THE MESSENGER ORANGE

by Ryan K. Jory

_The Messenger Orange_, a novel, follows the coming-of-age of Derek Baker, a young Michigander who finds himself in the middle of a complex divorce, torn between a fun but reckless mother and a stern but unshakably loving father. As the story opens, Derek’s mother receives a love-note from an old college fling, a Floridian named John. She flees to Florida with Derek, and although romance with John does not initially re-ignite, she decides to remain in Tampa, forcing a divorce from Derek’s father. Derek soon finds himself back in Michigan, under his father’s custody, but a question remains that largely drives the remaining narrative: Which man is Derek’s biological father, Howard, the dull man from Michigan, or John, the free spirit from Tampa?
THE MESSENGER ORANGE

A Thesis

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by
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PART ONE
I’m standing in the living room eating a strawberry Pop-Tart, and I hear a motorcycle in the driveway. A man gets off and comes up the walk. He’s got brown hair and a brown leather jacket. His eyes are sober, and he carries a square package tied up with twine. The package is small, and the eyes are bluish white, like frost.

I open the door, and the man looks in behind me. He hands me the package.

“Give this to Sharon.”

He turns back down the driveway, mounts his bike and drives away.

Dad comes out of the bedroom, dressed for work. “Who was that?”

I shrug.

“Answer me, Derek.”

Mom comes in, and I hand her the package. It isn’t labeled.

Dad says, “Who sent that?”

I mouth, John.

“Would somebody answer me?”

She says, “It’s a juicer, Howard. I ordered it from the television.”

It’s too small to be a juicer. He eyes her like he knows she’s lying. “We’ll talk about this when I get home.” And he leaves. Dad doesn’t argue in front of me. He just gets mad and leaves. He only argues when he thinks I’m sleeping but I’m not and I can hear them from my room.

I walk up to Mom and put my arm around her. We listen to Dad’s car pull into the street, and she places the package on the breakfast table. I say, “Open it.”

She pulls off the twine, rolls it into a ball, and sets it down beside the box. She pauses, and I’m impatient. I squeeze her tighter. She pulls open the flaps. Citrus is a warm smell.

We look inside. There is an orange, a single, enormous orange, so big it’s like a grapefruit, but it’s too beautiful to be sour. I wish there were one in there for me. Mom knows. She says, “I’ll share.” She picks up the orange and gently squeezes it. At the bottom, the skin puckers where it has already been pierced. She sticks her thumb in the hole and starts peeling. The skin spirals down onto the table in a single twisting strap, and we’re left with a fuzzy yellow ball.

Mom splits the orange in two. Inside the hollow between the two halves there is a thinly rolled note. She opens it. I watch her fingers, particularly the nails, which are shiny with oil. The note is small, and the words are beautiful together:

COME
HOME
She folds the note into her palm. I look at her, and I’m jealous. She understands. She takes the note out again and tears it down the center, hands me half of it and says, “I’m still going to share.”

I nod. I take my half of the orange and eat a piece. The juice runs down my chin like blood from a split lip. It’s warm. It tastes cooked, and it is too sweet. I set the rest of it down on the table. There will be better oranges in Florida.

We’re in Mom’s Buick. We stop at a dealership, and I wait in the office while Mom is outside negotiating a trade. On the magazine rack, there is a book. I pick it up. Its cover is too old and crackled to make out the whole title, but the last word is big and bold enough to read: Orange. There are guys on motorcycles on the cover, which reminds me of John. It’s perfect.

I steal the book. I walk out with it right in my hands. No one at the dealership cares about it anyway. Somebody probably left it there by accident, someone like me, waiting on his family, then the dealer comes by and sticks it on the magazine rack, doesn’t even look at it. He’s not going to care if it goes missing. He never even knew it was there.

Mom gets a bright red Jeep. She gets some money back, too, since the Buick is in good shape and the Jeep is pretty shitty. I’ve never seen her haggle before, not about anything. We’re on the road with a couple hundred dollars in our pocket.

The first rest area we come to, we stop to take the top off the Jeep. It’s made of canvas with sewn-in plastic windows, and it’s tatty. We put it in a dumpster because it’s useless anyway, and we realize we left our bags of clothes in the Buick. We don’t care, and we keep moving. We stop for snacks and gas in Ohio. I get a Pepsi and a bag of Combos and start eating when we’re back in the car. Mom says, “What are those things, dog treats?”

I remember the time I met my cousin, Joe. I was six years old, and he got me to eat a Milk-Bone. It tasted like cardboard and fish oil. Grandma Barbra makes me take a spoonful of fish oil every time we go to her house. I don’t like visiting Grandma Barbra.

Without the top on the Jeep the wind blasts pretty hard, and the sun is bad. The back of my neck itches, so I scratch it. Then it stings. There’s no hiding from the sun in the Jeep. There will be even more sun in Florida. But it’s still better than listening to the canvas flap.

It’s hard to find good music on the radio because it’s summer and everything is for sunbathers. When I do find a station, I turn it up so we can hear over the noise. My face goes numb from the wind, and a song comes on that is wonderful. I wish they played The Beatles all the time.

I go over my new life in my head. We’ll grow oranges and drive motorcycles. John will tell stories about crocodiles, and he won’t be boring. He won’t pretend I don’t exist when he’s mad, and he’ll never yell. Or if he does yell, he’ll let us yell back, not just storm out of the room like a wuss.

The song on the radio keeps playing in my head after it’s finished. I fall asleep. My dreams take me to orange groves. The smell is like blossoms and cut grass and cold fruit. I want to wake up in Florida with trees all around me. When I do wake, I don’t
know what state I’m in, but it isn’t Florida. It’s still light outside. I remember my new book under my seat, and I pick it up. My Orange book, put there just for me to find—in fact, it’s all about me, I’m pretty sure.

I decide not to read it. I don’t even want to glance inside. It’s probably really a boring book. Books always look good like that, then they’re awful. I don’t want to know.

* * *

In Tennessee, we stop for the night. Behind our motel, down a slope, there’s a K-Mart that’s still open. Mom and I walk there in the dark to buy underwear and toothbrushes and more snacks for the room. I get some licorice and a bag of little cookies shaped like peanuts that are filled with chocolate frosting. Mom doesn’t care what I eat because she’s wrapped up in the moment. I hope she stays like this forever.

My ears are ringing from being in the Jeep all day. My face still feels tingly. I bet my eyes look like somebody poked them, like they’re all red and bloodshot. We should be sleeping, but we’re up talking in our beds. I rip a piece of licorice out of the bag in my lap and hand it to Mom. She says, “Have I told you about John?” She knows she has a million times, but I shake my head because I want to hear it again.

She met John when she was at college in Tampa, in a bar called the Crocked Crocodile. John was the bartender. She got ditched there by her friends, and he took her home. They fell in love right away, and I shake my head because I want to hear it again.

John was fun. He was too much fun. She thought he’d never grow up, and she left him. Then she met Dad, who studied business and read newspapers. Dad moved her to Michigan, where his family was from, with cousins who make you eat dog bones and grandmas who make you drink fish oil. They got married, and they had me a few months later. Not nine months, just a few months. Mom leaves that part out.

I nod through the story.

I sleep through the night with my Orange book in my hand. I hold it under my pillow, and I’ve still got the song from the car ride stuck in my head, playing on a loop. I think it’s called “Yesterday,” and I guess it’s supposed to be a sad song, but I pretend that it isn’t because I like it.

* * *

The phone rings. Mom jumps out of bed like it’s going to be Dad or the cops saying they’ve tracked us down. It’s just a wakeup call. We eat breakfast at a Waffle House and we’re driving again. Before I even realize we were in Georgia, we pass a Welcome to Florida sign, like Georgia was never even there. Georgia is like that, I guess. Not Florida. Florida is an eternal state. The wind in my face feels moist. It’s muggy, and my armpits soak through with sweat. I bet you never get hot on a Harley.

I imagine John tearing down dirt roads on his bike. He doesn’t wear a helmet because who needs one? John isn’t afraid of dying. If he crashes, he’ll just soar off and catch the limb of the first tree he flies by. I’ll be with him when it happens. I’ll fly up there on his back, and he’ll pick me an orange since it’s an orange tree. We’ll eat it
together before we climb back down. That’s the kind of guy John is. He just does things
without thinking, and things turn out all right.

When we pull off the highway at six o’clock, I think it’s for gas, but the next
thing I know we’re parked outside some house, just some house in the middle of a
subdivision.

Mom says, “We’re here.”
I’m thinking, This is John’s house? He lives a block from a McDonalds? He’s
supposed to live in an orange grove.

Mom gets out of the Jeep. I do the same, but I’m woozy all of a sudden. Before I
shut my door, I grab my Orange book and stick it down the back of my pants so I’ll have
it with me. I get my first good look at the house while we’re walking up the driveway.
It’s a small place. It is white, and there are other small houses beside it.

We’re on the porch, and Mom knocks. The door opens. John is there.
John says, “Hi.”

We go inside. Mom uses the bathroom, and John takes me out back to talk. A
fence wraps around the backyard, and there is an orange tree. Just one. John points at
the fruit on it. Some are ripe, and some are overripe, and some are small and green.
“Oranges,” he says, “take more than one season to grow, so there can be ripe ones and
green ones on the same tree.”

Sounds real interesting.

He mumbles some more about oranges, but I’m not listening. He thinks he needs
to tiptoe around me, but I want him to be himself. I wish he’d take me to see his Harley.

Mom comes out. She starts talking to John. “I love what you’ve done with the
place.” We go inside, and they sit down at the table. I end up in front of the TV in the
other room so they can be alone. There’s nothing on but infomercials and baseball
games. It occurs to me that we are in dire need of new steak knives, and also that
baseball is boring.

John makes dinner on the grill. We eat at a picnic table on his deck, and he asks
me if I like his cooking. I nod. The grass in the yard is very green. John must water it a
lot.

John asks me if I like school. I nod again, even though it’s a lie.

When I go in the house to rinse my plate, John says to Mom, “Is Derek upset?” I
hear them through the window over the sink.

She says, “No. He’s just quiet.”
“Is he—slow?”
“No, he’s smart. He’s just quiet.”
“So… he knows?”
“Knows what?”
John whispers something I can’t hear.
“Oh, John,” she says. “He’s not.”

I stick my plate in the drying rack to mingle with the spoons.

*  *  *

5
John’s guest room is small, like my old room, only emptier. I just have one thing of my own to put in it, so I hide my *Orange* book under the bed. There’s little dust-balls under there, too.

I sit down. The wall across from me is naked and white. I could put a *Star Wars* poster there. Then it would look just the same as my old room.

Mom comes in. She leans in through the doorway and says, “John is putting on a movie. Want to watch?” We watch it in the living room. It’s a Jim Henson movie called *Labyrinth*. David Bowie is in it. People were weird in the eighties. I wonder if John put on a puppet movie because of me? I guess not. It’s the sort of thing Mom likes. It isn’t bad. Maybe it came out when they were dating and they saw it together when it was new.

Suddenly, I remember John’s eyes. They’re strange, how white they are. I try to see them through the dark, but there’s too many flickers on his face from the TV. I wish I had frost-colored eyes like that, instead of dull gray-blue ones.

I keep fidgeting. It feels awkward with me in the room. John sits next to me, but I’m sure he’d rather be next to my mom.

I get distracted from the movie. Fourteen years is a long time to stay stuck on a person who dumps you. John must have emotional problems. Mom, too.

I decide to leave the room. At first, I head toward the garage because I want to check out John’s motorcycle, but I stop. He probably doesn’t even have one. I bet he rode up to Michigan on a rental. I go to my room instead. There’s a little spider crawling across the floor under the doorway and I kick it into the hall. I pluck my book out from under the bed and keep running my fingers over the cracked title. I decide to go ahead and read it because why the hell not? It’s stupid to puff things up so much in your head when they don’t deserve it.

I get about halfway down the first page before I have to stop. What the hell is a Milkbar, anyway?

Suddenly I’m wondering how close Dad has already come to figuring out where we went. Ditching the old Buick was a good idea, but they’ll still track us down. He’ll probably fight for custody, not because he actually wants it but just out of spite. Maybe he’ll win. I don’t know.

Mom comes to check on me. She says, “Are you all right?”
I say, “Does John have a Motorcycle?”
She says, “Yes.”
“Does he ride it a lot?”
“I suppose so.”
“Do you like motorcycles?”
“Not really.”
“Does John like me?”
“He will.”
“But he doesn’t yet?”
“Honey, he doesn’t know you yet.”

She isn’t smiling anymore. I realize my mom is beautiful but not the most beautiful person in the world, and also that she should have gotten me away from my dad about a million years sooner if she really wanted it to work out. She puts her hand on my shoulder and squeezes. The fingernails pinch me a little by accident. “Come on, let’s finish the movie.”
I say, “No, I want to read.”
She shrugs. “We’ll be in the other room if you change your mind.”
She leaves. I look at my book again. It really is horrible. I rip off the cover. The cover is all wrong. Maybe I’ll like it better like this. Someday I’ll try reading it again—soon, I think, but I’m not ready yet. I stuff it back under my bed and try to go to sleep. When I sleep, I dream that I wake up and the orange tree in the back yard is fifty feet tall. It’s nice that way, and I sit down under it. The smell is like a million oranges, like a whole grove grown up in one tree, and I think, This is all right. I can stay here for a while. I dream like that until morning.

* * *

We aren’t in Tampa a day before Mom and John have a talk that leads to Mom and me moving to a hotel. I suspect it’s him who throws on the brakes, but Mom denies that like crazy. She insists the decision is mutual. “It’s best this way,” she says.

For the week that we stay in the hotel, we make a game of pretending we’re on the lam. Whenever we meet someone new, we throw together a set of aliases. Like, a waitress says, “Can I get your order?”

“I’ll take the sunrise omelet,” Mom says. “And my son, Oliver here, will have a small bowl of gruel.”

The waitress taps her pen against her bill-pad. “I’m not sure we have gruel.”
So I say, “All right, I’ll just have the chocolate chip pancakes.”

Making up names never stops being fun. In addition to Mr. Twist, I am now Archibald Pennyweather and Harry Butts. Mom is Minerva Cheevy, Michelle N. Mann, and, her favorite, Lacy Godiva.

If Bonnie and Clyde were a mom-son combo, we’d fit the bill exactly—just with less gun slingling, I guess. During our week as runaways, we do a day at Busch Gardens and visit the science museum and the aquarium. (I get sick on a ride that goes upside-down, planetariums are too educational to be fun, and stingrays have nothing on seahorses.) After all the touristy stuff, we decide just to spend some time lounging at the beach, mostly because we’re running out of money. Neither of us has a swim suit, so we just walk around and talk. Mom says to me, “Derek, you’ve aged ten years in the past week.”

“You have, too,” I say. “You look terrible.”

I bust up laughing. She chases me down and tackles me. Then we lie on our backs until the sun sets over the bay, and we peel our eyes for the first star to appear. Mom spots one that I insist is Mars and not a star, but for the sake of getting back to the hotel and washing the grit out of my hair, I concede, stand up, and begin knocking the sand off my butt.

* * *

When a cop and a concierge show up at our room in the morning, we know the gig is up.
“Sharon Baker?” the cop says.
“It’s Mrs. Sampson, actually.”
“Nice try, Mrs. Baker.”
Mom tries at first to explain it’s just a vacation we’re on—that if her no-good husband can’t listen well enough to have known that, it’s his own damned fault. But that doesn’t explain why the hotel bill is being footed by some guy in Tampa, or why us just-vacationers checked into the room as Midge and Bert Sampson.
The officer explains politely how he’s not going to use handcuffs on Mom but that we still have to go to the police station. They take us in separate cruisers. The shrimp I am, they mistake me for some kind of a snot-nose instead of a fourteen-year-old, and I’m handed over to a trauma counselor who’s quick to dole out teddy bears. Cops are morons. They really are.
Dad makes the first plane out of Lansing, and I’m back in Michigan in time for dinner. But we don’t have dinner. We just sit at the breakfast table where the box from the orange still sits. Dad takes turns glaring from me to the box. He asks no questions, and I give no answers, until finally the phone rings and I use the excuse to scurry away. I hear him talk through the kitchen wall.
“Yes, Mother. He’s fine… No… She’s still in Florida… I don’t know… I don’t know that either.”
Grandma Barbra will make us come to visit now. It’ll be hell. I’ll just hold my breath until I hear from Mom again.
CHAPTER TWO

If the summer starts out like a sprinter, it ends like some kind of slug. By July, I’m divided unevenly into parts. The biggest goes to Dad. Mom gets the leftovers—summers, and when I’m off school for vacations. This year, with the court stuff eating up so much time, I’ll just get a few weeks in August, then I won’t see her until Christmas. Her attorney assures us it’s the best she could have hoped for, given the circumstances, with her drug history and all. I think, Drug history? Mom says her lawyer is an idiot.

We talk over the phone every day when Dad’s at work. I think, technically, we’re not supposed to do that, at least according to Dad’s rules, but what he doesn’t notice on the bill can’t hurt him. She’s got a job now, waitressing at a sports bar, which she hopes is just a short-term thing. She says, without experience, her English degree won’t let her do much except substitute teach, which she says pays less and is more demeaning than shaking your ass for tips.

“I guess I’m doing all right,” she says. “All things considered.” She says she feels like a bug that’s just crawled out from a cocoon, like her wings are still wet but she suspects eventually she’ll be the best she’s ever been. I ask her to tell me what it’s like looking at palm trees every night, like I’ve never seen one before, and she tells me they’re ragged and pitiful on the west side of the state, that palm trees are more of a Miami thing. I guess Mom kind of lacks that sense of imagination sometimes.

“How’s the head-shrinking?” she says. Dad and I have to see a family counselor. Weekly sessions for six months, ordered by the judge on account of the way I acted toward Dad in court.

“We’re making immeasurable progress,” I say. “Our tribulations will only make us stronger in brighter days ahead, and we are prime candidates for a new drug study.”

“Sounds like a nightmare.”

“Only a little.”

The sessions only last an hour, but it’s no worse than an hour at home with Dad. At least this counselor guy, Demetri, doesn’t take sides. He only folds his hands together and breaks the long silences by insisting, “Your refusal to communicate merely perpetuates an atmosphere of undue hostility.” Dad agrees with him and decides, at home, to replace the silence between us with constant reminders that he is the one who’s the victim here, not Mom, and I should be siding with him.

I can only take Dad’s yammering so long before I finally cave and respond. It’s a Thursday night, the day before our third session with Demetri. I can’t stand the thought of us starting it with Dad explaining how he’s been making efforts while I’m still resisting.
“I know this has been rough for you,” Dad says. “But it’s been rough for me, too, Derek. At least I’m trying. You don’t even act like you care.”

I’m sitting on the couch with the TV on. I flick it off and stand up. He’s a foot taller than me, and I suddenly wish I had a stool. “The only reason you act like you’re trying is so you can use me as a weapon against Mom.”

“That’s not true.”

“It might as well be. Before the divorce, you barely said two words to me my whole life except to order me around.”

He tries to butt in, but I don’t let him. “Everything I know about you, I heard from Mom, and she thinks you’re an asshole. So what am I supposed to think?”

He raises his hand like he’s going to hit me or something, but instead he retreats to his room for the rest of the night. I go to my bedroom, too, try to read but can’t, then close my eyes. I sleep awful. When I wake in the morning, Dad’s face is hovering over mine, a little pink. The crows-feet by his eyes look deeper than I’ve seen before, and his breath smells like he’s been getting the fish-oil treatment from Grandma Barbra.

“Pack a bag,” he says. “We’re taking a trip.”

“Oh, God,” I say. “We just saw Grandma.”

“We’re not visiting your grandmother.”

So I’m intrigued. My father is not normally a spontaneous kind of man. I throw some things in a backpack and go out to meet him in the kitchen.

* * *

It would never occur to anybody from looking at it that my dad’s truck is used for construction work. He keeps it as clean as the day it rolled off the assembly line, changes the oil twice as often as it needs it, and acts like it would be a sin not to knock the grit off your boots before getting in. So I can’t help but be a bit cautious as I attempt to eat hash browns while sitting in the passenger’s seat. Stopping by a drive-through window is entirely unlike my dad. I operate on my wrappers like its someone’s brain behind the paper.

We take US-127 northbound. “Have you ever wondered about your grandfather?” Dad says. He sets the cruise control. “Your real one, not Grandpa Fred.”

“Sometimes.”

“I didn’t know him,” he says. “It’s always bothered me.”

Dad likes to drive without a radio on. Everything has to be calm and neat, from the starch on his shirt to the part in his gray-brown hair. The only sounds come from the engine as it hums along, peppered by the thumps of tiny potholes.

“I was so young when he died, your grandmother thought I would be better off if she told me a lie. She said he was a soldier, and he died in Vietnam. I found out from my football coach when I was sixteen, he was just a drunk—he died in a wreck.”

I’m not sure what to say. I go with: “You played football?”

“Four years.”

“How come you never told me?”

“I was never any good.”

* * *
The highway ends just before noon, and we’re spit out in the outskirts of Charlevoix County. We wind through pitted, God-knows-where dirt roads for another thirty minutes, until Dad pulls to the shoulder and cuts the engine. Where we sit, the road curves around a ridge of hills and forest. Down a drive to the right, there is a swatch of cleared land where the remains of a farmhouse sit next to an old shed.

“That’s where I was born,” he says.

“In the shed?”

“It’s a chicken coop. Your grandfather worked for the farmer. The summer he got your grandma pregnant, the farmer let him turn the old coop into a shack so they’d have a place to raise me and wouldn’t have to give me up. He died when I was two. But we didn’t move out until I was six, when Grandma met your Grandpa Fred and got pregnant with your uncle.”

“You lived in a chicken coop?”

“We ate our meals in the house with the farmer and his wife. Once a week they let us bathe in their tub. All we had in the shack was an old wood-burning stove, a card table, and a bed. On winter nights, it got so cold, the stove couldn’t keep up with the wind coming in through the cracks. Your grandmother would boil a brick in water, then wrap it in a towel and stick it at the foot of the bed. I got in the habit of rubbing my legs up against it to keep warm—until one day I knocked the towel off by mistake.”

He pulls up his pant leg for me to see. “That’s where this scar came from.” There’s a faint pink patch on the calf where hair doesn’t grow.

“You said that was a war wound.”

“That’s just a turn of phrase.”

* * *

Staying in a motel with Dad lacks the punch of a stay with Mom, but he does his best to keep up his streak of not being a jerk. “We can stay up until nine o’clock,” he says. Then a change of heart. “Maybe, nine-thirty.”


He frowns. “Knock off the sarcasm, bud. Please?”

I could say something back, but I don’t want him getting angry. Instead, I just say, “Okay.” Dad sits down on his bed and flips the TV on. The only movie playing is *Free Willie 2*. The awfulness gives us excuses to laugh, and when the credits roll, we keep sitting there for a minute, waiting for the other to make a move.

“So I’ve been thinking…” I say. “If you were born in a chicken coop, what does that make me, a chicken nugget?”

Dad shakes his head. “No, a male chicken is a rooster.”

“Then a rooster nugget?”

“That’s the one.”

I chuckle.

Time for bed. Dad would blitz if he knew I forgot to bring a toothbrush, so I ask him for the toothpaste and take my whole bag into the bathroom with me like I’ve got one stashed inside.
When I’m done, Dad takes his turn. “You know,” he says, “most places, they’ll give you a toothbrush for free if you ask at the front desk.” As he passes by, he snaps the toothpaste tube out of my hand.

“Good to know.”

I’m half asleep by the time Dad is turning off the nightstand lights. “Good night,” he says.

“Good night.”

My pillow smells like it’s been smeared with axle grease, but I suppose that doesn’t matter since I’m down for the count before I know it. My dreams don’t take me anywhere, as far as I recall, but that’s relying on what I recall, which with dreams, you know, gets tricky.
August comes like a birthday present you have to look at for weeks before you can open it. I pack my bag with all the shorts I own like I’m never coming back. On top of the pile, just for kicks, I stick my *Orange* book.

Normally, I sleep great on planes, but this time I’m too excited. The woman beside me is very nice. She’s maybe in her fifties. She says she’s been visiting a sister in Lansing and she’s glad to be getting home. “What about you,” she says. “Starting your trip or returning home?”

I say, “Both.”

The airport in Tampa is like a spider—you get off your plane on one of the legs and take a tram to the belly where your ride waits for you tapping her foot like it’s your own fault the flight was delayed.

Mom doesn’t look good. She’s in this wrinkled, red Coca-Cola t-shirt like she got dressed out of a lost-and-found box. And her hug doesn’t feel right—too weak. “You okay?” I say.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just tired.”

“I missed you.”

She nods with a puny smile.

Mom’s home, for now, is a sublet apartment in a building that’s almost completely vacant. They’ll tear it down soon, she says, to put up a set of condos. “It’s a hellhole,” she says. “But they’re renting by the month until the wreckers come, and it’s cheap.”

The apartment is only *almost* as bad as she describes it on the way. The carpet is brown and worn nearly through to the floorboards. The walls are painted cinderblocks. The furniture looks like most of it came off a curb or from a dump. But my room has a sliding glass door and a balcony, and though the blinds are broke and won’t open, Mom pushes them aside so we can step out.

“It’s nice,” I say.

“You don’t have to humor me.”

“I mean the view.” We’ve got a sixth-floor perch just a couple blocks from the bay. You can see to the water between the high rises, over the tops of buildings below. It’s so beautiful. I mean, it’s just like wavy black glass.

“Have a seat,” Mom says. There’s a white metal table on the balcony, the kind you see outside of cafés, with two almost-matching chairs beside it. She takes the one with flaking paint.
We chit-chat for awhile. It’s like when we’re on the phone, really—only, with a view of the sun setting down on Tampa Bay instead of the dirty clothes heap in my closet.

“Have you seen John lately?” I say.
“Not lately.”
“I like him. I think you should marry him.” I’m only partly serious.
She holds back whatever she’s thinking, but it’s clear she’s just melting inside. “I haven’t got much in the fridge,” she says. “We’ll have to order out.”
She gets some menus from a drawer in the kitchen and says I simply must try something new, preferably spicy. We decide on empanadas. “They’re Cuban-style around here,” she says. “Like a calzone, only fried, so they’re better.” I can hardly argue with that.
She pays the delivery boy with a wad of ones. “Would you like a glass of wine?” she says.
I look at her like this is some kind of a test.
“Just a glass,” she says. She holds a hand over her heart. “I promise it’s not going to kill you.”
So I nod.
We eat on the balcony with two tea candles for light. The smells coming in off the street are a nice mix of city fumes and sea salt. “This is wonderful,” I say.
“The wine?”
“No,” I say. “Just everything. Just all of it is nice.”

*   *   *

I’ll be glad when Mom gets her life better settled. She can’t take many days off work and still make the rent, so I spend half my time in Tampa watching fuzzy TV over-the-air on a set in her bedroom while she’s off pouring beers at some bar below. I ask if she’ll take me to see the place. “No,” she says. She assures me it isn’t a Hooters—just a place that might as well be.
The only food Mom has in the cupboards is value-brand tuna and dozens of cans of mushroom soup. The soup, she says, was an unbelievable bargain. I don’t know what that means, and I don’t trust it.
I sleep on a very stiff twin bed that’s got a plastic sheet beneath the covers. “That’s to protect you from the mattress,” Mom tells me. “Not the other way around.”
Not a lot else happens this visit. It’s not like the first time down. Mom gives me quarters one morning for an arcade down the street. “It’s going to be a long one,” she says. “I’m pulling a double shift.” I take the quarters to the laundromat across the street instead of to the arcade, along with all the clothes from her hamper. I figure she’ll appreciate the gesture. Also, I could stand to wash a few pairs of socks.
While I’m pulling the clothes out of the dryer, I happen on a black pair of men’s bikini briefs. At first, I just freeze up, like what am I supposed to do?
I’ll just put them back in the hamper is all. I’ll stick the whole load back in there, and she’ll never know the difference—unless she happens to notice that her dirties smell clean. Oh God! Why did I have to pay extra for the softener with the mountain scent?
A tiny, quiet woman two machines over catches me with my nose in the underpants and gets a crooked look.

“It’s not what it looks like!” I say, and I throw the damned things back in my basket. I’m out the door so fast, I lose a sock along the way, and I’m sure as hell not going back to pick it up.

* * *

Our last night together, we order Indian food. Mom has a spot of curry on her chin. I reach over to wipe it with my napkin. “Since when are you so keen on spicy things?” I say.

“I got it.”
“Thanks.”

I try not to act like I’m let down by the fact we’re spending our last night together the same way we did the other twenty. I guess it shows, though.

“Are you feeling okay?” she says.
I shrug. “I just can’t believe it’s been three weeks already.”
“I know,” she says. “I’m sorry.”
“For what?”

“Next time you come, I’ll plan something fun. This hasn’t been much of a vacation.”

“I don’t want it to feel like a vacation,” I say. “I just want it to feel like home.”
She looks around the balcony like, Not in this dump. “It’ll get better,” she says.

“Once things settle in. Next time, it won’t be like this.”

She’s still got the spot of curry on her chin. I just haven’t got the heart to tell her.

“Let’s play a little game,” Mom says. “Truth or dare.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Okay,” she says. “Dare.”

“I dare you to spit off the balcony.”
She looks at me like, That’s all?

“I dare you to spit off the balcony.”
She looks at me like, That’s all?

“Not just a little one,” I say. “A big snotty one. And you have to wait until there’s someone on the sidewalk below.”

“No problem,” she says. She stands and leans over the balcony, holding tight to the rail with one of her legs kicked back behind her. There’s a bag lady coming.

“Don’t do it to her,” I say. “Wait for someone else.”
Eventually, there’s some guys coming down the street like they’re on the way to a party. They’re acting a little too happy to be sober, and by the football jerseys they’re wearing, I’m guessing they’re some kind of jerks.

“Perfect,” she says. I agree, and she lets loose an incredible loogie. It slaps against the concrete about two feet away from the guys. They’re startled, and they all look up at us like, What the hell?

“Sorry!” Mom says. “Had to—it was a dare.”

“You’re a crazy bitch, lady!”

“That’s for sure,” she says, and we sit back down.

“Hmm,” she says. “If you could date any woman in the world, who would it be?”
“Oh, geeze.” I hate these kinds of questions.
“Come on, you have to tell me. It’s the law.”
I pretty much throw out a name at random. “I don’t know…Hillary Swank.”
“Really?” She gets puzzled. “She’s so boyish.”
“Well, I don’t know.”
“Hey,” she says. She throws her hands up. “I’m not here to judge.”
I say, “Your turn.”
“Truth.”
I think for a second. “How about…Have you really tried drugs before?”
She starts busting up so hard, she nearly falls out of her seat.
“Really?” I say. “Which ones?”
She keeps snickering. “Oh, Lord. It would be faster to name the ones I haven’t tried.”
For the record, she has never tried crack cocaine or heroin. I guess you learn something new every day.
My first day of high school, I’m standing on the porch at seven-thirty, and my neck itches. There’s still dew out drying, but it’s already bright as hell. The sun’s like, Dude, get ready for a hot one.

The garage door motors open, and Dad backs out in his Sierra. He rolls the window down. “You miss the bus?”

I say, “No.”

“You want a ride?”

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

He leaves, and I’m alone. What kind of trouble would it be to play hooky on the first day? Not worth testing it, I suppose. I keep scratching around my collar until I realize there’s a price tag hanging there. Jesus Christ, I almost started high school with a K-Mart tag flopping around on my back.

The bus shows up with ten minutes left before the bell. It’s a new bus. There’s no nose on the thing—the windshield just swoops down to nowhere, and all the windows are tinted black and twice as big as bus windows should be. The driver opens up the door shouting at me, “Get your butt in gear, honey!” She’s rolling again before she shuts the door. I have to hobble my way to a seat.

There’s only two other kids on the bus—some older guy I don’t know and a tiny girl from the grade above me with waist-length, frizzy hair she apparently decided should be platinum blond to start the year out right. I take a seat behind the blonde and scrunch myself low. The new vinyl smells like gasoline, and the girl’s hair like ammonia. Overhead, little speakers drone a Celine Dion song that at first I think is strange to hear on the radio these days but then realize, to my horror, is actually off a CD.

*   *   *

Well, well, welcome to Oakview High School. My homeroom class is social studies, definitely not gym, but my teacher, Mr. Durrel wears gym shorts anyway. He’s got a comb-over like you wouldn’t believe, and the end of his nose is a patchy-red bulb like my drunk Uncle Rick’s nose always is. I hand him the tardy slip the bus driver gave me.

“Mr. Baker?” he says. He throws the slip away.

“Yes.”

“You’re half an hour late. That’s an absence.”

I say, “The bus was late.”
“Not this late.”
“You didn’t even read the slip.”
“Just take a seat.”
I say, “Just read the slip.”
He yanks me by the collar to the hallway. “Are we going to have a problem?” he says.
“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”
“Good.”
I don’t know where it comes from, but suddenly I’m up to my elbows in nerve. “I mean, no one told me you couldn’t read,” I say. “Next time, I’ll read the note aloud. The other kids won’t catch on. They’re pretty dumb. Your secret’s safe.”
He gets a look like he could hit me. But he just pushes me to the vice principal’s office—literally, he pushes me there like a piece of furniture—and throws me in, saying, “You deal with him!”
I get a look from a secretary like, *Already?* She picks up her phone and puts in the page.

*   *   *

I call my dad for a ride home after detention, and he almost buys my story about staying late to tutor a kid. He figures things out when I rush in the house to hit delete on the answering machine. He squeezes the story out of me.
He says, “You couldn’t even make it one damned day without mouthing off?”
I don’t know what to say to that. He wouldn’t understand, no matter how I explained it.
“Get your ass to your bedroom,” he says. “I don’t want to see your face before morning.”
I smuggle a cordless phone in with me, lock my door and hunker down in my closet. I’m not crying, I’m just angry. I punch Mom’s numbers like the phone deserves a beating.
“What should I do?” I say.
“Ignore him,” Mom says. “Your father doesn’t understand what it’s like being smarter than the people around him. He’s a very simple man.”
“I mean about my teacher.”
She sighs. “That’s a tougher one. Just play it by ear, I guess.”
“You’re not being very helpful.”
“Well, he’s got you in a tight spot,” she says. “The man is an idiot, clearly, but he’s got all the power in this situation. You’re just going to have to choose your battles carefully. Hang low and avoid eye contact.”
I snort. “Can’t I just poison his coffee?”
“That’s more difficult to pull off than you’d think.”
“I wasn’t being serious.”
There’s a click like Dad’s picked up another phone. I hang up without saying goodbye.

*   *   *
I get the sense of things really quick—being a freshman is like one of those jokes that goes on forever, and when it ends there’s no punch line, you just laugh because the damned thing’s finally over. I guess I find my stride in a couple of days. High school, it’s just a matter of coasting along.

I’ve got this one teacher, she’s all right. Miss Hyatt—she’s the biology teacher for the honors-track kids. Her room is full of leafy plants she’s always spraying with oil to keep them shiny, and she’s got a pair of pet rats in a glass tank in front of the blackboard. Most of the kids don’t like her, especially the asshole guys in the back who only act tough when they’re surrounded by other geeks. Before the bell, while Miss Hyatt is poking around the equipment closet, they go on about her. “She’s kind of a twat,” they say. “Homework on the first day—total twat.”

“At least she’s smart,” I say. “That’s better than half the teachers in this school.”

“At least she’s got big boobs,” they say.

They are big. They’re like watermelons. I say, “They probably give her back problems.”

The guys just give me funny eyes. “What are you, Baker, a fag?”

Assholes.

Miss Hyatt starts her lesson. She throws up an overhead projection of some pea plants and starts talking about a priest named Gregor Mendel. Two pea plants with purple flowers, she says, will sometimes breed plants with white flowers—but not the other way around. She goes on about genes all hour. It’s really sort of interesting. This Mendel guy, he worked his whole life on that gene theory, and wouldn’t you know, nobody cared until after he died. I guess that’s how it is sometimes.

After class, I ask Miss Hyatt if she’s got a minute to talk.

She says, “Sure—” She leaves her mouth open like she’s trying to remember my name.

“It’s Derek.”

“Sorry,” she says. “First week foibles.”

I can’t tell for sure how old Miss Hyatt is. She seems pretty young—maybe thirty. She wears her hair back in a pony tail and a pair of square, black glasses. It’s not until I see her up close for the first time that I realize she’s part Asian or something. I guess the glasses are so thick, it’s hard to tell from far away—although, maybe not that’s the kind of thing you’re supposed to think out loud.

“I was just wondering,” I say. “I mean, just out of curiosity, if your mom has brown eyes and your dad has brown eyes and you have blue eyes, is that really possible?”

She turns her nose down, looking up over her glasses at my irises. “Well,” she says, “blue eyes are recessive, so it’s entirely possible. Sorry, bud, you’re not adopted.”

“Oh,” I say. “No, I was just wondering.”

She ruffles my hair. I think she can tell, I’m a little let down. “Actually,” she says, “eye color is a polygenetic trait. Very complex, so, not the greatest paternity test. There’s still hope.”

I nod along, real slow.

“Genetics,” she says, “they’re a wild beast. Very complex. And yet, when everything comes together, it’s like clockwork.” She holds up one of her hands in front
of me to see. “For example,” she says, “I’m a woman, so my pointer finger is longer than the ring finger, see?” I see. She’s right.

She takes one of my own hands. “But you’re a boy, so, your pointer finger—”

I’m looking down at my hand, too. The pointer is clearly longer than the ring finger, just like hers is.


I’m not sure I like the way she’s acting. “I better go,” I say. “I don’t want to miss the bus.”

“Right,” she says. She’s got her head down like she just saw me naked or something. I run out the door without remembering to grab my notebook from my desk. I decide against going back for it. It’ll be there in the morning.

* * *

I’m not a guy who’s got a lot of friends. That used to bug me. In middle school, I wandered the lunch room like a lost puppy looking for a home. Every couple of weeks, I’d try squeezing in with some new group. Sometimes it was fun for a little while, but it was never very long before I found myself wandering again. It’s not like they kicked me out of their groups—I mean, sometimes they did, but usually it was more like we just mutually realized we had nothing in common, and I drifted away, off to look for some new group of kids to join.

I almost got in with the theater kids. That was the closest I came to making real friends. They were a nice combination of smarts and mischief-making, like, they were all just on a different plane of reality that was fun to visit. But that only lasted a few weeks.

I blew it with the theater kids by being too much of a dweeb. One day—I think it was about a month after we started hanging out—we were loitering after school by the dumpsters in the parking lot, and a girl pulled out a pack of cigarettes she stole from her mom. They all started smoking like they were old regulars at it. And I could have just said no when they offered, but instead I said no and then lectured the whole group on what a bunch of idiots they were being and how they may as well just crawl into their coffins and get it over with. They looked at me like I was just the worst kind of traitor.

It was so awkward, I just slunk away. None of them ever talked to me again. When I told my mom about what happened, she said, “Derek, sometimes it’s all right to let loose for a while.” I thought she’d have told me I did the right thing.

These days, I mainly keep to myself at school. There’s this group I sit with at lunch, but it’s not like we’re sitting together—we’re just all the kids with no friends, so we sit there and eat and don’t say a whole lot. There’s a band nerd who somehow got banished by the other band nerds, and there’s this girl from my honors classes who’s obsessed with getting A’s because it gives her something to obsess about other than her lousy drunken parents.

I know it’s strange, but you could almost say my best friend at school is Miss Hyatt. The day after she gets all awkward on me, she asks me to stay after class and talk. She says she’s sorry about the other day, and she was really just out of sorts because of the start of the new year. Then she asks me if I’m really interested in Biology. “It’s hard finding kids who care,” she says.
I tell her, sure, I like her class better than my others, so she asks if I’d like to stay after school with her sometimes. “I could use a hand,” she says. “Lots of test tubes to clean.” Then she tells me that sometimes she has ideas she’d like to test out but that she needs a lab helper. She’s contemplating a study on amoebas, and she could use some help recording the data. If the results are interesting, she says, we might even publish the findings in a science journal.

I say, “I thought you needed degrees and white coats for that kind of thing.”

She says, “Heavens no. People make major discoveries out of garages.”

I guess that’s pretty cool. “Sure,” I say. “Let’s do it.”

So now I’ve got an extracurricular. Imagine that. Dad actually gets pretty pleased about it—once I manage to convince him this is a real thing and not just some kind of cover-up for detention.

I start meeting with Miss Hyatt after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I wash microscope slides and mix batches of lab chemicals for the older kids in AP Bio. Sometimes she has me sit with her by the microscope and jot things down. Mostly, I tend to the rats. Despite being females, their names are Darwin and DaVinci, and they go through an awful lot of wood shavings. Mostly, it’s boring stuff, but it’s something to do, and it gives me an excuse to make Dad pick me up after school twice a week instead of having to ride that awful bus home. I mean, seriously, whoever came up with the idea of putting CD players on school busses should have realized that bus drivers have the most god-awful taste in music in the world. I’d much rather sweep up rat poop.
Demetri thinks it’s a good idea if we try out a counseling session where Dad and I each get ten minutes alone with him at the end. I wait in the hall outside his office while they’re in there talking. There’s no magazines or anything to look at, just a cheap, framed Van Gogh print hanging on the opposite wall—a self portrait of the man in a straw hat.

Dad stumbles out of the office looking like he needs a cigarette, and he’s not a smoker. I give him my seat and head into the office.

“Is there something the matter?” Demetri says. I’m staring over his head. His office is small. He keeps the window shades just cracked enough to let in the least amount of light.

“No,” I say. He’s got another cheap print over his filing cabinet—two ballerinas, one with her leg up on a pole, the other just watching. I don’t know the artist.

“When’s the last time you spoke to your mother, Derek?”

“Yesterday. After school.”

“You talk to her every day?”

“Most days.”

He nods. Demetri has a little goatee he’s always stroking. It drives me crazy. He says, “When was the last time you spoke with your father?”

“About sixty seconds ago.”

“I mean, when was the last time you had a conversation.” I say, “I don’t know. A month, I guess.”

“A month is a very long time. You don’t talk at dinner?”

“Not really. He talks about stuff going on in politics. I don’t really listen, since I don’t care.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Is this what you brought me in here for?”

Demetri doesn’t keep notes. He just sits in a seat across from mine with his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap. “How about this?” he says. “Describe for me, in your own words, a typical day in the life of your dad. A work day.”

I say, “Well, he gets up. Grabs the paper, hits the john, hits the shower. Skips breakfast. He’s off to work by seven-thirty, back in time for dinner. He watches Jeopardy, watches a movie, watches the news, and hits the sack.”

“That’s it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, Derek, you’ve left an awful lot out.”
I spend a few seconds agreeing. “You’re right,” I say. “He stops at Blockbuster on his way home from work. He’s got a subscription I forgot to mention.”
“Derek, tell me what your father does for a living.”
“I don’t know,” I say.
“Sure you do.”
“He moves dirt.”
“He’s a contractor, Derek. There’s more to it than moving dirt. Your father has to run a whole business.”
“Okay,” I say. “He’s got some guys who work for him. They move dirt, too. And they smell like dirt. Dad likes his shower in the morning, so he goes to bed smelling awful most nights—this in spite of the fact that he’s pretty much a clean freak in every other way. Mom used to scream at him for it, but he didn’t care. He says he has to take his shower in the morning to wake up and taking two in one day would waste water. I don’t know the real reason why he does it that way. He’s just weird.”
Demetri uncrosses his legs. “Do you think he enjoys his work?”
“Nobody likes their job.”
“Sure they do.”
“Do you?”
He gives me a crooked look.
I say, “Did you always want to be a shrink?”
“I’m not a psychiatrist, Derek. I just help people talk through their problems.”
I nod. “You didn’t ever want to study art or anything?”
He says, “I wanted to be something I would be good at.”
“So you’re not good at art.”
“No,” he says. “I’m terrible.”

* * *

It’s a Saturday, and I should be sleeping, but I’m up rubbing my eyes in the kitchen at seven o’clock. Dad struts up to the coffee pot and pours himself a mug. “I think this is an excellent idea,” he says. “You know, I was skeptical at first, but that Demetri is an alright guy. I think he’s got the right idea.”
“Oh yeah?” I say. “Because I think he’s an idiot.”
“Get in the truck.”

On Demetri’s advice, I’m stuck spending the only Saturday left in September with my Dad on some kind of take-your-kid-to-work day that’s supposed to somehow make us understand each other better. Dad takes the suggestion like an excuse to torture me. “We’ll make a man out of you yet,” he says, grinning like he’s joking, but he’s only halfway joking. I think he’d love it if I actually enjoyed poking around in the mud.
Dad drives me all the way to Flint, forty minutes east on I-69, to stick me in a hole in the ground with a Dixie cup and a five-gallon bucket. “Cracked pipe,” he says. “Gotta keep the hole dry until the cement truck comes.”

He’s been coming to this jobsite for the past couple of weeks—an old strip mall they’re tearing down to make way for another strip mall. Dad and his men are laying the groundwork and putting in new pipes for sewer and water. “Just think of it like one of your video games,” he says. “Isn’t that Mario a plumber?”
Down the hole, it’s dark and cold. The dank comes off the walls nearly as heavy as it does up out of the leaking pipe. Up top, the sunlight shines through the opening. I crouch on my toes like that’ll keep the water from seeping through my sneakers, and I call up to my dad with a question. “Not to be overly curious,” I say, “but which kind of sewer is this—storm runoff or sanitary?”

Dad’s face twists into knots as he smirks. “You really need to ask?”

Oh, man.

“Watch out for toadstools.”

Toilet water takes on a whole different kind of stench when it’s riled up with suds from laundromats and dishwashers. What’s coming from the pipe is a yellow-gray liquid that smells like pond sludge and lemon Pledge and foams when I dip in the Dixie cup.

It’s a fifteen-foot climb down the manhole to where the pipe spits out its contents on the bottom. It takes me ages to crawl up and down the ladder, and, the shrimp that I am, I can’t fill the bucket more than halfway and still lift it out of the hole. And the rope I tie to the bucket to hoist it out of the hole keeps slipping in my hands, wearing raw spot. I’m too slow with the whole process and can’t keep the bottom dry, so Dad puts one of his workers, a young one named Jake, up at the top to do the hoisting for me.

“Just stay down there,” Dad says. “Let Jake do the grunt work.”

“But the bucket’s cracked,” I say. “It’ll leak on me”

“Got you covered.” Dad fetches a hardhat from the construction trailer and tosses it down the hole. “That should keep the slop off your face, at least.”

“This is bullshit!”

Dad is already gone, but Jake shouts down to me. “Watch that mouth, young man.”

Jake is the kind of guy, he’d be really attractive if he weren’t such an idiot. He’s got arms like a man on the cover of a workout magazine and a mouth like a bona-fide prick. I spend the rest of the morning filling the bucket, then squeezing myself against the side of the manhole as Jake heaves the thing to the top. He takes arm-lengths of the rope at a time, and that makes the bucket wobble and slosh like crazy. I close my eyes and hold my breath each time the bucket rises.

Michigan gets cold in September sometimes, especially down a fifteen foot hole. Enough of the slosh rains on me that it starts soaking in through my shirt, and I shiver. God, I wish I were in Florida.

There’s some yelping bleeps from a back-up alarm when the cement truck finally arrives. I get the hell out of the manhole and hide myself twenty yards away. Dad crawls down the hole with a trowel, and Jake wheels a barrow of the cement to the top, lowering it down to Dad a few gallons at a time with the same old bucket we were bailing with. After what seems like an awful lot of cement for one little patch, my curiosity gets me, and I jaunt back to the manhole to peek down. Dad isn’t patching the pipe at all but covering the whole bottom, pipe and all, in a layer of concrete.

“Won’t that make it hard next time someone needs to get at that pipe?” I shout down at him.

“What pipe?” Dad says.

Dad comes back to the earth shouting out over the whole jobsite, “Lunchtime, boys.”
Jake spikes his shovel into the ground. The others do the same. An old man who everyone calls Pops jumps out of a skid loader. I try to spike one of the shovels, too, but it doesn’t go deep enough into the dirt, and it falls over. I pick it up and lean it against a wall.

We head (my dad, all six of his men, and me) to a greasy little diner across the street from the jobsite. I’m nearly taken out of my misery by a sporadic lane-changer in a Lincoln Town Car as we’re crossing, but no such luck, and I make it to the diner in one piece.

We sit in two booths side-by-side. A waitress comes up with menus. She’s chewing on a French fry. All the men place their orders before the woman can even hand out the menus.

“And you, hun-bun?”
I look up at her. “I don’t even know what you have.”
“He’ll take a Coney,” Dad says. “Flint style, with cheese fries.”
“That all?”
“That’s it.”

The food comes in no time, and I’m staring down at this ugly, greasy chili dog. “I hate Conies,” I say.

“This isn’t even food,” I say. “It’s dog meat.”
“Well,” he says, “if you want to eat real food, you better get good grades, go to Ann Arbor, get a degree, get a job—and buy your own food.”

I could practically stab him with my flimsy fork. “You don’t have to have a degree to eat like a human being.”

Pops takes out his partial dentures and sticks them in a shirt pocket. “He’s got a point, Boss-man.” Pops is eating soup and a salad, rather than something greasy, on account of the fact he’s got a heart condition. “I never got no schooling, and look what a ‘ristocrat I come to be.” He gives a wide smile to show his missing teeth, and his leathery face bunches around the eyes.

* * *

Oh Lord, Demetri wants us to stick with the one-on-one meetings at the end of our sessions. Our second time at it, I go first. I’ve practically still got sewer stink following me around from the results of his last suggestions, so I’m a little sore about the whole process.

“Tell me,” Demetri says. “Do you think you can give me a clearer picture of your father now?”

“Yes,” I say. I hate that stupid ballerina picture on his wall. “My father is an asshole.”

The man just rolls his eyes.

Dad goes in after me, and they’re in there forever talking—much longer than usual. On the way home, Dad acts a little nervous at the wheel. “You know,” he says, “you might be right about that Demetri. The guy, he might be a quack.”

Oh, boy, here it comes. “Why? What did he say?” I start to wish I hadn’t opted for being so snide during our one-on-one.
“I don’t know,” Dad says. “Nothing.” Then he’s back to looking fidgety at the wheel for a moment before something else bursts out of him. “You know what that man said just now? He said, I mean he suggested—” He laughs a little. “He says he thinks you’re gay.”

Well, that’s certainly not what I’m expecting to hear.

“Excuse me?” I say.

“I mean, that’s crazy, right? Where would he even come up with a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “That is crazy. That’s not what I was expecting you’d say at all.”

“Me either.”

“Well, maybe we should just drop the whole subject.”

“Yeah,” Dad says. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

We nod for a second in unison and avoid talking the rest of the way home.
I call my mom one afternoon in October, and she’s all giggles on the other end. “Good news,” she says.

She bought a house in St. Petersburg. A house! And she’s still a waitress. She just got back from signing the mortgage papers. John went with her to do it. She says she had him pretend he was a lawyer.

“How is that possible?” I say.

She chuckles. “I just cashed your father’s first alimony check.”

The alimony. Right—I forgot that was part of the divorce. Kind of surprising Dad never said anything about it. No wonder he’s been such a grump lately.

“So how’s John?” I say.

“Oh, he’s good. He’s just fine.”

Mom sees John pretty often these days, supposedly just for coffee. She says they’ll keep it up, even with her living in St. Pete and him in Tampa. She says there’s a café near his house that’s worth the half hour drive for the biscotti alone. Personally, I suspect it’s more than shitty little cookies that’s making her go there.

The next thing I say comes kind of out of nowhere. It’s just this thing I’ve been considering for awhile. “How tall is John?” I say.

“Oh, five-six, five-seven. Why?”

“And how tall is Dad? Six-one?”

“So?”

“Just wondering.”

“I like little guys,” she says. “I like you. And you’re a little guy.”

“I know,” I say. “Believe me, I know.”

* * *

By Thanksgiving, I’m so anxious for a break from school, I’m practically excited about the trip to Grandma Barbra’s farm for dinner. Dad and I pile into his truck at dawn. I’m yawning. Seven o’clock is an unnatural hour to wake a person on a holiday. Doubly unnatural when that holiday falls on November twenty-eighth. Happy birthday to me. That’s right, I’m a Sagittarius—couldn’t you tell? My mind is so open, it’s like a cesspool or something.

I wedge an arm against my window to use as a pillow. I try to sleep. When the sun climbs over the hood of the truck, I have to borrow my free arm to use as a visor. No good, though. I give up and punch the power button on the radio. Dad turns it back off.

“I was just checking the time,” I say.
“It’s eight-thirty.”

My stomach starts telling me I neglected to have breakfast, but it’s tough shit on that end—Dad won’t let us have so much as a crumb until we’re sitting down to dinner. He believes a feast isn’t a feast unless you’re starving to death.

My mind drifts to turkey farms and slaughterhouses, and then, out of nowhere in particular, a thought pops into my head that I say aloud: “Do you think a dog would be honored to be eaten by its owner? Like, if it died of natural causes?”

Dad keeps looking straight ahead. “You’re fifteen now, Derek. You have to start watching what you say. People will think you aren’t normal.”

I’m a little surprised. I say, “You remembered.”

“Remembered what?”

“My birthday.”

“What kind of a father doesn’t remember his son’s birthday?” He glances down from the corner of his eye. “Did your mother?”

“Yes.”

“What did she get you?”

“Shampoo.”

A padded envelope came in Wednesday’s mail with ten First Class stamps and no return address. The bottle is brown and labeled in Dutch. The note tucked inside reads, *Straight from the Netherlands—bubble gum variety; right up your alley.*

“What kind of a present is shampoo?” Dad says.

I grin. “She knows my tastes.”

* * *

You’d think a person elbow-deep in gizzards would be too preoccupied to attend to the torture of her grandchild—but that’s my Grandma Barbra for you. We aren’t inside her door two minutes before she’s calling after my dad, “Oh Howard, give your son his vitamins.” She has the nerve to call cod liver oil a vitamin. Runts like me, you see, we just need more cod livers in our diets.

“Open wide,” Dad says. He’s got the bottle in his hand and a spoon in the other.

“You really enjoy this, don’t you?”

“Immensely.”

“At what point am I old enough to refuse this crap?”

“You tell me.”

Yuck.

Grandma Barbra does not believe in religion or science, or common decency for that matter, but she does believe in fresh poultry. She buys her turkeys from a man she knows personally, lops their heads off on a stump out back, plucks them in her shed, and once the blood’s drained out, she guts the things in her kitchen sink. Grandma has a knack for disembowelments—I mean, she’s really a pro; her flowery little apron stays just as clean as you ever saw it.

A whisper comes from the living room. “Derek…” Cousin Joe is standing against the china cabinet while his dad changes a diaper in front of the TV.

“Hi, Joe,” I say.
Joe is seventeen, thinks he’s twenty-five, and stands with the kind of posture, you’d take him for twice the slacker he really is. His little half-sister gets cleaned up with dollar-store baby wipes. Uncle Rick seems pretty sober. Supposedly he drinks less since the baby was born.

Joe brushes the hair away from his face. “How’s it hanging?” He hasn’t fed me any Milk-Bones lately, but I wouldn’t put it past him.

“Let’s take a walk,” I say.

Joe nods. Dad is distracted with Grandma in the kitchen, and Uncle Rick is wrist-deep in poop. It’s pretty perfect timing for sneaking away.

We slip out the back door and walk along the edge of the property where trees stand, back to the barn where Step-Grandpa Fred used to work on tractors before he got Alzheimer’s. We hide ourselves in the rear and sit down in the grass. The trees around are mostly bare. Clusters of yellow leaves blanket the grass between the barn and the empty field of corn stalk stubs.

“You bring the stuff?” Joe says.

“Yeah,” I say. We make our trade. I give him a small baggie for a little glass pipe.

“For future reference,” he says, “you can buy these things at, like, every gas station in the country. You just gotta ask the right way.”

“For your own reference,” I say, tapping his baggie, “this stuff grows from dirt.”

Joe sticks his nose in the bag. “Good shit,” he says. “Kind of sweet.” He sniffs again. “Where’d you get this?”

“My mom keeps a supply in the pantry.”

“Tat’s messed up, Cuz.”

Joe suggests we celebrate our exchange by trying the new goods out.

“You have to be joking,” I say. “That’s the most suicidal idea I ever heard in my life.”

“You kidding me?” he says. “Cousin, here’s the first thing you gotta learn about people like your dad and Grandma Barbra—people like that, they’re so caught up tending to the bug they got up their asses, they don’t notice the shit going on right under their noses.”

“You’re crazy,” I say.

“Got a lighter?”

* * *

Grandma scoops a third helping of stuffing onto Joe’s plate. “My, my, Joe. You’ve sure grown a healthy appetite.” She waves her wooden spoon at me. “You could learn from this man,” she says. “Eat like a man, you’ll grow like a man. Howard, put some more meat on your son’s plate, for Christ’s sake, he’s wasting away.”

Dad starts picking up bits of grisly, dark turkey meat and dropping them on the porcelain plate in front of me. Joe snickers below his breath, waiting for grandma to start yammering again, then motions for me to lean in. “Dude,” he whispers, “they’re so oblivious.”

Dude, we just smoked basil.
Uncle Rick grabs for the baby’s hands to keep her from banging her plate. Grandpa Fred zeros in on a drumstick like it’s the only thing in his universe—which, I suppose, is pretty accurate. Dad nods along to Grandma’s stories.

Joe times his laughing fits to coincide with Grandma’s chuckles at her own jokes. He leans back in his chair until his bulbous little belly sticks out from under its t-shirt, and he stretches his arms back behind his stringy hair. “Touché,” he keeps saying, like it’s the all-occasion quip. “Touché, Grandma B.”

When night falls and the old people start getting ready for bed, I act like I’m heading that way too. Dad and I share the basement together. There’s an old couch down there for him, a sleeping bag for me on the floor. “Shoot,” I say. “I left my duffle bag in your truck.”

Dad’s already under a blanket. “Keys are by the radiator. Don’t forget to lock it up.”

“Will do,” I say.

What kind of person locks their car on a farm in the middle of nowhere—I mean, other than the kind of person with Uncle Rick for a brother?

I snatch my bag from the truck and, since I’m too chicken to sneak back to the barn by myself, I crouch down by one of the truck tires. I fish mom’s present out of my bag and, since I forgot to bring a lighter from home, start working my way through a book of matches I fished from Grandma’s junk drawer. I’m too busy striking the useless things to notice any footsteps sneaking up on me.

“That’s pretty brave, little man, out in the open and all.”

Uncle Rick comes around the truck’s tailgate. “Jesus,” I say. “You scared the piss out of me.”

“You should be more careful. I didn’t think there’d be so many fireflies out this time of year.” I stare up at him, dumb. “Come on,” he says in his long, low voice, “ain’t you learned the sweet-spot yet?” He takes me back to the place behind the barn reserved for debauchery and pulls a lighter out of his pocket, taking my little pipe out of my hands while he’s at it.

“I thought you were sober lately,” I say.

“I’m off the bottle,” he says, and he holds up the pipe next to his face. “This look like a bottle to you?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know you didn’t.”

He takes a deep, long hit, holds it in for ages and then blows out the smoke without any kind of expression on his face. “Good lord,” he says. “What is this stuff?”


“Bubble gum.” He snickers. “Your mother is a hoot.”

“What makes you say that?”

He leans in and pats me a couple of times on the shoulder. “No offence, little man, but you don’t strike me as a guy who’s all that well-connected.” He passes back the pipe. “Too bad about the split,” he says. “Your mother’s a fine woman. Hooked the wrong brother is all.”

Creepy.

We finish up and head inside. Everybody but Joe is sleeping, including the baby who lies face-down on Joe’s chest in the living room. I guess it’s pretty warm there.
“I think we’re safe putting your sister to bed,” Rick says. He takes the baby upstairs to put her down.

I float into a spot on the opposite end of the sofa from Joe. I mean, you know, just float. I stare at the TV. Joe moves with a sort of sluggishness, but he still manages to grab my chin. He turns my face to look in my eyes.

“Jesus,” he says. “Twice in one day, Cuz? You better watch yourself.”

I shrug him off but keep staring at him. “Joe,” I say, “I don’t know anything about you at all.”

He just shrugs. “I’m right here, Cousin. Get to learning.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t think there’s anything there to learn. You and your father, and my father and me, we’re the most worthless people in the world.”

“Speak for yourself, Cousin.” He slides back to the far end of the couch and grabs the remote.

* * *

We get on the road pretty early Friday morning. When Dad notices I’m acting a little queasy, he says, “What’s the matter, you coming down with something?”

“Something like that,” I say.

“You didn’t even ask about your present.”

“My what?”

“Look in the glove box.”

I open it up. There’s an envelope with my name on it. Inside is a generic card and a gift certificate. “What is this?” I say.

“Book-of-the-Month club. I know you like books.”

Kind of thoughtful, really. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The warm engine air spills in through the vents, scented like plastic and pumpkin pulp. We ride on home, and the silence—the silence is so, so good.
Flying to Florida every couple of months doesn’t help the feeling like I’m floating all the time. I tap-dance out of the terminal and catch my mom off guard with her nose in a holiday edition of *Entertainment Weekly*.

“Mom!”

She’s up hugging me before I have a chance to set my carry-on down. She’s wearing a new perfume that smells just like a little yellow rose. She brushes my bangs away from my face. “Jesus, Derek, you look like a complete stranger every time I see you.”

“You do too.”

She shrinks back. “It’s the hair, right?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Daniel insisted I’d look fabulous in a bob.”

I never heard of any Daniel before. I give her a funny face.

“Oh, honey, he’s just my stylist. The man’s fruitier than a bowl of raspberries.”

She giggles, then promptly goes back to clutching her head. “It looks terrible, doesn’t it?”

“No,” I say. “You look just like a celebrity.”

She takes my bag from me to carry and starts walking toward our exit. “Betty Rubble doesn’t count as a celebrity.”

* * *

It’s my first time seeing Mom’s new house in St. Pete. It’s a little bigger than I expected—two stories tall and fairly old. But it’s nice, with pastel-teal stucco and terracotta shingles. We aren’t quite finished pulling up the driveway before I come to realize it’s going to be an interesting Christmas.

I say, “What the hell is that?” There is a white plastic skeleton hanging on her front door.

“That’s Mr. Bones, honey.”

I say, “What, are you trying to set a new trend in wreaths?”

“You could say that.”

I shake Mr. Bones’ hand on my way inside, still confused as to what he’s doing there. Then, “Oh, God…” I drop my bag and start gaping all over the house. There are fluffs of spiders’ web on the curtain rods and pumpkin cut-outs on the walls. In the living room, there’s a shoddy plastic Christmas tree standing by the TV, but instead of bulbs and lights it’s covered in tiny candy pails shaped like cats’ and witches’ heads.
I say, “You’re living in a funhouse.”
“I thought you’d like it.”
“You’ve lost your mind.”
She frowns. “Look, I’ll level with you,” she says. “Halloween was the only holiday on steep enough clearance to afford this year.”
“You never heard of a dollar store?”
She shrugs. “Sure. I’ve heard of the Ritz-Carlton, too. Mr. Bones was only thirty-seven cents.”
I say, “Touché.” (See, Joe, that’s the way you do it.)
“You ready for dinner?” she says. “I’m starving.”
“Aren’t you going to show me around?”
“Food first, tour later.”
From the kitchen, I get a pretty good idea what the rest of the house is like. Everything is tiled, including the countertops, in shades of white and apple-green, like living in a giant Granny Smith. It looks like the place was built in the fifties. There are tiny chips and cracks on a lot of the tiles. The table has pumpkin placemats and a cornucopia of plastic fruit for a centerpiece.
“Looks nice, Mom.”
She says, “I hate this kitchen—it looks just like my mother’s.”
If that’s true, I have no idea. Grandma and Grandpa Andrews live in Miami, and I’ve never been there. In fact, I think I’ve seen them twice my whole life. I say, “Are we going to see Grandma and Grandpa for Christmas?”
She takes a frozen pizza out of the fridge and throws it on a cookie sheet. “No, honey, your grandpa is an atheist.”
“I know that.” I lean against the counter. “But we are too, practically, and that doesn’t stop us.”
Mom says, “Miami is five hours from here. They may as well live on Mars.” She sets the timer on the oven. “You want that tour now?”
Sheesh, she’s always so sensitive about Grandma and Grandpa. She never says why.
The rest of the place is like the kitchen—outdated but still pretty nice. In the middle of the house, there is an open terrace, like a little courtyard, with red patio tiles and planter boxes. The terrace has doors on one side to the kitchen and on the other side to Mom’s bedroom. Her room is cozy but small for a master bedroom, and its bathroom is about as big as a pantry.
The last stop on the tour is my own room. Aside from a linen closet and a door to the attic, it’s the only thing upstairs. It fits a single twin bed and a desk, both of which look like they came with the place when she bought it, and it also has a view of the terrace.
“I love it,” I say. I set down my luggage inside the door.
“I moved your things from the old apartment.” I didn’t realize I had left anything behind, but sure enough there’s a box on my bed. “I better check on that oven.” She nods at me like I should settle myself in for a bit.
I wait for her footsteps to stop creaking down the stairs before I move to inspect the box. Inside, good God, it’s the black bikini briefs, along with some balled-up socks and my Orange book.
I pick up the soft, coverless paperback and flip through the pages a few times until the dusty smell drives up into my face. “I nearly forgot about you,” I say, and I set the book down on my new desk. “Never again.”

* * *

“Happy Christmas, honey.”
I roll over, still holding my eyes shut. “What time is it?”
“It’s Christmas time. Get up.”
There aren’t any clocks in my bedroom, so I assume it’s some god-awful early hour. I shuffle down to the living room like I’ve been traumatized by sleep deprivation.
“Pep up, zombie-boy. It’s almost noon, for Christ’s sake.”
“ Noon!” I check the clock on the cable box, and sure enough, it’s a quarter of.
“Well, why didn’t you wake me sooner?”
Mom makes frozen waffles and microwave sausage for breakfast, which is fine by me. We eat, and she takes a mug of coffee into the living room. There aren’t any candy canes on the Christmas tree, but Mom filled up the little cat and witch buckets with trick-or-treat taffies.
“You really went all-out on the Halloween thing,” I say.
“Nothing half-assed, honey.”
“You sound like Dad.”
She gapes at me. “Blasphemy,” she says. “And on Christmas.”
We open up our presents from the relatives, most of which have wrinkled paper from coming out of FedEx packages. We get covert gifts from Grandma Andrews every year that are generally small and easily hidden from Grandpa, who, according to Mom, would kill Grandma if he ever found out. This year, she gets me a plastic puzzle box with a fifty dollar bill inside. Mom gets a bottle of Irish cream liqueur. “Mother knows best,” Mom says, and she immediately starts pouring it into her coffee.
From Mom, I get a DVD player that I won’t ask how she acquired, more stale candy, and a book on preparing for the possibility of a real-life zombie attack.
“Thanks Mom,” I say, “this is great.” I have to run upstairs to get my present to her from my luggage. It takes a few minutes before I find the thing crammed beneath my jeans and underwear. It’s a frame with a picture of her and me from when I was a baby, when my hair was still blond and my cheeks were always pink. It’s lame, I know, but it’ll do. I don’t think she’s seen any of the pictures since the divorce.
As I’m coming back downstairs with the present in my hands, I see Mom in the foyer with the door open. “Is there something out there?” I say. But before she has a chance to respond, I see it’s not a some-thing but a some-one.
“Mom,” I say, “what is he doing here? No offense, John.”
“None taken.”
“I invited him.”
“When?”
“Ages ago.”
“You didn’t tell me.”
“I didn’t think to.”
She tells John to take a seat by the tree, and I follow her into the kitchen to get him a mug of coffee. “What the hell is this about?” I say.

“The holidays are about spending time with friends and loved ones, honey. John is a very good friend. Besides, I thought you liked him.”

“I do, but still.”

“Lighten up, then.”

It’s awkward as hell watching Mom open her present with John in the room. Doubly awkward when she starts crying over it.

“It was nothing,” I say.

“This means so much.”

“It was nothing.”

John stays for most of the day. He even has some movies with him. We put *Christmas Vacation* in the new DVD player and spend the whole time it’s playing on a half-assed round of Scrabble. Mom wins by insisting that ‘jumpingly’ is a word, and John and I are too mellow to start an argument over it. We have a frozen lasagna and some wine for dinner, and afterward John leaves.

“Merry Christmas,” we shout through the door as he pulls from the driveway. I’m feeling more merry toward him with a glass of wine in my stomach.

As the door closes, I glance over at my mom. Almost like it’s just floating out of me on its own, I say. “Are you sure John isn’t my real father?”


“Are you certain?”

“Yes, I’m certain. Of course I’m certain. Where would you ever get an idea like that?”

“It just makes sense.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

She moves back to the living room and puts another disc in the DVD player, sits down on the couch, and pats for me to sit next to her. I do, and we start the movie. It’s like the question never even came up.

“You wanna smoke?” she says.

“Sure,” I say.

Why not? Merry, merry Christmas.
CHAPTER EIGHT

The last day of January, it’s crazy, bitter cold outside, and wind drives snowflakes into the air from mounds around the house. Dad gets home early, even for a Friday. He walks into the house with a look like he’s stumbled into a foreign universe. “Derek?” he says.

I lean my body back far enough so he can see my head through the kitchen door. “Yes?”

“What’s that smell?”

“Cake.”

“You’re baking a cake?”

“Yes.” I start squirting the frosting on a little faster so I can stick the dishes in the washer before he has a chance to see the mess.

“What for?”

I pick the cake up and walk it out for him to see. It’s a double-layer, round cake with chocolate frosting and green letters. Across the top, it reads Free On Time Served. “Today is our last session with Demetri,” I say. I set the cake down on the dining table.

“Our six months are up.”

He scratches his head. “Your school let out thirty minutes ago. Where did you find time to bake a cake?”

I say, “We had a half day.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Okay,” I say, “so I cut out on gym class.”

“You have gym at ten in the morning.”

“So I cut out on a couple other classes, too.”

“Derek!”

He looks at me like he’s going to grab the icing knife off the counter and gut me with it. “How did you even get home?”

“I walked.”

“Two miles?”

“Why not?”

“Through the snow!”

I push past him out of the room. “Look,” I say, “I waited until after algebra. I’ve got A’s in everything else, and I only did it so I could bake us this damned cake, so what’s the big deal?”

He points his finger at me. “You intentionally did this to deceive me.”

“You’re paranoid.”

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We don’t speak again before it’s time to head to Demetri’s office. Once inside, Dad makes it about thirty seconds into the session before he starts throwing the whole conversation onto me.

“Derek cut school today.”
I swivel around in my chair to face him. “Well, you came home early, too.
Should we talk about that like it’s the end of the world?”
“I can come home whenever I want; I’m my own boss.”
I say, “Everybody’s their own boss. Some people just aren’t smart enough to realize it.”
“Derek,” Demetri says, “let your father speak.”
“He’s turning into his mother,” Dad says. “More so every day. All impulses, no restraint. It’s bad enough he cuts class, but the reasoning. He wanted to bake a cake.”
“That was not on an impulse,” I say. “I planned that for ages.”
Dad keeps ignoring me. “And the way he schemes! I can only imagine the things he does that I don’t even know about.”

As the hour runs out, I pop up from my chair while Demetri is still midway through telling me I need to work on my listening skills. “Well, Doc,” I say, “it’s been great and all, but as you can see, our time is now officially up. You wanna waste another minute of my life, you better get an order from a judge.”
“I’m not a doctor, Derek.”
I say, “I know that, asshole. I was patronizing you.”
I slink out, and Dad stays back a good twenty minutes with Demetri before he comes out to meet me in the hallway.
“That could have gone better,” he says.
I haven’t got a response to that.
We grab a pizza on the way home and eat it at the table with my cake there staring at us like it’s going to explode any minute. Dad keeps eyeing it. “It’s not poisoned,” I say. “I promise.”
He lets down his guard a little. “Where’d you learn to bake?”
“It’s just following directions. I do harder stuff for Miss Hyatt.”
He nearly cracks a grin. “You mean you make it all the way to sixth period sometimes?”
“Hey,” I say, “it’s not my fault if I can ace a class without having to be there.”
“Tell me that again when they fail you for truancy.”
I get up to grab forks and a knife to cut the cake with. “Come on,” I say.
“You’ve at least got to try a piece before you say it wasn’t worth it.”
He says, “Get out the milk.”
The cake is pretty tasty. Chocolate has a way of drowning out the rest of the world, even if just for a little while. “Almost a shame,” I say.
“What?”
“Now that the counseling’s over, we’ll have to come up with a new reason to pick a fight every Friday afternoon.”
He grimaces and swipes chocolate from around his bottom teeth with his tongue.
“About that…” he says.
“Oh, God.” I drop my fork. “You didn’t agree to more sessions, did you?”
“Not exactly.”
I just look at him puzzled. “Then what?”
He says, “Demetri thinks it would be a good idea if we sent you to some sessions on your own now. With a psychiatrist.”
“You can’t be serious.”
“I agree with him.”
“You can not be serious.”
“Derek, you’ve been acting really funny lately. Frankly, every time I think we’re getting along like we’re supposed to, you go and do something I can’t even explain. I’m not saying it’s your fault. If anything, it’s your mother… Not that I’m blaming your mother, either. It’s just—”
“Don’t bother,” I say. I pick the rest of the cake up off the table and throw it at the wall. The plate falls and breaks against the floor, and there’s a wide brown splatter left all over the wallpaper. I say, “Crazy enough for you?” I get up from the table and walk to my room.

* * *

I sob into the phone. “I want to come see you!”
“You can’t see me until Easter.”
“I’ll run away.”
“Don’t you dare, Derek. You’ll ruin things for both of us.”
“I don’t want them prying around in my head.”
“Then don’t let them. Derek, even if you were crazy, you’re a smart enough person to make people think you weren’t. Just tell the shrink what you know he needs to hear, and it’ll be over before you know it.”
“What if they try to put me on drugs?”
“You should be so lucky.”
“You’re not helping.”
“Hey,” she says, “I’m not the one who threw a cake against the wall.”

* * *

I spend a week just crying, I mean, just crying all the time. I want to strangle my dad. I nearly could, I swear. Wednesday comes, and Dad takes me to see the shrink. Jesus Christ, I can’t believe it. Seriously, I don’t even want to believe it.

Dr. Shelley’s office is in downtown Lansing. It takes half an hour to get there from home, mostly on account of the traffic—and the meeting is only for fifteen minutes! I’ll see her every Wednesday, which should make for an abusively long hump-day.

The first time I meet Dr. Shelley, I say, “So, what’s your deal? You’re one of these doctors, you want to act like you’re down-to-earth so you go by your first name?”
“No,” she says. “I go by Dr. Shelley because my name is Meredith Shelley. And I didn’t go to school for eight years so some self-righteous punk could talk down to me.”
I have to smile. “You don’t pretend you’re neutral,” I say. “I like that.”
“Nobody is neutral. We all view the world through a lenses, even doctors.”
“Demetri tried to pretend he didn’t have his own opinions about things. It just came off passive aggressive.”

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“Well, Demetri is an idiot,” Dr. Shelley says.
I keep smiling at her. “You only said that to get on my good side, didn’t you?”
She nods. “I have no idea who Demetri is. I assume he’s not somebody you
made up?”
I shake my head.
“Well, good,” she says. “That’s one less thing to deal with.”

* * *

By February, I get to where I really look forward to staying after school with
Miss Hyatt on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I know it’s just a lot of busywork, but the rats
are fun to play with, and she’s always giving me photocopies of journal articles she
knows I’ll find interesting. She’s got this one she’s been working on herself that she
thinks she may actually be able to publish. She says if she does, and if I help her with the
proofreading, she’ll give me credit as a coauthor.
I say, “That doesn’t seem very fair. I haven’t really done anything except wash
test tubes and keep notes.”
She tells me I shouldn’t worry about that—that in the world of science, ninety
percent of the credit is taken by people who do ten percent of the work. “We call most of
those people professors.”
Then she takes out a little box of chocolates to give to me. “Here,” she says.
“For Valentines Day.”
I say, “But Valentines Day isn’t until tomorrow.”
By the look on her face, I suddenly get the sense she’s going to ask me a favor.
“True,” she says. “And President’s day is Monday.”
She tells me she wouldn’t normally ask on such short notice, but her fiancé just
surprised her with a trip to Chicago, and she needs someone to watch Darwin and
DaVinci over the long weekend. “It’s not safe to leave them for three days,” she says.
“If they knock over their water bottle, they could die of thirst.”
I tell her I’ll do it, and since my dad is already planning to pick me up from
school, I may as well just take them with me now. We load the two rats into their plastic
travel cage, and she gives me enough pellets to make it through the weekend.
When Dad picks me up, I climb into his truck with my big winter coat billowing
up all around me and a yellow rat cage in my lap.
“What on earth are you doing with those?” he says.
“I’m assisting Miss Hyatt with an experiment.”
“Really?”
“Yes,” I say. “We’ve given these rats a potion, and they’re madly in love. Now
we’re going to see if they can make it a whole weekend without killing each other.”
Dad grins. “I wouldn’t bet on it.”
It’s pretty fun having the rats around. I spend Presidents Day in my bedroom with
a towel plugging the gap under the door so Darwin and DaVinci can’t get while they’re
crawling all over the place. They’re neat animals. Rats are actually pretty smart—or at
least really curious. They want to explore every inch of the room, and they just about
perform acrobatics to climb up on things. At one point, Darwin manages to jump from
my bed to my desk chair, then up the chair back and onto my desk. At that point, she
nearly squashes herself by knocking over a five-pound math book.

I grin at the thought of having to tell Miss Hyatt that Darwin got herself naturally
selected.

* * *

At my February head-shrinking appointment, I go on so much about Miss Hyatt
that Dr. Shelly starts getting suspicious. She says, “Derek, do you have romantic feelings
for your biology teacher?”

I have to laugh. “Now I’ve got a crush on Miss Hyatt? The last guy thought I
was gay.”

“Are you?”
“Tell me.”
She says, “Frankly, Derek, I don’t care.”
I smile. “That’s great. I love that. Maybe I’ll have a crush on you now.”
She smiles back. “Have you been taking your medication, Derek?”
“I have.”
“Your father says you’ve been having fewer mood swings.”
I say, “I don’t think I was that moody to begin with.”
“Mmhmm. Do any baking lately?”
I say, “That was a one-time thing.”
“Of course it was.”
She renews my prescription, this time for ninety days. And that’s pretty much the
end of the session—fifteen minutes doesn’t last very long. You’ve got to love that about
shrinks. It’s like psychiatry from a drive-through window.

Dad is late picking me up, which is really unlike him. It must be the traffic. I bet
he decided not to even bother parking and just spend my appointment time circling the
city. It’s so cold out in front of Dr. Shelly’s building that I duck down the alley for a
break from the wind. As I come to a halt, I notice a maintenance man about ten feet
ahead of me holding a joint and looking startled as hell.

I say, “It’s all right, man. I’m cool. No worries.” He’s so relieved, he offers me
a hit. And I take it.

When Dad shows up, I hop in, and right away, he wants to know how the meeting
went.

I say, “The drugs are working.”
He says, “That’s good news.”

On the way home, we stop at the grocery store to fill my prescription and pick up
a few things for dinner. While Dad is at the pharmacy counter, I nose around the produce
section. It’s so strange—the dead of winter, and you can buy yourself a great, juicy piece
of fruit grown forever away. I admire the navel oranges. There’s one in the pile that’s
just so bright, it shines under the florescent lights, and I just pick it up without so much as
a thought. I peel the orange like Mom taught me, with the skin in one continuous strip,
and then I take a piece and eat it. It is so, so very sweet.

Dad comes up behind me with a paper pharmacy bag in his hand. “Jesus Christ,”
he says, “what are you doing?”
I say, “I needed to know if it was as sweet as it looked.”
He takes what’s left of the orange and sticks it back in the pile—like it’s just going to blend in there. He says, “They’re not like grapes, Derek. You can’t do that.” Then he ushers me away from the produce, and we leave the store without getting any groceries.
I get a very strange call in April. It’s a Sunday, near the start of the month, when it’s still pretty cold in Michigan—colder than usual this particular year. What warmth that does come only turns the frost outside to a loose, brown mush that steals your shoe if you happen to step in it. I’m sitting on the couch watching TV, and Dad’s there reading a book on Benjamin Franklin. The phone rings. It’s Mom. My heart jumps when I see her name on the call ID box. We haven’t spoken in ages, way longer than usual.

I pick up. And then, just like she’s telling me the weather, Mom says, “Your grandmother is dead.”

I say, “Oh my God, Grandma Andrews?”

“Yes, Derek.”

“When?”

“A week ago. She’s already in the ground.”

I say, “Excuse me?”

But I heard her right. My grandma died, and Mom didn’t even tell me. “How did it happen?”

“She was old.”

I say, “I thought she was sixty-five.”

“Sixty-five is old.”

Trying to get any more information out of my mom is like taking a crack at Fort Knox. She won’t budge.

I say, “Why didn’t you tell me? I should have been at the funeral.”

She says, “This has not exactly been easy for me!” Then she slams down her phone, just like that.

I set my own phone down extra delicately.

From the look on my face, Dad says, “What happened?”

“Grandma Andrews died.”

“Oh, Christ,” he says. He kicks himself out of his chair. “Come on, I’ll take you to the airport.”

I shake my head. “They already buried her. I wasn’t invited.”

He’s still standing, and he shifts on his feet for a moment like he can’t tell for sure what to do. “Well, come on anyway,” he says. “Let’s go for a drive.”

Despite the fact that it’s thirty degrees outside, we get ice cream cones from Dairy Queen, then we head out onto the country roads east of town and just keep driving. The roads stretch on along open swatches of farmland, with cornstalk stubs in frozen rows of frosty, brown-gray mud. Soon, even the roads are made of dirt, and Dad drives slow. I think it’s the first time he’s really had to think about Mom in at least a couple months.
“It’s sad,” I say. “I never knew her, but it’s still sad.”
Dad just nods.
I say, “How come Mom is so weird about her parents?”
“You’ll have to ask her that yourself.”
“Why can’t you just tell me?”
“Because I don’t know, Derek. Your mother never talked about her parents. I
didn’t even meet them until you were born—she wouldn’t invite them to the wedding.”
“But why not?”
“Derek,” he says, “I really don’t know.”

* * *

It takes a week before I cry. I stay mostly in a state of confusion over things,
more frustrated than sad. It isn’t until I’m in school, a Monday morning, and Miss Hyatt
sends a note to my Spanish teacher to call me to her room.
Miss Hyatt doesn’t have class third hour, so it’s just her in the room when I get
there. She says, “I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”
I say, “Give me the bad.”
She shrugs toward Darwin and DaVinci’s tank. “DaVinci died over the
weekend.”
I look at the tank, and, true enough, there’s Darwin, just sitting by herself in the
tank like even she is aware that now she’s alone. That’s about all I can take. The tears
well up in me, and I just start bawling. “Why is this happening now?” I say.
She rubs my back. “It’s alright,” she says, “DaVinci was four—that’s a ripe old
age for a rat.”
“No,” I say, “it’s not DaVinci. It’s just, my grandma just died, and now this.” I
start crying harder. “Why does everything keep dying on me?”
Miss Hyatt doesn’t know what to do with me. She just keeps patting my back
until I calm down. She says, “I guess this isn’t the best time for the good news.”
“No,” I say, “what is it?”
“Our paper on microbe evolution, it’s been accepted for publication.”
I smile. My face must be red like crazy. “Next time, give me the good news
first.”
“Don’t worry,” she says, “I will.”

* * *

Easter approaches and, with it, spring break. I fly to Florida feeling weird about
seeing Mom. She’s been awkward on the phone since she told me Grandma died. At the
airport, she’s equally awkward, and she looks awful, like she’s just been a wreck for
weeks and weeks. As soon as we’re back at her house, she collapses into her bedroom
and won’t come out. She stays like that all day.
Easter Sunday, I make eggs in the morning and attempt to bring breakfast to Mom
in her room. She won’t eat it, though, and she won’t talk to me. “You have to eat,” I say.
“You look like you haven’t had a meal in days.”
“Honey,” she says—she talks from her stomach, with her face in her pillow, “just leave me alone.”

It’s so bad, I resort to calling John. He’s number one on the speed-dial in the kitchen.

I say, “I hope I’m not interrupting your Easter.”

He says, “Naw, I’m a heathen like your mother.”

I ask if he’ll come over, and in an hour he’s pulling up the driveway in his little red pickup truck. He tries coaxing Mom from her bed. He tries even harder than I do, and still it’s no use. She won’t budge. When he gives up, he shuts the door to her room, and he just shrugs at me. He motions for me to follow him outside to the front porch.

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes. “Smoke?” he says.

“No thanks.”

He lights one for himself.

“I don’t get it,” I say. “Why is she acting like this?”

John says, “Death is hard on people.” He holds his cigarette like he’s studied a lot of John Wayne movies. While he smokes, he leans against the wall in such a way, I have to look down just to look him in the eye.

“Did she even go to the funeral?” I say.

He nods. “I took her myself.”

And then I get an idea that’s awful—because I know he’ll have to say yes, despite what a terrible favor it is to ask. “Would you drive me there,” I say. “To her grave. Right now.”

He only hesitates a second. “Get in the truck.”

* * *

It’s a four hour drive to Miami from St. Pete. Four hours with a man I barely know, to tell the truth. He drowns the silence out with his stereo—a mixed CD of 70s rock songs that seem a little too old even for someone John’s age. When the disc ends, he puts in another, and then another, until the drive is over.

Grandma is buried in the northern part of the city, not far off I-75. John pulls into the cemetery, and he parks his truck along the side of the drive and points me toward the grave.

“Back there,” he says. “Almost to the corner.” He stays in his truck while I walk to the grave.

I imagine it should be cold when you visit a cemetery. That’s just how it’s supposed to be—it’s supposed to be cold and gray. But it’s eighty degrees in Miami, and bright, and muggy as hell. That just makes it surreal. That just makes me want a hole of my own, so I can crawl down in it and die there.

Grandma Andrews’ only giveaway is the headstone. There’s already sod covering over the dirt, and it’s had enough time to root in. It’s just the headstone that gives her away—it’s newer than its neighbors, without so much as a single chip worn off the edges of the crisp lettering.
There’s nothing more. It’s a very simple headstone, carved in white-gray granite. It’s strange that her tombstone is so blank. It’s like, I hardly know anything about her—and that’s just what got put on her tombstone.

I haven’t got anything to leave at the grave. I just rub my fingers over the stone, say my goodbyes, and try not to think too hard about what really lies six feet below me.

I trek back to John’s truck. He says, “All set?” I nod.

We’re rolling again. I say, “John, how did my grandma die?”

He says, “She was old.”

I say, “People don’t die of old age at sixty-five.”

“Some people do.”

“Did you ever meet them?” I say. “My grandparents. Back when you and my mom were dating?”

“Nope.”

“So you don’t know where my grandpa lives?”

He says, “Your momma and I didn’t date that long before she left me for your daddy. I never met her folks.”

I guess that kind of shuts me up for awhile. But then it starts to bug me. I say, “I thought my mom left you before she met my dad.”

He shakes his head. “No,” he says. “We were still living together. She ran away in the middle of the night.”

* * *

Mom stays all but comatose the rest of my week in Florida. Why exactly that is, she’s not saying. John’s not saying. Nobody is saying, so why should I care?

Wednesday night, with three days left to go before my flight home to Michigan, I do something I never did before—I call my dad from Mom’s house. He picks up sounding bewildered.

“Sharon?”

“No, it’s me.”

“Oh,” he says. He sounds really relieved. “What’s up?”

I tell him I just called to talk. You’d think I told him something in Greek.

“I beg your pardon?”


So we do. We talk, I don’t know, maybe five minutes. That may be a record for us. I don’t tell him about visiting Grandma—or about Mom being stuck in her bed. I sure as hell don’t tell him a word about John. I just ask him about the weather and say, “It’s really hot down here. It’s awful.”

“That so?” he says. “It’s cold as hell up here.”

“I know, Dad. I was just there.”

He says, “Oh. Right.”
And then I say, “Did I tell you? That paper I helped Miss Hyatt with, it’s getting published.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not,” I say.

And then he goes on and on. Why didn’t I tell him sooner? And, wow, he’s really proud. And I’ll get accepted at Michigan for sure now.

I say, “That’s a long way off, Dad.”

“No it isn’t,” he says. “You’ll see.”
PART TWO
CHAPTER TEN

Don’t say I lost the magic out of my eyes or any of that schmaltzy stuff like Mom says. I’m a little older is all—I’ll be nineteen in a couple months. And I still don’t know shit, so, in those regards, I guess that makes me pretty much the same as I always was. The real difference between eighteen and fifteen, I think, is at fifteen you think you’re a bright guy, and by eighteen you realize you were dumb all along.

I’m not doing things in secret anymore, starting today. I mean it. God, I hate secrets. They’re so time-consuming. I’ve got a whole shoebox full of secrets under my bed that I ought to just throw in the garbage—I don’t know why I can’t bring myself to do it. There’s a yearbook photo of some dope I used to like, my Orange book, a smutty magazine I found by the side of the road one day. The top one, the big daddy, is my acceptance letter from the University of South Florida. Mom and Dad both went there, and I kept it from them that I even applied. I had to gather spare change for six weeks just to buy the money order to pay the application fee. I didn’t want them knowing.

The other acceptance letters went on the fridge. Dad paid for those. I got in at Purdue and a couple other schools he thought were okay. I got rejected from Harvard, of course, and, for no apparent reason, from my backup school, Bowling Green State. Dad swept the fridge letters straight in the garbage the day the one came from Ann Arbor.

I showed it to him at dinner that night. He thought I did it that way because I was keeping it a surprise, but I really just couldn’t bring myself to do it any sooner. He jumped up out of his chair, he was so happy. “My son’s a Wolverine!” I never saw the man so happy before. When he was fresh from high school, he poured driveways for ten years before going back to college. I guess he never got over the fact he didn’t get into Ann Arbor himself—doubly so considering how much he regretted going to Tampa.

*   *   *

We decide to throw my graduation party at Grandma Barbra’s house since there’s more room there and it’s closer for most the relatives to travel. We even invite Mom, and as much to my own horror as Dad’s, she agrees to come.

“That’s perfect,” Mom says. The timing is just right for the start of our summer vacation together. “We can fly back to Florida on the same plane.”

I’m technically an adult now, so there’s no custody anymore. We can be together as much as we want. But I have to be back in Michigan by mid-July for my orientation at U of M, so I guess being free doesn’t really make that much of a difference.
“Oh great,” I say. “You’re really coming up here? That’s— That’s wonderful.”

It’s the first time she and Dad will be in the same state since the divorce went through. It ought to be hell.


She’s a tricky, tricky woman, my mom.

Dad takes Mom’s RSVP card like a blow to the face. He tries not talking about it, but as we’re driving out to Grandma’s, he grips the wheel so hard his knuckles turn white. Grandma, on the other hand, doesn’t know of such a thing as keeping quiet. She spends the whole night before the party going on about how awful my mother is.

“I never liked that girl,” she says. “Not for one minute. She was only after your money from day one.”

It’s like Grandma doesn’t even realize she’s talking right in front of me—not that it would stop her if she did. She’s particularly bad at dinner. She keeps plopping blobs of her apple stuffing on Dad’s plate, saying, “Why on earth did you even invite her? Did you not think to ask me if she could come?”

“For God’s sake,” Dad says, “could please stop talking about this?”

Then Fred—Grandpa Fred, the man so bad with Alzheimer’s he’s barely said a word in five years—pipes up out of nowhere. He says, “Florida ain’t a Southern state. Florida’s just where Yankees go to die.”

Grandma says, “We should be so lucky.”

Thank you, Grandpa Fred.

* * *

Some men come in the morning to pitch a party tent in the front yard and set up tables. After breakfast, we get out the streamers and go to work on the decorations. Dad says he has a headache and needs to lie down for awhile, so he goes to watch TV with Fred and leaves me to take orders from Grandma Barbra.

“No like that,” she says. “Good Lord, don’t you know how to tie a balloon?”

I say, “Apparently not.”

She gives me a crooked look, then skulks away like she’s decided to take some of the money out of my card.

Things get a little better when Uncle Rick shows up. He parks his truck in the grass beside the house, and his wife, Aunt Kristine, gets out with their little girl.

“My man!” Rick says. He walks up to me with his arms open and gives me a hug.

“Big day,” he says.

“Just kill me.”

He pats my back. “Help me with the keg.” He’s drinking again—big surprise—but supposedly not as much as he used to. We lug the keg out of his truck bed and put it in a tub full of ice beside the buffet table in the garage. We tap it, and he gives me my present then. It isn’t wrapped—he just fetches it from his truck. It’s a plastic Michigan mug.

“It’s got a lid,” he says. “You know, for keeping the flies out of your soda pop.”

Then he fills it up with beer and hands it over.

I say, “Thank you Uncle Rick.”
I go back to tying bunches of balloons to the tent poles, and Rick helps me out. It’s getting hot already, but it’s not so bad after half a beer. “Is it really true your mom is coming?” Rick says.

He’s tall like Dad, so his balloons wind up hanging a couple feet higher than mine. The whole getup starts looking uneven. I say, “It’s true.”

“Good God,” he says. “Sharon Andrews, back in Dodge.”

“It’s still Sharon Baker,” I say. “She never went back to her maiden name.”

I ask him if Cousin Joe is coming. “Later,” he says. “He’s got work today.” Joe never got his diploma. He works at a gas station now, apparently on the Saturday afternoon shift.

At one o’clock, Grandma sets out the trays of ham and macaroni salad and all the other stuff she spent a week preparing. By then, the relatives are trickling in. Between Grandma’s three sisters and four brothers, there’s enough shirttail cousins and half-this-or-thats-by-marriage, I barely recognize the people giving me cards. I think a lot only show up for the food.

The second time I flub the name of someone I don’t recognize, Uncle Rick tosses me a dinner roll. “Trick is,” he says, “just don’t stop chewing till you’re past the introductions.”

Finally, at three, Mom arrives. She’s in a rented yellow sports car, of all damned things, so the whole crowd takes notice when she pulls up the drive. I run over to greet her, and the first thing I say, real snide, is, “You got me a Mustang! How generous.”

She says, “Only the best for my baby.”

“Let me guess,” I say, “you were going to get a compact, but they were just plumb out?”

“No,” she says. “I simply asked for a car to match my outfit, and this was the one they had.”

She’s in her favorite yellow sundress, with her perfume on that smells like a rose, and she’s done her hair in pretty pin-curls that must have taken all morning. Dad isn’t anywhere around. In fact, I haven’t seen him since breakfast. Mom gets a plate, and we sit down at a table that quickly clears out except for us. It’s like there’s a ten foot bubble around Mom that no one else is willing to enter, which, actually, is like a blessing. Just Uncle Rick comes to sit with us. And since his wife is new enough not to know or care who my mom is, Aunt Kristine comes over with the baby. Mom and Rick get in a conversation about alligators, and I distract myself watching the little girl crawl around below the plastic tablecloth, chasing black beetles in the grass and calling them ladybugs.

Rick asks Mom if she wants a beer. She does. He gets up and takes my cup while he’s at it. “I’ll top off your ginger ale,” he says, winking like it’s not completely obvious he’s full of shit.

While Rick is away, the women start chatting about having babies, and Dad comes stumbling out of the house through the front door. He marches through the yard to the tent and stops across the table from Mom.

“Sharon,” he says.

She looks away from Aunt Kristine. “Howard.”

“How was the flight?”

“A little turbulent.”

He clamps his hands over my shoulders. “Holding up, champ?”
“Yep.”
“Good,” he says. And with that, he marches himself straight back into the house.
Mom just starts chuckling. “Some host,” she says.
I shrug.

* * *

The party clears out pretty early. A few hangers-on stick around until dark, mostly on account of the free beer. Cousin Joe rolls in about the time we’re saying goodbye to the last shirttails. He’s driving a red Pontiac with a smashed front bumper, and as he gets out I notice he’s finally cropped his stringy hair down closer to his head.
“Cousin,” he says. “Congrats.”
Grandma comes out of the house. She’s just finished putting all the leftovers in the fridge. She sighs. “Come on in, Joe. I’ll make you a plate.”
I tell Mom and Rick I’m going in, too, to check on Dad. They’re still talking about Florida, so they don’t even notice. Aunt Kristine just sits there with the little girl in her lap, both of them looking a little fidgety.
Dad is on the couch. He sits there watching the TV while Grandpa Fred flicks through channels. Fred never stops on one for longer than a few seconds—he just surfs like that continuously. He’d do it all day if Grandma let him.
I clamp my hands on Dad’s shoulders. “You holding up?”
He says, “No.”
I sit down beside him.
“She still here?”
I say, “Yes.”
“Didn’t she get a hotel?”
“She did.”
He snorts.
I sit with my back too straight to be comfortable, with my hands on my knees.
“She’s really been pretty alright,” I say. “It wouldn’t kill you to talk to her.”
He pats the back of my head. “Yes it would, son.”
I sit there a few more minutes until he says he thinks he’ll just go to bed. “We can clean up the yard in the morning.” He starts heading toward the fold-out in the basement.
“I’ll be down in a bit,” I say.
“I won’t wait up.”
I find Joe with Grandma in the kitchen, and she says she’s going to go to bed, too. Joe helps her get Fred up the stairs to the bedroom, and afterward he says to me, “You open your graduation cards yet?”
I shake my head.
“Come on,” he says. He has me fetch the box of gifts from the garage and bring it to the kitchen while he sits there eating a sandwich.
I open the first one. “Aunt Betty,” I say. “Twenty dollars.” I don’t know who that is.
He tells me to write down inside the cards what people gave so I can mention it in the thank you notes. “That’s a good idea,” I say. “I wouldn’t have thought of that.”
At some point, Joe’s step-mom pokes her head in the front door. “Joe,” she says, “I’m taking your sister home. You mind giving your father a ride when he comes to his senses?”

He says, “Not a problem.”
I’m still working on the cards. Once I’ve finished the whole stack, Joe gets up to rinse the crumbs off his plate. I take the pile of bills and checks and fold them inside my wallet.

“How much was all that,” Joe says. “Like eight hundred bucks?”
“Pretty close. You were counting?”
He just shakes his head. “Christ, that’s a lot of money.”
I wonder aloud where Rick and my mom got off to. Joe says, “I’ll give you three guesses.”

We head outside. It’s dark as hell now, and there’s lightning bugs out in droves. We could use a can of mosquito spray, but I wouldn’t know where to find one.

“Some night,” Joe says.
“You have no idea. It’s been crazy all day.”
“I meant the stars,” he says. “It’s really pretty.”
He’s right. We’re far enough from the city, you can see the Milky Way stretched out all over the sky.

Mom and Rick are carrying on behind the barn. There’s a glow and a smoky scent coming from that direction, like the two of them started a campfire. Joe and I wander back there along the edge of Grandma’s corn field.

“You ever met the guy who grows the corn?” he says.
Ever since Fred stopped being himself, Grandma rents the land to a neighbor farmer for practically nothing. I say, “No.”

“He’s real nice,” Joe says.
He explains this crazy dream he’s got that someday he’ll inherit the farm, and then he’ll be a farmer instead of a guy who sells hotdogs at a gas station.

“Is that why you’re so nice to Grandma Barbra all the time?”
He chuckles. “Everybody’s got an angle, kid. What’s yours?”

Behind the barn, Mom and Rick sit side-by-side in front of a fire they managed to build inside the same tub the keg was in. The keg now sits by the wall of the barn, mostly empty, with a pile of dumped-out ice melting beside it. From the looks of things, they’ve been hitting it pretty hard.

“Hey!” Rick says. “There’s the rug-rats.”
Mom says, “Sit, sit,” and we do, on the opposite side of the fire.
Joe tells Rick that Aunt Kristine already went home. “Good riddance,” Rick says, and Joe and I both cringe. Rick laughs. “I’m kidding!” he says. “You know I’m kidding.”

Mom says to me, “Is your father still alive?”
“He’s sleeping.”
“Good,” she says. She takes a glass pipe out of her purse, along with a Tylenol bottle full of weed.

“You took that on a plane?” I say, and she giggles.
“What, too dangerous for you?”
“No,” I say, “too stupid.”
But when she starts to pass it around, I don’t turn her down. Nor does Uncle Rick, naturally—but Joe does.

“Can’t,” Joe says. “Probation.” It was drugs that got him kicked out of high school. He was dealing.

Rick says, “I thought that ended a year ago?”

“Nope,” Joe says. “Still going on.”

He’s lying. Good for him, I guess.

Uncle Rick wants to stay all night, but Joe manages to coerce him into his Pontiac a little after three in the morning. Mom drives herself to her hotel in such a state, I’m surprised she even gets her key in the ignition on the first try.

In the morning, Dad crawls up from the basement, groaning like it’s him who should be hung over. We clean up the streamers that fell down overnight and got soaked through with dew, then pop the balloons and clear the tables. Mom eventually shows up to drive me with her to the airport.

I grab my duffel bag and give Dad a hug. Before I leave with Mom, he walks up to the Mustang and sticks his head in through my window.

“You are a monster,” he says.

Mom says, “Charmed.”

He says to me, “You know, you’re old enough now, you don’t have to go if you don’t want.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, Dad,” I say. And we head off to catch our plane.

* * *

The whole way to Tampa, Mom sits rubbing her temples, and I sit clutching my hands on my knees like at any moment some Air Marshall is going to come riffle through her purse. I nearly die on our way through security, but I guess she’s right about them not really looking at women’s things, because we walk right through, Tylenol bottle and all.

Once we land, things get settled quickly. Really, it’s not the most eventful summer with Mom. She takes time off to be with me, but mostly that just means we sit around watching movies and getting stoned in her living room. One day, she gets this random idea from the TV that we should try making home-made bagels. Three hours in, the kitchen is a disaster. All we’ve got is about three bowls of very sticky goop, and she says to me, “Remind me never to take advice from Julia Childs again.”

I say, “Agreed.” And that’s the end of that.

John stays pretty invisible the whole time I’m around, which is suspicious, to say the least, considering there’s a month’s worth of his clothes in Mom’s closet. She’s still hawking the ‘just friends’ line. What a load of bullshit. I mean, what does she think she’s got to hide?

Pretty close to the day when I have to leave, she starts telling me things about college, like how you should never ever let some advisor talk you into a class that starts before ten o’clock. At one point, she throws out there, “Hey, how come you didn’t try applying to Tampa?”

“Gosh,” I say. “I mean—I didn’t even think of that.”
She must know that isn’t true. But I’m not sure I get the sense she’d really want me so close to her, anyway.

In July, when I have to go back Michigan, she takes me to the airport. She still drives that old red Jeep. It’s such a piece of shit—although, I might just be crushed if she ever gets rid of it. The last thing she says before I leave her is, “Take it easy,” and not, “I love you,” which is a little weird, I think.

“You, too,” I say. “Real easy.”
We’re in Dad’s truck crawling along I-96, just crawling—can’t go too fast or my things will fly out of the back. He keeps randomly belting lyrics from the Michigan fight song.

“Hail! to the—”
“Dad, no.”
“Hail!”
“I’m not singing it.”

He pats my back and rubs the top of my head. “For twelve grand a semester, you’ll tap-dance the damned thing if it makes me happy.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. How do you tap-dance a song?”

“Doesn’t have to make sense,” he says. “Twelve grand.”

I push his hand back toward the steering wheel. “I would have been perfectly happy just going to State from home, which you know, so you can’t hang this money thing over my head.”

“Son,” he says, “do you really expect me to believe a lie like that?” He’s right. I’d rather have my eyes gouged out than live at home another four years. “Perfectly happy with State. Where’s that soap we packed you? Wash that mouth out.”

In Ann Arbor, Dad parks his truck on the grass in front of my new home, the dorm they call East Quad. There’s a million other cars around, most up on the grass like us, and people trickle in and out with boxes and bags and all other kinds of garbage you wouldn’t think would fit in a ten-by-fifteen-foot box. At the check-in desk, a girl hands me a card-key. “Room 348,” she says. “Welcome aboard.”

Dad gets distracted from the check-in counter and runs off to start rubbing his hands on a leathery old seat by a set of bay windows. He sinks into the chair and shuts his eyes. “You can feel the history.”

“It’s just a couch, Dad.”

“You think Bo Schembechler ever sat in this chair?”

“Bo didn’t even go here, Dad. He went to some shitty Ohio school.”

“Have a little imagination, son.”

I haven’t got a lot of stuff to bring up from the truck. It only takes two trips to carry it all in, which is fortunate—one more time through that hotbox of a stairwell listening to rich kids whine about having to lug their own stereos around, a man might just get bitter.

I drop my last bags in the room and wipe the sweat off my forehead. It’s hot as hell, no air conditioning, and the clunking noise of televisions and mini-fridges being fumbled through the hallway makes me suddenly anxious to get away from the dorms. “I
don’t think I should pick a bed before my roommate gets here,” I say. “I’ll settle in later.”

“Good thinking,” Dad says. “Let’s get lunch.”
I’m already halfway down the hall.

* * *

Somehow, not having a set plan gets Dad’s guard down. I convince him to try Japanese. There’s a sushi restaurant not all that many blocks away with a fancy-looking sign. “Here,” I say, and we park at a meter.

I order us a sushi platter to share, and our salads are in front of us before Dad gets another word out. “Dear lord…” He pokes at his pasty, orange-colored dressing with a chop stick. “Who ever taught you to eat this kind of stuff?”

“Take a wild guess.”
“Derek.”

We have an agreement not to discuss Mom again for the duration of our lives. When the sushi comes, he stops poking his salad and starts poking at a piece of tuna.

“Dad.”
He uses the angled end of his chop stick to skewer one of the pieces. “People actually eat this stuff?”
“Millions of people.”
“In this country?”
“Just try it.”

He sticks one in his mouth and gags it down almost whole, like a duck would.

“Disgusting.”
I shrug. “More for me, I guess.”
Dad picks up the tab with minimal griping and heads directly to a burger stand across the street. The guy at the counter says, “How do you want your meat?”
“Cooked.”

The guy mistakes that for meaning extra-well, and the thing comes out like charcoal. Dad throws half of it out and resolves aloud never to eat or say anything atypical again for the rest of his life.

We hop back into the truck and make a few loops around town to check out the sights before Dad drops me back at my dorm. There are a couple old theaters near campus with fancy marquees. “When they’re that old,” Dad says, “it’s called a movie palace.”

I say, “Look at that, I’m learning already.”

There’s also a big clock tower that’s covered in limestone, so it looks sort of like the Washington Monument. And there are coffee shops where the posers live and a million fancy places to eat that I could never afford on my own. When we get back to my quad, Dad takes a hint and says he probably doesn’t need to follow me in again. “You’ve got everything you need?” he says.

“Yes.”
“Got your pills?”
“Yes, Dad.”
“The new doctor, you’ve got her number?”
I just glare at him. He throws his hands up like to say uncle, then reaches one out for me to shake. “Congratulations,” he says. I take hold of it, and suddenly he pulls me in closer and wraps his other arm around my back. “You made it.”
I sit there for a second until it becomes apparent he’s not letting go. “This is a bit awkward,” I say.
“Act like it isn’t.”
I pick up my loose arm and wrap it around the back of his neck.
“Goodbye, Dad.”
“Enjoy yourself, Derek.”
“I will.”
“Not too much.”
“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”
He nods at me as I step out of the truck. I wait until he’s around the corner before I take myself inside.

* * *

My roommate shows up at four. I just lie face-up on one of the beds until then. I get up as he comes in the door, but he doesn’t say anything. His mother doesn’t, either, and he hasn’t got a father with him. The mother is this short, dumpy woman, but my roommate could be a basketball player. I would need a second of myself sitting on my shoulders to see him eye-to-eye, which I guess makes it convenient for him to avoid looking at me. The kid and the mother continue with the silent treatment until all his boxes are moved in. I think a couple times he says to me, “Hey.” That’s all. Once they’re finished, the mom leaves, and the guy comes into the room carrying an army-green duffle bag with a tiny Rebel flag sewn to it.

“It’s Chuck,” he says. He holds out his hand.
I’m staring at the flag. “Is that supposed to be ironic or something?”
He gives me a cockeyed look and drops the hand. Maybe Dad was wrong about those stringent admission standards.
I retreat to the hallway and speed-walk ten yards to the nearest drinking fountain, splash some water in my face, and I sprawl myself flat against the wall. I keep my eyes closed and hold the palms of my hands to the cool brick.
A minute passes. Somebody nudges me on my shoulder. At first, I expect it’s an RA, but it’s just another guy from my hall.
“Roommate trouble?”
I say, “Yeah.”
“Me too.” He checks back over his shoulder and starts speaking in hushed tones. “I’m pretty sure the guy’s some kind of a fag.”
I perk up, and a grin I must have inherited from my father spreads all over my face. “That so?” I say.
He nods.
I hold my chin for a second. “Suppose I might interest you in a trade?”

* * *
We have the French to thank for many things—croissants, of course, and Ferris wheels, and gratuitous nudity. My newly traded roommate grew up in Toulouse, or so he says, but part of me suspects he’s just some schmuck from the suburbs like the rest of us. He goes by Sebastian. It takes about a minute for me to get a general sense of his personality. He’s friendly enough, a little aloof, and just about totally insane. By Friday night, one day into our year together, he manages to clutter his entire half of the room with clothes and electronics and bottles of cologne. He sits at his computer desk, simultaneously eating a cereal bar and messaging a dozen friends from his phone.

I lean my head over the side of my bunk. “Not that I’m complaining,” I say, “but is there a reason you’re not wearing any pants?”

“Yes,” he says, “because such a very fine queue as this deserves to be on display.”

I shake my head. “I studied a little French in high school,” I say. “I don’t recall reading anything about a national sense of voyeurism.”

“Then you did not receive an adequate education.”

I say, “Truer words were never spoken.”

“But you speak French?”

“A little.”

“Then tell me something French.”

“Vestirse, por favor.”

“That is not French.”

“Touché.”

He’s fun, but I need a little break from Sebastian. There aren’t any payphones in the dorms. There used to be, but the booths where they once were now just house holes in the walls. I have to venture outside to a store around the block to find a place where I can use a calling card. It’s right in the store’s entrance, so everyone passing by on the street can tell what a loser you are for not owning a cell phone.

The phone rings six times before Mom picks up.

“Derek! How goes the big day?”

“The big day was yesterday. I tried calling. You didn’t answer.”

“Oh,” she says. “Sorry. I was—out. So how are things?”

“Crazy. I was supposed to be stuck with some red-neck roommate, but I arranged a switch. We didn’t tell anybody, though, so if my RA asks, my name is Mark and I’m not very fond of fags.”

“I see. So what does this new roommate look like, Mark?”

“Uncircumcised.”

There’s something a little off in her voice, like she’s distracted by someone else in the room. “I prefer them that way.”

“Gross.”

She giggles. “How was your father about everything?”

“He took it okay.”

“No melt-down?”

“Not really.”

Girls in too-sexy-to-be-walking-in shoes trickle out of my quad and down the street toward the bars. Half of them carry five hundred dollar phones in thousand dollar
purses. The other half carry hundred dollar phones in two hundred dollar purses, embarrassed to be seen that way.

“It took me forever to find a payphone,” I say. “I think we’re the only family left on the planet who doesn’t have wireless.”
“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”
“Really?”
“Next month, I think. The money situation should be better. Hang in there for now.”

There are more funny noises on her side of the line. I say, “Are you with John?”
“What?”
“You are with John!”
“Well, so?”
“Oh, God.” I push my forehead against the greasy, metal phone box. “You’ve got it on speaker-phone, haven’t you?”
“Hi, Derek.”
“Hi, John. You’re not naked, are you?”
“What is this, picture-phone?”
“Oh my God.”
Mom says, “Do you have plans for tonight?”
“No,” I say. “I think my roommate is going out. I’m sure he’ll let me watch his TV.”

“Derek.”
“What?”
“You should go with him.”
Mmhm. “I better get going, Mom—it says my time is up.”
“I thought you had a thousand minute card?”
“Later, Mom!” I gently hang up and slink back to my room.

Sebastian is no longer naked, just shirtless. His jeans have deliberate tears and patches on them that must have made them cost a fortune. He holds up two blue t-shirts against his chest in his full-length mirror. “Which one,” he says, “navy or indigo?”
I can’t even tell them apart. “The navy.”
“No, no, definitely indigo.”
I sit down at my desk. “Are you leaving soon?”
He wiggles into the shirt. He says, “Fairly soon.”
“Mind if I watch your TV?”
He pulls me out of my seat. “It is Friday night, Derek, baby, do not be absurd.”
He looks me up and down and starts circling me, like he’s painting little schemes all over my body. He tugs at my shirt, checking the tag for a designer name that isn’t there.
“Would you say this outfit is characteristic of your entire wardrobe?”
“What’s wrong with my outfit?”
“Oh, you poor thing.”
He says I need a total makeover, starting immediately. I say, “Sebastian—” The low light from his desk lamp glints in his eyes, and he’s all smiles. Christ, why fight it?
“Oh, all right, go to town.”
He does a giddy little skip, then returns to the tower of t-shirts in his closet.
“Your color is red.” He throws me a blood-red shirt covered in swirling velvet patterns.
I put it on, and he looks me over again. He clucks his tongue at my jeans. I’m too short for any of his pants, so he grabs a pair of scissors and a charcoal pencil from his desk. He makes little snips in random places around my jeans, then uses a scissor edge and the charcoal to make frays and dark spots. Lastly, he rips the sheet off my bed and wraps it over my shoulders, dumps half a bottle of Evian over my hair and uses his scissors to give me a trim.

He lets out a sigh, checks his watch, and grumbles. “It will do.” He grabs a jar of pomade from his toiletry cart and works a gob onto my head. He says, “Don’t jump around too much before this dries.”

“I’ll try to contain myself.”

He rolls the sheet off me, careful not to drop hair all over the place. “There,” he says, and he turns me to face his mirror.

My hair looks patchy, but in a deliberate way. He’s spiked it all so it points forward, like there’s someone with a big fan blowing on me from behind. I say, “Actually, I don’t hate it.”

“Of course you don’t. You look fabulous, babe, now come—it is past eleven.”

I look down at my feet and wiggle my naked toes. “Shoes?”

He curses and goes back to the closet.

* * *

The club stands three stories tall, sandwiched between a copy shop and a second-hand book store, with a short line stretched in front. Getting inside is a simple enough procedure—Sebastian pulls me around a dark corner. “Hold out your hands,” he says. “Palms down.” I do, and he rubs ChapStick on the backs.

“What’s this for?”

“You’ll see. Do mine now.”

Inside the door, he pays my cover, and we climb immediately up some stairs. The main room is on the top floor. People pretend they can hear each other over the noise and grind on each other to music that sounds like it’s meant for robots. At the back of the club, down a flight of stairs, smokers chat on a walled-off patio filled with benches and planter boxes.

Sebastian tugs me downstairs, to the bathrooms in the basement. The men’s room is packed. So he pulls me into the women’s, which is mostly full of men as well except for two very drunk girls and a drag queen. “Sebastian,” I say, “this is a gay club.”

“If course it is.”

“I mean—I assumed, I just didn’t know.” That sounds a little awkward. I add, “It’s just so cool I happened to get a gay roommate.”

He says, “You did not happen upon me, baby, you found me. And I’m not gay.”

I look at him cross-eyed for a second. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not gay, babe. Just French.”

“Then why are we at a gay club?”

He gestures toward a drunk girl in a corset and fishnets. “Very little competition for some very easy ladies.”

He pulls me to a sink and starts scrubbing off the black Sharpie X-marks the doorman drew on our hands. They come off pretty easy thanks to the ChapStick.
Sebastian takes my hand again and tugs me up a flight of stairs to the patio. One of the smokers recognizes Sebastian and waves to him. “There you are!” The smoker is short, like me, but normal-weight instead of scrawny and with hair that’s starting to thin up top. He gives Sebastian a pretend kiss and a hug.

“You know each other?” I say.

The smoker says, “We went to high school together in Grosse Pointe.”

I smirk. “Grosse Pointe? Is that what they’re calling Toulouse these day?”

Sebastian says, “My mother is from Grosse Pointe, father from Toulouse. I puddle hop.”

“I see.”

The smoker snuffs his cigarette in one of the planters and reaches a hand out for me to shake. “I’m Christopher.”

“Derek.”

“So, Chrissie,” Sebastian says, “did you come through on our little arrangement?”

Christopher nods and pulls two wristbands from a pocket. He says, “They only rotate between, like, two patterns here.” From another pocket, he takes out a pack of gum and unwraps some hidden pieces of tape. “These are my babies,” he says as he tapes on my band. “Don’t go losing them or anything.”

“Hold on,” I say. “Something’s happened. It’s like… My God, I’m twenty-one all of a sudden.” I look over at Sebastian. “It’s a miracle!”

He says, “Calm yourself. I assure you, you are still a child.”

Okay so, truth to tell, I’m sort of a lightweight when it comes to drinking. Sebastian buys me a double gin and tonic, which is about twice as much as I need. Christopher asks us if we’d like to sneak off to the dance floor. “I’m not so much into techno,” I say.

“We don’t have to go upstairs. They play retro stuff in the basement.”

“Oh,” I say. “Like it’s really the music I’m worried about.”

We aren’t downstairs two minutes before Sebastian is off talking to some girl in a corner. That leaves me with alone Christopher, but I’m foggy enough not to be uncomfortable about it. He wants to dance, and we do, and I sweat through everything I’ve got on. He gets pretty close, but everybody rubs everything everywhere at the club, so I don’t really take it for a come-on—it’s just that kind of a place. I spend the last eight bucks in my wallet on another drink, and we go back to dancing. “This is fun!” It’s crazy and all, but it really is fun. I kind of like Christopher. I mean, he’s an all right guy.

Around one o’clock, I get too drunk and too hot and have to head back up to the patio. Christopher comes running after me. “You okay?” he says.

“Just got a little warm. It’s stuffy down there.”

“You want to get going?”

“Going?”

“There’s an after-party in my building. Sebastian was planning on coming. You want me to get him?”

I have to lean against a wall. “Sure,” I say. Don’t puke, don’t puke.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move!”

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He’s gone for maybe ten minutes and comes back dragging Sebastian, who is still making out with the girl from the basement as they walk. “Follow me,” Christopher says.

We make our way to the street and then God-know-how-many-blocks to a small high-rise where Christopher lives. The elevator is old and slow, or seems slow, but maybe the building is just tall. The party is on floor thirteen, and it’s mostly guys there. Sebastian settles himself into a corner with his girl, and I take the arm of a La-Z-Boy that’s already got a kid passed-out in it.

“Come here,” Christopher says. He chuckles and pulls me onto a couch that’s less occupied than the recliner and squeezes in beside me. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I just need a little breather,” I say. “I’m more used to— I’m not so experienced at this kind of thing.”

“Gotcha.”

Christopher gets up and comes back with a glass of water. “Drink this,” he says. It’s nice to have somebody who cares enough to take care of you.

After a few minutes, opening my eyes doesn’t seem like such a horrible idea, so I do. We’re in an medium-sized apartment, maybe a two-bedroom, with windows looking out over the city. There’s a big TV with a movie collection on tall black shelves, and fancy magazines on the coffee table. More robot music plays softly on the stereo, and there are maybe twenty people around, half in other rooms, most drinking. “You said a friend of yours lives here?”

Christopher sits back down beside me on the couch. “Friend is a strong word.” He gestures over his shoulder to a too-tall blond guy making a drink in the kitchen. “My ex.”

“You still hang out with your ex?”

He shrugs. “Small community.”

“I guess.”

Christopher is the type to scout out things to talk about to avoid silences getting awkward. “Nice watch.”


“So you’re a south-paw?”

“No.”

“Then why do you wear your watch on your right hand?”

“I’m left handed.”

Christopher rubs the back of my head. “You’re a little drunk, aren’t you?”

“A little.”

“I’ll let you rest.”

I drift off for, I don’t know, an hour I guess. I wake up to Sebastian shaking me. I say, “We’re leaving?”

“No,” he says. His girl is hanging off him. “I am leaving. I need the room tonight.” The girl keeps lifting her head up to give him little butterfly kisses on the cheek. He reaches blindly into his wallet and pulls out a couple bills to throw in my lap. “Find a hotel.”

“This is only six dollars.”

“Then find an ATM.”
I’m still groggy-eyed and dazed, and he’s out the door before it occurs to me that,
even if I did have a bed to go back to, I couldn’t find my way back to our dorm by
myself. The party is pretty much cleared out by this point, but Christopher is still
hanging around. He comes up to sit beside me. “Did he just ditch you?”
“He did.”
“That’s Sebastian for you.”
“What am I supposed to do now?”
“Well—” He gives it a second. “You could crash with me.”
I shake my head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”
“You sure?” he says. “I have a very comfy sofa.”
I close one eye to think about it. “You’re not just going to drag me to some alley
and murder me, are you?”
“None.”
There’s only me, Christopher, and the La-Z-Boy wreck remaining in the room.
The ex boyfriend stands in a bedroom doorway eyeing us three hangers-on like we’re
pimples who need squeezing.
I say, “All right.”
Christopher lives two floors up, and we take the stairs. His apartment is almost
identical to the one below, only a bit smaller and with a view facing a different side of the
city. I collapse onto his couch, and he goes to fetch a pillow and blanket.
“Shoes off.”
I kick them off.
“Head up.”
He sticks the pillow under, then throws the blanket on top, which is nice
considering the air conditioning is set on about zero degrees. He says, “Mind if I sit for a
bit?”
“Knock your socks off.”
He sits by my head and starts brushing a finger along my ear.
“Just keep it above the belt,” I say.
“I fully intend to keep it above the neck.” He crosses his fingers over his heart,
bends to give me a small peck on the cheek, then moves to stand.
I say, “Stay.”
He settles back in. I fall asleep pretty quick. Just before dawn, about the time
when the sky goes from black to pink-black and birds chirp somewhere far away, I’m
awake again. Somehow it’s gone from Christopher sitting by my head to the two of us
curled together in our underwear. When he wakes, he offers me breakfast. “No thanks,”
I say. So he offers to walk me back to my dorm, and I say, “Please do.”
Outside, the sun beats down like it’s got a grudge against morning people. We
aren’t the only ones out. Here and there, girls in cocktail dresses and guys in wrinkly
collared shirts make their way across the city back to their homes. “You’re lucky,”
Christopher says. “Normally, in a situation like this, what’s happened is, some creep just
took advantage of you and you’re stumbling home alone. But I’m not… You know, we
didn’t really—”
“Thanks.”
It’s a twenty minute walk, so we eat the time up talking about Sebastian.
“Is he really French?” I say.
“Barely. He spent a summer with his dad when he was sixteen, and by the time he got back he was speaking with that ridiculous accent. Just ‘rubbed off’ on him, real quick.”

“He’s kind of a prick,” I say. “But I like him.”

“That’s Sebastian,” he says. “To the letter.”

“How’d you come to know him so well?”

“He was a year behind me in school. But we ran with the same crowd.”

“Which crowd?”

“Art crowd.”

“Of course.”

He says, “How about you?”

“I don’t think I really had a crowd.”

“Loner?”

I nod.

He stops walking. “Well, maybe you just never met the right friends.” And he smiles. “Can I get your number?”

I blush like crazy. “Okay,” I say, “this is going to sound like I’m shooting you down, and I’m really not, but, I don’t exactly have a cell phone yet.”

“Oh my God.” He chuckles. “You really are something else.”

“Would it be outrageously lame if I gave you my email instead?”

“Not outrageously.”

He hugs me before we part. I won’t even begin trying to fathom just exactly what I’m getting myself into.

Upstairs, I open the door to my room and a shrieking, naked girl sits bolt upright next to Sebastian. She looks frantically for something to cover up with. But the sheet she grabs is full of hair clippings, and that just makes her scream louder.

“Relax,” Sebastian says—facedown, through his pillow. “The kid is a fag.”

“Twenty minutes,” I say. “I’ll be back.”

With the girl still frantic, Sebastian lifts an arm up backwards and gives an OK sign. I head downstairs and drop a meal credit on some breakfast. “Give me one of those cheese-baguette things,” I say to the cafeteria worker.

“You mean a breakfast croissant?”

“What’s the difference?”

“The thing you said doesn’t exist.”

“Oh,” I say. “Then I’ll take the one that does.”
My new shrink in Ann Arbor is an alright lady. I don’t like her nearly as much as Dr. Shelly, but that’s hardly a fair comparison since Dr. Shelly was so great. The new shrink is a hundred percent by-the-books. Like, a fifteen minute session means exactly fifteen minutes, and they generally go about as deep as:

“In the last thirty days, have you had any depressive thoughts?”
“No.”
“Mood swings?”
“None to speak of.”
“Prolonged periods anxiety?”
“Nope.”
“Here’s your script.”

But that’s all right. Except for keeping my dad happy, I hardly see a point in going to the shrink anymore. They’ve got me on Zoloft, which Christopher says is like a prescription for Skittles. Sebastian agrees. One morning, while I’m looking at my pill bottle, I say I’m thinking about getting off my meds. Sebastian says, “Derek, baby, do not be stupid. If anything, ask for something stronger. Get your hands on some Xanax—come finals week, we will make a killing.”

I say, “Christ, Sebastian, why don’t we just start a coke ring?”
He gives me a look up and down for a long minute, like,

Hey, that might just be a good idea.

I say, “Sebastian, I was kidding. No drug dealing.”
He says, “Okay, okay.”

Rooming with Sebastian is like living in a cuckoo clock. But I can see why people like him so much—right around the time you really need him, right when you’re starting to think he’s just a total, worthless flake, that’s when Sebastian comes through for you. He’ll do something sweet. And then you like him all over again.

I spend the whole day after meeting Christopher just trying to figure out if he really liked me or if it was all something I blew up in my head out of nothing. Then suddenly I get all worried because I can’t remember exactly what he looks like, except that his hair is kind of wispy. About an hour after I go to bed, I have a wave of anxiousness hit me. Suddenly I’m sure that Christopher is never going to send me that email. I sit bolt upright, like I’m on fire, and Sebastian—he’s still awake, talking to friends on his computer—Sebastian just about has a heart attack.

“You do have a friend named Christopher?” I say. “I didn’t just imagine all that? That was real, right?”

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Sebastian holds his hand at his chest. “I should hope so. I was just talking to him.”

“Just now?”
“Just now?”
“A few minutes ago.”
“What did he say? Did he mention me? Let me see!”
Sebastian just shakes his head. “Baby, let’s get you some air.”
We go outside in our shorts and flip-flops and sit down on a step in one of the dorm entrances. Sebastian keeps telling me to breathe deep until he thinks I’ve calmed down.

He pats my back. “It has been a long day for you.”
“It’s been a long life.”
He keeps rubbing my back until he gets an idea. “Let’s watch a movie,” he says.

“Something fun.”
He buys a microwave popcorn bag from the convenience store down the block, and we go back to our room to settle in. We turn the lights off and pick a movie from the million downloads he has on his computer. “Something light,” I say.

He asks if I’ve ever seen *Thelma and Louise*. I say I haven’t. He says, “You must.”

It is not a light movie, but it is fun. At the end, when they careen off the cliff in their convertible, I bawl like a little baby. Sebastian rubs my back again, saying, “I will give Chrissie a nudge to drop you a line. How’s that?”
I’m too hysterical to respond. I just nod.

The next afternoon I get the call—on Sebastian’s phone. Sebastian is settled into his usual mode, half naked at his computer, when his phone starts buzzing. He says, “Derek, baby, this one is for you.”
I snatch it from him.

“Christopher?”

Of course it’s him. The text message where Sebastian tells him to make the call is still flashing on his screen.

Christopher asks if I’d like to go for a walk. I say of course I would, and that’s the beginning of it. We start going for walks all the time. It’s a good change of pace from hanging around Sebastian’s three ring circus. There’s a great arboretum right next to campus that’s full of trails and streams. It’s pretty hilly and really peaceful. At night, supposedly it’s a prime spot for getting mugged, but in the day it’s just quiet with some joggers and a lot of big, ancient fluffs of green hardwoods.

In one corner of the arboretum, there is a bench by a brook. We sit there, and Christopher says to me, “You won’t believe how pretty it’s going to be here once the leaves change.”
I say, “Yes I can.”

We sit there until we’re tired, or until the sun begins to set. I can’t imagine a better waste of time in all the world.

*  *  *

66
College is a goofy kind of beast. You go in with this impression out of the movies like it’s going to be some impossible combination of all-night study sessions and all-night parties. The reality is, a few people spend their lives in the library, a few spend their lives chasing a good time, and for everybody else it’s just a headache on test days, a hangover on Sundays, and you spend the bulk of your week being the same Plain-Jane self you always were. To me, that’s kind of a relief. I see those people like Sebastian who can’t stop moving—and those geeks who can’t even get their nose out of a book to do a load of laundry—and I just want to crawl into a hole.

Classes aren’t so bad. My only hard course is biology, and even that is like my forte, so it’s like I hardly notice when I’m studying. The labs are great. At my high school, we hardly had supplies. Here, there’s a thousand dollar scope at every table, and we just throw the slides away when we’re done. I can hardly believe it. I almost want to write Miss Hyatt a letter, just to say, Can you believe it, not everyone has to wash their slides?

I mostly leave the partying to Sebastian. If he comes rolling into our room on a Wednesday night at four A.M., that’s like nothing. By nine o’clock, he’s up with a coffee, debating between eighty-dollar t-shirts to wear to his astronomy lecture. I tell him he’s out of his mind.

By late September, I’m seeing Christopher three or four times a week. I think he’s got a streak in him that’s keyed-up like Sebastian, but there’s an unspoken agreement between us that he saves his low-key moments for me. In fact, my favorite thing we do together is actually damn near dull—he’s taking a film history class, and every Tuesday night he has to go watch films in a little lecture hall that’s set up like a movie theater. I go with him. We tend to watch movies I wouldn’t normally take an interest in, but the way the professor sets them up, it makes it fun. Like, one day we watch Citizen Kane. It’s the kind of thing I’d pass right by on TV. But the professor primes us with all this info on how original all the camera tricks were, and about how Orson Wells was a real prick in person who flushed his own future by making the film, and that just gets me enthralled.

After our movies, we go back to Christopher’s apartment and veg out. We get ice cream pints or some other kind of junk and watch the late-night cartoons on cable. It’s a nice balance against the brainy stuff we watch for his class. Sometimes, I’m not back to the dorm until one or two o’clock in the morning, assuming I make it back at all.

We’re not totally dull, though. I mean, some Fridays Christopher and I head back to the club where we met. But I can’t always enjoy myself that way. Christopher has so many friends, he’s always bumping into people and talking to them and dancing with them, and that drives me crazy. I suppose you could say that’s just jealousy and I should lighten up—but screw that, I want what’s mine.

* * *

One hushed Sunday morning in October, I’m alone in my dorm room. I go to the window and look outside. It’s really pretty. Most of the city is still sleeping, and the leaves on the trees are all pumpkin-orange. The campus buildings are covered in ivy, and the ivy is just the most brilliant kind of crimson.
I sit there like that for ages, just thinking how peaceful it is. Sebastian comes in around noon, for the first time since Friday. His hair is a mess, with bits of something in it, possibly straw. I’m sure he’s got a story to tell, but I’m not in the mood to hear it. I decide I’ll give my dad a call. It’s still looking peaceful outside, and we haven’t talked in awhile. I trek to my corner store payphone.

Dad says, “So you are alive. It’s been two weeks since you called.”
I say, “Really? Sorry about that.”

He says maybe the ten bucks a month for a phone line in my room wouldn’t have been such a bad idea. Then he says, “Are you going to be free later?” He says he could drive down for an early dinner. I tell him that would be great.

I hang up and call Mom next. When she picks up, it sounds like I woke her. She doesn’t even ask who it is. “Call back later.”

So I shrug and hang up.

Dad picks me up at four o’clock. First thing he says is, “My God, you’re bearded.”

I am not—it’s barely a five o’clock shadow. Still, I rub the stubble around my chin. I say, “Guess I forgot to shave.” That’s not true. I’ve been neglecting to shave on purpose. Christopher says the stubble makes me look older (or, at the very least, my actual age instead of twelve).

We get dinner at an Italian place on Main Street that’s pretty expensive but really good. Our table is on the roof. It’s a little chilly eating outside in October, but it’s pretty enough that neither of us minds. From the roof, we can see the whole city. The colors are like a flower shop cornucopia.

I order eggplant parmesan. When our food comes, Dad says, “You haven’t gone vegetarian on me, have you?” I just laugh.

After dinner, we take a walk around campus. Dad wants me to tell him things like a tour guide would. I try remembering what I can from my week of orientation. We stop by the clock tower.

I say, “The tower is ten stories. It’s mostly concrete. None of the four sides ever read the right time, and although the bell chamber is locked off, you can climb up there and look through the door. If you stand against it when the hour chimes, it’s like your own private earthquake. It’s pretty cool.”

I point to the undergraduate library, which people call the UGLi, both for short and because the building is ugly as hell. That’s about as much as I can say about the campus.

It’s getting dark. Dad says he could stand a cup of coffee before his drive home. I tell him he should try Starbucks since it really isn’t as expensive as everyone says. We head to the one that’s beside the old movie palace, and while Dad is in line I stand by the pitchers of milk.

Then out of nowhere comes Christopher from across the room. He was at a table, and I hadn’t noticed him behind his newspaper. He hugs me, saying, “Hey! I didn’t think you were a coffee drinker.”

I say, “I’m not. I mean, my dad is.” I shrug toward the counter where Dad is picking up his order. “He came down for dinner.”
“Oh.” Christopher takes a little scoot away from me. “Gotcha.” With a little wink, he says, “I’ll catch you later,” and he slinks back to hide himself behind his newspaper.

I’m a little dazed, like maybe I should start sweating or turn red or something. Dad taps my shoulder. We head outside to start the walk back to where his truck is parked.

“Who was that?” he says.

“Who?”

“The kid who just hugged you.”

I say, “Christopher. He’s a friend. He’s my roommate’s friend. He’s okay.”

Dad says, “Oh.”

We walk for a couple blocks. Dad says, “You were right—the coffee wasn’t that expensive. Too bad it tastes like charcoal.”

We get in his truck, and he drives me back to my dorm. Before I manage to get my door open, he says, “That guy at the coffee shop—he’s more than a friend of yours, isn’t he?”

I say, “Well—” And I’m kind of cornered, so I say, “Yeah.”

He says, “Next time I come, you should invite him to dinner. Or lunch. We should get lunch. Sometime in November?”

More than a little bewildered, I say, “Sure… I’ll run it by him.”

Dad nods in a way-too-nonchalant sort of way. I say, “November.”

I crack my door and slink out, walking backwards, like a cloud of gas dissipating into the night.

* * *

When I tell Christopher what happened with my dad, he says, “Really? That’s great.” I guess family stuff is just a topic that we always assumed was off limits with each other. But this gets us talking. He says his own parents are a couple wannabe hippie-dippy types who feel guilty as hell for being rich. He says, “They never give me trouble about anything. I think they get thrilled every time I give them something to feel liberal over.”

I tell him about my own parents, about the split, a little bit about Tampa. I don’t give a lot of the details. I guess I don’t want him knowing what a wreck things are.

“Was it a messy divorce?” he says.

I say, “Yeah. I guess. I don’t want to think about that now.”

But he says I should at least give my mom a call and get her up to speed.

“It’s so much nicer when you’ve got your life just on the table,” he says. “Like you can just breathe without watching your back. I’m just saying.”

I suppose he’s right. Tuesday afternoon, I give her a call.

“What’s up?” she says.

It’s been awhile since we talked. I try calling her more than Dad, but half the time she doesn’t answer. I guess it was easier when I was in high school. It was more like we had a set time.


She says, “Oh, really! Do dish—I must know everything.”
I say, “His name is Christopher. And he kind of looks older than he is, but he’s nineteen. He’s from Grosse Pointe, and his parents are loaded, but I’m not sure if he personally is because I haven’t asked.”
She’s just silent for a little bit, then she says, “Derek, I don’t think this is the kind of conversation we should be having over the phone.”
She cuts things short there, says she has to go, something about dinner plans.
I say, “With John?”
She says, “Yes, John.”
I hang up thinking, *That was kind of strange*, and I’m glad as hell it’s Tuesday so at least it’s movie night with Christopher.
But, ugh… You know how, sometimes, something happens and it’s just such a strange coincidence you just think, *Why now? How could this possibly be happening today?*

What happens is, I’m sitting there with Christopher, and I’m already uptight. He says, “You call your mom?”
“Yeah.”
“How did it go?”
“It didn’t.”
Then the professor struts in, and he’s running a little late, so he’s onto his spiel before he even sets his bag down. “On the final exam, if you identify Stanley Kubrick as a New Hollywood director, you get an F.” Then he gives his notes on the film. It’s from 1971, a real keystone piece in dystopian cinema, whatever that means.
I’m already antsy before the thing starts. When it begins, for a minute, it’s just some unsettling music and white credits on solid backgrounds of red, then blue, then red again. The title comes up. It’s my *Orange* story. Only it’s not mine, because mine is about riding around Florida, and this, whatever the hell this is, is just eerie music and too-bright colors. Then the first shot appears. It’s a close-up on the face of this awful creep in a black bowler cap with fake lashes on his eye, and he’s looking down at you with a scowl like he could just jump out and gut you, only you bore him so bad he hasn’t even got the energy to do it.
I say, “I have to go.” I’m out the door.
Christopher comes after me. In the hallway, he says, “Derek?”
I turn back.
“What’s wrong?”
I say, “Nothing. It’s complicated.”
He walks up to me looking sad, but I just can’t stick around. I give him a peck on the cheek. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say. “I will.”
I leave him standing there staggered.
I guess Sebastian got used to me being gone Tuesday nights. When I come in the door, he’s sitting there with a book, actually studying. I didn’t think he ever studied. He’s surprised to see me.
“Haven’t you got some girl you should be deflowering?” I say.
He takes the hint, and he gets out of his seat. “No,” he says, “but it’s not like they’re hard to find.”
When he leaves, I bolt the door behind him, kill the lights, and lie on my back on the floor. I stay there like that, just staring at the ceiling, only the flicker from Sebastian’s screensaver lighting up the room.

You know, I’m taking this art history class, did I mention that? It’s mostly a joke. But there was this guy, Andy Warhol—the one who did the soup cans. You know who I’m talking about. Warhol used to say that he was never sure whether he was living life or just watching television. Then a woman shot him, and he almost died. After that, he said he didn’t even question it anymore—he knew for sure he was just watching TV.

I think Warhol is right. It’s like your life is just some sitcom, and all the characters are there, and they’ve got their one-liners and their costumes. You get to where you can tell how all the plots are going to end before they even begin, but you keep on watching because that’s your show, and you’re loyal to it that way. It’s kind of spooky. And the biggest spook of all is, you get so damned caught up, it’s like you don’t even pay attention. They could switch out the actors and, hell, you’d barely notice.

All at once, I’m off the floor, and I hop on Sebastian’s computer. There’s this question I’ve had rolling in the back of my mind for who knows how long, like it’s always just been there, like a birthmark.

I search for “at home” and “paternity test.” Wouldn’t you know it? These days, for a hundred and fifty bucks, you can get a mail-away kit. I fish my debit card out of my wallet. That’s pretty much the last of my graduation money, but what can I say? There are some things, like text books and auto insurance—you just have to bite it and cough up the dough.
Sebastian disappears one day. He goes out to a party on a Thursday night and doesn’t come back Friday morning—or Friday night. Saturday afternoon, right around the time I’m starting to think, *Should I call the cops or something?* I get an email that says it was sent from a cell phone:

“Derek, babe, meet u at T&T.”

Tim and Todd live close to the School of Nursing. It’s a quiet part of town—mostly grad students and theater types who throw low-key parties in finished basements with trippy lighting and vinyl records. They’re pretty nice guys. I hear T&T make a lot of money selling cocaine upstairs, but the basement is strictly for friends of theirs, and whatever goes on down there goes on for free. Sebastian and I stop by sometimes on Saturdays. It’s a nice way to put a lull in the middle of a busy weekend. I take it from his text message he’s got some kind of tale to tell, so I strap on a smile and grab my jacket.

It’s kind of sad outside this time of year. A week into November, and the pumpkin smell still hanging in the air only comes from molding jack-o-lanterns. It hints like winter’s coming, and I really do find that sad. I mean, Halloween was such a great time. Christopher took me to a monster mash dressed up in white Ace bandages—he was supposed to some kind of an accident victim, but people kept mistaking him for a mummy. It drove him crazy.

You should see Christopher when he pouts, he’s so funny. I mean, he practically sticks his lip out, and there he is like a little kid—only, a kid with a cigarette in his hand and half his hair thinned away. Dad is coming down to meet him on Sunday, and he’s making us dinner tonight so we can give it a practice go. It ought to be just about perfect after some time in T&T’s basement. I mean, a homemade dinner, isn’t that sweet of him? I mean, I’m not into schmaltzy stuff, but that’s pretty sweet.

I arrive at an unassuming Victorian on quiet Catherine street. Dried twigs crack under my feet as I step onto the porch, and Tim lets me into the house. He says, “Hey… Derek?” He says it in a curious way, like to say, *You came here by yourself?*

I tell him about Sebastian’s disappearing act, and Tim chuckles. “That’s Sebastian for you.”

I say, “I get that a lot.”

I like Tim. He’s kind of chunky, with scruffy black hair all over his head and a beard to match. He tells me there’s something he has to attend to in the kitchen—baked goods, I suspect—but that there’s a few guys in the basement hanging out. “I’ll be down later,” he says. “Go ahead.”
The few people downstairs are, literally, three people. There’s Tim’s skinny-doppelganger of a roommate, Todd, along with a girl Todd clearly has a thing for—and the girl’s boyfriend. They’ve been smoking. The girl wears a goofy, too-short-for-autumn dress, and Todd practically has his eyeballs rubbing against her cleavage. The boyfriend sits in a massive, brown beanbag chair, wearing a blue collared shirt and staring at the ceiling while he drones some endless bullshit about the world of business. “Dude, man, it’s all about networking, I’m telling you.”

I join the group. The girl nods at me as if she knows me when she definitely does not. Todd just rubs his goatee. He says, “Fine day.”

The girl takes out an outrageous pink bong filled with strawberry-flavored water. She explains how she makes the strawberry concoction while her boyfriend keeps droning to no one.

Skip ahead an hour—I’m lying on my back. I nod along to the business major. The dude is crazy. In the corner of the room, there’s a projector from the Sixties with a kaleidoscope attachment on it. It shoots swirling, rainbow patterns of light onto the ceiling. They tumble over, real slow, bursting into fireworks that slip away into nothing. I think I could just watch them forever.

Tim comes down the stairs. Or—wait, maybe it’s Todd. I’m getting them confused. Anyway, one of them comes trotting downstairs, and he puts on a Pink Floyd record. I don’t even like Pink Floyd, but it works, I can dig it. Ha! listen to me. Goober.

Christ, it takes forever for Sebastian to show. I mean forever. Like, I’m on the far side of the moon by the time he comes strolling in. When he does, though, it’s like he owns the place, like he’s high on life so what are the rest of us bums doing?

Bastian swings his arms in circles. “Gather ‘round my babies. Papa has a tale to tell.”

Dude, there’s like half a dozen people in the room now. Maybe more. Go figure that one out. We make a little ring at Sebastian’s feet, like kindergartners at show-and-tell.

Bastian starts in on his story. Turns out, he met this flight attendant—this twenty-five-year-old flight attendant—at a club on Thursday night. “She was between flights,” Bastian says, “so I gave her a little layover.” She whisked him away to Milwaukee! He sent me the text message from the airport before boarding the plane back to Detroit. Now he just got back into Michigan an hour ago. The cab to Ann Arbor must have cost him a fortune, and that kind of thing doesn’t even faze him, the lucky bastard.

Oh, Christ, what time is it?

“Shit,” I say. “Bastian, you said you sent that message before your flight?”

He says, “Yeah, babe.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I don’t know. Three, maybe four hours?”

Shit! Dinner. Christopher will kill me. “I have to go,” I say. I run so fast to get out the door, I trip up the stairs and nearly break my nose. It hurts like hell, and it bleeds. Sebastian calls after me, “Baby, calm yourself.” But I’m already busting outside. And it’s dark out. Yeah, it’s pretty dark out. Christ, I’m not that high, am I? I mean, I couldn’t be—it’s been how many hours?
Ugh. Of all the damned times not to have a cell phone, this kind of ranks right up there. I take some deep breaths. One—no, two. There’s still that pumpkin rot hanging around. I guess it would be.

I’m okay. I mean, I’m not in great shape, but I’m okay. I start trotting my way toward Christopher’s. It’s a long walk. I mean really long. He lives, I don’t know—way the hell down State Street, then up some other thing. I’ll take it slow. But not too slow, I’m late as hell. Oh, man.

Of course, it’s kind of chilly out. I forgot my jacket in the basement. Press on, that’s all. I get to Christopher’s building, and I look up at it for a minute considering whether I should really go in. I could just go back to my dorm, sober up, call him later. I could come up with some kind of excuse he’d buy. Oh, but I can’t do that. That’s awful. I want to see him! I just don’t want him being mad.

I head up. In the elevator, I keep my eyes on the floor, feeling guilty has hell, like some kind of criminal, so this girl who’s in there with me probably thinks I’m some kind of weirdo.

I knock on the door, and from inside Christopher says, “Come in,” which is not like him—usually he opens it up and gives me a hug. So I push it open, and there he is sitting at his table with dinner already set out on it like it’s been there for an hour. He’s made pork chops and apple stuffing.

“I am so sorry,” I say.

He gets this look like he’s going to say something snippy, but he hasn’t got it in him. He’s too nice. He gets up from his chair and comes over to me. “Where were you?” he says. He notices the little bit of blood that dribbled from my nose after I fell. “Is everything all right? What happened?”

Then he gets close enough to smell me, and he looks in my eyes. That’s as many clues as he needs. “You know what,” he says, “don’t bother. I get the picture.” He goes back to his seat at the table and crosses his legs really hard.

I say, “I’m sorry.”

He says, “You know I don’t like it when you smoke dope.”

I say, “Well, I don’t like it when you smoke cigarettes.”

“That’s different.”

“I know it is!”

The two of us never had a fight before. I don’t want one now. I just want to crawl up on Christopher’s couch and watch cartoons and let the world slip away for awhile.

“I think you should go,” he says.

“No,” I say, “please don’t make me leave.”

He points at the door.

“Please.”

“Go.”

I skulk out backwards. I close the door.

At least the elevator is empty on the way down.

* * *

74
Back in my dorm room, lying in bed, I feel a little clearer—but I don’t feel better. A little worse, actually. You know whose idea dinner was? Mine. Christopher offered to cook, but I was the one who suggested dinner. It is November, after all. Dad’s coming down tomorrow for lunch. I was the one who suggested the trial run. Now I don’t even know if Christopher will come to meet my dad.

Sebastian pops in a little before midnight. He’s still all hopped up about his adventures in Wisconsin. I try acting like there’s nothing the matter with me.

“You’re back early for a Saturday,” I say.
“You are, too, babe. Trouble in paradise?”
I say, “No,” and he sees through me, so I tell him the story.
“Babe,” he says, “do not fret on this. Christopher, he is a softie. You show up at his door tomorrow morning. Take him breakfast. Tell him you are sorry. He will melt into your arms. I promise.”
I tell him that sounds like a Band-Aid on a geyser, but I’ll give it a try.
“You make too much of things,” Sebastian says. “This is nothing.”
I think Sebastian is an ass for making whales into guppies, but I’m not going to tell him that.

“Sorry I bailed on you earlier,” I say.
He shakes his head. “It is nothing.”
“You’ll have to fill me in on the details,” I say. “I mean, Milwaukee—Christ, that’s some kind of a fling.”
Now Sebastian gets a little syrupy. “Actually,” he says, “I kind of like this woman. I think I will see her again.”
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When they got to Milwaukee, she was too embarrassed to take him to her apartment. She said it was small and cluttered, and there were month-old dishes in the sink. So she got them a suite at a fancy hotel in the city. They spent the whole evening drinking beers in a boiling-hot whirlpool tub, with steam fogging up the glass looking out on the skyline.

When he finishes his story, I say, “Penthouse suite? I didn’t know stewardesses made that kind of money.”
“They don’t,” he says, and he crawls into his bunk for what I suspect is his first sleep in three days.

* * *

75
Sunday morning. Christopher answers my knock in person this time—but no hug. He stands with his arms crossed over his chest, wearing the same gym shorts and t-shirt he must have slept in.

“I brought bagels,” I say. I set the white paper sack on his table. “And this—” I hold out my *Orange* book—worn and coverless as it is—for him to see. He steps close to me and looks at it, takes it from my hands and flips to the title page. He reads it aloud.

“I guess I never explained,” I say. “The reason I couldn’t watch that movie with you—it’s because of this.”

We sit with our bagels, and I tell him my story, about Mom and Dad and John, about running to Florida and the note in the orange.

I say, “When I found this book, it felt like it was fate. Like this was my story, my whole life spelled out in a book. I know it’s stupid, but I think part of me still wants to believe that.”

Christopher takes the book from me. He flips through a few pages. “It’s British,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“The edition,” he says. “It’s early, and it’s British. What on Earth was a thing like this doing at a Chrysler dealership in Lansing?”

“What’s your point?”

“Nothing,” he says. “Just, maybe you’re right. Maybe a thing like that can’t happen unless it is fate. Maybe if you read it, you’ll see yourself in there.”

I take the book back from him. “Well,” I say, “you’ve seen the movie. Does it end well for me?”

He shrinks. “Put it that way, and maybe you shouldn’t read it.”

“That bad?” I say.

“Not bad. Depressing.”

I shake my head. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

* * *

We call Dad to give him directions, and he shows up exactly on time to pick us up in front of Christopher’s building. He’s oddly chipper about it. He’s all, “Great to meet you, Christopher,” and, “You’re looking dapper.” I give Christopher a crooked look, mouthing, *Dapper*?

Dad takes us to a nice café on Main Street that’s pretty busy on Sunday afternoons. But the corner they put us in is quiet. Dad must have requested it that way in the reservation.

My chair is a bit stiff, and our little round table is too small for three people to fit at. I can’t decide which would be more awkward, sitting closer to Christopher or closer to Dad, so I do my best to keep us all just perfectly spaced.

Dad’s got all kinds of questions, like he came prepared with cue cards. Fortunately, Christopher is a garrulous guy, so the two of them chat it up without me having to jump in a lot. They get onto everything—I mean, politics, religion, just everything. Dad tells Christopher, in a smiling way, that his ideas about the unions are a bunch of blind-eyed, liberal horseshit.
Christopher says, “Next you’re going to tell me I should have voted for Bush in ’04.”

Dad says, “No, I’m going to tell you it was a mistake to vote for Kerry in the primary.”

“Actually,” Christopher says, “by the time the primary rolled around, I was so fed up with the process, I voted for Al Sharpton in protest.”

Dad just stays quiet for a moment. He says, “I wondered how that man mustered seven percent of the vote.”

They laugh like crazy while I sit there thinking, What the hell are they even talking about? By the end of lunch, Dad’s saying, “You’re all right, Christopher.”

The whole thing just goes fine. I mean, we eat our little tapas, and the lettuce on our sandwiches is crisp. It goes like gravy, like I guess I’m the only one who got the memo that these kinds of lunches are supposed to be awkward.

While Dad is paying the bill, I say to Christopher, “This went okay.”

He says, “It did.”

“Still, I’d like to gauge him without you around,” I say. “I’ll have him drop me at my dorm like I’ve got studying to do—then I’ll head to your place.”

“Good idea,” he says.

We pile into Dad’s truck, and he heads to Christopher’s high-rise. We go through the standard goodbyes, and Christopher hops out saying, “Really, Mr. Baker, thanks for everything.”

Dad says, “Don’t mention it.” And we’re back on our way.

It’s pretty quiet for a second. Dad says, “Nice kid.”

I say, “How was this not stressful for you?”

“You kidding me?” He lifts his right arm to show a giant pit stain. “Do I normally sweat this much?”

“Oh,” I say. “In that case, thanks for phoning it in.”

“Don’t mention it.”

From there, the talk shifts back to shooting-the-breeze type stuff. “You keeping your grades up?” Dad says.

“I am.”

“Learning anything good?”

And then this little lie pops out of me—this one I rehearsed a few times in my head but wasn’t sure I’d ever have the guts to go through with. I guess, with all the stress from lunch still keeping me keyed up, it just pops right out of me like it’s nothing.

“Yeah,” I say. “Actually—we’re doing some pretty cool stuff in biology lab.” Then, from the pocket inside my jacket, I pull out a pouch like the kind dentists’ tools come in. Inside, there’s a narrow plastic tube with caps on each end and a long white cotton swab inside. “Mind if I borrow a few cheek cells?” I say. “I could tell you if you’ve got healthy mitochondria.”

“Sure.” He smiles. “Why not?”

While the truck idles outside the door to my quad, I have him swab the inside of his mouth, and then we put the stick in the plastic tube.

Dad says, “What exactly does healthy mitochondria mean?”

“Well…” Hell, I hadn’t thought this far ahead. “It means you’ve got a good metabolism.” Seems plausible.
He pats his hands on his belly. It’s pretty small, but he says, “I’m guessing they’re not so healthy, then.”
“I’m sure you’re fine.”
As I’m opening my door to leave him, he says, “Call me.”
“I will.”
“Soon.”
“I will.”
Then I run inside and up the stairs before my nerves can get the best of me. From a big padded envelope hidden in my desk, I fill out a label and stick it on Dad’s tube. Then I open a second sterile package and swab out my own mouth. I label it, and I stick it with Dad’s back in the envelope. There’s already a bunch of paperwork filled out inside it.

On my way back to Christopher’s, I drop the envelope in a post box. Then I stand there for a minute. I put my hands on top of the big blue box, and I drum my fingers on it. They make low, hollow thuds, like a big beating heart. I snap my hands back to my sides. Then I start waking. The first few steps, I go backwards, really slow. Then I turn, and I take off. I full-out sprint the rest of the way. By the time I’m getting Christopher’s welcome hug, I’m covered in sweat.
“Good Lord,” he says, “you’re drenched.”
“Sorry.”
“You ran here?”
“I did. Sorry. My dad really likes you. You up for a shower?”
He says, “Well…” He’s puzzled a second, then happy. “Yes.” And we both dash off to the other room.
I don’t like people disappearing on me without notice. I tell Sebastian, “When you ran off to Milwaukee, I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere. Don’t ever do that again.”

He says, “I did die in Milwaukee.”

Oh brother, and now he’s born all over again. Three weeks dating Joanne—almost all of that over the phone, no less—and he’s like a totally different guy. He hardly goes out anymore. Half the time, when his phone rings, he skips out of the room to take the call outside. When he comes back, he’s got a goofy grin all over him.

“You really like this woman that much?” I say.

“She has the voice of an angel.”

“You sound like a teenager.”

He says, “I am eighteen. As are you.”

“You know what I meant.”

He shakes his head “You must hear her voice. Then you will understand.”

He makes plans to spend Thanksgiving break with Joanne, in Vancouver. Myself, I’m just going to Tampa for the break. But when Sebastian finds out our flights leave Detroit at the same time, he cooks up a scheme for a double date with me and Christopher.

“We will get lunch,” he says. “Someplace nice. Joanne will like that.”

I say, “I’m too broke for nice.”

“I will pay, you cheap bastard.”

I say, “If I’m so cheap, how’d I get so broke?”

Christopher agrees on the plan, so here we are. We’re in Christopher’s car—a ten-year-old Lexus handed down from his dad. It’s got tan leather seats so worn in, they’re like old people’s skin. I sit up front next to Christopher while Sebastian is sprawled in the back.

“You think we could pick up some speed?” Sebastian says.

“No.”

Christopher drives five under the limit. But he’s always like that, slow as hell. He claims he had a vision once that he’d die in a wreck on the highway, and now he doesn’t like taking chances.

Sebastian says, “In your vision, did you get run over from behind for doing thirty-five on the freeway?”

When we swing by the airport to pick up Joanne, I’m a little surprised that she’s wearing regular clothes. Somehow, I’ve got this permanent image of her in my head as a woman in a blue blazer and red neckerchief. But she’s just in some jeans and a nice
emerald green blouse that doesn’t show too much skin. Contrary to everything Sebastian has said, she does not look young for her age. She is every bit of twenty-five, but that’s not a bad thing. She’s really very pretty, and her hair must cost a fortune to keep so perfectly blond and curled.

We say our hellos. Christopher says, “Joanne, you have the most marvelous low-lights.”

She giggles. “Christopher, honey, you’re a doll. You could be a steward.”

She only means it as a joke, but Christopher actually takes an interest. “Is it hard work?” he says.

She says it’s daunting more than hard, but it’s good pay for someone without a degree.

“Good perks?” he says.

“Oh yeah. Really good.” She says, in fact, she can fly anywhere in the country for free, as long as it’s on a flight that isn’t full. She can even take friends along, if there’s room.

She seems really nice. Her voice isn’t anything like I imagine an angel’s would sound like, but it does have a certain calming quality to it. I can see why a guy like Sebastian might tone himself down a few notches around her.

Lunch is a little too fancy for my tastes. But free is free, so whatever. As Sebastian picks up the check, I catch about a millisecond of shock in his eyes. I think it’s the first indication I ever got that the bottomless well of cash he draws from might actually have a floor.

It’s not even two o’clock by the time we leave the restaurant. We’ve got a couple hours before we need to be back at the airport.

“There is time to murder,” Sebastian says.

Christopher puts out the idea that we could go to the art museum. The rest of us have never been. He says, “You’re kidding me. We have to go, then. The Detroit Institute of Art is surprisingly good.”

Joanne says, “Isn’t that that the place where a kid stuck a piece of gum on a million dollar painting last spring?”

He says, “The very same.”

“Wow.”

There’s an exhibit going on at the museum that actually sounds pretty cool. They’ve got prints by Rembrandt and Picasso and some third guy I never heard of. But we don’t have time for that kind of browsing, and the special tickets aren’t cheap, so we just stick to the permanent displays. There’s a self portrait by Andy Warhol. In it, there are two photos of him with neatly parted hair, stacked on top of each other, colored in with reds and yellows and blues. When I see it, I just laugh and laugh. The others say, “What’s so funny?”

I say, “Nothing. It’s just funny I should see this now.” They give me crooked looks, and I go on chuckling.

Christopher puts his hand on my shoulder. “Seriously,” he says, “the man made much funnier portraits than this.”

“It’s not the picture I find so funny,” I say. “Not exactly.”

There’s other neat stuff around. They’ve got a portrait of Van Gogh in a straw hat—it’s oddly familiar, though I can’t quite place where I remember it from. But the best
thing of all, I mean by far the very best thing, is this whole room done up by Diego Rivera. It’s huge, with a glass dome ceiling, and all around, on all the walls, it’s this bright, busy mural of men on a Ford assembly line. Only, it’s not like a realistic depiction. The engines are bigger than the men themselves, and they all work in perfect tandem, like it’s the men and the machines all wrapped together in one. It’s so cool. I mean, I could just stand in the room for hours.

Christopher likes the Rivera room, too. He points to a small panel up in a corner. It shows a baby being born with three scientists in the background doing experiments. “That’s a parody,” he says. “Of the Virgin Birth. See, the scientists are like the Wise Men. People threw a fit about that in the thirties.”

I say, “What does the rest of it mean?”

He shrugs, waving his arms around at the rest of the pictures. “Rivera was a Communist. It’s supposed to show how all of us are bound up with everything else.”

“Like the people are run by the machines,” I say, “instead of the other way around.”

“Maybe.”

I nod. “I think he was right,” I say.

“I don’t.”

He hangs with me a second longer, then heads off to catch up with Sebastian and Joanne in the next gallery.

Once he’s gone, I say, “But I’m sure of it.”

* * *

Ten thousand feet up, and my eyes are closed. I’ve got my earbuds in, listening to the free radio piped out of my armrest. I like flying this way. When I was younger, I used to get anxious on planes. I got upset every time my ears popped, and I was always trying to read something, which just made me sick to my stomach. These days, though, I just take it like a preschool naptime. Free snack, a little shuteye. As hectic as things have been for me lately, it’s actually kind of a relief to have some time to sort things through. I never thought I’d live like this—with a whole group of friends, always running around. It’s crazy.

I’m sitting in a window seat. The middle is empty, and the aisle seat is filled by a woman about my mom’s age. An hour into the flight, she nudges me, saying, “Do I know you?”

I crack open my eyes and pull my earbuds out. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sure I’ve seen you before. Do you go to Warren Mott High School?”

“No.”

I figure if I’m curt maybe she’ll take a hint and leave me alone. She doesn’t. She’s convinced she’s seen me before, like maybe I’m one of her son’s friends. I am definitely not. Maybe I wrestled against her son in a tournament last year? I say, “Ma’am, I have never gone out for a sport in my life.”

Finally, she snaps her fingers, and she says, “You know what it is? You look just like River Phoenix. That’s what it is.”

I say, “I don’t know who that is.”
I close my eyes and get back to my music.

* * *

So guess who picks me up from the airport in Tampa? I’ll give you a hint—not my mom.
John says, “Hey.”
I say, “It’s just you?”
“Your momma wanted to pick up the turkey from Boston Market before they closed.”
“She’s buying Thanksgiving dinner pre-cooked?”
“Yes.”
“You’re kidding me.”

I guess I never fully considered it, but, growing up, we always went to Grandma Barbra’s house for Thanksgiving—Mom’s probably never cooked a turkey in her life. She made a ham once at Christmas, so I guess she can cook. Or, wait a minute, maybe that ham was pre-cooked, too.
John still drives his little red S-10 pickup. I throw my bag in the back and hop in.
John makes a motion toward the radio. “Feel free to pick a station you like.”
I say, “I don’t really know the stations around here by heart.”
He just puts it on some kind of classic rock station.
Between the airport in Tampa and Mom’s home in St. Pete, there’s a three-mile-long bridge crossing Old Tampa Bay. It’s really pretty at night. The lights from skyscrapers shine down from the city, casting glittering beams across the smooth, black surface of the water. I always forget how nice the ocean is until I’m looking at it again.
“You know, “ John says, “we used to call this bridge the Frankenstein, so many people died on it.”
“That’s certainly comforting.”
He laughs. “That was back when I was a kid. They fixed it up since then.”
I nod.

John doesn’t look anything at all like my dad does when he drives. Dad keeps his hands at ten and two on the wheel, with his back so straight you’d think he was in a church pew. John just keeps one hand on the wheel and hangs the other on his door, with the elbow poked out the window. I guess he’s younger than my dad by ten years. Maybe only a little older than Mom. You know, it’s strange, but I never wondered how old he was before.
“How old are you, John?”
“Forty-one.”

There you have it—two years older than Mom, nine years younger than Dad. I wonder whether John drives such a tiny truck so he doesn’t look like a shrimp while he’s driving it? If so, that’s an excellent idea. If I’m ever in the market for a car of my own, I think I’ll try and keep that in mind.
“So…” John says. “Sharon says you found yourself a boyfriend up at school.
Ugh. My skin could crawl right off my body. What a strange conversation to be having with your mother’s boyfriend. “Uh, sure,” I say.

He nods. “I sort of went through a phase like that once. I wouldn’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

Goodbye, skin. It was nice knowing you.

* * *

Mom doesn’t notice at first, but the first thing I do Thanksgiving morning, I tiptoe down the stair and scope out what she’s up to. She’s in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking through the Black Friday ads from the newspaper. In the oven, the turkey and sides are heating up in their trays. The smell is pretty nice.

“Since when do you subscribe to the paper?” I say.

She looks up. “John likes having the sports pages.”

I sit with her. “It’s good to see you,” I say. “I’ve missed you.”

She smiles, pulls her eyes from her ad again, and she rubs the back of my neck with her hand. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

I say, “You could have fooled me.”

She takes her hand back. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” I say. “You’ve just been hard to get a hold of lately. I can’t remember the last time we really talked.”

She frowns. “It’s been a busy couple of months, okay?”

She asks me to fill her in on all the things I’ve been up to at school—with the noticeable exception that she doesn’t go looking for details on Christopher. I have to bring up that part myself.

“This Christopher,” she says, “he’s older than you?”

“Just by a year.”

She doesn’t say anything for a minute. Then, “Derek, you have enough problems to begin with. I don’t see why you had to add this to the heap.”

“Problems?”

“I mean, don’t let me tell you what to do, for Christ’s sake, but what exactly are you trying to prove with this?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything.”

“Not all women are so awful, you know.”

“I never said they were.” I start getting a little impatient with her. “Are you trying to make this into something about you?”

She says, “Of course this is about me.”

I could practically slap her. “What about you?” I say. “I guess John is just living here now?”

She says, “Yes.”

I ask if they’ve gotten engaged or anything like that. She acts like I asked something outrageously personal. “No,” she says. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

John comes strolling into the kitchen, looking groggy and dressed only in his black briefs. When he sees me, he’s startled, and he dashes back into the bedroom.
minute later, he comes back in blue jeans and a white t-shirt. “Sorry,” he says. “Forgot myself for a minute.” At least it breaks the tension.

It isn’t even noon, but Mom suggests we get started on the all-day eat-athon. “The smallest turkey they had feeds twelve,” she says. “I hope your pants have an elastic waistband.”

To help along our gluttony, Mom pulls out her stash. We set the table with paper Dixie plates and plastic forks and knives. Then we pass the pipe around and dig into the stuffing.

Right away, I don’t feel right. It’s like I ate too much and my stomach could just explode—only, we barely even started eating yet. I just don’t feel right.

John gets this bright idea. “Shouldn’t we be watching the TV?”

“What for?”

“The Macy’s Parade.”

Mom says, “Of course!”

We take our plates to the living room, and all that’s left of the parade is the very end. We get to see Santa. That’s all.

Mom says, “Damn. Just our luck.”

“At least there’s football,” John says.

I could say something snide, like, “Oh, I sure do love football,” but I just don’t feel right. I put my plate down on the coffee table.

“Honey,” Mom says, “you cannot be done already. We have eight more pounds of turkey.”

“I think I need to lie down,” I say.

I move from the couch to the recliner in the corner, and while John finds football and Mom gets more turkey, I just lay there feeling distended, like I’m just sick, and it just gets to me. My mind starts buzzing around, and it’s just like the last time I got this way, that night when Christopher was mad at me. Oh, and that just makes me miss him already, and I want to call him, but I can’t call him like this! He’d dump me on the spot.

I hate this. I need a break from the football noise. I slink out of my chair and up the stairs and lie down in my bed.

Man, I get dizzy. It’s like I’m sitting in a painting by Salvador Dali, and there’s clocks melting off the walls, and a giant metronome beside me, and every time the needle ticks, it bonks me in the head. It’s like that story by Edgar Allen Poe about the tell-tale heart, only instead of hiding under the floorboards, the thing is beating in my chest, and it’s like a jackhammer, and I just want to rip it right out!

Mom comes in. “You okay, Derek?”

I can barely whisper. “It’s the beating of that wretched heart.”

She sits by my head and strokes my hair. “You’re just having a little panic attack. It’ll pass.”

She talks to me, I don’t know, a long time. At first it doesn’t help, but then she gets me talking, too, about nothing in particular. That sort of helps. I talk about the bells in the clock tower at school. I really do like those bells. I’d like to lay right up against one now and feel it rock me through and through.

We talk about Thanksgiving when I was little, about how Grandma Barbra always made great stuffing, then ruined dinner by saying something awful right to Mom’s face.
That makes me think of Mom’s mom and dad. I say, “How come we never talk to Grandpa?”

She says, “What would be the point?”
I say, “How come you didn’t invite me to Grandma’s funeral?”
She says, “Because I didn’t want you knowing how she died.”
“Why not?”

Very suddenly, she gets like she’s very angry, but like she’s keeping it balled up so tight inside, she can only let the tiniest bit of it out. “Your grandma took a whole bottle of sleeping pills, and then she never woke up.”

“What?”
She’s not saying another word on that—not one. She stands to leave. “Get some rest.”

Of course—I’ll just take a little snooze now. Jesus Christ. Or maybe I’ll just rip that heart out after all.

* * *

Friday morning, Mom uses shopping as an excuse to be out of the house all day. That leaves me with John to sit perfectly silent in front of the TV, which is alright until I feel like I’m about to explode from Mom’s secrets.

We’re just sitting there on the couch. John has a turkey sandwich. I haven’t got an appetite. To him, it must just seem like a regular, lazy day off work, but I’m going so crazy I just have to say something.

“John, did my grandma really kill herself?”
He turns his head away from the TV for a second. He mutes it, and he nods.

“That’s what they say.”

I’m almost relieved to be getting some truth, but now I sort of feel like I’m deflating. “But why?”
He stays quiet for a minute. “Derek,” he says, “your granddaddy is not a good man. Never was. Some men, they just beat on the people they’re meant to love. I suppose a body can only take so much of that.”

I say, “That’s not a very good explanation.”

He says, “Some things don’t have a good explanation.”

I keep on deflating. “Why didn’t you tell me before—when you took me to her grave?”

“Wasn’t my business to tell.” He shakes his head. “There’s some kinds of things a kid just shouldn’t have to know.”

* * *

I don’t talk to Mom again until Saturday. We have a late, quiet lunch—more leftovers—and we’re onto stale pumpkin pie before either of us gets up the nerve to say anything.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “About Grandma.”

“I’m sorry I told.”

“No,” I say, “I needed to know.”
She stares at her pie. “I used to think about killing your grandpa. When I was your age, I thought about it a lot.”
I’m not sure how I should respond to that. “I’m glad you didn’t.”
She says, “I’m not.”
It’s strange and quiet the rest of the day. Sunday morning, I have to catch my flight back home. She has John drive, but she comes along. I hug her at the drop-off. “I love you,” I say.
She nods, and she gives me a wimpy hug in return.
John gets out to pretend he’s helping me with my bag. He leans in a little close.
“It’s just old wounds,” he says. “She’ll be better soon.”
Maybe I believe him. Without thinking about it, I give him a hug, too. He’s taken aback by it. “See you,” I say.
“See you.”
At my December appointment with the shrink, she says, “In the past thirty days, any feelings of depression?”
   I say, “Yes.”
   “Anxiety?”
   “Tons.”
   “Have you been taking your meds on time?”
   I say, “Actually, I’ve decided to stop taking them altogether.”
   The shrink says, “That isn’t a good idea, Derek.”
   But I tell her I’m quitting whether she likes it or not, so she gives me a plan for stepping down a little at a time. When I leave her office, I stop at the front desk. I tell them I won’t be coming back again. The secretary doesn’t really seem to care. While I’m at it, I make sure my medical records are sealed off from anybody’s eyes but mine, and I tell them to send any future mail to my address in the dorms.

   I spend Christmas with Dad for the first time in ages. We open our presents to each other at eight in the morning. I get him a wireless thermometer that tells the temperature outside. He gets me a Michigan sweatshirt, some cash since he knows I’m broke, and a subscription to Scientific American that’s actually pretty thoughtful.

   Even dinner at Grandma Barbra’s doesn’t seem too awful. Uncle Rick hits the eggnog extra hard—Grandma doesn’t make it with alcohol, but he spikes his own glass with Black Velvet. Aunt Kristine gets so mad at him, she starts crying, and that causes enough of a distraction that Cousin Joe and I sneak outside for some air.

   It’s a strange December for weather. For Christmas, the temperature hovers just over freezing, so instead of snow, there’s just cold brown mud and mushy leaves in the yard. “This is crazy,” Joe says. “Three weeks ago, we got a foot of snow overnight. Now this.”

   He pulls out a lighter from his pocket, then a cigarette. Seeing me eye it, he says, “Sorry Cuz, it’s just tobacco these days.”
   I say, “Actually, I’m kind of off drugs altogether.” I guess that sounds sort of high-and-mighty once I say it, so I jump in with, “But only because I stopped liking them.”

   He grins. “No need to justify yourself to me, Cuz.” He takes a long, deep drag and blows it out really slow. “How long you been clean?” he says.
   “A couple weeks, sort of—I’m still stepping down off the Zoloft.”
   He shrugs. “Close enough. You may as well be stepping down off of Tic Tacs.”
   I have to chuckle. “That’s so strange,” I say. “My boyfriend says the same thing.”
He gives me a crooked eyebrow, like, Not that anything shocks me, but what did you just say?

“Oops.” I try shrugging it off. “I guess you weren’t aware of all that.”

He throws his cigarette off of the porch, and the butt gets quenched by the soggy brown lawn. He does his own shrugging. “Not here to judge, Cuz.” And he turns to head inside.

* * *

For the rest of winter break, Dad takes a week off work, which for him is unheard of. We spend Boxing Day at home reading books, curled up in blankets with the heat turned down. When I tell him his enthusiasm for John Grisham is ridiculous, he points out that I’m currently reading Dean Koontz. I hide my book behind my back. “At least I have the decency to be ashamed of my taste.”

By Thursday, Dad says, grinning, “You’re getting in my hair,” and he tosses me the key to his truck. “Why don’t you go see Christopher?”

It’s only a ninety minute drive to Grosse Pointe, and, strange as it seems to think about it, I’ve never even been there before. Christopher and I get lunch at a nice little place downtown. There are twinkle lights all over—wouldn’t you know it, rich people really do their places up nice.

Christopher’s parents are both lawyers. I get to meet them for a minute before I head back to Lansing. They’re just like a couple off the TV, like you wouldn’t believe it.

When I get home to Lansing, the house is empty. I figure Dad is off on a walk, so I take a shower, and I kick back in front of the TV. A little later, a Chevy pulls into the driveway, and Dad hops out the passenger’s side. I can’t quite see the driver, but she seems to have an awful lot of red hair. When Dad comes in through the front door, he’s surprised to see me. “I didn’t think you’d be back so soon,” he says.

I say, “I didn’t think you’d be gone when I got here.”

“True enough.” He’s blushing, and he’s grinning, so I don’t push it. I just grin back.

We’ll call this a pretty good break, overall. Things with Mom could be better, but I’m not taking responsibility for any of that. We only talk for a few minutes, on Christmas night. It’s shallow conversation, and she doesn’t call again the whole rest of the break. I try making a call to her on Wednesday, but John picks up. When I ask for Mom, he says, “She’s sort of in a bad way right now.”

A bad way. What now? After Thanksgiving, she barely talked to me for three weeks. I thought she was finally coming around.

* * *

The new semester starts out hectic. I guess they always do. But after a week or two, things settle back down. The settling at least makes the god-awful cold of January a little more bearable.

I guess I like my new classes. They’re practically a repeat of my last ones—a bunch of requisites, and now physics instead of biology. Funny enough, the one class I miss the most isn’t even one of mine. I miss my Tuesday movies with Christopher. But
he’s not taking a film course this semester. I mention to him how much I miss our movie nights, and he says we should go see one at a theater on his birthday. It’s coming up on the nineteenth, which falls on a Friday this year, so maybe something good will be opening.

There are two theaters in downtown Ann Arbor. But if you want to see a movie and not some god-awful film, you have to drive four miles to the outskirts. I look up the listings on Sebastian’s computer. The only opening is for some remake of a horror flick from the eighties. It is truly the most awful thing Christopher or I have ever seen. In fact, it’s so bad, we spend the ride back to his building just cackling at each other over how stupid it was.

Christopher doesn’t know it, but I do have a little present for him. When we get up to his apartment, I say, “What do you want to do for dinner?” He says he hasn’t thought that far ahead yet, but it’s too damned cold to go out again.

I say, “Perfect,” and just about with exact timing, a knock comes at the door. It’s Sebastian, with cartons of Chinese and a box of cake mix.

I say to Christopher, “Have you got a pan I could borrow?”
He says, “I didn’t know you could bake.”
I snicker. “Oh yeah, I’ve got a whole history of baking.”

Sebastian sticks around through dinner. All Christopher has is a sheet pan, which is fine. The cake cooks pretty fast. When it’s done, I pull it out and start to frost it while it’s still hot. The frosting melts right into the top. It’s a soggy, gooey mess, but it tastes fine.

At eight o’clock, Sebastian leaves. Christopher and I spend the rest of the night in the most wonderful way, just being lazy, wrapped up in blankets in front of his TV, as the cold outside shakes the window panes.

* * *

When I stroll into our room Saturday morning, Sebastian is at his desk, tipped back in his chair, eyeing his bedposts like there’s something there to see. I’ve got a Starbucks cup of hot cocoa in one hand and a wad of mail in the other. I guess I seem happy because Sebastian says, “Feeling frisky?”

I say, “Maybe a little.”
“Baby,” he says, “you are glowing.”
I tell him it must be the cold that’s turned my cheeks pink.
“But of course,” he says. “I will remember that excuse.”

I set down my cup and settle into my desk chair. I take off my gloves and start shuffling through the mail.

Sebastian says, “Anything good.”
“Naw.” Mostly junk. I toss the letters into the trash as I go.

There’s one envelope that’s so thin, it feels like it must be trash, but it’s addressed to me directly, and I don’t recognize the return address, so I open it up. What’s inside just catches me off guard. I was expecting this—but not like this. I was expecting some big, official-looking thing, in a manila envelope, with a fat red stamp reading: CONFIDENTIAL. I was expecting I’d agonize over opening it for an hour, then peel the paper slow, like Charlie Bucket with his Wonka Bar.
“What is it?” Sebastian says. My face must give me away. “Bad news?”
“I’m not sure,” I say.
I have to read it a few times before the words really make any sense.
Sebastian sits up in his chair. “Well, what does it say?”
I stand from my seat and grab my gloves. “It says my father wears black bikini briefs.” Still reading the letter, I walk out the door.
Sebastian calls after me, “What is that supposed to mean? Is he in trouble for something? Derek?”
I take the elevator down and walk straight to my corner store payphone. Maybe if I gave myself more time to think it through, I’d resist the urge to call her right away. But I don’t. I’m too frazzled for calling cards, so I just call collect. But it makes no difference. No one at Mom’s house answers the phone. We haven’t spoken since Christmas, but still—why can’t she be there now?
I hang up. I guess… now what? I’ll take a walk. That’ll work. I’ll go to the arboretum.
I’m a block down the street, thinking, Damn, it’s cold today, before I remember the gloves sticking out of my back pocket. I trade the letter for the gloves and make the rest of the walk with my hands feeling fine and my ears going numb.
I guess never made this walk alone before. It seems longer without Christopher. The cold doesn’t help. There were dusts of snow early in the week, but the last few days, it’s just been cold and dry. In the city, the little bit of snow is mostly melted off, or packed to ice from footfalls. It’s different in the Arb. The naked trees are thinly frosted, and snow still clings to the tall field grasses that grow in the lulls between patches of trees. The paths are calm and empty. I find my way to the bench where Christopher and I came when we first started dating.
My butt is so cold already, I hardly notice the ice on the bench. It’s like a snow-day when I was little. I used to tunnel outside where the snow banked up against the house, until I got so tired, I couldn’t even stand. Then I’d fall into a drift and just let the cold creep in around me until Mom came out to get me. “What are you, crazy? You’ll catch pneumonia.”
You know, I didn’t think this would hit me so hard. I really didn’t. I mean, the answer was obvious—I practically knew the answer from the beginning. It’s not the answer that’s getting to me, I don’t think. It’s the absence of the question. I spent so long with that question mark just hanging over my head, it’s like without it I’m not even the same person.
I’m surprised by the time when I get back to town. How long was I sitting on that bench? I’ll be lucky if I haven’t got a frostbitten ass.
I stop by the payphone again. Still no answer from Mom’s house. But Dad picks up when I try him.
“What’s the occasion?”
I say, “Nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice.”
He asks what I’m up to. I say not much, it’s just a cold, cold Saturday.
I guess he can tell I’m a little down.
“You feeling okay?” he says.
“Just a little out of sorts.”
Mom won’t answer my calls. I try twice again on Sunday, but nothing. The second try, I let it ring twenty times before I hang up. Now I’m starting to get a little pissed about it. I mean, where the hell could they be on a Sunday night?

Sebastian sees I’m fuming and asks why. I tell him I haven’t spoken to my mom in a month and now she won’t answer her phone.

He says, “Maybe she and her boyfriend went away for the weekend.”

I say, “They haven’t.”

Monday night, I finally get an answer—only, it’s a machine that picks up. This is John. I can’t come to the phone right now. You know what to do.

I start screaming at the machine. “John? What the hell is going on? Where is my mother? Damn it, pick up the phone!”

There’s a soft click on the other line, and I hear, “Derek?”

Christ, how am I even supposed to talk to this man now? What does he know that I don’t know? How many other kids has he got?

“John, is my mom home?”

He says, “Derek, your mom moved out three weeks ago.”

I can’t even begin to process that statement. I say, “Excuse me.”

“She moved out. After New Years, she threw her things in her car, and she left.”

“Left where?”

“I don’t know.”

“But it’s her house.”

There’s a silence on John’s end that lasts a few seconds. “Wise up, Derek. Your mom could never get a loan on a place like this.”

“Well, where did she go?”

“You tell me.”

“Why did she go?”

“I wouldn’t marry her.”

Now I go silent.

“You know what,” I say. “Sorry. Sorry to bug you.”

I hang up. I feel lost on my way down the block to my quad. I have to take the elevator up—I’m too weak for the stairs. I’m crying so hard when I walk in our room, Sebastian just gets up and hugs me.

“It is okay, baby. You will be okay. Who died?”

I say, “I did. Just now.”

He keeps holding me. “Baby, calm yourself. Everything will be okay.”

I kind of hate this. I hate living this way. I used to have a question. Now I’ve got an answer I never needed, and I sure as hell don’t know what to do with it. And more questions. Like, what the hell is wrong with my mom?

It takes awhile just to get my bearings. Tuesday night, I meet with Christopher, and he says it’s like sitting with a ghost, like he’s afraid if he touches me, my skin will be cold. I tell him I’m just a little scattered.
Sebastian is good to me through all of it. He stays pretty patient, despite the fact I hardly let him in on any of the details. I do at least tell him the part about Mom disappearing. I tell him she’s run away, and I haven’t got the first clue how to find her. I can’t call her. I try her email, but she doesn’t reply.

A week to the day after I first find out, Sebastian gets an idea that’s so sinister, it could actually work. He says to me, “Derek, baby, how is it you obtain all those plane tickets to Florida?”

I say, “I just put them on my mom’s credit card.” Ages ago, she faxed me a copy to Dad’s house so I could book my own flights online.

He raises his eyebrows at me.

I say, “Oh my God…”

I start tearing through my desk. It’s in there, folded up and worn around the edges, but there it is—the photocopy. I’ve even got her social security number, printed right on my birth certificate.

Sebastian lets me use his phone to call the customer service line. A computer asks for the account number. Then a woman with a thick, quasi-British accent comes on the line. I use my most ridiculous girly-voice to talk to her.

She says, “May I have the name on the account.”

“Sharon Baker.”

She asks for my address. I’m sure Mom hasn’t bothered changing it yet. I cross my fingers and give her the address in St. Pete. The woman says, “Thank you Mrs. Baker.”

Then, it’s just easy. I say, “I’m concerned about possible fraudulent charges.” So she tells me the last week’s worth of transactions—three for a pizza place, two for a liquor store, and a couple dozen charges from a Motel 6—all made in Phoenix, Arizona.

“No,” I say. “That’s not a problem. Those were all me. Thank you. Good day.”

I give Sebastian a look like a poor, whipped puppy. “She’s at a motel in Phoenix.”

“Arizona?”

I nod.

“How long?”

“Weeks.”

He says, “Are you going to try to call her?”

I shake my head. “I’m going there.”
Christopher drives like he’s angry at me—with his back stiff and the heat in his car turned up so high, I could practically melt to my seat. He says, “This is crazy.”

“I’m a crazy guy.”

Sebastian says, “He’s got you there.”

We’re on our way to Detroit Metro. Christopher only got the details at eight o’clock in the morning, when Sebastian and I came knocking at his door demanding a ride to the airport.

“What if the return flight fills up?” Christopher says. “I thought Joanne could only give away empty seats?”

“She checked it,” I say. “The flight is never full on Tuesdays.”

“This is stupid.”

It was my idea. I made Sebastian call Joanne, and then I snatched the phone from him and begged her, literally begged her to do this for me. She said, “I’m not promising. I’ll see what I can do.”

And then she did it. She found a steward from Detroit willing to trade her shifts. I’ll have six hours in Phoenix while we’re between flights—less if you count check-in time at the airport. But that should be plenty.

“Does your father know you’re doing this?”

“No,” I say. “And if you tell him, I may have to kill you.”

We meet Joanne in the unloading lane at the airport. This time, she’s in her uniform, with her cute little scarf and skirt. She’s just come off her normal route from Milwaukee, and now she’s putting in another fourteen hours for a guy she barely knows. I guess Sebastian might be right about her after all—the woman is an angel.

Sebastian rolls his window down and sticks the top half of his body out. “Come here,” he says to Joanne, reaching his arms out for her. “I rode all the way here for this.” She gives him a kiss while he’s still hanging outside.

I walk around to Christopher’s door to say my own goodbye. “Good luck,” he says. He kisses my cheek. “See you when you get back.”

“It’ll be late,” I say.

“I know it will.”

I join Joanne. We watch them leave and dash into the terminal.

Joanne checks me in. We head through security—my only carry-on is a small brown box, wrapped in paper, tied up with twine—and then she leaves me. She says she has to go settle things up in a place where I’m not allowed. “I’ll see you at the gate,” she says.
I’ve got an hour to kill, so I dink around the overpriced shops in the terminal. There’s a bookstore where they mostly sell copies of the latest *Harry Potter*, but there is a small shelf of what the store calls ‘classics,’ and right there, wouldn’t you know it, they’ve got my *Orange* book. It’s a paperback. The cover has a black background, with an orange plume of flames flicking up above a man’s open, screaming mouth. It’s an awful picture. I buy it. It takes fourteen of the thirty bucks I have to my name.

I head to the gate and wait in a chair until Joann shows up to get me. I have to wait until all the rest of the passengers are boarded. She leads me to a seat in the middle-rear of the plane, over the wing, between a chubby guy in an aisle seat and a skinny one by the window. I put my package under my seat.

“Pillow?” she says.

“No thanks.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

She goes to work, and I start reading. The chubby guy says, “You’re lucky you can read on a plane. Not me. I get airsick.”

I start to say, “Actually, I do too.” Then I realize he’s not talking to me but the skinny guy by the window with his nose in a copy of the *Detroit Free Press*. The skinny guy just ruffles his paper. Then the fat guy gets excited. “Oh my God,” he says, “you’re — Are you?”

The skinny guy is some no-name sportscaster from a big name cable channel, who clearly just wants to read his paper. The fat guy is clearly an idiot who just wants to spend the next four hours gabbing about the game coming up on Sunday.


I try tuning him out and zero in on my book. It’s not so bad, actually. I mean, it’s absolute nonsense—like reading some nightmare ramblings—but once you figure out to just skip over all the gibberish words, there’s a story in that’s interesting enough to follow. It’s only about two hundred and fifty pages, but it’s slow reading on account of the nonsense. I get halfway through before Joanne and another woman come by with pretzels and a Coke.

“Thanks,” I say. “Really.”

I use my napkin for a bookmark and decide to sleep through the rest of the flight.

* * *

Here’s some advice: If you ever want to know what it’s like to be crazy, or at least lose all sense whatsoever of space and time, just board a plane at noon in Detroit, where it’s nineteen degrees outside, read a little Anthony Burgess, take a nap, and wake up five hours later, at two o’clock, in the middle of a bone-dry desert where it feels like the end of May.

Joanne says I’m on my own from here—she’s going to catch a nap in a crash pad before the return flight. I tell her I’ll meet her at the ticket counter at six.

I take off my winter coat and tuck it under my arm with my *Orange* book. I kind of have to play things by ear from this point. There’s a bus stop right outside the terminal. I take it to a transfer center. Then I spend twenty minutes studying a convoluted bus map, holding up the address of Mom’s motel and trying to find the
nearest bus stop. Then I finally ask for help from a lady who looks like a local. I feel like a dumbass when it turns out the motel is only a mile and a half away, right on one of the bus lines.

I catch the number three bus, and I sit with my box and my book and my coat, wondering, *Is this what Forrest Gump felt like?*

I nearly miss the motel. In my head, I imagine there’s going to be a deliberate stop at the Motel 6 and a dozen people are going to get off. Of course that’s stupid. I pull the cord at the last second, and the brakes squeal as we stop.

I step out. This place is so strange. I mean, it’s a desert, a real desert. From what I can tell so far, the city of Phoenix is about fifty percent open, barren tracts of sand, filled up with shrubs and cactuses—and the other half is asphalt. The smell is the interesting thing. The smell is like the few minutes of rain after some long, god-awful drought, like the air is dense with ions and it’s dry as hell with dust, but still the air is heavy. It tastes like metal.

I creep into the motel lobby like I’m there to rob the place. I stand in line for a minute behind what looks like a businessman throwing a fit because he didn’t get the kind of room he reserved. Then it occurs to me—if I ask for Mom’s room number, are they going to call her? I don’t want that. I really don’t want that.

I notice a stack of coupon fliers for the nearest Dominos Pizza. I pick one up, and when the businessman finally storms out of the lobby, I ask the guy at the desk, “Could I use your phone to order a pizza?”

He says, “Sure.” He hands it over. I dial the number on the flier. “Delivery,” I say. I don’t even bother with the girly-voice. “For Sharon Baker. I’m staying at the Motel 6 on Van Buren—you should have my info on file.”

The pizza girl says, “Still in room 216?”

I hang up.

I need a minute to gather myself. This place is crazy. Could someone tell me how exactly, in the middle of a city of a million and a half people, you can be standing in a parking lot next to a patch of green lawn, then look ten yards away and see desert all over the place? It just doesn’t make any sense.

All right, Christ, I have to stop stalling. I walk around the building until I spot the room. It’s up on the second floor. I don’t see Mom’s car around. Maybe she’s not even here.

I climb a set of stairs, holding my package to my chest and my coat over my arm, and then I stand in front of the door. The shades are drawn tight. I can’t see inside. For a minute, I imagine the door will open suddenly. And Mom will come out in her pretty yellow dress, with her hair done nice, and she’ll say, *I’ve been expecting you, Derek.* And she’ll explain all that’s happened, and it’ll really be a funny story. Then she’ll move back to Florida, and we’ll talk all the time again, and— No, I’m too old to be thinking like this.

I knock on the door. There’s rustling inside. It’s awhile before she answers. She has to kick a pizza box out of the way as she opens the door. She’s dressed like a disaster relief victim, with hair to match. She looks and smells hung over.

She doesn’t miss one beat. She says, “What are you, a private dick now?”

I say, “Not a private one.” I hold the package out for her. “For you.”
She lets me in. We sit down at the little table by the door. It’s cluttered with wadded up napkins and tissues, some receipts, empty pop cans, and a half-empty bottle of vodka. She doesn’t say anything. She runs her left hand over her mess of hair, trying to smooth it down. No good, of course. Then she looks at me, looks at the package, pulls the twine of, and opens the flaps. It only smells like cardboard. Slowly, she reaches in and withdraws it—a small, bruised, unripe orange stolen from a Michigan cafeteria. She isn’t delicate with it. She finds the hole in the skin where it’s already slit, sticks a thumb down deep inside, and she rips the thing in two, rind and all. The tiny, rolled-up note is there. She opens it.

The front of the note, in small, neat letters—scribbled out—reads:

COME
HOME

The back, in sloppy scrawl, reads: What the hell is wrong with you?
She throws the sour fruit in the trash and sets the note aside. “Nice touch.”
I just look at her. I’d like to say I hardly recognize her, but that’s the scary thing—I do. She looks just like Mom, like she crawled straight up out of the gutter. I say, “Why didn’t you tell me?”
She frowns. She says she was planning to call—when she got to Los Angeles.

Los Angeles! Why?
She says, “I hear Orange County is nice.”
Her car broke down in Phoenix. There was an awful noise under her hood while she was driving through Tucson. She didn’t want to stop because she was making good time. Then, an hour later, she heard a bang, and her transmission downshifted to first. It wouldn’t shift back up for anything, and she had to have it towed. The guys at the shop were really nice—said they could rebuild the thing for a bargain price, at eighteen hundred bucks. She didn’t have that kind of money, so she told them to do the work, and she’d pay them off just as soon as her next alimony hit the bank.

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“I never lied.”
“You lied straight to my face. I asked you, clear as day, and you said it wasn’t even possible. But you knew it, didn’t you? You knew it all along.”
She looks like she could stand a swig of the vodka. I could use one myself. I grab the bottle and take a pull. I offer it to her. She shakes her head.
She says, “I never got to have a father. I got a monster. I grew up so afraid of the man down the hall, I didn’t dare get up to piss at night for fear the flush would wake him. All I wanted, for twenty years, was to be able to take a piss in my own home.” She makes a shallow flick with her head. “When I met your father—”
“Which one?”
“Howard, Derek. When I met Howard… I thought if I could get him to marry me, I’d be happy. I didn’t want you growing up around that bar, for Christ’s sake. I thought it was a win-win.” She keeps frowning. “What I didn’t realize was, you can’t force someone to love you that way.”
“But why?” I say. “After the divorce, after everything—why didn’t you ever tell me?”
She explains it then—when John came up to Michigan, all those years ago, when we ran away together, when it all started—he only came up because he heard about me. He wanted to set things right, by both of us.
She says, “I had to know. If he was going to marry me, I had to know that it was for me, not just because he thought he had to. I didn’t want him finding out the truth.”
And there it was. That’s why she ran. When John moved in with her in St. Pete, she thought he was finally going to propose. When Christmas came and still no ring, she couldn’t take it. She broke down. And that’s when John told her—as much fun as they had together, he just wasn’t the marrying kind. Then she asked him if he loved her, and he wouldn’t answer. So she ran. Why L.A.? Because it never rains, the fruit is sweet, and it’s so, so far away.
I say, “You used me.”
“Derek, I didn’t.”
“Yes, you did. Then you used me again.”
“I didn’t mean to.”
“It doesn’t matter what you meant.”
She can’t respond to that.
“I have to go,” I say.
“Derek.”
“I’ve got a plane to catch. I’m sorry. Call me when you get to where you’re going.”
I’m out the door.
I don’t want to stop. I want to run. I want to run with my jacket flapping behind me like a flag, with my Orange book clutched in my hand—straight past the bus stop, two miles to the airport entrance. I don’t want to stop until I get there.

* * *

For nearly three hours, I sit in a chair in the busiest place in the world, with people streaming in and out, to luggage claims and ticket counters. It’s like sitting in a
bee hive, and, in a funny way, it’s almost calming. With so much going on, I just zone out, and I read my book. I finish it. Then I just stare at it for awhile. I stroke the cover. Then I rip the cover off. “You’re better this way,” I say.

When Joanne comes to get me, she has to tap my shoulder. I’m busy tearing the cover of my book into tiny pieces of confetti.

“That bad?” she says.

“No,” I say. “It’s not such a bad book after all. In the end, the bad guy, he comes around. They left that part out of the movie.”

“I meant the visit,” she says. “With your mother.”

“Oh, that,” I say. I sweep my pieces of confetti up and start walking toward a trash can. “I think that it went like it needed to go.” I sprinkle the pieces into the bin. “How was your nap?”

She says, “It was bliss.”

“Thanks for doing this for me.”

She puts a hand on my shoulder. “You ready?”

“I think so.”

We start heading for the counter to check ourselves in, through security, through the terminal, to our plane, thirty thousand feet into the air, and two thousand miles through the sky. We land at two o’clock in the morning, on a cold, cold Michigan night. Waiting outside, like they never left, Christopher and Sebastian sit in the Lexus. I climb into the front, and Joanne sits with Sebastian in the back.

Joanne says, “Derek, would you mind if I stay in your dorm room tonight?”

I say to Christopher, “Mind if I stay with you?”
PART THREE
I think I know what it is about kids these days. It’s not that life is easier or harder. It’s more like, where ever you go, you’re already home, and that’s the saddest thing. When I was a kid, I was eating an apple one day in July, and Grandpa Fred—this was before he got the Alzheimer’s—he said, “You know, when I was your age, we didn’t have apples in the summer.”

I said, “Why not?”
He said, “They weren’t in season.”
Now we’ve got oranges in Michigan, in March.
The last night I ever spent with Christopher, he called me to his computer.
“Look,” he said. He had a page open up to show the satellite picture of his soon-to-be neighborhood in Virginia. “There’s my street. See, whenever you miss me, you can look on this, and there I am.”

Somehow, that only made things worse.

* * *

It’s autumn when Grandpa Fred dies. Dad calls my cell phone at two in the morning. “You have to come home, Derek.”

I drive from Ann Arbor in Dad’s old truck—he gave it me a year earlier, when he bought his ’09 Sierra. But it still doesn’t feel like mine. It feels like something I borrowed. I think it always will.

One of the first things I say after I get in the door is, “I guess it’s lucky Grandpa died on a Thursday. I won’t miss a lot of class.”

Dad gives me a crooked glance. “Derek, that’s an awful thing to say.” The he thinks about it. “You’re not going to miss anything major, are you?”

It’s funny when somebody dies after you’ve been expecting it for years. The doctors gave Fred five years in 1999. Now it’s like the inevitable happened, and we’re all looking at each other like we had no idea it was coming. I guess death is something you just never expect.

We drive out to Grand Rapids as soon as I get my overnight bag in the back of Dad’s new truck. He drives a lot slower than usual. The sun is rising as we pull up Grandma’s driveway. Cousin Joe is already with her. She’s inconsolable, just crying and crying. I never saw her like this before, not even close. All my life, she’s been this mean old lady, just this unshakeable gripe. It’s a funny thing seeing someone like that turned inside out.
We have the showing on Saturday, at a funeral parlor that once was a farm house, converted way back in the fifties. The floors creak and creak, but it’s a really nice place. There’s a wrap-around porch with views of the neighboring fields. The fields stretch back until they meet up with orange-brown tufts of forest that disappear over the horizon.

I sit with Dad on the porch for an hour, maybe longer. Inside, we’re the odd men out—the only two not a part of Fred by blood. It’s strange, the way people look at you differently over things like that. Dad and I probably spent more time with Fred than half the people in there, but still we’re the interlopers, the stepson and his godless child.

“It’s funny,” Dad says. “I never considered old Fred a father, and yet, he’s really the closest thing I ever had.” Dad isn’t crying, but he will be tomorrow, I can tell. “I didn’t think this would hit me so hard.”

I scoot closer to him on our bench and wrap an arm around his back.

He tries talking to me about school, mostly just to change the subject. He says, “You start your grad school applications yet?”

“I have.”

I’m applying to programs in microbiology. When I first told Dad, he asked me why, and I said, joking, “Because I’ve really come to identify with certain amoebas.”

He took that for gospel and said, “Good for you.”

“I’m applying to Michigan State,” I say. “They’ve got a program in evolutionary biology that I might have a shot at getting into.”

He chuckles a little. I say, “What?”

“Of all things, I never would have pegged you for a biologist.”

I shrug.

“Hey,” he says, “whatever happened with that experiment you were doing your freshman year? The mitochondria. You never told me how it went.”

“Oh,” I say. “I almost forgot about that.” I watch the dried-up, papery corn stalks dancing in the fields across the way. “You haven’t got anything to worry about,” I say. “Your mitochondria are perfectly healthy.”

* * *

Cousin Joe is like Grandma’s own personal crutch the whole way through the funeral. She leans on him, and she cries on him, and she lets him do just about everything for her.

Sunday morning, Dad’s girlfriend drives up for the burial. She’s a nice enough woman. She’s got a very large puff of very red hair, which must be dyed, since I’m guessing she’s nearly as old as Dad. I’ve got a sneaking suspicion the two of them are engaged, and they just aren’t telling anybody. We get a moment alone together while Dad is off being a pallbearer. “Holding up?” she says.

“Yeah.”

On the ride to the cemetery, she asks me about school—all the standard stuff that people always ask. Only, she adds, “Been on any good dates lately?”

I tell her, “Technically, Christopher and I never broke up. He won’t be in Virginia forever. It’s just a master’s degree.”

She nods. “Mmhm, you’ll come around.”

101
We put Fred in the ground, and they fill in the hole. Afterward, while people slowly file away to their cars, Uncle Rick and I stand like trees between gravestones, taking in the November chill. “You know, I always thought November smelled like death,” I say.

“You’re right,” he says. “It does.”

He’s the only one who’d dare to ask me— “How’s your mom?”

I say, “I think she’s doing okay.”

We talk sometimes, Mom and I—not often, but we do talk. She made it to L.A. She’s still a waitress. She says she’s still got a few more years before she’s too wrinkled to make ends meet that way. Her alimony ran out in September, and she didn’t even bother trying to renew it.

Mom says she hasn’t talked to John since she left him. I’m sure it’s true. For a little while, I contemplated calling him myself. I thought I had a secret he deserved to know. But ultimately I decided to do us both a favor and keep it under my hat.

That’s the thing about secrets. With some of them, there’s just no winning. With some of them, you’re damned if you keep them inside, and there’s hell to pay if you let them out. With those kinds of secrets, I guess you just keep them wrapped up—maybe it’s selfish, but at least that way, if there’s damage done, you get to feel like you’re in control of it.

Rick and I hang together, off to the sidelines, until most of the others are gone. Cousin Joe helps Grandma into his car to take her home. “Is it true,” I say, “that Joe is going to move in with Grandma Barbra?”

Rick says, “It’s true.”

“He must really be vying for the farm.”

Rick puts his arm around me. He says, “Sometimes you love someone, and you get something from them, too. That doesn’t mean the love doesn’t count.”

Good advice from a man who’s twice divorced. I pull away from him. “I’m not giving you my mother’s phone number.”

“I didn’t ask for it.”

“But you want it.”

He only shrugs.

Back at Grandma’s place, before the ride home to Lansing, I ask Dad’s girlfriend if she’d like me to drive her car so they can ride back together. “That’s alright,” she says. “You take him.”

And then I see what she means. He’s exhausted. And he’s frazzled. I tell Dad, “I’ll drive,” and he gives me the keys. Not counting when I was on a learner’s permit and could barely keep it between the lines, this is the first time I’ve driven him anywhere. I have to move the seat six inches forward to reach the pedals. I must look so ridiculous, I’m sure Dad would make fun of me if he weren’t fast asleep.

It’s a half hour’s drive to the highway, then a long, murmuring trek along I-96 to take us home. I watch my dad sleeping, his head held up in his seat belt like a sling—until I drift into the shoulder lane and briefly touch the rumble strips. The noise shocks Dad awake.

“Are we okay?”

“We’re fine,” I say. “Just hit a rough patch.”

He closes his eyes.
I say, “I’ll let you know when we’re there.”

He snorts, and he nods, and he falls back to sleep. I turn on the cruise control. And we roll on along over all the little bumps in the patchy stretch of road that takes us home.