze; their first kisses were provocative rather than preliminary. Eventually, she leaned into him more and looked him up and down. Shirts became tighter, skirts shortened. When he finally did have the chance with her – she was leaning up against the dresser, exposing her legs, throwing her hair behind her, so fair and light that it seemed to float – he wanted to be delicate, but there was already adrenaline pumping through him. Her appeal had always been understated, forcing Dominic to pay close attention, but he was sure of her invitation that night because of the quiver on the left side of her mouth – as if for the six months he'd been trying to have his way with her, it was she who'd had a plan for him.

He nuzzles in close enough to Laura that he has woken her and she moans comfortably with his warmth. Funny how the world evens out in ten years, he thinks. They linger in the Shelley guest room and take their time cleaning up, but Dominic can

see preoccupation setting in with Laura, when she stares at the open suitcase with her hand covering her mouth. He walks up slowly behind her and gives her a kiss. “Relax,” he says. “It’s two days away.”

Whereas the quiet the night before had highlighted his restlessness – a running faucet isn’t disruptive beside a waterfall – he appreciates it this morning, along with the space of the guest room and bathroom, the Shelley home, Chestnut Hill. He is smack in the middle of a twelve-day teacher’s paid vacation. He has chosen the right career. He’s going to sleep in and catch up on his movies and reading.

“You know me,” she admits. “I’m a planner.”

“To say the least.”

One last time, he thinks. “Are you sure you don’t want to lay around on the couch all weekend, go out to dinner, watch some movies?” He has meant to offer an appealing alternative but knows the prospect of inactivity does not compare in her mind to New Year’s at Times Square. He adds the critical element of his offer: “With me.”

Her response is a kiss and an “I love you but...” The plan is already in place.

They descend into the Shelley kitchen to the smell of Francine’s French Toast and bacon. Francine welcomes them with a new moniker – the lovebirds – and prepares a breakfast plate for each while Kendra pours them coffee. Francine admits she’s not going to apologize for the cold food since they were late to arrive. Pierce and Dr. Shelley sit behind newspapers; the rest of the pages are spread across the table. The plates have already been cleared.

“Were you able to talk about anything this morning?” Francine asks Laura when she and Dominic are seated.

“No, not yet.”

Now what, Dominic thinks. Despite his resolution the night before, he has not prepared himself this morning to confront them on their complicated, upper class form of subterfuge.

“What are we going to do with you?” Francine asks Berkeley, sedentary on a circular dog bed, reacting with her eyes, with cynicism as efficient as that of an 80-year-old judge. The dog has seen more than they can know, the prospect of death, the decline of the spirit. Dominic sympathizes with the dog but he has already thought about how much he will have to feign disappointment when the dog kicks it. He knows Dr. Shelley and Pierce are with him on this too.

Dominic is an outsider again this morning as the Shelleys coordinate their New Year’s extravaganzas. When Laura commits to her stay in her parents’ suite at the Radisson Times Square, Dominic thinks about the arrangement and wonders if her invitation for him to accompany her was sincere. Pierce and Kendra, who are flying to Aruba tomorrow, decide they will leave their keys with Francine, and she can leave the keys to both houses for the house sitter in case of an emergency. Laura is clear about staying in Chestnut Hill until they leave for New York. Francine is nearly packed, she announces, but she must make sure the dog sitter has more than enough food and medication at *his*, or *her*, disposal. Why are Francine and Kendra looking at him? Laura is absorbed in the comics. What would the affluent male do, request to be excused respectfully with his fiancé and inquire quietly in the next room. What he wants to do is casually ask everyone what the fuck is up. The ladies are up to something again but perhaps he sees in Kendra’s smile directly to him that the antagonist is someone else.

He's comforted by the knowledge that his car is in the driveway. It is his mode of escape.

As Francine's concern about a dog and house sitter escalates, Dominic figures he's safe. They can't leave the house or the dog with anybody; there are two distinct skills sets required – one based in trust and the other in palliative care. But as he sits and enjoys his coffee, he realizes that Laura's plan is more intricate than her surreptitious approach to their engagement: he has already been assigned. He tries to ignore the realization, until he catches the five of them staring at him. He has not heard the last word spoken. Was it a question? He had been staring into his syrup thinking about *Patton, Hamburger Hill* – the theme for his Christmas viewing was going to be American war movies – as if they are already relics of a past life or one not chosen.

“I'm sorry?” he says, inciting a chorus of laughter.

“Would you mind sitting?” Laura asks, unable to conceal her laughter.

“What do you call this?” he says, indicating to the chair.

“For the house. For Berkeley.”

For the second time, he has been duped by Laura and her family. It is the women who keep their comfortable gazes on him; Dr. Shelley and Pierce look away: welcome to the family.

He looks at the dog as if she is eagerly anticipating his answer but her stare is indifferent. He has no choice but what the hell, how hard is it to take care of a sedentary dog and pristine house? “Sure,” he says, as nonchalant as possible, hoping the unspoken words are already registering with Laura. He takes comfort that she investigates his brevity; it is clear to her that his reaction is an anomaly.

It is stubbornness that keeps him from addressing Laura's planning and subterfuge with her, assuring her he is fine with the arrangement, avoiding even simple forms of dissent such as mockery or sarcasm. It is a skill he developed in childhood and has not fully abandoned; he is the perfect straight man through the rest of breakfast and all of the next two days, as Laura repeatedly asks him if he's okay watching the dog and house and he assures her its fine, not all right or wonderful, without elaborating – the key is never to elaborate. Laura, already in a frenzy, is perplexed by him; he has never shown her this before. He is not done with her, not until he leaves this place and has time to settle back into his groove in South Philadelphia, but he has made his point. On the night before she leaves, he addresses her again by kissing her neck but she announces that it is that time of the month.

On the morning of Laura's and her parents' departure, Dominic does his best to stay out of the way. The television, an old 27 incher without a remote, and – for the love of god, without cable – sits in a room ancillary to what Dominic would call a living room. Here he will have 10,000 square feet available to him and he's going to hole up for whole days and nights in a room that is 12 x 9. He is not yet able to relax. He hears the commotion of Laura and her parents separately above him and changes his goal from staying out of the way to helping them get out faster. He is the one that zips Laura's luggage closed for her – the bag is only getting bigger – as well as the one who carries the Shelleys' bags out to the car.

As Dr. Shelley and Laura make final checks of their bags, Francine goes over a three-page list with Dominic. The first page is the feeding and medication schedule for Berkeley – three serving times and only two meals – along with disclaimers she has

marked with stars of things to be avoided: starches, walks, running, car rides, interactions with other dogs, too much stimulation. He asks if there is a leash and she is confused by the question, or perhaps its location. She thinks there's one in Pierce's garage but he won't have to worry about it; he *certainly* won't need a *leash* for *her*. Why don't you add "life" to things to be avoided, Dominic thinks as Francine flips to the next page, a list of emergency contact information, for she and Dr. Shelley, Pierce and Kendra, along with the borough police and fire departments. The third page is a list of upkeep tasks – Dominic calls them chores – what to do with the trash, how to operate the dishwasher, clothes washer and dryer. She postponed the newspaper delivery so he didn't need to worry about recycling the paper. Why don't you include how to flush a toilet and wipe my ass, he thinks. His smile – though false – has encouraged Francine. She gives him a hug and says thank you, and touched by her, he envisions himself giving the floor one primo mopping job.

There is one more bag with Francine and Dominic offers to take it outside for her. He has yet to say goodbye and see Laura off. In a tee shirt and jeans, he is struck by the cold on his skin. He has been inside for two days straight. Laura halts her conversation with her father when Dominic approaches the car. Dominic sets the bags in the back of the Mercedes SUV and sees Francine cue Dr. Shelley, who reaches into his pocket. Dominic's first reaction is irreverence and then considers as a better course of action a subtle form of denial, but Dr. Shelley's statement – let me give you a few bucks to cover expenses over the next few days – reminds him Dominic that he has a job to do. Dr. Shelley hands him a roll of bills, a thick roll of \$20s Dominic figures for about two hundred dollars. Dominic probably is too effusive in his thanks and places the bills in his

pocket. He is tired of acting. As much as he loves Laura, he wants his future in laws to leave.

Laura comes by and plants a kiss on his lips. Cold. "Sure you don't want to stay?" he asks.

"No, Dominic."

Has she been crying, he wonders, as they exchange goodbyes: they are loved and will be missed. "You sure?" he says, and though the offer is no longer feasible, it is convenient, knowing her answer will be no. He smiles at her as she enters the car but her smile appears conciliatory. It is difficult to tell whether the look – a frown he has not seen much from Laura – is superficial and fleeting or an indicator of something deeper on a long road of emergence, situated close to the instinct that prompted her to manage him via plans, to keep her eyes closed during sex. Marriage is about working through minor complications, but he is tired, goddamnit. He is looking forward to being alone, even if it is in Chestnut Hill with Berkeley.

He waves as Dr. Shelley backs the Mercedes down the drive. It is a movie moment, Dominic thinks, more of an inciting action than a climax, and a vague feeling of a beginning settles into the circumstance. He has not yet thought about his New Year's resolution but he's going to be ambitious this year. It is going to relate to honesty with himself and commitment to Laura, or perhaps something more concrete. When the sound of the engine fades, he can only hear the wind whizzing through the branches of trees. He looks around, thinking there is an opportunity to be absorbed in the moment, but a chill overtakes him and he walks inside.



The closing of the door behind him echoes through the house. Francine, forgetting an occupant remains, has turned off all of the lights. There is no murmur of television or radio, only the hum of appliances. Francine's perfume is still in the air. He is not sure what he wants to do with his time. When Dominic arrives in the kitchen, Berkeley looks up at him with expectant eyes. "You are one sorry son of a bitch," Dominic says to the poodle, whose ears perk slightly at his voice.

He needs to go to Blockbuster and rent a bunch of movies, but maybe first he'll take a nap. Because he likes the TV on when he sleeps during the day, Dominic walks into the television room – what would his mother call it, a pantry – and lays down on the leather love seat, turns on a soap opera, and closes his eyes. Though he can think of nothing he wants more than a nap, sleeping will be a challenge. His insides are still would tight. His heartbeat is too disruptive for stillness. Relax, he tells himself; it's the beginning. His engagement to Laura and the turning of the New Year coincide with renewal. He leverages the idea and tries to be more specific about how he's going to improve himself this upcoming year. He's going to read more history books. No, he needs something more tangible. He's going to read a history book a week, or maybe every two weeks. Perhaps there will be graduate school applications. Not this year, not before a wedding. Maybe his resolution will be not to flirt with other women. It is a safety net, in a way, and also a challenge. For a moment, he is close to a resolution as he thinks about managing his life in terms of the present versus the past. He'll try not to make the same mistake twice, or maybe three times. A resolution should be clearer to him. Maybe an engagement is enough commitment in terms of self-improvement for the year. He'll work on his relationships with family members, Laura's and his own,

especially his mother, who he has been neglecting since he resumed his relationship with Laura. If there is anything that seriously needs fixing in the upcoming year – last year, it was his relationship with Laura – it is his relationship with his mother. He closes his eyes, intent on a nap one last time, mindful of a resolution in progress: that he is going to suck the most out of the moment this year instead of dwelling on the past.

He closes his eyes for ten seconds before realizing the nap isn't possible, at least in this room, on this love seat. He decides that he is hungry and walks into the kitchen. He is already bored. He misses his apartment. The thought of lying there on his own couch, contoured perfectly to his body, makes him lonely as if the apartment is the counterpart he misses during this vacation. He has been in the Shelley house for three days. Francine has said Berkeley cannot leave the house but Dominic is already plotting to take the dog to his apartment. What does she need? Only a dog bed, toys, and medication. He'll even set the little priss up on his bed if she wants.

As an adult, Dominic has learned not to think of things in black and white, between obeisance and resistance, but rather in terms of compromise, and he searches for a gray area between the rules and restrictions of Chestnut Hill and the lingering appeal of his apartment in South Philly. It is time to go somewhere, maybe find a Blockbuster and rent movies or engage in a larger enterprise, a drive out to Valley Forge; no, he's too restless for a plan without individual, utilitarian tasks. What is there to do in Chestnut Hill? This geographical pattern of thought, extending away from the Shelley estate, out to Main Street, and along branching roads, leads him to Roxboro and his mother. It is December 29, the Christmas season for Chrissakes, and he might as well get a fresh start on his New Year's resolution, if in fact he is going to commit to the one about his mother.

He can't remember exactly what the resolution was but regardless of his actions and statements, he knows that a visit would be progressive.

When he grabs his wallet and keys from the kitchen counter, Berkeley lifts her head. "I'm going for a ride," he says, and her ears perk. There is life left in her yet.. Perhaps it is the Shelleys and their medication obsession, not a mysterious ailment, that keeps Berkeley from walking and barking. He has to be careful, but it's time for a change in the dog's life. "Want to go for a ride?" he asks, watching the dogs ears perk again. "Okay, you little pain in the ass. We're going to see your new grandmother."

He is foolish to think the dog will follow when he waves to her. C'mon Berkeley, he says, then repeats it emphatically – he hears himself mimicking Francine's playful voice – but the dog sets her head down and watches him. Berkeley watches him as he approaches, lifts her head when he's close. Easy does it, he says, sliding his arms underneath her belly. He can already feel the atrophy of her muscles, loose and soft. Berkeley doesn't resist – doesn't have the gusto anymore – just emits a slow groan when he picks her up. That a girl, he says. He has expected that the dog would contour to the position of his arms, but he finds she is sliding away, like a bag of sand with a hole. He wraps both arms underneath, as if he is carrying not a single item but several.

When he sets Berkeley on the passenger seat, she collapses, but her head picks up when Dominic starts the engine. She steadies herself when Dominic slowly reverses down the driveway, and when he shifts into first gear and starts down the hill to Main Street. He has heard that dogs sometimes throw up in cars, but Berkeley is a trooper, he says, aren't you girl. She even picks herself up out of curiosity to see the world beside

the window. With the heat on, Dominic cracks the window and watches the dog's nose sniffle at the air.

At his mother's house, when he reaches to pick her up, she walks into his grasp. Her face is suddenly directly beside his, and he cringes at her breath – she is already dying inside. He walks quickly but as he approaches the steps to the house, the dog reaches her face closer to his and licks his cheek. Her tongue is dry and she may have left residue but Dominic cannot help but find it endearing. He wipes at his cheek with the top of his sleeve and knocks on the door, only realizing then that is not prepared to talk to his mother, to answer for being a negligent son. He has only the moment between her question, who is it, and the unlocking of the door to consider whether he wants to conceal his engagement or somehow break the news lightly.

His mother peeks through the crack in the door at him and opens it wider to see him fully. An odor wafts toward him; it could be her, the old bathrobe, or the house. She hasn't washed her hair in a few days. "What the hell is that?" she asks, staring at the poodle.

He's a fool; how can he avoid the subject of Laura after arriving with the pitiful poodle in his arms? "This is Berkeley," he says. "It's a long story."

"Well?" she asks.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh, you mean you're going to stay a while this time?"

Rather than allowing him the space to enter, she stands beside the door and closes it behind him. Dominic drops a kiss on his mother's cheek as he passes. The action is rare enough that it startles her. He sees in the way she runs her hand through her hair that

she is blushing; her complexion doesn't allow the color. He takes a seat at the kitchen table, still holding the poodle.

“Where the fuck have you been, you son of a bitch? You finally remembered you had a mother?” She lights a cigarette.

The house is void of clutter – his mother never had enough stuff to leave lying around the house – but the room is stuffy and damp. The smell isn't bad necessarily, just stale. The carpet, once soft with upright fabric, lies flat like a monsoon-blown meadow. He remembers her bathrobe from his teenage years. Like the carpet and bathrobe, her hair is the same but worn and flat; she is an extension of the house. The skin in her face droops, giving the illusion of a pout, as if age has lent recognition to her mood. He is still surprised by her pale, crinkly skin and yellow teeth. The last time he saw her, before leaving for Vegas on Thanksgiving over a year ago, she had retrieved her color and a spirit in the absence of alcohol. He had hoped then that she would replenish, somehow capture the young adulthood she missed, but the best she can do now as a 47-year-old drunk is move on slowly from 60.

There are no drinks on the table or beside the living room. She could have been hung over or on the eve of a bender, but she is sober today. She's restless. The only time she has ever been able to remain still, to ask a question while making eye contact, besides in prolonged sobriety, was after a few glasses of rum.

Berkeley fidgets, a paw at his arm; she wants to get down. His arms feel empty when he sets her down and she curls up on the floor beside his chair. He crosses his arms then adjusts to fold his hands. Not it is he who fidgets as his mother stares.

“Why are you here?” she asks.

“I haven’t seen you in a while. It’s Christmas.”

“Christmas was four days ago, meathead.”

“I meant the Christmas season. Did you get my card?”

“I got the money, didn’t look at the card.” She looks away, takes a puff of her cigarette. Dominic has a right to challenge her: Santa Claus had a bad habit of forgetting the Rossi house; one year, he’d received a bike just like the one stolen from Timmy Breslin a week earlier. But he’s no longer on the offensive with his mother. He has been able to abandon the past related to his mother because it was something too complicated to resolve perfectly, and if something were to remain forever imperfect, why fiddle with it. Instead he has distanced himself from her because the separation allowed him to forgive and, in his brief moments with her, to help. It is when he sees her often that he has trouble helping. Besides, his mother has never been one that was receptive to assistance; her successes in life – staying sober, keeping a job, going to church – were accomplished alone. It was when she worked in concert with others when things became complicated.

“So. How are you doing?” Dominic asks.

“Are you here to ask how I’m doing or to tell me something?”

“I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“So there’s no news?” she asks. “You’re telling me that by the end of this talk, you’re not going to tell me anything important.”

Dominic averts his gaze from his mother and looks down at Berkeley.

“Are you gay?” she asks.

“No, Jesus.”

“Is the poodle yours?”

“No actually.”

“If the poodle was yours, then I’d say you were for sure a homo.”

“You know I’m not.”

“Well I know that fuckin’ poodle isn’t yours so why don’t you start there?”

“Okay,” he says, thinking that no good history starts in the middle. “Let me begin at the beginning.”

In a sense, the history begins with his mother and Dr. Shelley, but he wants himself and Laura to be the central figures. He can begin with Laura, the first time he saw her in the park, after which he stole her car and drove it across the country; or perhaps when he moved in with his mother and Laura Shelley became a schoolmate, an obvious point of reference. Or maybe the history doesn’t begin within his own realm of experience; it begins with the Mayflower and old money, along with poverty in Southern Italy, which prompted the Rossis to emigrate. There could have been a magnetism in the universe that attracted the Shelleys and Rossis, but on a tangible level, the intersections of the families is related to leverage, power, and entitlement. These were the forces that impelled Dr. Shelley to act with Angela Rossi, and it had been alluring to her before she realized her first act, of compliance, was also of subservience. In an ironic form of the converse, leverage, power, and entitlement had also driven Dominic to act when he saw Laura in the park and stole her car, and upon meeting her in the zoo when he knew on a visceral level that she was shy and vulnerable. He later made his mark indelible by resolving Laura’s issue with David Hogeboom directly and violently, and he knew she had no choice but to be his afterward.

“There’s a girl,” he says.

“I’ve figured that out,” she responds.

“And we’re pretty serious.”

“Is she pregnant?”

“No, but we’re engaged.”

“And she’s not pregnant?”

Dominic shakes his head.

“Maybe we did raise you right.” It is an obvious slip, the first person collective, she and Jimmy, wife and husband, mother and father. “Thought for sure you’d have a shotgun wedding.”

“I guess it runs in the family,” he says, intending to reference everyone else in the family, but she takes it personally, dragging hard on her cigarette. He has to be careful with these comments, only preliminaries.

“I saw Dad recently,” he says, because it is something other than the subject of Dr. Shelley and Laura.

“I heard he was dead.”

“No, he was there breathing and everything.”

“He’s dead to me.”

“He asked about you.”

She looks out of the side of her eye at him. He can see the red at the edges of her eyeball. “Don’t fuck with me, Dominic.”

“I told him you were still beautiful and he was missing out.”



“Fuck you, you bullshitter,” she says, but the banter is light and, in her own way, affectionate. “What the fuck did you come here to tell me anyway?”

“That I’m engaged. That I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much.”

“This broad have a name?”

“Yes.”

“Another rich girl from Chestnut Hill? Something about you and those little rich girls. Must be rich. Only someone with that much money would buy an ugly ass dog like that. What the fuck is wrong with it?”

“She’s sick. She’s dying basically.”

His mother leans forward and stares at the dog. “Join the club.”

“What about it, you marrying money or what?”

“To be honest,” he begins, then stalls. “It’s Laura Shelley.”

“I fucking knew it,” she says. Her cheeks pucker at the long drag on her cigarette.

“How did you know?”

“Jesus Christ, Dominic, am I your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Or just some fucking stranger off the street.” She’s investigating him for an answer but it is not for him to answer literally. “I don’t give a shit whether you screw over a stranger. But your mother, Dominic. I’m your fucking mother, and what is she?”

“You should meet her, Mom, she’s really a sweetheart.”

“What is she?” she asks, expecting an answer now.

“She’s my fiancé.”

“She’s your fucking fiancé. And she could have been your fucking stepsister.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Who knows?”

Time, he sees, has allowed his mother confusion instead of clarity, the clouding done by alcohol, pain, and maybe Jesus. Before Dominic ever spoke to Dr. Shelley, he knew the relationship was never one with a prospect. His mother was used, and though Dominic is committed to the truth, he is here to report, not to argue. And he already sees her hands shaking.

“You know, Dominic, you’re a real fucking asshole.”

“I’m sorry. But what am I supposed to do?”

“Dump the bitch.”

“She’s not a bitch.”

“Dump the whore and find someone else.”

“I can’t do that. I screwed it up once and I was fucking miserable.” He takes an obligatory glance at the dog.

“*You* were miserable.”

“I’m telling you, if you meet her – ”

“I’m not fucking *meeting her*,” she says, screaming the last two words.

“Okay.” He sits back in his chair. He wants to check his watch but doesn’t dare.

He can’t remember the time he is supposed to give the dog her medication.

“Does he at least ask about me?”

“Who?”

“Daniel.”

It has taken him a moment to process Dr. Shelley's first name. What should he tell her? His question about Dominic's mother was a throwaway gesture. "He asked about you."

"What did he say?"

"He asked how you were doing."

"And?"

"And I said you were fine."

"Oh sure, you lie to him but come to me like Honest Abe."

"You look like you're doing well."

"How does he look?"

"He looks old mostly."

"He always looked kind of old," she says, a softness, a fondness, slipping into her voice. "Or maybe distinguished. I remember when I took you in for that earache –"

"Strep throat."

"Whatever. There was something real happening there, something that never happened between me and your father. Around your father I felt like a receptacle."

"Jesus."

"Now I have to see the son of a bitch at a wedding. I'm not going."

"You don't have to."

"You don't want your own mother at your own fucking wedding?"

"No, I do."

"You're not sorry," she says.

"I am."

“If you were sorry, you never would have gone back with her.”

“I didn’t go *back* to her. I don’t know what happened, we kind of fell for each other.”

“So why do you get to have the satisfaction and I’m left here alone?”

“It’s just the way things worked out.”

“Things never just work out. Let me fucking tell you that.” She lights one cigarette from another.

“Maybe this won’t work out,” he says.

“Yeah, right.”

“I mean, I’m not a hundred percent sure it will work out. You never know.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“We’ll see what happens,” Dominic says.

“What happens is you’ll get married and probably turn into an asshole,” she says, then laughs through a cough.

“We’ve got a long way to go yet,” Dominic says, citing the month and year he and Laura discussed.

Her eyes grow large, revealing the red rims again. She is having trouble processing the timeline. The years have moved quickly without her, but they still show on her face.

“Two years,” Dominic says, clarifying.

“Jesus Christ,” she says. “I was only married to your father for five.”

“Maybe it will come quick,” he says.

“Tuesday don’t come quick.”

“Maybe it won’t work out,” he repeats.

“With my luck, this will be the one to work out.”

“Maybe it won’t work out,” he says again, feeling the rhythm of the words, watching Berkeley stare up at him again. “What do you think, Berkeley?” he says. “You think it’s going to work out?”

“She’s got bigger problems than you and your prissy girlfriend,” his mother says.

The problem with being a son to Angela Rossi, Dominic thinks, is her penchant for crisis. Though the course of events that led up into his engagement to Laura involved quite a bit of coincidence that was, for Angela, quite unfortunate, part of the initial action was Angela’s own. Dominic has never been able to figure out whether her crises are genuine or overblown, actual or interpreted. But what he remembers today is her amazing ability to recover, her resiliency. Expecting the worst out of life, she is never surprised. The conversation gradually declines from its climactic seriousness to casual. But Dominic knows that the news will stay with her for some time, and he fears that her outlet will be the booze. He looks around the room and sees no bottles. Before he goes, he’ll inspect the cabinet beside the dining room table, her old storing space.

“What’s wrong with her anyway,” his mother asks about Berkeley.

“I’m not even sure. Some rare dog disease. Actually, I think she’s just bored.”

“She looks bored. What’s her name again?”

“Berkeley.”

“What kind of a stupid name is that?”

“There’s kind of a funny story behind it, if you’re interested.”

His mother attempts indifference but he sees eagerness in her wave of the hand, encouraging him to continue. Dominic has never been the best storyteller, but during the first year he lived with his mother, she asked him to talk about his day and he came to look forward to it. It has been a while since he's weaved a story, but he decides to provide a long version. It's only December 29<sup>th</sup> and he has another four days until he has anything to do. In the meantime, he's in no rush to get back to Chestnut Hill.

Dominic tells her about Berkeley, the town, the girl, the dog. His manner is unapologetic, and his mother seems to enjoy the part when Laura confronts him in the airport and steals his car.

"That's pretty fucked up," his mother says when he's finished.

"Tell me about it."

"Maybe I'll come to like her after all."

Dominic's news of his engagement has unfortunately been a worst-case scenario for his mother, but at the same time, he can see that she is giddy with the idea of her son being engaged, the principle of his maturity. She will be fine as long as he is with her, he knows; the potential for harm will exist after he's left, after her loneliness is highlighted and she fixates on the Shelley/Rossi family history. Dominic's response to this dilemma is to delay his departure. He tells his mother about some of his students and their questions in class, some of the teachers and who's sleeping with who. She always liked soap operas. He asks about her and her response is superficial and ragged but nonetheless substantive: she has been working on and off over at the church. The priest asked her one Monday to help with the collections and some bitch said she didn't need Angela to help – she didn't *want* Angela to help because she was afraid Angela was

going to steal the money straight from the parish and straight from Jesus. Here I am, Angela says, a fucking Catholic and she's accusing me of stealing from the church. There are stories from St. Rose's Alcoholics Anonymous too, mostly derogatory, but it's the subject matter that appeases him. She has never given up hope. When she does, it will be over.

Dominic is surprised to see that it is already the afternoon when he checks his watch, his mother reacting immediately. "I know, Dominic, you got places to be."

"Not really," he says, thinking of setting up another visit. "But I was supposed to give the dog his medicine a few hours ago. I forgot."

"I don't think he can tell the difference," his mother says. "If anything, the little shit looks better."

Dominic agrees. Whereas all of her movements had been made out of necessity – to eat, drink, go to the bathroom, and occasionally, to socialize – over the past hour, Berkeley has been walking around the apartment, sniffing and exploring. It is a shame to think of the dog as pragmatic. He can't help but be encouraged by seeing Berkeley operate as a dog should, on a whim.

Eventually the absence of the dog's medicine becomes a concern, and Dominic reluctantly announces that he's leaving. His mother, checking her watch, makes a request of him, that he wait for her to take a shower and then drive her down to St. John's in Manayunk so she can help out in the rectory with the phones. Of course, Dominic responds, the weight lifted from him: the concern that his mother, upon his leaving, will resort to liquor. But when she goes into the shower, he cannot find any liquor – not even cough medicine, traditionally her last resort – in the cabinets, cupboards, or hidden

behind the couch or television. He could look in her bedroom but he has surprised her today with his visit and she wouldn't have had the chance to conceal anything. He sits down to watch television, content, reminded in fact, of his contentment in his first few months in her home.

What Dominic has forgotten is the arduousness of his mother's process of getting ready. He has seen her, even in stretches of sobriety, go for days without a shower, perhaps because she views the remedy – getting ready – as such an affair. Dominic has never known what is entailed in her preparations but today it is the same pattern, an hour for her to emerge from the shower wrapped in a towel and close to another hour in the bedroom. He has learned that knocking and nagging only makes it worse, makes the application of makeup somehow slower or more obsessive. Of course, there is nothing on television on these afternoons even though half of the country is sitting in front of the idiot boxes. He hasn't watched anything for more than fifteen minutes at a time, flipping when the commercials come, between *Jaws* on AMC and a college football bowl game between UTEP and Southern Florida, and – in breaks on both of those – a cheerleading competition on ESPN.

It has been four hours since Berkeley was supposed to have her medication. Dominic isn't sure which function each pill serves; Francine had distributed them in a pill organizer and Dominic knows them only as the big yellow one that he has to break up into the food, the black and pink capsule, the round, red one that he buries in the wet food, the little white ones, six a day, and then there's the liquid applicator for her water. But the change in Berkeley is even more evident as he waits for his mother. She once lifted her paws up on the couch as Dominic watched television, unable to make the leap



but at least considering the effort. (In the end, Dominic picked her up and set her beside him.) And she has been exploring the house with her nose into each door and under each nook and cranny, probably looking for food. He thought she barked once, but it turned out to be a sneeze, followed by a gag – nothing came up. She had been shaking for a time while lying next to him, but she stopped when he wrapped her in a cover. As his mother was in the shower, and then in the bedroom, he thought of leaving to take the dog home and feed and medicate her, but he anticipated a round trip at about a half hour, more time than it would take for his mother to rush down to the liquor store and knock back a bottle of rum. Twenty minutes to get to the liquor store and back. Five minutes to finish the bottle.

Despite his mother's lengthy preparations, she is definitive in her finality. Whenever Laura announces she's ready, she embarks on another task that she has forgotten. But like always, Dominic's mother emerges from her bedroom fully prepared.

"Okay," she says, standing in front of Dominic, wanting to be noticed. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

She has washed and done her hair, still stringy but vibrant, and put on makeup that leaves a glaze over her face but still makes the skin appear collective rather than separated by wrinkles. The dress is simple, navy blue, and it hangs off of her the right way, despite her age and experience. The dress is sleeveless and he can see her skin droop from the triceps; there is a run in her stocking. She won't notice as long as he's examining her. Her appearance is as much for him as for her. "You look great," he says, grabbing his keys. "That's a nice dress."

"Nice enough to bury me in it."

He walks to the door before realizing he has forgotten the dog. “C’mon, Berkeley,” he says, forgetting that she is not a real dog. But she stands up on the couch and contemplates a leap to the floor. Though her stature is still fluid rather than solid, the strength of a colt only discovering its legs, she softly reaches down to the floor with her front paws and slides her rear end along the couch until her rear legs plop on the floor. It is less than graceful but, even for Dominic, momentous. “Good girl,” he says in Francine’s voice. The dog follows Dominic out.

His mother is behind them, locking the door. “You really might be a homo,” she says, “and not even know it.”

The drive to Manayunk is a short one through Roxboro’s duplexes. Manayunk ten years ago was indistinguishable from Roxboro but now is yellow and pink with restoration. White picket fences surround a ten by ten yard, antique shops are advertised in the bottom floor of people’s homes. Main Street is a meat market of college student and college grads, a safe place for suburban white kids to hang out together.

St. John’s, however, is an unalterable, stone cathedral in the middle of the hill. It mimics the standard for cathedral architecture, with three steeples, the center one the highest and punctuated with a massive cross. The impression is made in how massive it is, a far away church from the highway but a cathedral of overwhelming authority from its front doors. From the few times he’s been inside, he remembers the pipe organ upstairs and the curvature above the altar showing a hierarchical organization of heaven, the angels serving from the side and the central saint and Catholic figures standing content above the clouds. He also remembers the infinite rows of pews inside that he and his mother surpassed like years as she used to search for her position in the front.

He is drawn to the possibility of accompanying her inside. In these memories, Dominic tastes revelation and wants more. But there is the dog. And there is his mother, with whom he has spent an entire afternoon without a hitch. The unique form of math Dominic applies to his mother says that a blowup is likely in the next hour, regardless of their appearance together in church or a bar, heaven or hell. "Goodbye," he says, as she is about to get out. "Say a prayer for me."

"God bless my Nicky," she says, responding literally and immediately, before hastily leaning in to kiss him on the cheek. Her exit from the car and into the church is equally hurried. He is proud of her but disappointed in the circumstance; after a long, tumultuous road of 27 years in his relationship with his mother, today has passed too quickly.

He winds out the engine up Manayunk's and Roxboro's hills and zips through Chestnut Hill. The streets are familiar to him; it has become his second home. He knows to take the shortcut on Pine Street from Broad to Main because there are no lights and there is a better view of oncoming cars once on the cobblestone thoroughfare in Chestnut Hill. He feels justified in his abrupt pace because the dog needs her medicine. He is as much as five hours behind schedule and wonders if he'll have to stagger the next dose or deliver it on time. Berkeley, of course, knows nothing of the threat to her health. She has come to life today, albeit briefly and subtly. Dominic reaches behind her ear between shifts and scratches, and she licks the tips of his fingers. She stands when the car is stopped at a red light, perhaps now equating stopping with a destination, and sniffs out the window. Dominic has even seen what could be a wag in her hairless tail as a woman walks past with a Pomeranian. He is able to enjoy the moment for the dog. Life

is simply a sequence of moments. Though he is still not sure about his New Year's resolution, he has one for the interim. His aim in the next three days is to make Berkeley appreciate the moment. Unconvinced of her limitations, he is her new life coach; he's going to steward her through healthy meals and playtime activities. The Shelleys are going to recognize him as a miracle-maker. A walk is what she needs, after she is medicated. The medicine may ruin her again and walking her could be like dragging a scrub brush, but he'll try anyway. The leash is in Pierce's garage; he checks the set of keys Francine has given him and suspects one of those is to Pierce's house, most likely the one beside the Ford key. It's not like he's breaking in; he would buy a leash but isn't sure where to get one out here or how much they cost.

Laura has pointed out her brother's house before and Dominic remembers the address, 1213 Hazelnut Lane. Like the Shelley house, the façade is solid with rock. The structure is similar to the Shelley mansion except on a smaller scale, certainly a beautiful, comfortable residence with a long, winding driveway and three hundred feet of lawn, but Dominic remembers Pierce calling it a starter home. As much as Dominic knows he cannot be like Pierce, he is envious of entitlement. The key doesn't fit into the main entrance, and Dominic almost walks away from the endeavor, knowing the walk with Berkeley is a long shot, but figures there may be a window of opportunity with the dog that he wouldn't want to miss. The key opens a door on the side; he is careful not to disturb anything in the house on his way into the garage. Francine has told him the leash was in there but he'll have to look for it. Rather than turn on the light, he opens the garage door allowing the sun to illuminate his surroundings.

The Mustang is revealed in the sunlight as if from behind a curtain. He is surprised by it but shouldn't be; they didn't *drive* to Aruba. It is obvious that Pierce washed and waxed it before he left, or paid the Mexicans near Lincoln Drive to do it. Dominic never would have allowed anyone to put his hands on the car. An anger arises in Dominic regarding Pierce. Though Pierce explained the logistics of dividends in paying cash for the car, Dominic knows it is a gift from Shelleys he has never known, an ancient collection of money that has simply sat and expanded, into massive mansions, medical school tuitions, and brand new special edition Mustangs. Dominic fingers the key in his hand with the rogue horse as an emblem and remembers Pierce had offered him a joyride. Without considering balance, or risk versus reward, he acts on impulse. The leash hangs on a nail beside the driver's side door; he grabs it, then sets Berkeley on the Mustang's leather, her body perking up at the cold. When he starts the car, he feels the engine roar beneath him, and he slowly takes it out to the road. Berkeley doesn't have time for a joyride but if the dog has made it this far, what is another ten or fifteen minutes, for a ride around the block?

The dog thunks against the back of the seat as Dominic accelerates, challenging her to find her balance. She chooses to lay low, suddenly alert. The engine's rumble is deep, a baritone humming a low note. It reminds him of the '71's torque but the Shelby engine is refined and smooth. You really can't stay below four thousand rpms. The cobblestone road of Main Street is unacceptable, and there is simply not enough room on the side roads, so he takes the car out further away from the City toward the Turnpike, heading West, the direction in which there is less traffic. It is a toll road, and rather than explain himself to the attendant, he takes a ticket and drives. It surprises him how

quickly he has reached the first exit, only two or three miles past the tollbooth, and he decides he's entitled to a few more miles. The next exit, for Paoli, comes four miles later, but he hasn't had enough of the car yet. Berkeley reaches up toward the window for a sniff, and Dominic lowers the window enough for the wind to slap her face. He is supposed to be perfect this weekend but he can't help but favor the alternative, not just something reproachable, but something heinous. It is the impulse that has led him to trouble, he knows, but his father was right about good times.

He acknowledges he is stealing the car and leaving for good two hours West in Williamsport. The car is no longer Pierce's. The car was his when Francine handed him the keys, or maybe when he pulled beside it in the driveway. Or maybe the car was his before it was conceived and assembled, before he'd ever met Laura. At an ATM at a rest stop, he takes out a thousand dollars. The money is all he needs; he can leave the list of things behind. The apartment contains mostly Laura's belongings. He'll miss teaching more than his students will miss him. The Toyota is on its last leg. And there will be another man in Laura's life, if he is not there already: the one she tried to conceal behind closed eyes.

Berkeley, Dominic discovers after paying the toll in Pittsburgh and crossing into Ohio, is better off without her medicine. When he orders drive-through at a McDonald's, he is amused by the dog licking her lips and hands her a small piece of hamburger – Francine emphasized manageable portions – but the dog scoffs the meat and waits for more. Dominic is hungry himself and isn't about to share the burger with Berkeley. The fries would kill her. Dominic doesn't believe that starches could kill Berkeley but fears a death of drooling and convulsions, whereas the lack of medicine, he figures, at worst will

accommodate a peaceful, dying process. And not without a little adventure first. He could give her a hamburger without the bun, but the line in the drive-through had been long. He pulls into the mini-mart across the street, hoping they have dog food or maybe the dog would like to chew on some jerky. When he gets back to the car, Berkeley is missing, or at least not in her usual place in the front seat. But when he is closer, he sees Berkeley in the back seat, her head buried in a pile of bags and wrappers. She looks up at him with grease shining off of her whiskers. Only a few fries sit at the bottom of the box. He no longer feels guilty about the medicine. He leafs through a phone book at the public booth, then realizes he won't call a vet. Even though no one knows it yet, he's on the run. He decides that the dog is going to die and it isn't right for Berkeley to spend her final moments in an office being poked and prodded anyway. Each moment counted for her and why should it be any different for him?

In an Illinois motel, Dominic makes a bed for Berkeley out of extra blankets and finds a candle to light beside her. He checks on her throughout the night, expecting cold and rigid, but her breathing is steady and she's warm. Early the next day, he fears an expression of terror left on her dying face, but she is licking his hand and her tail is wagging. He crosses the Mississippi with dawn in his mirror into Iowa's rolling hills and Nebraska's prairies. He knows the way. He has tried to forget but there is a barrier to be crossed, one that has teased him since he was sixteen years old. And he has tried to ignore the gold but she has been so bright behind his skull that she dulled what was in front of him.

He sees the Rockies ahead of him, the slow ups and downs of the terrain like the sea and its wake before gathering to swallow and crash. The Mustang digs deep for the

ascent and, in the left lane, he winds out the engine in third gear at five thousand rpms. His imagination has sustained him but there is no comparison. Life is better lived in the moment. He enjoys Berkeley's futile attempts to brace herself, pressed against the back of the seat. When his ascent plateaus, he is so light and free that he wonders if it has something to do with altitude and oxygen. He coasts through the Rockies, a hot knife through butter. It is not until the Utah dessert that he feels relieved, the Rockies now a barrier from the past. He is across. After the land was explored and deemed perilous, gold was struck. They'll say it took two hundred years to settle the West but the path is his alone. On the Arizona and Nevada plains he empties his memories of cobblestone streets and muskets to think of the golden Camaro but it is not exactly the image he craves; it is the twinkle that holds the image, a goddess amid roses with golden hearts.



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