THE LAST WEINRIP

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ABSTRACT

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Stories of success and failure figure prominently in contemporary American fiction and drama. The life story of the author's father, Perry Weinstein, presents the uniquely American account of a man who both soars to the greatest heights of success and descends into the darkest depths of poverty, addiction, and the shame these afflictions evoke in our cultural consciousness. Through the imaginative lens of fiction and the artistic license it affords, the dissertation presents a tragicomic rendering of the author's father through the narrative recollections of a fictional character, "Larry Weinrip." Although *The Last Weinrip* incorporates a fictionalized voice and a number of imagined scenes, Larry Weinrip's story is modeled closely on the life and consciousness of Perry Weinstein. More than a decade-and-a-half after his death, this fictional account provides an artistic vehicle and a voice to imagine what was, and what might have turned out differently for a man whose life the author still struggles to understand.

DEDICATION

For Blake and Maya, who are the reason. And for Agnieszka, whose unwavering support, near-inconceivable sacrifice, and occasional kicks helped shepherd this to the finish line. My deepest love and thanks.

To my father, Perry David Weinstein: You have inspired in the most unlikely of ways.

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The Last Weinrip — Introduction

"It was you who doomed yourself,
man of hard fortune. From no other,
from nothing stronger, came your mischance.
When you could have chosen wisdom,
with better opportunity before you,
you chose the worse."

—Sophocles (*Philoctetes* 1095-1100)

"The pains we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all."

—Sophocles (*Oedipus the King* 1360-1361)

In every man…there is one part which concerns only himself and his contingent existence, is properly unknown to anybody else and dies with him. And there is another part through which he holds to an idea which is expressed through him with an eminent clarity, and of which he is the symbol.

—Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Autobiographical Fragment," 1816

I

In discussing the demise of Willy Loman, his most resonant and enduring character, Arthur Miller once wrote, "A point has to arrive where a man sees what has happened to himself" ("Nature" 8). To step back and evaluate one's life is a colossal task. As millions of audience members and readers have witnessed, Willy cannot bear the grim realization "that life…had slipped so unaccountably through his fingers" (Bigsby viii). Similarly, I've often wondered if a time ever came when my father, Perry Weinstein, could step back and, as objectively as possible, assess his own life. Did he ever stop and wonder

about that life, one in which he soared to great heights of financial and professional success and had a beautiful wife and loving family, only to face his end having lost everything but what must have been anguished memories of all he'd had and squandered? What was going through his mind in those final hours and days leading up to the moment he died, alone, at the age of 63, in a tiny room of a Hollywood, Florida efficiency motel located just steps from the sand on which my father spent many a night when he didn't have the money to sleep with a roof over his head? Throughout the downward spiral that defined the last decade of his life, that seedy room on Connecticut Street, with little more than a queen-size bed, TV, a small refrigerator and two-burner hotplate, would be Perry's final destination after a long odyssey of decline.

Such is the setting and situation Larry Weinrip faces in *The Last Weinrip.* As the creator of the fictional character, and the son of the flesh-and-blood man whose experience provides the model for Larry Weinrip's story, I chose the sand of a south Florida beach at night, a setting on the edge of oblivion, to give Larry the opportunity to reflect on a life that has, for the most part, slipped away. The mysteries of the ocean, both literal and symbolic, are mere yards from the place he lies. Above him, the full moon shines down like a single judgmental eye. Its pale light casts a glistening path across the water, stopping abruptly at the horizon, evoking the image of a journey mercifully coming to an end.

The actual end of my father's strange path through life took place in that efficiency motel room: Two hundred decaying square-feet, at most, concealed inside a nondescript white bungalow just one block from the ocean, in an area populated primarily

by transients and tourists. Many a morning my father would jog on that same beach when he had sufficient breath, no thanks to the two-pack a day cigarette habit he maintained for three-quarters of his years. The fictional Larry Weinrip shares the identical habit, the physical damage from which to his lungs and arteries comparable to the destruction he's done to any number of lives that have revolved around his own crooked orbit. A wife, three children, a business partner and numerous others count amongst the casualties. When my sisters and I were tasked by the Hollywood Police Department with cleaning out that Connecticut Street motel room and salvaging my father's scant material possessions—a small transistor radio, a cracked teacup half-full of coins, a ragged pile of clothes and a prosthetic front tooth conjoined to a plastic dental bridge—it was not difficult to understand that collection as the final poignant emblem of a man whose "life had unaccountably slipped through his fingers" (Miller). Certainly evidence of the addictions the man battled were also there—the alcohol, most recently—as was the glaring lack of self-esteem that defined so much of my father's psyche. Amidst the mess, the decay, and the hollowed-out sense of the abyss, perhaps the most notable symbol of all was the three or four ashtrays scattered around the room—overflowing with stamped out butts, matchsticks and piled ash, and the random beer cap and other scraps. The metaphor of an entire life burned down to charred rubble is clear. So too does the fictional Larry Weinrip, like Miller's iconic Willy Loman, "land in the ash can like all the rest of them" (*Salesman* 106). For both my father and these fictional characters, these destinations are most often self-directed. At one point in the novella,

Weinrip himself admits: “the man I was, and lost, had been discarded by my own hand” (142).[1]

II

Joseph Campbell, in the section of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* titled “Atonement with the Father,” discusses “the mystery of the apparently self-contradictory father,” in whom “are contained and from [whom] proceed…good and evil, death and life, pain and pleasure, boons and deprivations” (145). As a fictional character, Larry Weinrip embodies many of these paternal contradictions Campbell observes. Aside from the generalities of good and evil, and the basic certainties of life and death, many of Larry’s conflicts and inconsistencies manifest themselves as both “pain and pleasure, boons and deprivations (Campbell 145).” The arc of his life itself, with its long pendulum swing between the heights of financial success as a shoe industry trailblazer and its devastating poverty as a homeless man roaming some of south Florida’s most squalid locales, illustrates Campbell’s archetype. Larry Weinrip is a man who once snorted tens of thousands of dollars of cocaine up his nose, who owned a “six-bedroom home nestled in the wooded suburb north of the city…[with a] kidney-shaped swimming pool…dug into the backyard” (47). From his patch of Florida sand, he remembers the “[o]ne Mercedes Benz garaged in Manhattan, another in Taipei. A four-continent business that grossed thirty-million one blessed year back in the 80s” (47). He too is a man who once signed a

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, numbers in parentheses refer to pages in the manuscript of *The Last Weinrip* by Clifford W. Evan.

check for $31,000 of 1980s money to pay for his son's bar mitzvah at a lavish Manhattan dinner club. By the end of his life Weinrip "huddle[s]…alone, bearded and half-naked, on a stolen and torn motel sheet, with the shards of [his] earthly belongings in an overnight satchel wedged as a pillow beneath [his] head" (92). While the boons now exist only in memory, the deprivations of poverty, indigence and exclusion illustrate the reality of Larry's final days.

A man living in emotional despair and with a pain in his chest as "sharp as a knife thrust [that] cuts across bone and flesh," Larry Weinrip also relishes the pleasures his lost life of wealth and privilege at one time afforded (95). Not that he was capable of appreciating the intrinsic value of many of those delights at the time. For Larry, each of those pleasures seem to have been accompanied by a persistent yet pernicious dark side. In fact, a pathological self-abnegation informs much of his thinking and personal interactions, as if his final, broken destination is but the last act of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For all the professional success he earned, the familial love he could have enjoyed, and the accompanying joy that might have been rightfully bestowed onto the man responsible for it, Larry Weinrip, in the very first scene of the novella, recalls "the voice that whispered inside my head like some demonic fucking chant: *You don't deserve it.…Any of it"* (47). This denial is evident as Larry lies with his ex-wife on a chaise beside the newly-dug pool in the backyard of their former home, rejecting her honest sentimentality and expressions of love, while their children splash in the water. Likewise, the love of family never seems to be enough, as Larry recalls the fleeting pleasures he once sought through encounters with prostitutes he'd known in "Honolulu or Hong Kong,

Manila or Bangkok" (47). If the examples suggest that Larry felt undeserving of the many expressions of authentic love directed at him over the course of his life, the fact that he dies alone and penniless after being wealthy and achieving "[e]very success a man might want…[e]very benchmark of American distinction," suggests that he felt the material rewards he'd earned were also unjustified (46).

Campbell describes these contradictions of the father in relation to Viracocha, "the great divinity of prehistoric Peru" (145). Illustrations of Viracocha depict the "god" as all-powerful with a tiara that is the sun, wielding a thunderbolt in each hand, "and from his eyes descend, in the form of tears, rains that refresh the life of the valleys of the world" (Campbell 145). Through this description, the contradictory sense of power and sadness is evident in both my father's decline and Larry Weinrip's fictional self-destruction. At the same time, Campbell writes, stories of Viracocha's appearances of walking the earth amongst mortals almost always show the god "wandering as a beggar, in rags and reviled" (145). Like my own father, Larry Weinrip roams through his final years dressed primarily in rags, with "sun-browned feet and dirt-caked cargo shorts" and a "black hole where [his] missing front tooth should have been" (60). Although he claims the world may call him anything but not a beggar, that "[n]ever once, even for a dull nickel, have I scraped the barrel and panhandled[,]" Weinrip does turn to both his own father and his embittered ex-wife for financial handouts (166). Similarly, his son, Jeffrey, bails him out of jail the second time, after the police catch a drunken and mosquito-bitten Larry urinating on the wall behind the same supermarket he once robbed of a kaiser roll and a package of liverwurst and was arrested.

Perhaps, for Larry Weinrip, it might only be considered begging if his outstretched hand is directed at a stranger. A combination of pride and shame prevents him, during a random encounter at a boardwalk pizzeria, from asking a "barrel-bellied tourist…a plumber's apprentice, foul-mouthed and red-faced, someone I might have once hired to install a toilet…for three dollars so I could buy a lousy beer of my own" (56). As Weinrip admits, even though drinking a cold beer in the sunshine seems like "heaven" to him, there is no way he could ever ask the guy for money. In this case the cup of beer is something Larry does not deserve, since he does not have the three dollars to purchase it. Campbell similarly writes of Viracocha as being "reviled," and this encounter with the drunken plumber's apprentice from the pizzeria suggests that Larry Weinrip can only find some measure of pride and self-respect among strangers. He chooses to leave the revulsion to the family members he's abandoned, some of the same people he still needs to enable his path of self-destruction.

At the heart of Larry Weinrip's colossal disregard—even revulsion—for self lies his calculated departure from designing shoes, the work that both gave him joy *and* created all the financial success and professional renown he had once known. In abandoning this calling that was both central to his identity and the source of his wealth, Weinrip essentially stopped following his "bliss," the consequences of which directly contradict Campbell's enduring prescription for leading a fulfilled life. If Willy Loman, notably, "was a happy man with a batch of cement," the implication is that his career as a salesman was a departure from the pleasures Miller's character found in working alongside his sons to improve the family house that is paid off by the end of the play

(110).[2] Just as my father abandoned his bliss after his bankruptcy, effectively leaving the shoe industry for a series of misguided entrepreneurial ventures, Larry Weinrip buries that bliss in a place where it would be unlikely for him to ever find it again. By obscuring himself in an area full of transients, tourists and others like the "pair of drunks" who were once his roommates in a crumbling efficiency apartment not unlike the one where his life ultimately ends, Larry ensures his total disconnect from the world in which he once figured so prominently.

More than fifteen years after his death, I cannot say with any confidence if my father harbored any regrets for abandoning his "bliss"; it is a question I long to answer, but never had the opportunity to ask. In retrospect, I don't even know how I would have asked him. In the fiction it is clear, as his life is winding down on the southeastern edge of American soil, that Larry Weinrip yearns to have some measure of that time back. Alone on the sand, without having even the luxury of a pair of shoes on his feet, Weinrip recalls the days, at the height of his shoe industry success,

> always working on some new design, some detail, some flourish of functionality or style. Scissoring a gum sole loose from one pair so I could re-glue it to a radically different upper, swapping a certain style tassel for another, buffing a nearly perfected sample with black or brown Kiwi shoe polish in order to "antique" the vamp. (145)

Here he remembers the happiness he found working with the "stitchers, sewers, and last-fitters" in the sample room of his company's Taipei office, the "hot, cramped and smoky shop" where his footwear creations—his *honeys,* as his ex-wife used to sardonically refer

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[2] Ironically, Willy Loman is never willing, or able, to do the same work required of a father or a husband to build an actual "home."

to them—first sprang to life. "The first designer," Weinrip offers, "to put hiking boot treads on sneakers, that was me. A lug sole on a wing tip, a dress casual huarache sandal, fake leather loafers that…even smelled like cowhide. These were all my innovations, too" (134, 135). In recollections of those days when he was ostensibly happy, enmeshed in his bliss of creating shoes, Larry describes the glue smell of that sample room as "narcotically dizzying," and the completed shoes as "virtually orgasmic, as little sun flares of inspiration became pieces of beauty" (146). As the broken Larry mournfully admits in the section titled "Foot Flop," he might have been "[n]ine thousand miles from home…[but] as a new shoe emerged complete from that cramped sample room, nothing else I knew in this life could make me any more content" (146). As Annie Dillard describes it in "Living Like Weasels," in designing shoes, Larry Weinrip had found "the perfect freedom of single necessity" (70).

Weinrip further acknowledges regret for abandoning his bliss in "Could Have, Would Have, Should Have," the opening lines of which show a prostrate Larry wondering "what might have been" had he made any number of different career-based decisions after his once-thriving and influential business went bankrupt (134). Although he admits to "the embarrassment and shame," and the pain of "an incomparable loss" from the experience, central to his anguished reminiscence about the different life he might have lived is the clear regret he expresses for abandoning his bliss—his great talent for creating shoes, and the enduring passion it once inspired in him (135). Alone on the beach, looking back on the bankruptcy's aftermath, Weinrip is "free to wonder why I never took a job as a design consultant…or even a head designer position, with any of my

former competitors…Steve Madden, Kenneth Cole, Johnston & Murphy—any of whom…would have…slit the others' throats…to bring me into their fold." He realizes that a single phone call that he never made could have kept him inside the "world where I [was] both admired and respected, and my designs [were] precious currency" (135). For Larry, one pride-swallowing act, deep in the past, could very well have led to a shoe industry second-act even more successful than his first, and might have resulted, realistically, not just in even greater financial rewards than he ever knew from his first business, but also in an enduring and wholly fulfilling relationship with his three children. At this moment, if only with the clarity of hindsight, Weinrip understands that abandoning the work he loved was in effect the same as giving up the most essential part of himself, and may very well have been the single most important decision he made that ensured the peculiar destination of his life.

Although Larry Weinrip indulges in this meandering thought experiment, the source of the fiction both subscribes to the reality of my father's history and notably departs from it. Like Weinrip, my father was Endicott Johnson's top salesman for the better part of a decade, only to leave that position to start what would become the hugely successful JP Marks, International, one of the first companies to manufacture, out of factories in Taiwan, shoes made primarily of man-made materials. And much like Larry Weinrip, after JP Marks went bankrupt, my father essentially disappeared and left his partner, Jerry Shames, carrying the full weight of an insolvent company that, only a few years earlier, had generated tens of millions of dollars in revenue. It was, in fact, my own conversations with Jerry, years after my father's death, that gave me insight into how

influential and respected my father actually was in the shoe business. On more than one occasion Jerry told me that, after the bankruptcy, my father could have literally worked as a designer for *anyone* in the industry. "Crazy as your father was," Jerry said to me, "he was the most talented guy I knew, and I loved him." These discussions with Jerry, the man who in many ways knew my father better than anyone, helped inform this most crucial aspect of the fictional Larry Weinrip's character and psyche.

Where the fiction takes considerable license from my father's story is in its assertion that Larry Weinrip wholly abandons his bliss he found in designing shoes immediately after he loses his business. My father's actual rejection of the shoe business wasn't nearly as stark and absolute as Larry Weinrip's. As the prospects for his business were looking more and more grim, and bankruptcy seemed inevitable, my father explored a series of shoe business ventures in which he licensed brand names—*Camp Beverly Hills,* most notably—to adorn a line of innovative teens' and children's shoes he'd been developing. Of course none of these projects ever took off with a trajectory anywhere close to what he'd known with his first business. Neither did my father's venture called *Foot Flops,* from which the section of the novella gets its title. For a time, in fact, the business enjoyed some measure of success selling an array of sandals to beach stores around Florida, and my father believed he was well on his way to another triumph. So while it is true he had grand designs for his fledgling company to create a new business as big as the one he'd lost; and while a category-5 hurricane provided the coup de grâce to both the fictional and historical Foot Flops, where the novella diverges most notably is in Larry Weinrip's attitude towards his tiny startup. Trapped in an idealized past where

he romanticizes the ongoing creation of ever new lines of shoes that bring him both professional renown and financial success, Weinrip never fully invests his heart in the new venture. By illuminating the novella's theme of abandonment and showing Larry's unwavering bent toward self-destruction, the novella shows Larry rejecting this new venture out of pride and indifference, further emphasizing how the actions of his own hand have determined his fate.

III

Though he died, alone, of what the Broward County, Florida coroner officially called *cardiovascular disease,* I could just as easily classify my father's death a suicide, just the slow-drip method rather than the instant. Suicide, in both a literal and figurative sense, informs *The Last Weinrip.* Figuratively, Larry Weinrip, like my father, suffers from an afflicted spirit, brought on by his own bad choices and a conscious abandonment of self that slowly kills him. In the most ineffectual of ways, Larry tries unsuccessfully to hasten his own end by holding his breath repeatedly for successive minutes, hoping the "cardiovascular shock might puncture something vital, tear a weakened artery or ventricle, burst a secretly buried aneurysm like a water balloon" (63). For both my father and his fictional portrayal, each man can also be understood as suffering from a different kind of disease of the heart, one that kills even more slowly, more insidiously, but involves a pathology that is at least somewhat consciously manifested. Larry's own heart, one "that's already failed, clinically, two separate times, and requires a…

scaffolding of pharmaceuticals to keep marching[,]" represents his own colossal inability —even failure—to love himself, or another, and is one of the central patterns at work in the fiction (107). In the end, this same heart kills Larry Weinrip; still, unlike the instantaneous result of Seymour Glass's gunshot to the head, Willy Loman's car wreck, or Okonkwo's self-inflicted hanging at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, Larry, the admitted coward, doesn't have the courage to drink a bottle of Clorox or slit his wrists and float adrift in the ocean to become dinner for the sharks he imagines are lurking to devour his corpse. He can only envision the act passively, as the inevitable result of ever more self-inflicted bodily damage, which stands in contrast with the teenage girl, his daughter's friend, who "shot herself in the temple with her father's pistol." For Larry, the girl has "always been [his] hero" because of the fearlessness she demonstrated in taking her own life (64).

From time to time during his actual downward spiral, my father would make some seemingly offhand comment to me about "doing himself in" or "kicking the bucket," as if he subconsciously knew the toll the drugs, drink, the endless cigarettes and fast food—not to mention the inability to give, or receive, love—were taking on his body and spirit. This understanding combined with a persistent sense that his life would never again rebound to its previous heights of success and achievement, and that the family life he all but abandoned held incomparable and irretrievable joys. The same can be said for Larry Weinrip. Not long after he tries unsuccessfully to hold his breath for as long as possible, he feels a pain in his chest, near his heart, that is as "sharp as a knife thrust cut across bone" (95). This sign of an impending heart attack occurs just after Larry has watched a

young couple have sex on top of a lifeguard tower yards away from where he lies, unseen by the enraptured lovers. Their carnal embrace symbolizes the sexual wantonness Larry once valued more highly than his family's love, and the vision of the lovers causes him to remember one particular summer morning, as he sat with his wife next to the swimming pool they'd just built, watching their three children play in the water. His recollection is of a time, deep in the past, when the young, healthy and hugely successful Weinrip has just rejected a loving comment his wife made about the shared sacrifice they've made for their children. But instead of deepening his connection with the woman with whom he's shared vows, Weinrip admits to how his "wife and three children all seemed to disappear, and there was only me, alone, sitting there in the strange shade of that patio" (94). For Larry Weinrip this moment of self-imposed isolation reflects the man's persistent emotional disconnect, later echoed as he faces his own solitary death. When, moments later, he says: "I think we cut down too many trees back here,"—a reference to the backyard space that needed to be cleared for the pool—the words reflect Larry's own fear of laying himself bare, and represent the vulnerability human beings typically need in order to love and be loved in return (94). Like Dostoevsky's "Underground Man" who "never guessed that [Eliza] had come to me…to love me," rejecting outright the woman who might have delivered him from his misery and isolation, Larry Weinrip does not possess the emotional vulnerability to make that deeper human connection (126).

Back on the nighttime beach, Larry senses the pain in his chest as a sign sent by the divine, or "a warning, even" (95). Once again the symbolism of a faulty heart's inability to love echoes as Weinrip's most destructive literal and metaphorical affliction.

In the end a heart attack kills Larry Weinrip, but his inattention to, and neglect of, matters of the heart slowly devour him. Once the pain subsides, Larry receives a revelation of sorts, a brief flash of understanding, as he becomes aware "that the most real measure of having lived, of being counted, of mattering even just a little on this earth, lies in our courage to remove the heart from the safety of its cage and daring the world to break it" (95). In this fleeting instant of self-reflection, Larry Weinrip can see not only *what* has happened to him, but also a small glimmer of the *why*.

On at least one occasion my father contemplated taking his own life. As he toed the edge of the elevated Miami-Dade Metrorail platform, he supposedly said to a friend of mine who happened to be with him: "I should just jump." This friend, on that day, had gone to Miami with my father on a quixotic hunt to secure county permits for a snack bar he fantasied about opening in the pool area of one of the seedy seaside motels that had become his home. This was a time in my father's decline into full-on indigence when he still had the money to buy a motel room by the week or month, as well as enough remnants of his former wealth to explore the kind of misguided venture he was considering with the poolside snack bar. This was also before he started driving a cab, as Larry Weinrip does in "Holy Fare," and also before some shady south Floridian paid my father on several occasions to smuggle oxycontins into Amsterdam taped to his thighs and chest.[3] I do not know if those permits were ever procured, but I know for certain that snack bar never opened. I also know that, by this time, my father had strayed far off the course that had directed him towards the kind of success so many men only dream about.

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[3] A criminal side gig Larry Weinrip performs a number of times, as well.

He was nowhere close to the man I had known growing up—the star salesman for Endicott Johnson, the visionary shoe designer whose company revolutionized an industry. He was, literally, and like the fictional Weinrip, a man on the edge—of an elevated train platform, a continent, a lost life to which he could now never return.

"My life is worthless," he evidently added, gazing down at the electrified tracks and the tops of palm trees.

Still I wonder how my father would have defined *worthless.* Were there any thoughts of his three children, all grown and healthy and productive? Was there any hope this snack bar venture might succeed? Did he possess any sense, deep inside his well of insecurities and self-loathing, that he was, essentially, a good man? That there were countless people he touched in his life—in family, in business, in friendships that lasted decades—who loved him? As Sherman Alexie writes of his character Victor's father: his "heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family….He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want to be found" (61). The same might have been said of my father, too.

Of course my father never jumped—it might not even have taken much to talk him down from the edge of that train platform—but I think that occasion, out there among the palm trees in the Miami humidity, might certainly have been an honest glimpse into the torments that both haunted and drove him, and sliced untold minutes off the lifetime of his heart. For me, it is the moment that best informs Larry's desire to kill himself, as well as the conscious acknowledgment of the existential terror that prevents him from ever carrying it out. Both the real-life man and his fictional study must wait instead for a faulty heart to complete its work.

IV

In an excerpt from his published diaries, John Cheever laments that he would never "be as great as Picasso, because you are an alcoholic"; my father, too, might have harbored similar regrets about the effects of his drug and alcohol use on his work and family. The pinnacle of my father's cocaine abuse was arguably the early to mid-1980s, which was, ironically, the time of his greatest financial success. In retrospect, it's easy for me to understand him as an addict for most of his adult life. At maybe four or five, I can remember his rolling joints in front of me whenever my parents entertained company, and I couldn't possibly count the number of times I watched him fill a highball glass with scotch or vodka, or, later on, drain bottles of cheap white wine that he'd drink over ice. For the writer of fiction, it's memories like these that help inform the essential details of the art. That said, the Sunday morning my mother threw my father out of the house, after finding him snorting cocaine for the umpteenth time under the roof of our suburban home, was the climactic event of that specific chapter of his substance abuse.

Despite his supposedly getting clean after a thirty-day stint in rehab, the alcohol and tobacco use continued, unabated, until his final breath in that Hollywood Beach efficiency. The evidence of addiction lay strewn all over that room, illustrating a life of disarray demonstrated by the man's nearly full withdrawal from the world around him in general, and his family in particular. In my imagination, it's a similar setting to the room where Larry Weinrip spends his last moments drifting in and out of consciousness by the television light, coughing from the 750,000-odd cigarettes he estimates, in his final

minutes alive, to have smoked in his sixty-three years, before the heart attack tears through his chest and ends his life.

Although Larry Weinrip mentions, in passing, a stint in rehab, some twenty years before his own death, my father, at my mother's insistence, had checked himself into a rehabilitation facility for his thirty-day stay. The section titled "The Shot That Echoes" similarly describes how Larry's "ex-wife, the mother of my children, caught me for the last time with…[a] rolled hundred and a small square of mirror glass spread with lines in our darkened bedroom" (64). His compulsion for the drug is evident in this scene, as is his desire to withdraw after the confrontation, telling of how he "wanted to curl up in a fetal ball on the rickety cot in the maid's room" (65). The objective of his going into rehabilitation was to wean his body off cocaine. As is the case for the fictional Larry, my father never returned to our home as a husband and a father after my parents' divorce. Instead, the intention was for my father to get clean, get his life back on track, reestablish himself as a responsible business owner and thus a reliable provider for those who counted on him. I now understand that day my father left our home for rehab and never lived with us again as the first day the wheels of his life truly left the rails, never to be set right. The cocaine use, for all we knew, might never have returned after my father's month away; it was just replaced by habits equally destructive, namely the alcohol consumption, which was apparently not addressed in his rehab with the same attention as the illegal drug use. For Larry Weinrip, too, the cocaine abuse is subsequently exchanged for the less expensive and more easily obtained beer and vodka.

My father's sister once told me that all his "troubles all started with the drugs," a reference to his years of cocaine abuse and the month he spent in rehab—something my father, were he alive, might very well refute. In terms of Larry Weinrip's story, the assertion would also seem far too simplistic. In the mid-1980s, addiction was simply adjudged as "weakness" of character, of will, something that happened to irresolute people who couldn't control their urges, became victims of "partying too hard," or required constant anesthetization from enduring psychological or emotional pain. The science of our somewhat more enlightened time now understands addiction differently, not so much as a character flaw, but as an actual psychological, even physiological affliction, whereby "acute and/or chronic exposure to abused substances engages and/or pathologically alters distinct brain circuits" (Herman and Roberto). The American Psychiatric Association likewise describes addiction as "a…brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequence" ("What Is Addiction?"). As J.D. Vance suggests about his opioid-addicted mother in his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, "Addicts are at their weakest during emotionally trying times" (184). In my father's case, as in Larry Weinrip's, although both men might betray a trove of weaknesses, each clearly exhibits consequential behavior consistent with this "brain disease" that can take control of, and ultimately overwhelm, a life.

The "White Manna" section of *The Last Weinrip* illustrates the full impact of Larry's cocaine addiction in more detail than any other part of the novella. "Stained Wedding," the section in which Larry reflects on the events surrounding his daughter's wedding, similarly depicts the effects of Larry's alcoholism and how that distorts the

man's "thinking, behavior and body functions" ("What Is Addiction?"). Both sections of the novella foreshadow the late-stage consequences of those duel addictions, as manifested by his descent into indigence, homelessness, and the despair that consumes Weinrip in the final accounting of his life.

"White Manna" recounts the story of Larry's son Jeffrey's bar mitzvah, both its ceremonial preparation and the elegant celebration of it afterwards at a Manhattan dinner club. Larry's cocaine abuse distorts the entire event—as a religious ritual, or even simply as a family occasion to be memorialized and cherished. Instead, as suggested by the double-entendre of the section title, the "White Manna" resonates more strongly as a euphemism for cocaine than the biblical sustenance God bestowed on the Israelites during their forty-year exile in the desert. For Larry Weinrip, these flake-like things, "fine as the hoar-frost on the ground" might be understood as one and the same (Exodus 16:14). As with almost any other addict, the drug itself, ironically, provides its own kind of sustenance. But unlike the divinely sent biblical manna, the cocaine provides no nourishment for Weinrip, only degradation of the physical, the spiritual, and, most importantly, the familial.

In remembering the Saturday morning of Jeffrey's bar mitzvah, Larry admits to giving little concern for the traditional spiritual, cultural, or hereditary aspects of what is supposed to be his son's rite-of-passage into manhood. He recalls, with an uncharacteristic degree of solemnity, or even a sense of guilt, the importance of "the ritual in which I participated, as did my father before me, and his devoutly before him, all the way back to our dirt floor roots in the shtetls of Poland and Germany" (96).

Throughout the novella, one enduring aspect of Weinrip's identity, despite his manifest poverty and the perception of his life as a failure, is his cognizance of being Jewish. This is seen as he notices the Stars of David on many of the headstones at his father's funeral, his assessment of the ethnicity of Judge Greenblatt—the judge he must stand before after being arrested for stealing a package of liverwurst and a kaiser roll from a supermarket—and in Larry's earnest hope that the two Hasidic men he is driving in his Miami Beach taxi cab don't notice *Weinrip* on his nameplate and realize that he is Jewish. In this case, the shame over his name and its associated identity clearly represents Larry's own shame. For he is, of course, "of a people who owned the fucking cars, not drove them for meter clicks and people's extra nickels" (119).

Larry is likewise appalled after learning that Jeffrey has legally dropped *Weinrip* as his last name and taken the name *Andrew* instead. "It doesn't sound Jewish," Larry barks at his son as they stand on a footbridge watching fish in the murky pond below. To which Jeffrey replies: "It's got nothing to do with *Jewish"* (171). That Jeffrey has just bailed his own father out of jail doesn't seem to factor into Larry's understanding of his son's motives for the name change. Still Larry seems only concerned with the "jewishness" of Jeffrey's new name; he issues no defense regarding the matters of duty and respect and honor that a son should bestow on his father. For Larry, Jeffrey's decision may be a renunciation of his Jewish heritage, but the failure of duty, of respect, and of honor—the real reason for the son *becoming* "Jeffrey Andrew"—was perpetrated by the father long before this moment. In this, Larry's odd devotion to his Jewish identity seems hypocritical, particularly in the context of his son's bar mitzvah or, perhaps more

specifically, during his spiral into indigence, a final grasp at retaining some measure of self-respect and nobility.

In relation to his son's bar mitzvah and its cultural and religious significance, the cocaine for Larry takes clear precedence. Already wired from the morning lines he's been snorting, Weinrip seems more concerned about the particulars of the Manhattan afterparty than the suburban synagogue where the family is headed for Jeffrey's bar mitzvah service. To this, he wonders "[i]f the quarter ounce of cocaine I had tucked in the back of my nightstand drawer would last the evening." For most of that bar mitzvah day, in fact, Larry's foremost concern is the cocaine he's snorting, or would be snorting, and how his third "highball of Dewars," once they arrived at the party, would be "a double." That, of course, and "the check for the $31,000 bill [he'd] have to sign later that night" (98, 99). He even harbors suspicions that his son, at some unknown time that morning, had pocketed a rolled-up hundred dollar bill and a coke-straw shaped like "a miniature silver Hoover upright" vacuum cleaner that Larry would keep hidden under his and his then-wife's king-sized bed. Those suspicions, a manifestation of Larry's drug-fueled paranoia, are pretty much confirmed when the family is driving to the temple in his wife's Cadillac El Dorado, as he "sat stone faced and silent in the passenger's seat, muffling my cocaine sniffles as the heat of [Jeffrey's] eyes burned…into the bare back of my neck" (102).

"Ready to go brew some Heebs, Dad?" Jeffrey asks from the back seat of the Cadillac, *Heebs* being a derogatory reference to Larry's view of the bar mitzvah. His own way, he admits in retrospect, "of poking poison sticks at his [son's] having to go to

Hebrew School…[s]omething I knew he hated…which also evoked images of helpless Jews baking in Nazi ovens" (96). This disparaging commentary is one more indication of Larry's self-loathing, made even more poignant here as he belittles, with both his attitude but especially with his drug use, this supposedly sacred event in his son's life. His commentary becomes all the more darkly ironic considering how being Jewish factors in such a fundamental way into Larry's Weinrip's sense of identity.

Instantly Larry knows, by the "simmering blue glare of his [son's] eyes, that it's Jeffrey who snatched his assortment of drug paraphernalia. "Not because he had any desire to snort a few lines of cocaine with his buddies, or buy anything necessary with that hundred besides cassette tapes or video game quarters at the pizzeria," but because Jeffrey knew "that this whole so-called bar mitzvah was a staggering fraud" (103). The son clearly labels the father a fraud as well, but Larry's only reply is: "Brewing heebs, buddy" (103). It's supposed to be Jeffrey's day of joy and celebration and even transcendence, but Larry's addiction and his pathological allegiance to it makes the event a source of regret and shame in the final hours of his life.

The greater irony is that Jeffrey becomes a man that day in a very different way from what the traditional bar mitzvah represents. Jeffrey's actual transcendence might even be seen in the light of what Joseph Campbell describes as an "initiatory second birth," or even, ironically, as a kind of baptism or purification, as any plunge into water suggests (142). Instead of an extended reading of the Torah or the traditional speech from father to son that articulates the meaning and responsibilities of manhood, the end of "White Manna" features Larry in the fancy Manhattan banquet room, surrounded by

friends, armed with "stash and spoon and howls of ignited laughter…, with the power of God's powder coursing through our veins" (105). At this moment Jeffrey, having just spent the cocktail hour swimming with his friends in the club's top floor pool, "walk[s] into the ballroom" and witnesses Larry hoisting a spoon piled with cocaine up his nostril (106). Here *The Last Weinrip* might be seen as an inversion of the "Prodigal Son" story, with a wayward father at its center and an angry and frustrated son who ultimately feels compelled to part from the man who sired him. Referring to the traditional father-son relationship, Campbell also observes that "when the roles of life are assumed by the improperly initiated, chaos supervenes" (136). "White Manna," with its themes of traditions broken and manhood redefined, of addiction, and in the obvious biblical allusion of the title, marks the first major step of Jeffrey's exile from Larry's destructive orbit. In its illustration of family breakdown precipitated by the chaos of cocaine addiction, the section underscores Larry as "improperly initiated" in his role as provider and protector of that family, and the observant steward of traditions it might have otherwise upheld. If the traditional father archetype is positively represented by order, discipline, and rational behavior, Larry's actions contradict each of these (Hancox). For Jeffrey, this moment marks the first time the sins of the father are consciously rejected.

A decade-and-a-half later at his daughter's wedding, Larry Weinrip is similarly alienated by his addiction, but the effects of his substance abuse, this time with alcohol instead of cocaine, remain central. Even in retrospect, the social afflictions manifested by Weinrip's

alcoholism reflect his emotional state and his need to make himself numb to the dark realities of his fallen life. Instead of the remembered joy a father should feel on his daughter's wedding day, Larry looks back on the "six-pack of convenience-store beer already swirling in my bloodstream" and "a swell of deep sadness lodged in places I could not reach" (111). From his patch of moonlit sand, he recalls his anxiety having to face the crowd of wedding attendees, people he knew from long ago when he was wealthy and successful, instead of "helpless, penniless, and patched together in the name of respectability, just for this single occasion" (110). Nearly fifteen years after their divorce, Larry's wife is now the "irrepressible entrepreneur" who not only is paying for the wedding, but has paid for his tuxedo, his cab ride to the hotel where it is taking place, and for his prosthetic tooth "to mask…the black hole" in what was once his smile. All of this makes Weinrip "black-tie presentable," if only for a few hours until he must return to the "hundred-a-week…roach hole on this degenerate strip of Federal Highway" (110). She's also paying for the "top-shelf vodka cocktails" Larry voraciously consumes as the family is being photographed, and during the cocktail hour and dinner party (112). Weinrip is alienated by his addiction, yet ironically, like so many addicts, he relies on the alcohol to lessen the impact of the psychological, social, emotional disconnect he feels.

Weinrip's history, indigence, and appearance all explain the man's profound anxiety at attending the wedding and having to navigate the "final memorial to that other world that once contained my life" (112). In turn, he depends on the beer and vodka to numb himself to the larger indignities his daughter's wedding forces him to confront. If it isn't painful enough having to watch his ex-wife and another man walk his daughter to

the altar, at the cocktail hour Larry must also face his old friend Rapoport, someone with whom Weinrip "had always been competitive, no matter if it was business or playing ping-pong in my basement…slamming Heineken-fueled overheads across the table." Rapoport, we learn from Larry, had just sold "his Manhattan buildings for nearly twenty million" (113). In sizing up his old friend over drinks, Weinrip becomes hyperaware of the contrasting trajectories their lives have taken since those ping-pong days, even noting how Rapoport "looked pretty much the same as I remembered from twenty years before, just…thin and dignified and elegant in a slim-fitting suit" (113). For Larry, this Rapoport embodies a mature incarnation of the high-flying Weinrip of the past, someone Larry Weinrip might have become. Larry even recalls how, at one time, Rapoport "was jealous of me, because I created things, and he merely sold stuff in his chain of sporting goods stores." Now, Rapoport's one-time jealously has been supplanted by Weinrip's sense of "shame that seemed to be spewing from my pores" (113). This feeling of indignity resists even the top shelf cocktail Larry is gulping, on top of the ones he's already downed from the open bar.

The brief conversation that follows between Weinrip and Rapoport might be one of the most ironically telling moments of the entire novella, as it reveals the nuances of Larry Weinrip's tortured character and the despair he carries. Through the admitted "vodka slur" in his voice, Larry slaps his old friend on the shoulder and says: "You won't believe this, Rapoport, but I'm happier than you." Only then, Weinrip adds: "You think I'm bullshitting you?" (113).

Although Larry's profound insecurity and narcissism prevent him from registering Rapoport's actual reply, Weinrip's old friend clearly sees straight through the rented tuxedo, the prosthetic tooth, the bravado. In his posturing, Larry muses that his "decline into indigence wasn't a measure of failure but a radical statement of protest against the indulgences and corruption of modern life" (113). Here again, he is simply lying to himself in a vain attempt to bury his shame, and the darker truth of the direction his life has taken.

V

My mother once told me, shortly after his death, that my father was afraid to die. He never once discussed death with me—his thoughts about his own, or anyone else's—and seemed only distantly affected when his own father died exactly one year before he did. In fact, the last time I saw my father alive was the evening of my grandfather's funeral, as the two of us sat in front of the TV in the small sitting room of the efficiency apartment he was sharing with some other guy, whose name and face I cannot remember, and who was asleep in the apartment's lone bedroom. Possibly, he was passed-out from drinking, as my father would soon be after a long day of synagogue services and the burial itself. The room in which we spent that hour or so could barely hold more than that sleeper sofa my father lay on, the TV stand, and the folding chair on which I sat. Some college football game, with the sound turned down, was playing on the television.

"I can't believe my father's gone," was all my father said that night of my grandfather's burial. His words might easily have been my own, as I watched him drink himself to sleep on the ragged pull-out that served as his bed. Perhaps my father's drinking that night was indeed a numbing agent that served to help him avoid any measured contemplation of his own end, which would arrive exactly a year later on Thanksgiving weekend. I likewise possess no understanding of my father's ideas on the subject of mortality—his own, or anyone else's. Did he believe that our spirits continued to exist but in different form, or do we simply snap to black, as if we've been switched off, like I did with the television that night after I left my father alone and asleep? Do the worthy proceed through St. Peter's gates on their way to eternal paradise? As a non-practicing Jew—one even less engaged than the spiritually lapsed but existentially embattled Larry Weinrip, who wonders alone on the beach if "we meet our dead before we die"—my father seemed outwardly unconcerned with this central human question about our mortality and what might happen on "the other side." As far as I know he never looked, as Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon do under their own omnipresent moon, for "something to give us the impression we exist" (77). Even now, I cannot recall a time my father gave me the impression he contemplated any such questions, although surely, as much as any other mortal, he did.

The setting of that crumbling motel room became my own imaginative model for the place Larry Weinrip goes to retrieve the pastels and sketch pad his son, Jeffrey, once sent him as a Father's Day gift. The fictional room is inhabited by a pair of local drunks who are living there "on their disability checks, their cheap whiskey and fast food, and

probably would be forever until their graves gape open" (183). As the final foreshadowing of Larry's own death, it is the antechamber he must pass through before his final demise in another run-down motel room.

The novella similarly describes that first room as "a place that never changes," but Larry's entry to it, in search of the art supplies that recall for him a simpler time in his life, signifies a subtle transformation, or even redemption. He walks out of the place, one that symbolizes the world he has inhabited as a broken man, armed with a new urge and obsession: to illustrate, and present as a gift for his unborn grandchild's nursery, his own impression of that same morning's sunrise over the Atlantic. Clinging to his recovered tools of creation—rather than destruction—he remembers how the glow of morning sunlight "reach[ed] like outstretched fingers into the eastern sky. A beauty I've never before noticed…Something true, and sad, terrifying and damning, because I seem to be its only witness" (182).

Larry's drawing is a gift, both literal and figurative, one that holds three-fold significance. He, of course, plans to send the art to the child for its nursery. But the drawing is made with pastels and on paper that had been given to him by his son. It is also, for Weinrip, a return to the days when he found a certain joy in creating his own paintings, something he still fantasizes about despite his array of regrets. Most significant, Larry has also given a gift to himself. Only hours before his death he commits this wholly unselfish act, one that suggests that Larry Weinrip may now understand something greater than he ever has before—about life, love, and particularly

about himself. Given the opportunity, he now might make some very different decisions about any, or all, of these.

VI

When I consider my father's death as a kind of suicide by attrition, my imagination turns to him as a child, a boy oddly on his own, part of some nebulous and fraying family structure, left to fend for his insecure and uncertain self in a world becoming ever more harsh, cruel, and in shadow around the edges. In a world where love was a precious commodity because it was so rare, I imagine a darkness slowly descending upon him, one that would eventually consume his entire being and symbolize his death in isolation. The younger of two children, my father grew up in a home with parents he always claimed—as does Larry Weinrip—"married on the rebound" (49). I know very few details of the story, except that Grandma Esther was a Roaring '20s flapper, and Grandpa Charlie, who ran a taxi dispatch and owned a small fleet of cabs, used to joke about his business that he "was in oil," in obvious reference to the Rockefellers and their obscene wealth. For my grandfather, it seems, his lot of running a New York City taxi stand paled in contrast to the evident prestige of the petroleum industry. There is, of course, a current of truth that undergirds almost any attempt at humor.

Musing aside, the man seemed determined to break his fragile son down pretty much from the day he was born. From my own childhood, I fondly remember my father taking me to Mets and Yankees games, on Saturday afternoon car trips to tropical fish

stores, of driving in his Mercedes 450-SL with the convertible top down to the Sabrett hot dog truck that always parked on the same corner not far from our suburban New Jersey house. Of the preceding generation, I only heard two father-son stories: after my father finished college, my grandfather ordered him to *get a job;* and the only time my grandfather took my father to a ballgame, to see the Giants at the Polo Grounds, they sat behind the foul pole and couldn't see the game. Not surprising, then, that in the story of this loveless family my grandfather cheated continuously on my grandmother and ultimately left her when they were both in their late-60s. *The Last Weinrip* depicts a comparable family dynamic, as Larry reflects on his father's leaving his "mother for the woman he'd been secretly fucking for two decades" (49). As in the fiction, it was my grandfather's second wife who did not honor his will, leaving my father not a penny from his father's estate at a time when he was destitute and most needed it. For both my father and Weinrip, that money would have easily prevented each man from spending his nights on the beach.

When I think of that house my father grew up in on Broadman Parkway in Jersey City, the same house Larry looks back on—a place, as a kid, I only stepped inside on two or three occasions—I don't imagine it as a home but as a dark and cramped relic in a museum few people would ever care to visit. In my recollections it remains a place without much light, tight and cramped and inorganic, something transported back in time, like crawling through a World War II-era submarine. Everything in that house seemed shrunken and small with little windows and little rooms, and a dark, a phone booth-sized kitchen like an underwater commissary where meals were eaten for survival, not love and

communion. I know that a family, or a so-called family, lived there for decades, but in my imagination and scant few recollections, that house lies cold and breathless like a body without a heart.

A story that circulates in my family tells of my father on one of his return visits home from the army—on leave, I presume, not desertion.[4] As a soldier, my father wasn't ever in war or involved in anything remotely heroic, but he'd been away at boot camp, and when he arrived home to that empty house on Broadman Parkway there was only a note from his mother on the kitchen counter near a pair of gristly lamb chops sitting in a pool of fat on the stove. The note both welcomed him home in a quasi-motherly way and instructed him to heat up that frying pan of fatty lamb chops. My grandmother, it seemed, couldn't miss her weekly bridge game just because her son was home on leave.

Reflecting from his patch of nighttime sand, Larry Weinrip confronts a similar scenario on his own return from the army as a young twenty-something. After he walks into the house and "the silence I sensed would assault me the moment I stepped inside the…front hall that inched like a blocked artery towards the kitchen," he finds the note from his mother and, in the fictional telling, a frying pan with pork chops rather than lamb chops (58). For an ostensibly Jewish household, it is a decidedly non-kosher meal, one prepared in a home where nothing seems pure or clean. The young Weinrip is of course disappointed—heartbroken, even—but the empty house isn't entirely a surprise. Fast-forward forty years, to another time of isolation, and Larry's resurgent sting of abandonment feels just as immediate: "I wasn't expecting party balloons or chilled

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[4] Considering the man's future proclivity for abandoning things—like a family and an insolvent business, most notably, among myriad other responsibilities—I write these words without jest.

champagne, but after six months sleeping in a barracks, eating goddamned horse slop in a mess hall, was a human welcome too much to ask for?" (58)

As author, and son, I can only wonder: Could an experience like this, compounded by constellations of other snubs make a man secretly wish for the end of his life to arrive a few hours, days, or even years, earlier? The question could be asked of Larry Weinrip's character, too.

Fiction tends to ask more questions than it answers. As for my father, I can only speculate that he secretly desired to end his life prematurely. For the fictional Larry Weinrip, despite the man's fear of death and his persistent angst about whatever comes after that final breath, it seems clear that all that has come before has manifested in a deep desire for things to end as soon as possible. Weinrip may not have the courage to end things purposefully by knife blade or bullet, but his self-destructive actions seem clearly to be a sub-conscious design to shorten his life. In this he is wholly successful.

VII

While *The Last Weinrip* is the final recollections of a man gone down, at its heart the novella is a father-son story. I now realize that in many ways I needed to first become a parent myself before I could actually write this fictionalized version of my father's decline with any measure of competence or believability. Of this most elemental of human relationships and the complexities of its mental, emotional and psychological terrain, Joseph Campbell asserts, "Whether he knows it or not, and no matter what his

position in society, the father is the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world" (136). Understood in this light, the father possesses an almost-divine power to affect a child in both positive and negative ways, to forge a particular destiny for good or ill. Through the challenges raising my now two-and-a-half year-old son and his infant sister, and in my ongoing dialogue and conflicts with my father nearly two decades after his death, I've come to understand Campbell's words in a far more intricate way. In a large sense the universal father-son dynamic they illuminate provides the narrative energy that keeps the novella moving forward.

In my fiction writing, particularly in *The Last Weinrip*, these most personal of matters manifest in the relationship between Larry and his son, Jeffrey. If a central motif in Ibsen's dramas is of the father's sins being passed onto the son; and for all the contempt we might feel for Happy Loman's desire to proudly carry Willy's torch and "come out number-one man," Jeffrey's emancipation from Larry by the end of the novella proves to be more akin to Biff Loman's rejection of his father's flawed perspectives on life, or even the larger metaphor of Huck Finn's ingenious escape from Pap's locked-down cabin (Miller 111). If, as Joseph Campbell suggests, all fathers are the initiating priests to their sons, it's difficult not to see the irony of Larry Weinrip seeking absolution from his son Jeffrey by sending him the drawing at the end of the novella. The pastels Larry uses to create the drawing were originally a gift from Jeffrey, one Larry needs to "steal back" by sneaking inside the "rancid roach den" of an apartment he used to share with two local drunks. "[A] place that never changes," he lets us know (183). By creating and sending the pastel drawing, Larry does seem to change

by reasserting some part of his prescribed role as a positive model for his son. In this moment, Larry becomes something of "a divine [rather than a] daemonic figure" instead of the lacking father he'd always been for Jeffrey (Jung, qtd. in "Father Archetype"). As a new father-to-be, we can only hope the son will recognize the uniqueness and generosity of the gift. This despite the severe disappointment he lives with in respect to the abandoned life of his own father.

As Campbell's "initiating priest," Weinrip's role is profound, yet suspect, from the time Jeffrey is born—even from before his son's birth. As a man who seemed to understand instinctually his own unpreparedness for the responsibilities and sacrifices of fatherhood, Larry recalls his frequent visits to the local synagogue in the months before Jeffrey's arrival "in order to pray for the child growing inside my wife's young womb." The prayers, Weinrip admits, are for the baby's health, so "that it wouldn't come out with twelve fingers and toes, a hunchback spine, retarded or blind" (79). The request seems particularly narcissistic in terms of how a disfigured baby might affect Larry by demanding a much larger measure of self-sacrifice. Only then does Weinrip acknowledge the darker revelation that his prayers might actually have been for the baby never to come. "I was…praying for myself," he confesses (80). Those prayers are not nearly enough, as the child is inevitably born and Larry Weinrip, the parent, fails time and again to meet the responsibilities imposed onto him by fatherhood.

Nowhere is Larry Weinrip's failure in his role of "initiating priest"—as daemonic father rather than divine—seen more clearly than in the section "The Award." The title refers ironically to the baseball awards banquet when Larry neglects, in his anxiety and

self-absorption, to call eight year-old Jeffrey up to the dais to receive his first-place trophy. Among his friends from the team, to whom Larry has already presented their championship trophies, Jeffrey sits and waits for his father to call his name, which comes only after some of the boy's teammates begin shouting reminders to Larry. Here on public display, Weinrip has again abandoned the son he once prayed might never arrive. After first abandoning the newborn in the initial weeks of his life, when Larry leaves home for another woman, to describing Jeffrey, as a gravely ill teen, "shrinking into something I couldn't recognize, some hideous creature I could barely look at," the father's actions provide early impetus for the son's eventual emancipation (81). As his own family has begun to form, Jeffrey makes a conscious choice to separate the purity of his new world from the toxicity of the old, and to become the initiator of his own son wholly on his own terms. Jeffrey's name change which, in effect, cuts Larry off from the last of his familial ties, also provides the source of the novella's title. Since neither Jeffrey nor his children will carry that surname into the future, the name *Weinrip* accompanies Larry unceremoniously to the grave.

In this most elemental of human relationships, Campbell likewise refers to "the archetypal nightmare of the ogre father," the "dreadful" specter of which the child must "dissolve," another manifestation of Jung's *daemonic* and *divine* (137, 130). On numerous occasions, Larry Weinrip might be identified as the metaphorical "ogre" his son seems compelled to vanquish. Although the Weinrip of the story is never seen or understood to be any kind of cruel and mindless beast—quite the opposite, in fact—his presence is nonetheless threatening, as his legacy remains potentially destructive to a

child less cognizant of his father's frailties and thus less compelled to forge an independent path through life. Larry even acknowledges how Jeffrey, upon finding a job far from his father's gravitational pull, "loved his newfound independence from me best of all" (138). In fact, from the night of Jeffrey's bar mitzvah, to his demand to remain in Taiwan after Larry has flown back to the States, to the son's ultimate rejection of the father's name, the novella bears ongoing witness to the kind of emancipation inherent in many father-son narratives, both fictional and real-life. At one time Larry Weinrip might have convinced Jeffrey, the recent college graduate, to forestall a career in his chosen field and "move to Florida…and be the vice-president of [his] new venture," promising his son that "we'd grow it big like my first business, and be rich all over again" (138). These grand notions of a father-son success story wilt , as the elder Weinrip cannot move beyond the impediments of pride, apathy, and self-loathing. In a scene that helps illustrate the archetypal separation between father and son, Larry, dressed in running shorts and a tank top on a work day, dangles his feet in the water of a fish pond, as he waits for Jeffrey to arrive, so they might go out on sales calls to beach stores together. Jeffrey then arrives, ready for work, dressed in a

> pressed pair of khaki cargo shorts, brown leather fisherman sandals and an oversized short-sleeved white button down, untucked but neat. Sunglasses hung from his neck on an elastic black lanyard. All in all, the perfect ensemble for a guy who intended to close flip-flop sales along a string of boardwalk bikini shops. (148-149).

If appropriately dressed Jeffrey seems primed for the present, and ultimately the future, Larry's heart is committed to this new venture about as deeply as his feet dangle, barely

past the ankles, in the water. In terms of baptismal renewals, he isn't dunked nearly deep enough. Weinrip then admits to a longing for the glories of his past, and all the places he'd rather be: "a design suite, a sample room, on a rickety China Air flight to a sweltering shoe factory in southwest Taiwan. To be reading my name printed, yet again, in *The Footwear News*" (149). For him, there will be no new life, something his son seems, in this moment, to intuit.

In the end this venture is ultimately doomed by the destructive force of a hurricane that wipes out much of South Florida, most specifically the warehouse with the cases of flip-flops Larry had hoped to sell, those which Jeffrey once seemed to believe would be the source of a newfound prosperity for both his father and himself. In a ruined sub-tropical landscape, Jeffrey, fresh from a purifying swim in the Atlantic, assists Larry in salvaging as many cases of flip-flops as possible from that wreckage of a warehouse. The son, who's already decided to flee the destruction left by the storm, and by his father, has been reborn by this decision, as symbolized by his swim in the still choppy ocean, his clean workout clothes, and by the promise of emancipation from his father that now seems at hand.

Larry Weinrip lies beside these same waters for the majority of the story, yet never once does he dip even a single toe into the surf. The promise of rebirth persists but Larry never chooses to enter those cleansing waters. Even as the waves encroach, he will simply move further away from their crashing reach, a "withering body of some not-so-old, old man plunked down here" alongside "[a]ll the flotsam and retch the tides deposit" (49).

Even though Larry can never reanimate whatever glorious self he remembers of the past, and though he never makes the gesture of renewal by his own full immersion into the waiting ocean, I reflect on my own father and his time beside the waters of the non-fictional Atlantic. In imagining this scene, difficult as it still is more than fifteen years later, I see a broken yet misunderstood man, who had essentially given up his life—someone alone, lost, by all evidence still addicted and, by many measures, mentally ill. Previously a man of great humor, and most often a gentleness of spirit and manner, Perry Weinstein was also a terribly flawed human being whose greatest sin was one of which he was arguably innocent: the inability to love others, or himself. Together, setting and character converge to form both a peculiar destination and a defining trait that might very well have brought my father to furtive tears on any number of solitary nights he spent on the edge of the North American continent. As one of only a handful of places on Earth whose unique geography is immediately recognizable from the heavens, its phallic plunge into the warm convergence of the Atlantic, the Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico suggests new beginnings as much as fateful ends. Of Viracocha, the universal father of ancient Peru, Joseph Campbell writes of the life giving tears that steam from the eyes of the god, the withholding of which "would be to annihilate; yet to give them forth is to create this world that we know" (146). In some inexplicable way, then, my father's imagined tears have delivered to this world a Larry Weinrip, whose fictional breaths continue, despite his death on the novella's final page, into this very moment.

Epilogue

For the "Watercolorist's Craft" course I took during my classwork in the Arts & Letters program, I once prepared a written reflection about a visit I made to a gallery in Sugarloaf, NY. At the time, I hadn't been to the little Hudson Valley town, known for its artisans and artists, for a decade or so, and the last time I'd visited was with a friend I'd known since first grade who had died only months before this most recent visit after a long struggle with leukemia. The first part of the reflection argued how I was mostly unimpressed with the paintings on display in that gallery, and how I couldn't make an emotional connection with any of them. I attributed this lack of affinity, on some level, to the contemplation of my friend's recent death, and how the mood of most of the paintings conflicted with the swirl of emotions I was experiencing during that half hour or so I spent walking the gallery. All except one series, that is.

The reflection goes on to describe a group of stark, leafless white birch trees set against winter skies, with small moons nestled in the spaces between the trunk and limbs, or hovering just out of reach of the branches. For me, the paintings spoke to both the fragility and endurance of life, and to the existential questions each of us faces as we proceed toward our inevitable end. After what was a mostly disappointing tour of the gallery, the stark and haunting beauty of those white birch watercolors immediately evoked for me the untimely death of my friend, and his own powerlessness against that unrelenting disease a metaphor for the most poignant of our human vulnerabilities—our mortality.

In retrospect, I sense a certain kinship between my experience in the Sugarloaf gallery and Larry Weinrip's decision, near his end, to draw the sunrise he'd just witnessed for his yet-to-be-born grandchild. Such urgency of emotion can be conveyed in the symbolism of a drawing or painting. While my father dabbled, from time to time, as a painter, and my grandmother—his mother—brought her formidable artistic talents to the canvas nearly to the day she died, I'm inclined to think that my experience in the gallery speaks to a sensibility I've refined—specifically over my time in the Arts & Letters program—in terms of understanding the redemptive power of art and its capacity to communicate the varied palette of human emotion. Despite his considerable failings, I've always maintained that had he been given the opportunity, my father would have enjoyed being a grandfather. Would this have redeemed most of his other transgressions, and failures as a parent? It's an unanswerable question, but in my imagination, and from what I knew of my father in the best of his days, something about the man's childlike nature, combined with his aversion to responsibility, would have allowed him to embrace the role of grandparent. The drawing Larry produces at the end of *The Last Weinrip* speaks to those same themes of redemption, renewal, and resurrection, and as a natural world still-life recalls that series of white birch tree paintings that so affected me that day in Sugarloaf.

In many ways my father's experience, its accompanying stories and the themes they evoke, became a kind of insistent ghost during my time in the Arts & Letters program. His death, only a few years before I enrolled in the program, informed—or, better, haunted—much of the writing I produced and most often felt like an emotional

center-of-gravity whose force I could not escape. *The Last Weinrip*, it seems, is both an amalgam and a distillation of so much of that work. The origins of "White Manna," for example, began as a memoir that looked back at similar events but from my own perspective. The piece was first conceived and workshopped in "Memoir Writing," and at one time the story seemed destined to become part of a non-fiction dissertation based on my father's life. The success of "White Manna," as a set piece, also allowed me to understand, perhaps more fully than ever before, how I might directly mine art from my own life experience, something I was never fully cognizant of and, in the case of my father, at one time was reluctant to undertake. Similarly, a one-act play I wrote for the final assignment of "Writing to Heal," titled "The Aisle," deals with a fictionalized version of my family's grappling with the specter of my basically homeless father attending my sister's wedding, and the fallout of her essentially excluding him from the wedding party. Elements of these events make their way into "Stained Wedding," as Larry recalls the sense of exclusion he felt on what, for him, should have been a day of joy and celebration.

There were, of course, other essays and fiction that explored various aspects of my father's life, the downward spiral of his fortunes and death, but it was "Dania Beach Elegy," a monologue inspired by the themes and voice in Rilke's *Duino Elegies,* and which featured a homeless man on a Florida beach looking back with regret on the life he'd let slip away, that proved to be the emotional and thematic prototype for the fiction that ultimately would become *The Last Weinrip*. Originally conceived as a simple journal entry for "Journey Back to Self," the existential melancholy in Rilke's opening line of the

"First Elegy"—"Who, if I shouted, among the hierarchy of angels/would hear me?"—immediately evoked the loneliness and despair I imagined my father must have felt as he lay alone, destitute and broken, on that south Florida beach (3). Coincidentally, the castle of Duino, where Rilke composed his long poem, also echoes the name "Dania Beach," the place, not far from the sand where my father spent many a night, and where my sisters and I, on a warm May evening, poured his cremated ashes into the blue-green Atlantic. Although there were no evident angels present on the beach that evening, I will forever swear the cumulus clouds piled high on the serene Florida horizon evoked imagery nothing short of heaven. My father's life was being put to rest on that beach, but my quest to understand it was only just beginning. It seems much of my Arts & Letters work became the vessel in which to navigate it.

As I read Rilke's poem and felt the depths of its lament and existential angst, the connection to my father's final destination as "the reckoning of many columns/[that] totals to zero" seemed eerily linked (41). When Rilke evokes the "fall[ing] into an indifferent pond" and the "blooming and withering" inherent to any human life, the imagery seems so specific to my father's peculiar journey (29). I still remember, as if it were only an hour ago, the jolt of recognition I felt when that connection became both obvious and urgent, as if the voice that pleads to "restrain myself and swallow the luring call/of dark sobbing" was being spoken, not by Rilke's speaker, but by the man whose life, and death, I yearned to understand (3). Of all the literature I've read, in the Arts & Letters program and beyond, I've never experienced a work that echoed within me in quite the same way that *Duino Elegies* resonated with what I imagined to be my father's

torment. Oedipus may have been damned to commit his infamous transgressions, and Philoctetes, isolated on his island and snakebitten, was still in command of the formidable talents harnessed in his famous bow. And yes, Willy Loman led a futile search through his downward years for where his life went astray. But the connection to *Duino Elegies* evoked something much deeper and more elemental in understanding my father's distinct human frailties and their effect on his demise. It captured an essence, a mystery and an anguish that could be compelled into words.

THE LAST WEINRIP

For in this yellow grave of sand and sea
A calling for colour calls with the wind
That's grave and gay as grave and sea
Sleeping on either hand.

—Dylan Thomas, "We lying by seasand"

All is disgust when one leaves his own nature
and does things that misfit it.

—Sophocles (*Philoctetes* 902-903)

A BEAST WORSE THAN FEAR

It's nights like these I can't silence the howls inside my beating heart. Great pressures against my chest, stray thrusts of pain as if any second the engine was finally seizing after sixty-three years. My third straight night sleeping outside, on the continent's southeastern edge, I can't help but think about that last heave and gasp, all that silence that comes after, how I've been its goddamn slave my entire life. Like a pendulum blade it swings inside my ribs, slicing off tiny bits of flesh, as I watch the near-full moon hovering over the water, feel the cool of the sand grit against my thighs and calves. The hunger that radiates like an executioner's grip from my gut. If only I *could* turn off those stars and sleep.

Without a home, rootless as a storm-toppled palm, I gaze out at the moonlit waves, listen as they soak the packed sand along the shore. In the half dark, some great smoky exhale of emptiness spreads in front of me, all as the world continues, full speed, at my back. Sacred industries of commerce, galaxies of families, entire communities of interconnection and interdependence, clubs from which my membership has been revoked. Yet a world I used to navigate with barely a measure of friction, as if I were sledding on my ass over ice into fortune's waiting arms. Every success a man might want, I had. Every benchmark of American distinction, I achieved. Looking back now, into the darkness past the surf, I marvel at how easy those triumphs seemed to come. Like I was wielding superpowers, some magic fucking wand, I'd simply say *Abracadabra!* and I was the company's top salesman. *Alikazaam!* came the six-bedroom

home nestled in the wooded suburb north of the city. A kidney-shaped swimming pool we dug into the backyard. One Mercedes-Benz garaged in Manhattan, another in Taipei. A four-continent business that grossed thirty-million one blessed year back in the 80s. Offices in Asia, Brazil, Manhattan, trips on the company dime I'd take to Florence, Paris, Milan, Rio and Sao Paulo. Side excursions, just for fun, to Honolulu or Hong Kong, Manila or Bangkok, so I could blow some steam, or a few lines, or spread an exotic pair of legs and lose myself to the pleasures inside. Without any effort at all, it seemed, my every action would turn golden.

Goddamn, I remember it all so well. If only I could find that elusive knob in this darkness, in this night that seems to smile as it curses the day—all of my remaining days—I'd open that door to the past, step back inside and dance the whole jig over. At one time I might have gripped the world by its proverbial balls, but I always felt it wriggling, slippery as a lake eel, struggling to escape. The razor edges of its scales intent on slashing my skin. Punctuated with a voice that whispered inside my head like some demonic fucking chant: *You don't deserve it. You don't deserve it. You don't deserve it, Weinrip.*

Any of it.

As if I were fated for this patch of sand.

So strange to gaze back on the then and now, to have lived two entirely different lives, one blessed and one so cursed. As if, one fateful day, the voltage on some cosmic switch reversed and unleashed a plague of filth and rot. Like the soul of another man, with some other past—a doppelgänger, an impostor, some stricken clone—stepped inside

my skin and started breathing something toxic. Some foreign mixture of air pumped directly into my cells. The polarity of that magic wand I once wielded now calibrated to make things disappear, self-destruct, inflict the most savage brand of pain.

Opening my eyes, I just as quickly close them tight to the sky, the spotlight of a moon that seems to watch me, heckle me like whispers from the raw wind that scratches off water onto my unshaven face. Weeks of grayed beard that hide vestiges of the once familiar me. A mask made of age and time and determined neglect. In this darkness there is very little sound of earth, only the blood coursing like lost moments through my veins, the heat that turns to memory inside the mind.

If only we were so easily pulled from this world. Yanked like an electric plug from the moments, hours and days, years that sum up our time here. Only all of my experience, except this body and this howling swirl of memories, have vanished. Scattered from this earth like ocean spray, as waves smash rock. A slow erosion as I lie here, alone beneath the stars and moon, waiting for that final pulse that stalks me like a beast worse than fear.

THE DEAD

Here as they do, the dead begin to visit. In the white-noise silence of the wind, the Florida sand cools beneath my skin. Shadows slither in moonlight. Do we meet our dead before we die? I've wondered, and I've feared, though they always seem so kind, in the manner of an executioner, there to deliver the condemned man one final wish before delivering him to the gallows. It's such a slow walk and I cannot see the rope. I cannot keep my eyes closed.

Out of arm's reach, they hover above the foam where land and water meet. In that dampness where the waves heave seaweed onshore, the beached man-o-war, shells the most ancient life once called home. All the flotsam and retch the tides deposit—the fish bones, a Budweiser can, junk food wrappers, plastic straws. The withering body of some not-so-old, old man plunked down here.

In the first full darkness, I recognize those mist-blurred shapes. My parents, God bless them. I'd be kind to say. Two more names on that list of loveless pairings, married on the rebound, each a castoff. A union that ended in a single afternoon as each of them was scraping seventy, and my father left my mother for the woman he'd been secretly fucking for two decades. In features, size, and stature she was a near facsimile of my mother—frail, blonde, and barely five feet on her tallest toes. Both women short enough to make my five-foot four-inch father stand tall as an NBA forward.

At that seam between water and sand I see him—my father, dead a year already. There as if returned to flesh, after the fall that shattered his ninety-five year-old hip. The

man transformed from wealthy active senior, to hospitalized invalid, to a buried memory in five days. As I clutch the sand on either side of me, I remember the handfuls of cemetery dirt I scattered onto his coffin before he was packed in earth. The finality it foretold. Words that would remain unspoken. On the surrounding headstones I counted at least thirty Stars of David, plus the fifty-grand I knew was willed to me, before I could look back at my father's dirt-strewn casket. A glint of Florida sunlight sliced off polished brown oak as the box vanished into the ground.

Only a few weeks earlier, just days before his fall, we'd sat inside his sun-filled condominium. A perfectly air-conditioned three-bedroom spread tucked inside those gated walls, a palm-lined fortress patrolled twenty-four-seven by armed security. The last afternoon I visited for one of his cash handouts, a life vest to stay afloat until the new month's Social Security deposit hit my account. Or until he died. Selma, his new wife, that chicken-necked cunt who lassoed every last nickel from my father's estate, hovered in the background. I could feel her judgmental eyes like a sunburn on my neck, scribbling notes on the markers of my indigence—the wrinkles dappling my sun-baked skin and filthy clothes, uncut toenails curling over the front of my ground-down flip-flops, my skull lacking a front tooth. Her toxic glare combed for signs of the man I used to be, a man she'd never even known.

I coughed, halfway on purpose, half because my lungs ached, every time her hot gaze landed.

At one point she said, in her pecking voice that raked through flesh to bone: "Whatever happened to that car you bought? With all that money your father sent you after he sold your taxi medallion?" She was shouting all this from the kitchen.

My father, in the taxi business for most of his working life, had owned a handful of New York City medallions. Nothing close to the fleet of three hundred cabs his former partner had built running the dispatch, but a tidy nest that grew and grew as taxi medallions outpaced gold or diamonds, or even Apple stock. One of those medallions had been mine, a wedding gift nearly forty years gone, that my father managed for me as part of his own fleet of cars.

"The car died," I said, after a short phlegmy cough, hoping her mouth would stop. It was a white two-door Buick Regal, with shrunken side-back windows that somehow reminded me of my first car, a red and white 1957 Thunderbird. "It was too expensive to fix," I said a little bit louder, after a second cough. Far as I knew, that Buick still sat in the far corner of a motel parking lot on North Miami Beach. The Thunderbird, a lost blip of my history, a compacted heap of rust sinking into landfill, maybe even a polished relic preserved in a climate-controlled garage, now worth three-quarters of a million dollars. I'd sold it in 1961 to buy my wife-to-be an engagement ring.

"Why didn't you buy something more reliable?" Selma clucked again, standing now in the threshold between the living room and the sun porch. "Something like your father's Honda, instead of that weird little car you chose?"

"I liked that car. And it ran fine when I bought it."

"That's how it always is with those used car lots. They're crooks. The cars run nice for the first few days."

I didn't answer because she'd already walked back to clank some metal pans, or maybe the tea kettle, as a way of not listening. And because, deep down, I knew she was right.

"*Marty!*" she shouted again, this time at my father. He was dressed in a rumpled green and white track suit, his hazy blue eyes gazing at nothing I, or anyone else, could see. Maybe some terrible moment from his past that he'd never dare reveal. Or a growing horror right here in the present, one he was powerless to fight, like how two years earlier he'd signed three million in cash and assets over to Selma. It was protected in the will, he'd promised me, on another one of these visits, so I didn't have to worry. I would get mine when he was gone.

"Do you want some ice water, Marty?" She was nearly shrieking. "Or lemonade?" It was like I'd suddenly vanished, even though she was looking straight at me, and I was obviously thirsty after three bus rides and a quarter mile walk in the Florida heat.

My father didn't answer. In general he had little to say, and I often wondered, even when I was a kid, if there were any real thoughts or feelings occupying that space inside his skull. He simply re-flattened his few strands of slicked gray hair, and bounced his left knee as he stared into the empty space between the sofa on which he sat and the wall of jalousie windows that opened onto the palm-lined paths and the lake.

"*Marty!"*

"No!" he finally shouted back without so much as moving his head or blinking an eye.

Just then I turned and faced my father, leaned over with my elbows dug hard into the soft flesh above my kneecaps. I stifled my smoker's cough, stared at my uncut toenails, thought about the fifty-K that was willed to me, if his next breath turned out to be his last. Inside my head I filtered out all thoughts that might hurt or sadden him, if I ever allowed them to leak from my tongue. Cause him to change his mind and the directives in his will that might one day deliver me from this patch of beach sand. Like how the two or three hundred dollars he forked over to me on these monthly visits had everything to do with the guilt he carried as a father, a husband, a human being.

But it would not have mattered what I said, or thought, because after he died not a penny came. Through some sadistic loophole in Florida law, that chicken-necked Selma finagled to keep every wretched dime.

I lifted my elbows off my knees and looked away from my father, out past the sunporch screen to the palm trees, the small lake and the three little bridges that crossed where the water narrowed. We continued to sit in air-conditioned silence, on wicker furniture, as if I were denied the welcome to sit on the living room sofa or at the kitchen table like any other guest in their home might have. I sipped from the glass of tap water I'd had to ask for, a single ice cube floating, like a turd or corpse, dead center.

All Selma's handiwork, I told myself, her flapping gizzard neck and stick bones now disappeared in the TV room, some kind of game-show bell reverberating off the condominium's white tiles.

Finally I asked my father about his new favorite early-bird dinner spot—a Japanese restaurant, whose specialty was a salmon teriyaki bowl sprinkled with sesame seeds. By then I was ready to leave with the three hundred dollars he'd quietly handed me when I first arrived. I coughed into my palm, just to get myself comfortable.

"I think you'd really like the tango class I'm doing with Selma," he said, his gray eyes a shade brighter. I coughed again. "It's very sensuous."

"I'm not much of a dancer."

His eyes closed and head lowered, and I thought he might have fallen asleep mid-thought. I sat quietly, impatient to get back on my buses, back to the sand where at least I was invisible when I wanted to be.

Eventually my father's head jolted back upright, but his eyes were still far off. "I broke one hundred all three games in bowling this week."

I stood up, stepped outside the screen door and fished for the half-smoked cigarette, a charred stub reeking in my shorts since I got off the last of the three buses I took here. For the handout, my monthly kissing of the ring, insurance for an inheritance that would never come. A few deep drags and it was finished.

Back inside the sunporch I sat, took a small sip from my glass. The water tasted of smoke, fouled ice, and something like disgust.

***

Of course I cannot sleep—not here, or now. Not when it's just this failing body alone on sand, filled with hunger, staring at the stars, the black expanse of ocean. Terrified of the secrets that lay in store for me beyond them. I think about lighting a cigarette, but decide to save the tobacco and the energy it would require to strike the match and keep it lit against the wind.

I huddle inside the gray knit blanket, lifted from my last motel room, and when I close my eyes, it's 1960, not 2003. I'm twenty and standing alone inside our empty house on Broadman Parkway in Jersey City. The home modeled in sad gray stone-front, nestled between Henry Snyder High School on what would become JFK Boulevard after the assassination three years later, the state college one street to the south, and the Miss America Diner bordering the block on West Side Avenue. The neighborhood, after I left Jersey City and started making money for the first time, decayed into a shithole of urban blight. Only now, forty years later, was the area gentrifying, home to professors and professionals, Manhattan commuters looking to get more bang for their hard-earned buck. I learned this list of details over a chance encounter with this barrel-bellied tourist I met one morning at my favorite boardwalk pizzeria. A plumber's apprentice, foul-mouthed and red-faced, someone I might have once hired to install a toilet. A guy, for all his growling burps and snorting boardwalk spits, happened to be from Jersey City, just a few blocks from the street where I grew up. We shot shit at the beachside patio, under its sky-blue umbrellas, not even fifty yards from where I now lie.

"You grew up on fuckin' *Broadman*," he said, his rounded and stubbly face red with sunburn and too much alcohol too early in the day. "No shit, that's *crazy* bro!" and

he bit hungrily into his first slice of pepperoni pizza, the crust folded and greasy and gripped inside the meaty fingers of his left hand. With his right hand he sipped a draft beer in a clear plastic Budweiser cup, which I eyed with a lust I once saved for women, since I couldn't afford a beer of my own.

Out of a sense of hometown solidarity—of fraternity, or even pity—I kept hoping he'd offer to buy me my own beer to wash down the plain cheese slice I'd just gobbled down. Gone in less than thirty seconds-flat, as I hadn't had a morsel to eat since sunset the night before. Only it never happened. With his wrinkled bills and roaring belches, his talk of buying lap dances at the pussy club the night before and heading back again later for another go, I could tell this wasn't the kind of guy who went around buying charity beers for people—filthy beach vagrants, most notably. Besides I'm not really from Jersey City, or anywhere, anymore.

"I haven't been in Jersey City in close to thirty years," I said, glancing between his peeling red cheeks and the swishing cup of draft beer wedged inside his thick fingers. Inside my head I was assembling sentences, looking for the best way to hit-up the guy for three dollars so I could buy one lousy beer of my own. Just the idea of sipping a cold Bud in the sunshine, even one bought with this guy's plumber money, struck me as five minutes of heaven. But there was no way I'd ever ask.

"Shit, you'd barely recognize the place now," he added, after taking another long gulp and barely suppressing a burp with the back of his tattooed hand. Something that looked like red and orange flames and a predatory bird, but it was hard to tell because my

eyesight's shit after all these years. I haven't seen an optometrist probably since Reagan was President.

I glanced at my sun-browned feet and dirt-caked cargo shorts, made certain to keep my top lip curled over the black hole where my missing front tooth should have been, something I could do now, expertly, even when I spoke. Without realizing, I began to crush the grease-stained white paper plate, empty but for a trace of crust crumbs. I resisted licking my thumb for a last taste of cheese and crust and grease. Something, I figured, that might only reignite my hunger. Force me, even, into doing something desperate, like pilfering the three-dollar tip wedged under the toast plate at the next table.

"They probably wouldn't recognize me there," I answered, scratched my beard and gestured at the filth and bone-deep tan that covered my body. I hoped the guy might catch some shred of my joke, unfunny and pathetic as it was.

Only he never laughed, not even a twitch or a smirk. "I'm out," he said after gulping down the last ounces of his beer. He tossed the empty cup and paper plate into the trash a few feet away. "Nice talking to you, buddy." And just like that his pizza, his belches, his belly, red cheeks and tattoos were gone.

Another face vanished like these sun-worshipping tourists that show up here for a few days, maybe a week, before returning to their jobs, their schools, their friends and families. People who live actual lives in the present. One more blur like the airplanes that soar overhead, then disappear into the clouds, one after the other, from the international airport only a few miles to the west. Here and then simply gone, like one of

those moments you know will become a memory that stays. One that is heavy and burns worse than the others, until something unleashes it.

One like that November afternoon, more than forty years ago. The day I'd just returned home from the army after six months. To that house on Broadman Parkway, where I'd spent my entire Jersey childhood. The same block that belching plumber said I wouldn't even recognize. That certainly wouldn't recognize me, even if I shouted my name into the gray Jersey City sky.

In uniform and slinging my army duffle, I could feel the shroud of empty darkness through the narrow windows guarding the front door. Could feel the nearly tangible void of the world inside, even before I twisted the knob. The silence I sensed would assault me the moment I stepped inside the short stretch of front hall that lay like a blocked artery towards the kitchen. I could hear my footsteps echo on the parquet floor, ravenous for home food, some kind of family welcome. What I found instead was a note from my mother, penciled in her jagged script, directing me to the stove and a trio of fat-soaked pork chops wading in a cast iron pan. The note said she was at her usual Tuesday bridge game, my father was working late at the taxi dispatch, and she would give me a big kiss later. My sister was already off and married to a medical student, a future surgeon.

Just turn the heat on, her note instructed. *For a few minutes on each side until they're soft.* There wasn't even anything to go along with them—a side dish, some rice or mashed potatoes.

I wasn't expecting party balloons or chilled champagne, but after six months sleeping in a barracks, eating goddamned horse slop in a mess hall, was a human welcome too much to ask for?

Instead of eating pork chops I went upstairs to my bedroom, its one window overlooking trashcans in the alley, but I didn't really sleep—couldn't actually. I just stared at the empty aquarium I'd needed to drain before I shipped out, had my head shaved tight, my body's muscles wrung, my name replaced with the equivalent of a government-issued serial number. The tank sat, unlit and silty, on my dresser, a small dent in the corner of the aluminum frame that braced the glass at all the seams. I thought about the little red and blue neons, the baby zebra danios, the hungry green catfish, that all had swam there, lived and breathed and sometimes died among the rocks and plastic plants. But I especially remembered the silver and black angelfish that sailed through the water like the very god of that world. Despite its beauty, its long delicate fins and peaceful drift, it terrorized all the smaller fish. Some even became a meal.

I remember being sad the day I had to drain the tank, how when I netted up that angelfish its spiny fins got twisted in the mesh. The next morning I shipped out to Fort Dix. I still remember my service number better than my kids' birthdays.

Thirty years later, a skeleton in a wheelchair on the periphery of my nephew's wedding weekend, I swear my mother willed herself to death. Hours sooner than she was meant to depart her body, despite the ravages of cancer, of heartache at the masterwork of my father. At being too weak the past year to lift a paintbrush to canvas. There in those

early Saturday hours, just after the rehearsal dinner—which, like the wedding I did not attend—she pulled her one remaining breath and never exhaled.

My son Jeffrey, who did attend the rehearsal dinner and was an usher at the wedding, later told me my mother had looked sick and weak, but that she still seemed alert, even spirited, in her wheelchair that Friday night. She was wearing dark blue, a long string of pearls, glasses whose huge plastic frames dwarfed her face. According to Jeffrey, she'd asked how his college was going, if he had found a cute girl there, if he was doing better with his classwork than his father did.

He told me he'd laughed and kissed her on the cheek, held her tiny hand for a few moments. Said he was getting mostly Bs. An occasional A, or C.

"That's a whole lot better than your *father's* grades," she'd said. I could picture her face, the pouty lips and little gleam in her blue eyes as she said it. "He went to two colleges, and barely graduated after five years."

"Did she tell you anything else?" I asked him, a few hours after her funeral. We were sitting on a pair of chaises out on the dock at my sister's house, Biscayne Bay's light green waters choppy and white-capped from the breeze.

"She said you used to paint, too. But you quit."

"She told you this?" I asked. In one corner of the blue Miami sky, a churning pile of storm clouds began to blot out the sunshine. "Why would she bring that up?"

"I told her I was taking a watercolor class at school."

My mother, the painter, the one with all the talent, continued to work, trembling hands and diminished eyesight be damned, until she died. When we went to clean out her

Miami Beach apartment, there was a half-finished oil on an easel by the alcove window overlooking Collins Avenue. A blurry still-life of a daisy bouquet bunched in a clear green vase. You could see their naked stalks through the glass.

"I told her she'd inspired me to take the class," Jeffrey said. "She was so talented."

"She used to tell me I was good, too."

I remember never believing her when she'd say it. I'd look at her realism, her precision with depth and shadow and light, and compare it to my sad and muddled abstracts. Results that far more resembled bad Jackson Pollack than anything close to her Norman Rockwell energy and detail. So maybe that's what it was, her fleeting praise and staggering talent were the real reasons I quit? So often I had I told myself I wanted to make money, or so I thought. The wealthiest I ever was, probably, was that year she died. I didn't tell Jeffrey any of this that afternoon.

"When I went into the army," I added, gazing out at the choppy green water. "She started using my brushes. I couldn't figure out why."

I was once told, as a boy, that Jews, when confronted simultaneously with events both grievous and joyful, would always celebrate the latter. And so, according to tradition, the Saturday night wedding of my nephew went ahead as planned, followed by my mother's funeral the Monday morning after, to which I red-eyed from Taipei, by way of Los Angeles. I arrived barely in time for the synagogue service on Miami Beach. It was six months after the divorce, and I'd drunk Dewars and smoked nearly two packs of Trues for most of the flight, reeking of nicotine and scotch as I entered the sanctuary in

rumpled tan slacks and a brown sports jacket. My palms were cold and sweating, as if it were five years earlier and I was reliving the greatest hits of my cocaine days.

The first thing I noticed, amid the gathered crowd— including my son and two daughters, and an extended family I'd avoided since my wife and I split—was my father. Tiny as he was, he stood out like the olympic torch inside a pitch dark cave. Hunched there, red-eyed in a baggy dark gray suit, bawling over my mother's casket, spilling a flood of tears like he couldn't bear to live another moment without this woman who was his sunlight, his bedrock, the garden where his most beautiful flowers bloomed.

This woman he'd abandoned, twenty years earlier, for another woman. Same one he'd been fucking for twenty years before that, and to whom, after the funeral was over and his tears dried, he'd be returning.

What a steaming crock of horse shit, I thought. The only perfectly clear thought I could conjure after nineteen hours on airplanes.

"You made it," he said to me, a few minutes later, over by the side door that led to the parking lot, after I looked at her face inside the casket one last time. I was heading out into the Florida heat for sunlight and another cigarette and relief, and to keep myself from socketing all ten of my fingers around his throat.

"Barely."

"She looks very beautiful." At least I think that's what he said. Because he wasn't looking at me, and I was barely listening.

THE SHOT THAT ECHOES

Now I start this lung-function test I sometimes try. I suck a deep swallow of salty wind, hold my breath and keep holding it, pressing the air ever deeper into the bottom of my lungs. *Ten Mississippis*, I count to myself. Dig my fingers and toes into the sand, and seal my mouth like a fortress. Get it up to twenty seconds. Then half a minute, and deprived of oxygen my heart starts to beat harder and faster against the insides of my ribcage. Soon my lungs burn, my brain is dizzy, and when I close my eyes I hope the darkness is permanent. All a child's game really, the plan being that a minute or so of cardiovascular shock might puncture something vital, tear a weakened artery or ventricle, burst a secretly buried aneurysm like a water balloon. I'd see a flash, maybe hear a pop, and then vanish into whatever's next.

A game, as I said. Like imagining I still owned a car and a house with a garage, where I could park and run the motor until I dream forever.

Other choices: Finding a knife for my wrists, cutting them, then wading chest-deep in the surf, waiting for the sharks. Maybe gulping down some Clorox from a bottle on a bathroom floor in one of the boardwalk restaurants I wander in and out of during the day. One of the places I buy french fries, or toast, or pizza, when there's money on my bank card or coins in my pocket. Only doing it inside, someone would find me. A person I might actually know—not a random lifeguard, or a bicycling beach cop, though I've come to know a few of them over my weeks and months out here. Someone actually needing to use that filthy little toilet, or change a baby's diaper, or to shoot a heroin fix—

which people around here do in restaurant bathrooms. And a knife, if it's even sharp enough to sever a vein, will leave a mess of blood that somebody would have to clean.

So a few times a night, when dawn seems furthest away or the moon most disgusted with the sight of me, I try to hold my breath. Suck in and count to sixty, or even seventy, in the hope that air never becomes an exhale. For me, a coward at heart, it's the only possible way.

In all my sixty-three years, I've only known one person who'd done it. It was my older daughter's one-time friend. A girl whose face, with its sad beauty, I'd seen alive only a handful of times, when she babysat for the children of my drinking and snorting friend, Rapoport, who now lived in a Manhattan penthouse. I'd see her with his kids out on their wide front lawn, or on their driveway under the basketball hoop, her wrists thin as Mandarin House chopsticks, her sadness as real and touchable as her mane of chestnut hair. Her name I've now forgotten, or maybe I never knew it, but her ending always haunts me. This girl, who shot herself in the temple with her father's pistol when she was sixteen.

That shot still echoed inside me in the weeks not long after my ex-wife caught me for the last time with the cocaine. A rolled hundred and a small square of mirror glass spread with lines in our darkened bedroom. It was a rainy Easter Sunday morning, and I'd barely gotten out of bed, except to eat and shit, in the week I'd been home from another trip to Taiwan. By all measures I was already dead.

"I want you out of this house tonight!" Her scream sounded so primal that I dropped the bill and spilled the pile on the glass onto the comforter that covered me from feet to waist.

"You don't give a *fuck* about me! You don't give a *fuck* about those kids!"

I can still remember, as she screamed, licking my index finger and swabbing it across the mirror in an attempt to salvage some trace of spilled white dust. I swabbed my coke-dappled finger inside my mouth, felt my gums go numb as she glared with pure fury. Eventually, I pushed my body out of bed, slithered past her and went downstairs.

Jeffrey who, I was certain, had just heard everything, was sitting on the sofa staring at something violent on the projection TV. Maybe my favorite toy I'd ever bought, the thing cost five grand back in the eighties, and it remained right where it was, in the living room, even after I was gone.

"Whatcha watching, buddy?" I asked him, though I could mainly hear the clatter of my heartbeat, the clicking of my jaw as I ground my teeth. He was maybe sixteen, and quiet, and hadn't yet gotten sick. Still, I knew there were deep reservoirs of rage inside him. I walked carefully into his space, between the cushions and the coffee table, but I didn't yet sit.

"Some Chuck Norris movie, where he kicks like twenty guys' asses at once."

I glanced at the TV, then at Jeffrey. Or at least I pretended to be interested in the fury there. Mostly I wanted to curl up in a fetal ball on the rickety cot in the maid's room.

"It's kind of stupid," Jeffrey said. "But it's ok."

I ignored the thump of my wife's heavy footsteps in the bedroom above us, and plunked down on the tan suede sofa, a foot away from Jeffrey, in the cushy L-shaped corner, my usual spot. For a minute or so I pretended to watch Chuck Norris, and even enjoy his head ducks and spin kicks as he pummeled yet another adversary. Then I lit a cigarette and bent one knee toward the ceiling. My cloud of smoke quickly engulfed us.

Jeffrey said, "Your smoke smells like a salami sandwich." He might have then said, "It's pretty gross." But he could also have been talking about some flash of gore in the movie, a snapped neck or bloodied nose. As I smoked a coil of ash dropped onto my chest, which I rubbed into my t-shirt, instead of steering the mess to the ashtray. A few other flakes of ash landed on the sofa and I brushed them onto the carpet.

"Mom's gonna kill you," he said. "Chuck Norris your ass."

"You want some eggs?" I asked, even though I wasn't hungry. I could cook scrambled eggs, scramble them in the sizzling butter, straight in the pan. The cocaine in my veins made it hard to lie still. The footsteps, thundering above, made it even harder.

"Not really."

"You sure, buddy?"

"I'm positive."

I need to look to the darkened ground, grasp new handfuls of sand, then fumble for the quarter pack of cigarettes lying on the sheet between my body and the earth. Just like the blanket, something I also snatched from my last motel room after I ran out of money and lived out here for six days. A sheet once clean, white and starched, now filthy and wrinkled, and tearing near the edge. I strike a match against the wind, cup the flame

inside my palms, imagine the crack of that single gunshot. That terribly sad girl with her chopstick wrists, how the moment before she squeezed the trigger she'd pulled a breath. The bullet burrowing, and a life ending, gone in the time a line of cocaine vanishes off glass.

I pull in smoke and exhale with a tinge of disappointment, even failure, when I take my next breath. For a moment the wind is calm and my thick spread of hovering smoke veils the moonglow.

"How did you do it?" I ask. Though my voice only whispers in the vast outside, I'm surprised to hear it break through the sound of wave and wind. "Have the guts?"

I realize, then, I'm talking to her. The girl whose fragile teenage finger pulled that trigger inside her family's pool house and left her lifeless self to be found. Tiny, delicate and beautiful, and still she confronted the cold blackness I've always imagined to be the beginning that follows the end. She, who in some terrible way, continues to be my hero.

"I could never be that brave," I say and pull another lungful of smoke. As I wait, somehow, for her to answer, but a voice never comes.

In all these years, ever since the news of that gunshot, the funeral my daughter would attend, I've known the bounds of my fear, the crippling power of my cowardice. That even if I spend my final hours outside, without a roof or a cent in my shorts, I know I could never make that final muscle twitch. The trigger pull, that chug of Clorox, the arrow launched irreversibly from the bow, unleashed by my own hand.

Confront those final consequences.

Truth is, any time I sneak a few minutes inside one of those filthy boardwalk bathrooms, and look into the cracked mirror hung over the sink, I can barely believe it's my own face looking back.

My own eyes seeing what the world sees.

OVERSEAS

Twenty years ago, something close to that, my son Jeffrey became sick—virulently, and mysteriously, his six-foot frame weighing one hundred and ten pounds, drenched. Started not long after that cocaine Sunday my wife kicked me out, my thirty-day stint in drug rehab that came after. A quiet month in a convalescent home nestled deep in the Jersey hills. He was barely sixteen, beyond handsome up till then, and one day the diarrhea appeared and never stopped. The young life slowly drained out of him like a persistent leak.

For nearly two years he shrank, and stabilized, then shrank even smaller. *My bony boy,* one of his oldest friends began to affectionately call him. At least on those days when he would see friends.

The symptoms began the winter after I took him on a summertime business trip to Taiwan, only the American doctors determined it wasn't some exotic Asian water-borne parasite, or a local venereal disease from the Chinese prostitute my Taipei associate bestowed on him one night, capping a pleasure tour of the city. The odyssey left the kid glowing, a veritable hero amongst his friends in terms of sexual escapades and the tall-tales they inspire—in teenage boys, especially. I'm sure some of them had girlfriends, some had even been laid, but none could brag about a real-life China doll they bedded for an entire weekend at their father's apartment in Taiwan. Boasts that were short-lived as the boy's teenage body began to decay.

For months before the trip, before any signs of fever and relentless toilet trips, of those young bones pressing ever closer to the surface of his skin, I'd quietly promised the kid a Chinese girl like those countless treats I'd tasted at massage parlors, night spas, and hotel suite cathouses in Taipei, Hong Kong, Bangkok.

"Just don't let things slip to your mother," I said to him more than once, picturing the disapproval my wife's face. "About any Chinese girls." I realize now, more than anything, the primary aim of that advice was to preserve my own sordid trove of secrets. In my mind, a Chinese hooker for my son was meant to be a gift of manhood, an authentic rite-of-passage, the same potpourri of flesh I feasted on every time I was in Asia.

"Duh, I'm not stupid," Jeffrey always said. Which was more than a handful, and bordered on obsession. And like a man of honor bestowed with a great secret, the kid remained quiet.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," he even told me once.

Four or five times a year I'd fly twelve hours to Tokyo, then three to Taipei, where LBM International, the shoe company I'd founded with my ex-partner Barry, had its Asia office and a corporate three-bedroom apartment, a place with white tile floors, window air-conditioners, and four or five arcade-style video games we'd acquired—*Miss Pac-Man, Asteroids, Scramble*, if I remember the names right. Something we had, and Jeffrey loved, because the Taiwan government had outlawed them for commercial use. Kids were getting addicted, stealing their parents' money to funnel endless coins down their

slots, so went the official story. The whole spread, including the TV and the bar full of liquor, cost little more than a Chevy station wagon back in the States.

The apartment was nestled in a residential neighborhood, but to get to our office on Taipei's skyscrapered main thoroughfare, you had to navigate this dark snake of an alleyway—a Chinese slum, basically. A hundred yard stretch so filthy and impoverished, so foul-smelling in the hot and sticky air, that the first time we walked from the apartment to the office, past that line of rusted corrugated shacks and their unwashed and emaciated inhabitants, I glanced at Jeffrey and felt as soiled and foul as the soot-thick air and permanent grime, ashamed of the air-conditioned apartment we'd just left and the shiny high-rise office to which we were headed. Of my big white suburban home, my Mercedes Benz and my wife's Cadillac parked in our garage back in the States. Of how the money I blew on prostitutes could probably feed that whole slum for a year. This sense of terror at a cruel mystery I couldn't begin to understand or solve.

"They…these people, really live like this?" Jeffrey asked, his feet beginning to move faster past the dilapidated shacks, the strewn scraps of litter, the staring and desperate faces. I'd neglected to warn him about what we were seeing, as his blue American eyes fluttered in both disbelief and terror.

I remember beginning to sweat in the Taipei heat as I checked my watch, shut my eyes, pretended to ignore mother and child squatting with a feral dog under a post-supported roof only slightly larger than the flat top of a grade school desk. Chickens pecked around their dirty bare legs and feet, a tin hovel a quarter the size of a steel shipping container crumbling behind them—a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom all in one.

"You might see even worse here," I said, noticing the shoeless feet of both the woman and the child. Because I didn't really know what to say.

"You should bring them shoes," Jeffrey said.

"Forget about it. If I bring them shoes, I have to bring them all shoes."

In retrospect, it would have been easy to drop off two or three, even ten cartons of shoes, some slippers and child's size sneakers. Jeffrey and I together could have hand-trucked the boxes from the office into the alley, felt more like men than any whorehouse visit might've made us feel. Maybe the glad tidings would have kept him healthy?

For a moment I open my eyes, notice the moon has sunk lower in the southeast, over the endless expanse of water. I glance at my own bare feet wrapped inside the blanket, cast here on this sand, miles and decades from those New York and Taipei showroom, walls lined with thousands of single shoes, never pairs, all right-foot size 8s, as if created for some other one-limbed species. The glue-reeking sample room in the Taipei office, my own teeming shoe laboratory, and I the mad-shoe scientist, stitching and pasting and cutting, crazed with creation with my team of Chinese assistants. Meticulously assembling each shoe sample, one beloved member in an ever-growing line each successive season, an array of gems designed for mass production in the Tainan and Taichung factories. Newly-born prototypes perfected into salesmen's samples that would turn into orders for millions of pairs. Shoes worn by millions of men, sold by name-brand companies, delivered by countless shipping containers, across vast oceans. Shoes on display in windows of stores you'd see in malls, names like *Florsheim* and *Thom McAn*, *JC Penney* and *Payless*. In all it was close to forty-million pairs.

Only now I own a single pair of flip flops, worn rubber in the toe and heel, $2.99 at a grimy suntan lotion shop on the asphalt boardwalk a hundred yards behind me. Probably a quarter each to mold and cut in a Chinese sweatshop.

One last pair I'm forced to keep.

Normally I would spend four or five weeks in the East, but I cut that trip with Jeffrey short, down to a paltry ten days, all of which were spent in the Taipei office, or an overnight trip to the Taichung factory. My excuse, to both my son and to my wife back in New Jersey, was that the work I needed to do was complete. The new line was finished, ready to manufacture, container by cargo ship back to customers in the States. Factory production had started and was on schedule. We'd only be wasting money and time staying in Taiwan. Truth is, it was the kind of complaint I'd make only if I was trying to sound responsible, appeal to that overwhelming sense of practicality in every last one of her cells. My default was to piss money down every waiting drain, to delay and laze and waste vital time until hardly a useful minute of the day remained.

"You promised him at least a month there, Larry," my wife reminded me over the phone. "He hasn't done anything except go to your office, play video games in the apartment, and see two shoe factories."

The secret I was forever harboring while I roamed 8,000 miles away from my family for four, five, six weeks at a time, was that my work on nearly every Taiwan trip could be completed in two weeks, just like that time I brought Jeffrey. Truth is, I *chose* to

stay away, pretended to be busier, more burdened with work, with production deadlines and factory schedules, than I actually was. Outside office hours, on my own in foreign lands, I loved the freedom of being unknown, an exotic and mysterious stranger, one with secrets, limitless pockets and the precious sovereignty to roam, drink in the plain-sight anonymity of lobby bars, overindulge on weekend jaunts to Hong Kong or Bangkok, sometimes Manila with her most exquisite cocoa-eyed whores. Back home meant banal suburbs and a vicious New York City commute, whiskey and chain-smoking to sports on television, cocaine binges in bed or in the master bathroom. Week-long slumbers I'd blame on jet lag, a wife who asked a lot of questions, kids that mostly bored me but who needed the boundless troves of attention I could rarely provide.

"Why don't you take him around the country, to see some things?" she said during that same call, overtones of impatience, displeasure, and derision saturating her voice. "There's forests and Buddhist temples and beautiful beaches. You always love the beach." She'd read a bit about Taiwan over the years.

I remember it being late, after ten at night, with the twelve-hour time difference on the other side of the globe. Usually, during my trips, we spoke in the mornings, Taipei time, when I had the necessary energy and the kids were all home for the evening. I was lying on the bamboo-framed queen bed in the apartment's second bedroom, smoking cigarettes to keep my eyes open. Just listening to her made me want to snort a line, dial up my source in New York, have him Fed Ex bundle me an eighth. Though in nine years traveling in Asia I never once took a single bump. Like some knife-wielding cycle, or a brush fire raging from a spark, cocaine was always a home vice.

"The place is a shithole," I remember saying about Taiwan, a place I usually loved. Only all the things I usually loved about it—the escape, the anonymity, the whores—now seemed off limits, forbidden. Cock blocked by my son, and the promises I'd made him that I couldn't now keep. "There's nothing to see here."

"What kind of father are you?"

After I hung up the phone, Jeffrey slipped quietly into the bedroom, a distinct blanket of disappointment spread across his randomly pimpled face. Though he wasn't yet sick, he already looked angular, frail—narrow across the shoulders, skinny in his arms and legs. Lanky and almost girl-like, but for the patch of teen scruff on the edge of his chin, with a mane of long frizzy hair, wearing cut-off jeans shorts and a black *Iron Maiden* tanktop with an axe-wielding ghoul haunting the front. He'd already spoken to his mother at the beginning of the call, an easily summarized recap of his weeklong tour of Asia, before I told her we were coming home.

He'd obviously heard the news I had to tell her.

"I want to stay," he said, and stared down at his bare feet, away from my eyes, the indifference which must have burned in them like a dimming pair of binary stars. He looked ready, right then, not even yet sixteen, to declare his independence from the profound disappointment I was becoming for him. The seeds of which, I'm sure, had already sprouted many years earlier.

That I hadn't delivered on my promise of a Chinese girl was only a symptom, of a a pathological strain of self-interest that went beyond plain selfishness.

I looked at Jeffrey, could sense his suppressed rage fomenting, but I didn't say anything. Mostly I wanted to go to sleep.

"Burt's going to New York in three weeks, I can fly home with him." The kid sounded as dug-in as a hardened infantry unit bracing for ambush. "And David's gonna be here too."

He meant Burt Wu, the director of our Taiwan office, and David Standley, who everyone called *Pong Pong*—affectionate, in Chinese, for "double fat"—our minor partner, the American who oversaw the entire Taipei operation. Burt would go on to become the head designer at Steve Madden Men's. David, who also remained a fixture in the shoe business for several other companies, died many years later of a heart attack on a flight from Charlotte to Las Vegas.

A set of stand-in fathers, I realize.

"If your mother says it's OK."

"I'm calling her back," he said.

And stay in Taiwan, he would—without me, his father, with my hollow collection of promises, and that persistent urge to be separate. For three more weeks, or maybe even longer, he stayed those 8,000 miles from home, then flew back to Jersey a few notches closer to manhood. Having the adventure of his young life, I would imagine—and from the stories he told, or even didn't tell, after he got back. Spectral replacements of what might have been our own father and son experience.

Like jetting off to Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China with Pong Pong and his nine year-old daughter who was in Asia for the summer. How in Hong Kong the kid had

his own hotel room at the Hyatt, and with it the freedom to roam the Kowloon side of the city, pretending he was eighteen, not fifteen, and visiting bars and a side-alley strip club with a clutch of American sailors whose aircraft carrier was docked for three days in Victoria Harbor. Then back in Taiwan where he hiked up tropical hills and across seaview cliffs to the ruins of a Buddhist temple. Or the backpack-full of pirated cassettes he bought of his favorite bands, for a quarter each, from a shop near the Snake Alley Night Market. Names like Scorpions and Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith and Van Halen, all scattered around his bedroom like mystic runes, for the boombox he rarely turned off, the headphones he rarely took off. He told me about the time a group of Chinese guys from my sample room fed him at a local noodle shop and soaked him in Taiwan Beer, then delivered him first-class, condom in hand, to the same high-rise hotel brothel I'd frequented at least a dozen times. I even heard about the night Harry Chen, my old friend and first Chinese consultant, a man who originally helped me launch my business, who knew my wife and kids and stayed more than once at my New Jersey home, took the kid on a Friday night romp through the raunchiest underbelly of old Taipei, then sent him back to the apartment with his very own Chinese girl who'd stay until breakfast on Monday.

All stories I'd come to hear, and overhear. Stories of a son getting the things a father once promised, but never delivered. About the finest things the father had always taken for himself.

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Back home, seven months later, the fluids just started gushing like muddy water out of Jeffrey's body. A child pulled slave-like to the toilet eight, nine, ten, sometimes a dozen or more times each day, until almost nothing physical was left except the piss pale skin that barely held his bones. Six feet-tall and the kid weighed one hundred and ten, his ribs so distended I'd swear I could see the heart beating inside his chest when he took off his shirt one afternoon by the swimming pool Pretzel stick arms, catcher's mask ribs, an Adam's apple that protruded like a second nose from his throat.

A sight so pathetic, so repulsive and sad, that I needed to look off into the woods bordering our back yard. It was all my imagination, I told myself. It would pass. It had nothing to do with me, my being mostly gone from his life, for basically having become an absentee father.

At first, knowing no other way, I tried to joke with the kid about what I tried to imagine he was going through—at home, at school, inside his own head. Thinking maybe I could wring a smile out of him, even some kind of laugh, because I still imagined I was funny, the kind of father who told jokes and made his kids smile. I'd just driven the Benz from my Manhattan apartment, there to share a pizza and some giggles with Jeffrey and my two daughters, before navigating the thirty minutes back.

"Maybe we need to pop a cork in your ass," I said to Jeffrey this one time, after his mother informed me, tears swelling in her eyes, of his countless bathroom trips, the lack of a diagnosis from at least a half-dozen doctors. How he couldn't put any food down, or stop anything from gushing out. That he'd lost thirty-five pounds in five months.

"Keep you plugged up," I added.

If the joke were about anyone else, about anything else, he might have laughed. Might have even told me to *shut the fuck up,* if he'd had the strength. The clear-eyed rage to stare me down as he did that morning in Taiwan when he told me he wasn't going back home with me.

By all measures the boy looked as if he were on some death-march, an Auschwitz prisoner minus the striped pajamas. A pound dropped each day sometimes, his skin tone a sickly grayish-yellow, the color of murky morning urine after a vodka binge. For months of sadistic blood scans and ass scopes, the kid was a fucking lab rat, and as a diagnosis stumped each élite Manhattan specialist he saw, I began to believe he was dying. That buried inside his body was some hidden virus or tumor the very best of science couldn't discover, and as the one who'd left him and his mother in the second month of his life, having to watch him die was my penance.

In the months before he was born, I would quietly set off for the synagogue, to pray for the child growing inside my wife's young womb. To reaffirm some measure of the spiritual I'd abandoned over the years, shard by shard, as if sweeping pieces of broken glass out a barely used back door. From my solitary pew I recited the Hebrew I learned as a boy, solemn chants for the baby's good health. That it wouldn't come out with twelve fingers and toes, a hunchback spine, retarded or blind. For a few of those visits I was actually a believer, but my newfound faith was short-lived, my desire to shape the kismet of my unborn son nothing but some bullshit act of fear and guilt.

In retrospect, maybe I was praying for the opposite, for the child never to come. To magically fend off the labor that would deliver him. Or maybe I was simply praying for myself.

The January night before he arrived it was eight degrees according to the digital clock in front of the bank that we could see from the dining room window of our Fort Lee apartment. There was no snow, only a near-full moon and a vicious cold that seemed to claw through the glass as I hosted poker night, even though it wasn't my week to have the game in our house. Six guys spread around the dining room table, smoking cigarettes and drinking bottled Schaefer, tossing dollar chips into ever-swelling pots while my wife tidied the hallway closet and cleaned random junk from under the kitchen sink, while in our bedroom her bags were packed for the hospital. As someone dealt a fresh hand of Hold 'Em, and I glanced at the Jack and eight I held, I realized I'd forgotten to put gas in the car. For two days my wife had asked me to fill the tank, to be ready for when the baby came, and for two days I'd pushed the chore just far enough out of mind to keep the realities of fatherhood safely away.

There's almost a quarter tank of gas in there, I told myself and tucked a third card, an ace, between my Jack and eight. *The hospital's only three miles away.*

I shielded the hand, and as I swigged my freshly cracked Schaefer, I could feel my wife's dagger eyes cut into my skin. The bank clock outside said nine minutes to ten. Just past midnight I was pulling the car around to the lobby of the building, the needle pressing empty, the outside temperature down to seven. By breakfast I was a first-time father.

Maybe it was the sound, the infant cries, the nighttime shrieks that reverberated off those apartment walls, and inside my own fevered head. Maybe it was how those walls seemed closer, the rooms tighter, their ceilings lower, how I felt ignored and as essentially helpless as that baby boy. But I could not stay. For the better part of a month, I disappeared, bedded down with curly-haired Cynthia Shore on the sixth floor in the next building. A tiny one-bedroom apartment, where she didn't talk much and liked to sleep late, and two different times told me by candlelight that she loved me.

Considering how much I loathed every cell of myself, I thought she was the very definition of wacko. And after one last visit to the *shul,* laden with one desperate prayer for forgiveness and one more for resolve, I crept back home to wife and son.

Sixteen years later and Jeffrey was shrinking into something I couldn't recognize, some hideous creature I could barely look at, let alone speak to in any way that might have given him comfort—or better yet, hope. Even after seeing that doctor who first diagnosed him and directed the boy towards an enduring recovery, all I could manage to say was: "Good to be taking that cork out. Pretty soon you'll be eating hot dogs." The latest CT-scan had found hidden inflammation along the entire length of his digestive tract, basically a wildfire burning from his throat to his ass. And here I was, still making jokes.

"He was smart," Jeffrey said, about the new doctor, looking both at me and beyond me as he spoke. "I think that guy's a genius." I could see the light that had come back to his eyes.

A month or two left, that same doctor had confided to my wife.

Twenty years later, here in the salty cool from Florida's November waters—two decades I've basically spent away from him, anyway—I wonder, in between the crashing of waves, how I might have handled that degree of torment. Had fate dealt an early exit for the kid, and I were forced to live with the never-ending gut punch of those memories. Would that pain have changed my own path, kept me off this beach? Inspired me, through pain and grief, to some hidden greatness I never knew existed inside me? A thousand times, easy, I've heard those stories of someone who changed the world after losing a child. Started a charity, cured a disease, worked for decades on some noble cause, something far bigger than themselves, that wound up making history.

In all honesty, despite the cold and the wind, the hunger in my belly and this torn and stolen blanket under my bones, I'm thankful to have been spared—*that*. Besides, I can't ever become immortal. I've always been too fucking weak.

THE AWARD

One evening in the late 1970s, when Jeffrey was seven or eight, we attended the town's baseball awards dinner, in honor of his tee-ball team I'd volunteered to manage. A feisty group that tied for the first place trophy, with my son installed—undeservedly, most likely—at shortstop, and the sterling record of 7-2. A .778 winning percentage, if we were compiling statistics the way the American and National Leagues did in the sports section standings, the only part of the newspaper I ever cared about. The hell with politics and current events, a building fire or some little girl's cat trapped in a tree, my ball teams were what mattered. Knowledge I wanted to pass on to my son, though I'm not sure he ever really cared.

The baseball dinner was held at the Florentine Gardens, the garish banquet hall at the far end of our town, a place normally reserved for weddings, sweet-sixteens, and bar mitzvahs, with an outdoor stretch of landscaped grass for al fresco events, and a massive, yet claustrophobic indoor space with a bandstand, a parquet dance floor, and room for a few dozen white-clothed tables. A picture lifted straight from the suburban playbook, but perfect for the kind of social events people had in that world. So much of what simultaneously disgusted and terrified me, and all of it would become that much worse if I had to speak. Six months of Dale Carnegie classes meant shit for keeping my sweaty palms and armpits dry. On that night, in front of probably half the goddamned town, I would have to give a speech and call each member of the team up to receive his first-place trophy.

In what feels like a totally separate life, back before I'd launched LBM and traveled the world for months every year, I was an account representative for Endicott Johnson—the company's top salesman, quarter after quarter, for the better part of a decade. Eventually, as my client list grew, I massaged my schedule so I could meet all my customers in Manhattan on Wednesdays. Buyers from at least a half dozen stores I'd schmooze from just past dawn to the after-hours rib-eye and cocktail close to midnight. The other four days a week, I hardly had a single work obligation, except maybe a phone call or two to the Manhattan office. By the mid-70s I'd climbed into six figures a year, a Cadillac convertible, my first Mercedes SL, and the six-bedroom home in a wooded Jersey suburb thirty minutes north of the city. The dream of dreams they all said I was living.

With all that free time and the money tumbling in from a single day of work, in the spring of Jeffrey's second grade, I volunteered to manage his tee-ball team. We practiced Tuesdays and Thursdays at the rutted and often muddy field behind the kid's elementary school, played a girl at first base, and stoked a season-long rivalry with the team we eventually tied for the league trophy. Other afternoons I spent hitting grounders and popups to the kid on our side lawn, hoping to groom him into Brooks Robinson or Willie Mays. My main managerial innovation was to make my fielders, no matter their position, stand ready with their gloves planted on the grass or dirt, rather than with hands-on-knees the way their Mets and Yankees heroes played. With tee-ball, each kid got to bat, even if a few didn't always play the field. I think we were allowed four outfielders and an extra infielder, who stood just behind second base.

Our games were played on Saturdays from late April through mid-June, and when I close my eyes and ignore the sand and wind and gnawing hunger, I can still tap the happiness I felt those mornings. I remember springtime dew from the grass soaking my cleats, the scruffy headed boys in baggy uniforms eager to run and hit and throw. The feeling I, too, was eight again and batting balls and shagging popups in a Jersey City playground. At season's end, on a sun-baked June Saturday right after our last game, I even hosted a championship barbecue in our backyard for the team. I must have grilled fifty hamburgers and hot dogs, and chowed down three or four myself.

Those mornings on a spring sun field, it was as if I were actually made of something pure and solid and permanent, instead of what had always felt like some house of cards ready to buckle from the breeze of butterfly wings. As if I finally sealed my secret vault of demons, this nagging bitch of a tug, every last place inside me, that as a family man, a rich man, an actual citizen attaining every American success, I was nothing but an impostor. That I didn't deserve one measly speck of it.

Then, after that short spring season, the team's .778 winning percentage and my own boyhood joys brought back to life, came the night of the awards banquet with its roast beef and baked potato dinner served by bowtied waiters in black vests. Fathers palled around with one another while their sons, mine included, laughed and made minor trouble as they fidgeted against their seat cushions, waiting to hear their names called and receive their first-place trophies. Winning team managers from the town's other leagues all spoke, some articulately, some with humor and confidence, but all with a sense of pride and purpose as they handed those awards, one-by-one, to their players—their sons

included. Meanwhile I sat terrified, waiting for my turn, picking at my well-done beef with the tip of my fork, wishing they were serving beer, or, better yet, Dewars.

Finally, with the names of our team roster typed onto a sheet of paper in hand, my heart galloping inside my chest, I could feel the room turn silent, all those eyes watching my own self shrink as I made my way to the bandstand. The microphone taunted me as I approached, those thirty or forty steps to the stage feeling like they took an hour.

After a moment, a single hot spotlight blurring my vision, I managed a brush of eye contact with a face I knew, one of my team coaches, an Italian guy with a full-mane of salt and pepper hair and a square jaw, the father of our third baseman and four others, a man who always seemed so solid and earnest when he looked you straight in the eye and spoke things plain. A man, I know for certain, who'd never end up alone and broken, inhabiting some godforsaken patch of sand, the way he'd find me now. When his day comes and his maker calls, I'm sure his friends and family will only speak the kindest words—about his honor, fidelity, sacrifices, the unconditional love he gave without so much as an ant fart of effort. A *mensch,* they'd call him, were he a Jew.

A man who, most definitely, would never have forgotten to call the name of his son to receive his trophy and the applause he deserved.

Just as I did that night.

In my rush to leave that podium I heard someone shout from one of the hall's round tables: "What about Jeff!" Then another voice echoed: "You forgot Jeff!" In those moments, I'll always remember the hush and stillness vacuuming that banquet hall, and my own pathetic giggle that wormed its way into the microphone, then rang over the

loudspeakers. But what I remember most is the look of eager anticipation on the boy's face, one twisted up with a terrible sadness after all his teammates' names were called, his eight year-old body ready to leap from its seat, as he waited for the team manager—his very own father—to call his name and hand him his trophy, but with this fear in his eyes that he'd go home empty-handed and unknown.

LIFEGUARD TOWER

To my right, across twenty yards of cold sand near the lifeguard tower, its white wooden beams dirty gray silhouettes in the moonlight, I watch a pair of dark figures stroll along the beach. A couple, arm in arm, they nestle so close together their bodies look like a single two-headed beast prowling the sand. A young guy and girl barely into their twenties, the lust rising out of them like heatwaves off summer asphalt, they begin to climb the tower's skinny ladder. I watch but at the same time I'm praying they don't look over the rails and notice me. It would ruin everything.

She crawls up first, he right behind her, as if he's ready to ram her through her short-shorts, until they're both standing on top of the platform, at it again with their arms and hands, their bodies a writhing shadow like a single horny jackrabbit in the moonlight. When I close my eyes, the outline of their embrace, and the tongue kiss that comes next, hovers like a ghost. Wrapped around each other, they seem on display, like some lusty painting. If I had a camera I'd take a snapshot.

In a simpler time, when I was young, before I was married, and not at all concerned with branding my name across the big fat ass of the planet, I believed—really believed—I could paint. Create art some other person might stop for ten seconds to look at. And maybe even think about for longer than that. I couldn't do much with a face or hand, anything sharp or precise, but I could go on endless journeys in the abstract, make chaos out of dark colors, deep blue turbulence and purple swells, sudden bursts of red and terror and lusty sex with raw pussy, of stormy green seas and furious black skies, but

mostly streaks of pink, or gold that called like a quiet beacon. For a while I was possessed, like I would later obsess over a shoe design, or even my next bump of cocaine. The godspeed elation it delivered. The feel of brush attacking canvas was almost sexual. The ways in which I could almost understand myself from what came out in color.

As a teenager, my mother started painting jewelry boxes that sold in Manhattan department stores, and she never put down her brush until they planted her bones. I still remember some of the canvases she'd paint for her grandchildren—an orange-striped kitten, a sun-dappled daisy, a pair of ballerina slippers for the girls. The lion's face, precise as a photograph, that hung on the wall of Jeffrey's childhood bedroom. Same one I know he plans to hang in the baby's nursery. Somehow it all came easy for her.

Four or five days a week, after college, before I landed my first job selling shoes at a Thom McAn store near Journal Square in Jersey City, I'd hole up in this paint-dappled basement studio. The owner would charge me a dollar to stay all day—and deep into the night, if I wanted to. Honestly, I would have paid ten, or even a hundred dollars, because I never wanted to leave its concrete floors, crumbling brick walls, the light from shaded bulbs and a pair of sidewalk-level windows. Without going anywhere, it was like stepping outside my skin or deep cleaning it all the way down to bone.

The entire day of November 22, 1963, I was alone in that dirty little studio, hidden away, blissfully ignorant of the gunshots in Dallas, as the country shuddered and convulsed, then staggered silent in grief. I walked out of the studio that evening into a different world.

I never went back to that studio after that shot, barely once picked up a paintbrush again. I was a few months out of college, with a pretty girlfriend who wanted to become a wife, a father who had definite plans for how a young man was supposed to live his life, none of which involved the bohemian, the rebellious, the artistic. For him, that was stuff for women like my mother.

"Get a job!" he demanded. "Or get out of the house!" Maybe it was a week after the assassination. "You want to be a goddamn *beatnik*…or a bum!" He was pointing me down a definite pathway, and all the glorious places it was meant to lead.

And so I got a job. In a shoe store, where I kneeled at people's feet for eight hours a day. And wound up here, forty years later, lying without shoes on a square of fucking beach sand.

A few years back, for Father's Day, when I still had a mailing address, a decrepit two-bedroom bungalow I shared with a pair of local drunks, Jeffrey sent me a box of pastels and a wide-leafed sketch pad. I don't know what compelled him to mail it to me, but I understood exactly what he was saying. For days I stared at the first page, even broke open the cellophane wrapper on that sky blue box of crayons. I sat tempted to spill some sense of my journey and its wretched destination onto that white space—the roach-infested living room, the wobbling table, a refrigerator with a half-eaten package of Oscar Meyer luncheon ham and one can of Miller Lite on a six-pack ring. Only I couldn't bring myself to touch one of those pencils, to ram my shovel into that first patch of dirt and exhume the living dead.

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Back on top of that tower, I watch him kiss her again, this time longer and hotter in the moonlight. Their bodies so entwined, they might actually be in love, or just all charged-up and lusty after a chance barroom tryst or some after-hours party at a beach house. No matter what I'm looking at, these two are speaking a foreign language. A tongue I haven't heard in years. Their human connection so strange, as if I'm observing the behavior of some alien species through shatterproof glass.

My fingers dig into the sand, watching their outlines in the moonlight, now going at it on the tower. Both her hands squeezing the guardrail, body bent forward and face pointed toward the sea as the guy starts fucking her from behind. I peek up at them, then away into the sky when she turns her head to glance at him, and I think for a second they might notice I'm here. That they're putting on a show for me, just to get me to feel. Or find some sign of life inside my shorts.

I hear the waves inch closer to my feet, the foaming creep of the rising tide, glance at that pair still humping like night beasts in the sky. Only when something I can't see splashes out of the water, I close my eyes. Imagine what might have made the sound —a shark, or maybe the grim reaper himself with his razor-sharp sickle—because for an instant I lose my breath, along with any of that remaining life inside my shorts. A second later I can feel a tear swell at the edge of one eye. Thinking about someone I've known for fifty years but barely knew me.

Jeanette, the seventeen year-old girl with Elizabeth Taylor eyes. We met at a college dance in Paterson, when she was still a senior in high school. I'd driven the thirty minutes from Jersey City, with my best friend Howie, in the 1957 Ford Thunderbird I'd bought after two years of saving, plus a small loan from my father. A red convertible with rear tail fins and separate port-hole hard top, which I let her drive through the city's side streets that same night. A chance encounter, nearly half a century ago, with the woman I would later marry, for whom I would sell that T-Bird to buy an engagement ring, the mother of my children. Four faces who now might not even recognize me. As I huddle here alone, bearded and half-naked, on a stolen and torn motel sheet, with the shreds of my earthly belongings in an overnight satchel wedged as a pillow beneath my head. Trying my best to keep from being noticed by two people fucking on a lifeguard tower.

Then, by some magic, I no longer feel the humid Florida night on my skin. Instead there is only sunshine, the comfort of a summer's day, more than thirty years ago, as Jeanette and I lay side-by-side on matching chaises in our backyard. Stretched across a leafy patio next to the newly-filled swimming pool we'd built that spring. The first weekend we ever used it, a bright Sunday mid-morning, the day just beginning to turn from warm to hot. New Jersey trees—elms, tall maples, majestic oaks like giants guarding the fortress—spread green against the June blue sky, as our three children splash. The whole scene magazine photo-perfect, except for a kidney-shaped pool that looks more like the Hudson River or an unflushed toilet, the shit-brown color caused by faulty chemistry in the underground spring water we'd used to fill it, eighteen-thousand

gallons the experts at the pool & spa shop said was safe to swim in. My son and two daughters—11, 8, and 4 at the time—all squealed with childhood joy, reveling in a moment my own success made possible.

Fifty-two thousand pairs of shoes, give or take, I remember counting in my head, as I gazed at the white expanse of the house. *That we needed to sell to pay for this pool.* The same pool we'd have to drain and refill with the slow stream of the garden hose.

But in that moment—as I counted the seventeen windows and sliding glass doors on the back side of the house, and lost count of my kids' splashing laughs in that stained water—as I glanced at Jeanette, who seemed even prettier than on that night of the dance—for a single fleeting moment I felt *this* close to having reconciled the warring ledgers of manhood I could never make peace with. Or, at the very least, I'd quieted those whispers telling me I wasn't worthy and deserved even less.

We were watching this brand new swimming pool, with its mysterious brown water, when the sun crept out from the leaves of an overhead oak. Then as if on-cue, Jeanette said to me: "It was worth every thousand to watch these kids laugh like this."

At first I didn't speak or glance her way, or even sneer to myself at her overripe sentimentality. I just struck a match and lit a cigarette, gazed at the smoke as it left my mouth and vanished. The sun snuck back behind the trees, or maybe it was the clouds, but for an instant the day felt darker, all the whites and yellows had been scrubbed. Just then I turned back and saw my daughter's four year-old head plunge beneath that stained water, swallowing her the way a flash flood or tsunami might bury a helpless body.

I closed my eyes and the voice I thought had quieted was shouting louder: *Paying with your skin and sweat for a swimming pool that looks like a cesspool.*

How fucking typical.

That day, in days I can trace all the way back to my first human thoughts, even as I lie here alone, I've somehow always believed that everything I deserved—or, better, didn't deserve—was determined by the stars. As they spun and burned and pulsed their light, I was basically helpless. That my every action—each success, and the grand list of failure—was part of some unsolved cosmic equation, the ink of its ledgers being scrawled with pin drops of my blood. It could be the furthest thing from truth, a load of hocus-pocus bullshit that justifies this place I've wound up, but this is how I've always felt. It's a theory no one can disprove.

Then I said—to my wife, but also not to my wife, as the big suburban house, in-ground pool, a wife and three children, all disappeared, and there was only me, alone, in the strange shade of that patio:

"I think we cut down too many trees back here."

"Just look at them laughing," she said.

"The whole neighborhood can see in."

"So everyone would swim in the shade all day?"

"There would've still been enough sun."

"For once, can't you just enjoy yourself, Larry?"

All that summer, and for many years after, I'd swim alone in that pool, always buck naked and always at night, with three or four lawn lights lit. In water that was

eventually filtered clear and blue, I'd lie on my back and stare at the sky, a lot like how I stare at the moon and stars now. In the darkness no prying neighbors' eyes could see me, my bare body that might've made them snicker or think something snide. Or worse, see even deeper, past my skin into a darker place. Somehow the warm summer water and surrounding darkness insulated me, kept the even darker truth hidden away—or even unborn. Even then, as a rich man, with a beautiful wife and three great kids, my own multi-million dollar business and every last thing I wanted that those millions could buy, I'd float in that water and think how I could simply go under. Hold my breath and sink to the bottom and be done with the charade and struggle to keep selling tickets to the parlor trick that was my life. Just end it, or go it alone.

I turn away from the tower and the two up there, now done slamming, and look back at the water, the moonlight glowing like a path from hell across the endless black. I think of all the lives I've exited, the traces of blown ash I've left in what might be memories. The sadness, revulsion, or even unvarnished hate. Off the water a stronger wind begins to blow, a deeper chill that raises goosebumps. Inside my chest, somewhere near my heart, a pain as swift and sharp as a knife thrust cuts across bone and flesh, burns and then stops without a trace. A sign, I start to think—a warning, even. The tiniest of voices that whispers, in words meant only for me, that the most real measure of having lived, of being counted, of mattering even just a little, lies in our courage to remove the heart from the safety of its cage and daring the world to break it.

WHITE MANNA

When he wasn't yet thirteen, Jeffrey had a bar mitzvah. When I think about it now, the whole thing seemed closer to a scene in *Saturday Night Fever* than some ancient religious rite-of-passage, more like a minstrel show to flaunt my newly-minted super wealth. A devil's orgy, even.

With a last name like *Weinrip,* I suppose this sacred tradition was more or less preordained for him, a divine mandate, an expectation based on no good reason except that *everyone does it*. A ritual in which I participated, as did my father before me, and his devoutly before him, all the way back to our dirt floor roots in the shtetls of Poland and Germany. Only with my son, despite this family tradition I felt determined to uphold, I paid hardly a flicker of interest in the event itself. Was involved in barely a minute of the five-figure planning my wife lustily embraced to impress a hundred-odd invitees with hors d'oeuvres more like art than food, three choices of French-served entrées, and tuxedoed band that featured both backup singers and a horn section. Occasionally, in the months leading up to the big day, at the dinner table maybe, I'd ask the kid if he'd been *brewing his Heebs,* which was my own way of poking poison sticks at his having to go to Hebrew School on Thursday afternoons, something I knew he hated. A witless stab at humor that evoked images of helpless Jews baking in Nazi ovens. Another time, I remember, I made him watch a show on PBS titled *Bar Mitzvah Boy,* hosted by Kermit the Frog, which was airing at the same time as Game 7 of the World Series.

Not that I could blame the kid for wanting to kick the whole thing to the curb, for not practicing his chants, for his ongoing routine of sulks and pouts when his mother would tell him, at my insistence, to shut off the heavy metal booming from his bedroom and open the prayer book for twenty minutes. This was a family that also gave Christmas presents and gobbled chocolate bunnies on Easter.

"Just go up there and say some shit that sounds like Hebrew," I'd tell him, when he complained about not knowing a single word of what he needed to say, about not giving a shit about any of it. Even about the piles of cash he would be getting from people he barely knew.

"The whole thing feels ridiculous," he said, his long hair half-covering blue eyes that blazed with resentment. "Like not even about me. Just so you and Mom can have some fancy party."

"You're going up there and doing what you have to do," I shouted, never explaining what a bar mitzvah was supposed to mean, and why it was so important to me —and so for him, too. My barking-orders voice was alarmingly aggressive. Probably because I didn't have those answers for myself. To me, a bar mitzvah was just something you *did.* For him it probably sounded pretty ridiculous how I suddenly cared about something he'd only heard me making fun of.

"Make something up," I said. "Nobody'll even know the difference."

"I'll know the difference."

"Just get yourself ready."

That conversation, all that led up to it and all that came after, right up to the five minutes the kid spent on the altar muttering something that barely registered as actual Hebrew, was a far cry from the high-holy bar mitzvahs I remember, including my own. Never-ending hours of funny costumes and joylessness seemingly designed just so my buddies and I could mock the next one of our friends sacrificed on that sacred altar in the name of becoming a man. All of them taking place at Temple Beth-El, on Hudson County Boulevard, a decade before the four lane was renamed for JFK. Sporting a prayer shawl across our shoulders and yarmulkes on our heads, each of us would recite straight from the Torah the Hebrew we spent months practicing. After which we'd give a speech that always echoed the same theme: What it meant to become a man. Even though we were thirteen. Our own fathers would then deliver a blessing of thanks that they were no longer responsible for the sins of their sons.

I'm wondering now why the sins of the father were never an issue.

To say the least, Jeffrey's bar mitzvah, on a Saturday morning in January, just three days into the New Year, had far less to do with tradition. With a literal snowstorm in the forecast and a Peruvian coca blizzard poised to blow that night through midtown Manhattan's Excelsior Club, I followed my son onto that synagogue altar and read my own two-minute lick of imitation Hebrew. No speech about manhood trailed in its wake, nothing about the sacredness of tradition, the importance of legacy, or other inspired words telling the world that my son was now a man. One more keeper of a hallowed torch that stretched back untold generations. Neither of us even wore a skull cap, let alone a prayer shawl. For most of it I was thinking about the check for the $31,000 bill

I'd have to sign later that night. If the quarter ounce of cocaine I had tucked in the back of my nightstand drawer would last the evening.

Of those hundred-odd bar mitzvah guests to grace the Excelsior Club that snowy Saturday night, the two that stood out most were Harry Chen, my old friend and business agent from Taiwan, and the slinky Chinese call-girl I'd arranged to be his date over three nights in New York. The same Harry Chen, who, two years later, in Taipei, would shepherd my son home to the apartment with a Chinese hooker. In the transactional way I viewed it, if there was no Harry, there would be no millions of pairs of my shoes being sold across America, no big suburban house and swimming pool, no inventory of six-figure bank accounts, no Mercedes Benz and no Cadillac. There might have been many less lines of the nose candy, too. It was Harry's smarts, his savvy for navigating the landmine that was the Taiwan business landscape, his innate appreciation for a beautiful and elegant shoe that matched my own, that made possible my then-charmed life in general, and my son's Manhattan high-rise bar mitzvah party in particular. As far as hookers go, I felt I owed Harry top shelf.

I can't remember her name, or much of her face except the puffy cheekbones, but as I lie here, I remember my first sight of her curved outline as Harry helped her take off her long black coat in the tiled foyer of our New Jersey home. The red flowered dress she wore that looked effortless to peel off, the silken white skin, the sweet, powdery scent that trailed her like an almost visible garden of jasmine. I'd driven her and Harry from

the City to the house in the early winter darkness, so I hadn't yet seen her in full light. All I'd imagined the entire drive along the Palisades was the catalog of ripe Asian pussy I'd visited in a half dozen countries, and how the secret treasures of this one whose body sat pressed between me and Harry in the front seat might compare.

When the three of us first walked in, my wife must have been off in the kitchen, maybe piling up a cheese board or heating appetizers. She was nowhere to be seen. For all she knew, I was coming to the house with Harry's New York girlfriend, someone who kept him company on his long trips to the States. To have her discover otherwise, to phrase it in corporate-speak, would have caused a first-rate PR shit-storm.

At one point, I remember, someone at the house, one of our neighbors taking part in the combination-Holiday-season-bar mitzvah-week festivities, complimented her flowered dress.

"They're lotus flowers," Harry's girl said in a Chinese accent that felt both soft and razor-like, with a smile that seemed to bloom like new petals at dawn.

The lotus flower, whose frail seed sprouts in muddy water, the blossom of which, Buddhists believe, in its emergence from filthy origins, symbolizes spiritual awakening and the abandonment of all earthly attachment. I learned these facts off the back of a laminated menu, at some Hong Kong side street noodle shop, in what vibrates like a single halcyon day from a different man's life.

From the moment she stepped inside our living room, Jeffrey couldn't keep the gaze of his disbelieving eyes off her. As if he secretly imagined this China doll come to life were his real bar mitzvah gift, the jewel he'd carry with him into manhood instead of

the new stereo system and pile of anointed cash that would arrive later in a stack of congratulatory envelopes. A gift he must have felt was turning true, when a moment after they were introduced and modestly shook hands, she of the red dress, and the lotus flower bearing, full on tongue-kissed the boy for a good five seconds.

In the parlance of the seventh-grader, he would only ever get that visit to first base. Even as, for the next two nights, Harry and the lotus flower made a most earthly use of the boy's teenage bed, fucking away on my dime.

The plan was for Harry and his lotus blossom to stay at the house for two nights, then accompany my wife and me to a neighborhood New Year's party at Rapoport's house across the street. After that, they'd have a prepaid Manhattan hotel room all to themselves, then attend the bar mitzvah in the pulsing heart of Midtown on Saturday night. No need for them to come to the synagogue, I figured. Little need, if any, for anyone to come see what amounted to barely a fifteen-minute flirtation with the solemn bar mitzvahs I remembered as a kid. Even less of a need for anyone extraneous to bear witness as I performed my requisite stitch of butchered Hebrew. Meanwhile, all weekend, from New Year's Eve Wednesday through the waning minutes of the party just past midnight Sunday, I'd keep sneaking off to the bedroom, or bathroom, or a dark corner behind some wall, for a bump. Maybe two or three lines, when the need arose. For seventy-two hours my teeth ground and my hands felt as clammy and cold as a pair

of steakhouse sirloins on a defrost slab. If I slept three hours a night it was because of the never-ending current of liquor that washed down the powder.

Besides the stash I hid in the nightstand, I typically kept a small square mirror, and maybe a rolled bill or my little silver coke straw shaped like a Hoover upright, tucked under my side of the bed. It never even occurred to me that my wife might discover it, or maybe, deep-down, I secretly wanted her to. Give her one more reason to finally boot me to the curb. What I do remember is that the Saturday morning of Jeffrey's bar mitzvah, both a rolled-up hundred and that miniature Hoover were gone. Only the mirror, dusted white with coke residue, remained unmoved and without even a thumb smear across the glass. The baggie with my stash lay untouched at the back of the drawer, so just minutes before we all got in the car for Temple Beth Or, I locked myself inside the downstairs bathroom and took two bumps, one to clear each nostril.

We rode to the synagogue in my wife's Cadillac, a white El Dorado, while I sat stone faced and silent in the passenger's seat, muffling my cocaine sniffles as my son's eyes burned through his long black bangs and into my bare neck. Despite the deep freeze and the snow flurries, I wasn't wearing an overcoat, or even a scarf.

"Ready to go brew some Heebs, Dad?" he said from the seat behind his mother. As his two sisters giggled next to him, and I glanced over my shoulder at the blue glare of his eyes, I knew right then it was he who'd snatched that rolled-up and the coke straw. Not because he had any desire to snort a few lines of cocaine with his buddies, or buy anything necessary with that hundred besides cassette tapes or video game quarters at the pizzeria in town. And there was no chance, which he knew, probably even better than he

knew that this whole so-called bar mitzvah was a staggering fraud, that I'd ever accuse him of stealing keepsakes from my trove of drug paraphernalia. I could only imagine how that conversation might turn.

"Brewing Heebs, buddy," I said.

Eight hours later, in the early dark of a winter night, we were back in the Cadillac, driving through a steady snow, first down the Parkway, then across the George Washington Bridge and along the West Side Highway until we exited eastbound into Midtown toward the Excelsior Club. My son and both daughters each carried a backpack with a bathing suit and towel. During cocktail hour, they and all the other kids would be swimming in the club's pool, while eighty or so adults got lubed on champagne, liquor, or whatever other leaf, pill or powder they'd secretly toted inside pocket or purse. My own nestled eighth and backup spoon were on secure lockdown inside my suit jacket. Back home I'd already pulled two highballs of Dewars over ice and was looking forward to my third being a double.

On the way upstairs to the banquet room, the elevator stopped, and my father, attending the party alone, stepped inside the car from the building's lobby. He greeted me and smiled at my wife, who was standing next to me along the elevator's polished back wall. Wearing a navy woolen suit, his gray hair slicked, he stood nearly a head shorter than I, and was missing some yellowed side teeth when he smiled. My three kids

stood fidgeting by the button panel. They might not have even recognized their grandfather. I'm pretty certain the girls didn't.

"Dad," I said, as he shook my cold hand. I tapped my chest to make sure my stash was secure. I was nervous, but not because of him. I just wanted to be off that elevator, gripping my fresh double Dewars, surveying the party floor for my lanes of escape for when I needed a bump or a line.

"Hi Jeanette," he said to my wife.

The elevator doors closed and the car rose toward the upper floors. First the champagne room we'd reserved and then the rooftop indoor pool, a tiny reminder of summertime, for the thirty or so kids there.

Just as my father was about to turn and face the door, my wife said, "Aren't you going to say hello to your grandson? Your granddaughters?"

"Oh, *Jeffrey*," was all he said to the bar mitzvah boy, and handed him an envelope.

As the cocktail hour wound down, the band tuned up, and white-gloved waiters passed an array of hors d'oeuvres, the party, all fine-suited and evening-gowned, migrated slowly into the banquet room, where the crystal chandeliers were dimmed over a constellation of white-clothed round tables with massive flowered centerpieces. Midtown Manhattan's skyline hovered just outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, as the bandstand bordered a wide wooden dance floor where the party's emcee would soon dispense with stale jokes

and a hit parade of famous fun songs, party staples like Kool & the Gang's *Celebration* and *Birthday* by the Beatles. It was the kid's thirteenth birthday, after all.

After twenty minutes or so, the three kids' tables began to fill up, boys and girls, some of them with wet hair, sipping cokes and scarfing cocktail franks, but I didn't see Jeffrey anywhere. I gulped my fresh Dewars, poured double over ice, and imagined him, off somewhere quiet and private, showing that miniature Hoover and the hundred dollar bill to his friends, maybe trying to impress some pretty girls in party dresses with his illicit discovery. Then I looked around the room, at the fancy chandeliers, the white-gloved waiters hustling around the tables, the snow now falling heavier onto Manhattan, and I thought that maybe he really did bail. Simply set off with a couple of buddies, or maybe just one girl, into the cold city streets, off on some adventure he'd actually enjoy. I even tipped my glass to him, then took another sip of scotch and spied Harry and the lotus flower tucked away and smiling in their seats. My wife was mingling, a glass of champagne nestled in her hand.

Before I even had a chance to sit for dinner, a group of friends called me over to their huddle, tucked against a wall, a few tables away from the kids' tables. The stash and spoon and howls of laughter were already circulating when I joined them. If someone didn't know better, it might have looked like that group was plotting to take over the world, and some of us, myself included, with the power of God's powder coursing through our veins like white manna from heaven, might have even believed it.

As it turned out, I barely touched my own stash that night. In exchange for my top-shelf hospitality, my friends, a few of whom I never saw after that party, reciprocated

most kindly—in dark corners, bathroom stalls, even right out in the open, funneling the promise of immortality through our noses. Exactly how I was standing, half-hidden and halfway exposed, a piled spoon shoved up my left nostril, at the very second Jeffrey, now a bar mitzvahed *man*, walked into the ballroom and landed a vicious stare on me.

STAINED WEDDING

The night sky seems to taunt me, pointing a finger only I can feel, as if casting the judgment of God onto this body, one that shrinks by the second. With a heartbeat that struggles to kick in my chest, force life though my veins. A heart that's already failed, clinically, two separate times, and requires a scaffolding of pharmaceuticals to keep marching. A stack of VA hospital prescriptions, paid for by the US government, courtesy of its taxpayers, something I haven't been for almost twenty years. From whom I also receive a check—a direct deposit—like a blood-sucking, one hundred and sixty pound leach the first of every month.

A day that approaches, minute by agonizing hour. A turn of the calendar, three days off, for which I have no other use. But a day which can't ever arrive soon enough. A morning that will usher a trace of me back to life. A pitifully meager resurrection where I spend whole days with a full belly, buy quarts of discount beer and generic brand cigarettes, spend the next two or three weeks indoors, sharing a one-room efficiency with palmetto bugs, and watching cable TV, ESPN and the NFL delivered to me like room service. A refrigerator to chill beer and store leftovers. All but a mirage of luxuries until those funds shrivel to a few useless cents on my debit card. The last shreds of the way I once lived.

A wind cools the left side of my face, then mysteriously shifts to the right. For a moment all is still, but for the lapping waves and the whirr of an early morning flight from the international airport a few miles north, the first of the day, lifting eastbound into

the dawn and disappearing inside a cloud bank. Headed toward any one of a thousand cities. And I remember how it once felt—just to fly off…

To Hong Kong, Rio, Milan, to Honolulu and Bangkok. To Paris, Manila, Los Angeles and Rome. To Tokyo and Taipei more times than I could ever count, and a thousand touchdowns, easy, at New York's JFK. A little piece of me left on the ground after each take-off, some twinge of regret with every arrival.

If I dared to list everything I ever had, and lost, the things I once swore to live by and then abandoned, owned and then scrapped, I'm not sure how, or where, I'd begin. Which of them might grieve me most by their absence. Would it be the house, the cars, the three-continent business built then ditched as it got sucked under by a rip current of high living and bad management? The thieving little bald-head comptroller who didn't pay our taxes for five years, that son of a bitch. Or would it be the people, all the human souls I've run from, once they threatened to penetrate my cage?

Lying here now, at this dark and watery edge, just inches beyond the beached seaweed, decayed driftwood and the random dead jellyfish, it's impossible to say which of these cast-offs might sting most if I imagined I had them back. Would it be the first million-pair shoe I ever designed, the zeroes it created in the bank accounts, the same money I used to spoil myself and the ones I was supposed to love? The feel of my hands on a leather sport steering wheel, or the smile on the face sitting beside me in the passenger's seat? The high I'd get from a line of cocaine, versus the love I could have delivered with one authentic embrace, had I found the courage to give it? None of it matters, I guess. Like that airplane soaring through the sky, the steps we take across this

earth move in only one direction, even when our memories want to travel backwards. And knife the old scars open as they go.

A year or so ago my daughter, my youngest, the one I've almost never spoken to, not since she was a small child, got married. When she was a kid we'd nicknamed her *Newt,* and I never remember calling her anything else. I realize now that she hated me for never using her real name, but that she loathed me even more deeply for abandoning her mother, older brother and big sister, and especially her, just weeks before her eighth birthday. The backyard pool party her mother had been planning. The rest of her life she'd quite possibly started to imagine. With a *Daddy* who'd always occupy, for her, the fixed-star position of fidelity and stability. Whether she was eight, or eighteen, the deep freeze remained the same. From that moment I left forward, sass was the best gesture I could ever hope for from her. Outright scorn might be the worst.

I remember, on more than one occasion, times when I took the kids out for pizza, or a Jersey Shore weekend, I responded to one of her alternating moments of freeze and sass with a sudden, tongue-in-cheek: "Fuck you, Newt."

To which she replied: "Fuck you, Dad."

My son and other daughter would always chuckle at these exchanges, which eventually became shtick. Only there was maybe more truth in that banter than in any other conversation I've ever had.

***

Even though she was living in Atlanta, they held the wedding here in Florida. Right down the beach road actually, at this movie star-fancy resort with a golf course, an oceanfront high-rise hotel sculpted out of sapphire-blue glass. I was there, wearing the tuxedo they rented for me, with a fresh haircut and a prosthetic new front tooth to mask the black hole in my smile, but I wasn't a participant—not in the ceremony, certainly not in the check-writing or gift-giving. My ex-wife, now the irrepressible entrepreneur, paid for everything I needed to make myself black-tie presentable. She even paid my round-trip taxi fare to and from the room I was staying in at the time, some hundred-a-week roach hole on this degenerate strip of Federal Highway.

Jeffrey, who was in town the whole week, drove me for the haircut, tuxedo and my prosthetic tooth from the dental lab. Sweating through traffic and lurching from stoplight to stoplight, I kept turning up the rental car's air-conditioning full blast, and he'd it notch back down, trying to negotiate a temperature and fan speed to make us both comfortable. It was a non-smoking car, but with his permission I opened the window wide and exhaled my fumes into the Florida wind. For the first time in all the years, throughout every slow stage of my decline of which he'd watched but random scenes, I could feel a sense of his embarrassment, a shame he could barely conceal in bearing witness to a father who was sixty-two years-old, only helpless, penniless, and patched together in the name of respectability just for this single occasion. A man-child with a hole in his smile, where the left front tooth had decayed and fallen away. When the wedding was over, much like the fate of that tooth, he knew I'd simply vanish again.

In all confidence I say this, because for most of the drive he barely spoke, not even small talk, and couldn't look at me, let alone in the eye, for more than a fleeting and horrified instant.

Finally I said, "Are you surprised that I'm coming to the wedding?"

He steered the wheel with both hands, then reached over and notched the air-conditioning a tick cooler. "It's your daughter. You should be there."

"That's not what I asked you."

He didn't speak for what felt like hours, as we drove past strip malls, gas stations and random stores that flashed outside the car's windows like wheels spinning in a slot machine. One that promised no jackpot.

"You know there's going to be a lot of people there from a long time ago," he said.

"They'll all just want to talk about themselves."

He swung a right turn into the tuxedo store's parking lot and pulled the car into a space closest to front door not marked with a handicapped sign. Before he switched off the ignition, he said: "I guess I'm a little surprised."

The day of the wedding, I remember I got to the hotel early for photographs, a six-pack of convenience-store beer already in my bloodstream. I was that anxious. The south Florida afternoon was steamy, softly raining, a swell of deep sadness lodged in places I could not reach inside of me and snuff out like a spent cigarette butt. Those same clouds

swirling, as I stood there in that rented black suit, drinking top-shelf vodka cocktails I wasn't paying for, waiting to be herded into stilted poses and instructed to smile for pictures I would most likely never see. That I have still never seen, and know now I never will. All at once, I was an impostor, a ghost, a nearly forgotten god silently responsible, in some perversion of irony, for the whole scene unfolding before me. I stood at the far edge of every group shot and forced a fake smile each time the flashbulb lit. Through it all, the photographer snapped exactly one picture of my daughter and me, in what I realize now was a final memorial to that other world that once contained my life.

An hour or so later I'd forced myself numb. The liquor helped, but I had no choice. As I sat alone, nearly anonymous, at least insignificant in the crowd of 150, and watched my ex-wife and her second husband escort my daughter—the girl I'd only ever called *Newt*—down the aisle. She wore an angelic white gown that glowed with the same light and heat as the afternoon sun. Liz, my other daughter, was her maid of honor, my son standing tall among the six ushers that lined the altar. As the ceremony proceeded, and the rabbi and priest combination swapped sacred passages about fidelity and union and the ring as a symbol of eternity, my bladder ached to be relieved from the beer and vodka. Only since I couldn't escape across my row—to the men's room, or someplace even more invisible—I passed some spouts of gas to relieve the worst of the pressure. In the throes of my discomfort, and with the sense I'd stained the back of my shorts, I would miss the couple's anointing kiss.

The other thing I always remember about that wedding is a few minutes after the ceremony, at the bar, chatting with Rapoport during the cocktail and hors d'oeuvres hour. Rapoport and I had always been competitive, whether it was business or playing ping-pong in my basement, and I knew he'd recently sold his Manhattan buildings for nearly twenty million. At one time I knew he was jealous of me because I created things, and he merely sold stuff in his chain of sporting goods stores.

The pianist was playing, a female vocalist sang jazz that sounded like hymns, and Rapoport and I were sipping our drinks like on those summer days at my swimming pool, arguing Yankees and Mets virtues, or slamming Heineken-fueled overheads across the ping-pong table. He looked pretty much the same, just entirely bald now, clean-shaven, thin, dignified and elegant in a slim-fitting suit. Still, I needed to posture, speaking with eagerness, only not in the mold of a precocious child but to dispel the shame that seemed to be spewing from my pores. So I slapped him on the shoulder and said, with only the slightest hint of a vodka slur:

"You won't believe this, Rapoport, but I'm happier than you."

In that moment I glanced away and saw that Jeffrey was watching us. But instead of feeling chastened, I slithered into horseshit mode, lifting my chin like I was above the fine suits and evening gowns, the handcrafted hors d'oeuvres being passed on silver trays. As if I believed my self-imposed isolation, my persistent decline into indigence, wasn't a measure of failure but a radical statement of protest against the indulgences of modern life.

"You think I'm bullshitting you?" I added.

Rapoport swallowed the rest of his cocktail and smiled, it seemed, as if he had peeled away my façade and unearthed a kernel of truth. As if he were agreeing with my unlikely assessment of the trajectory of our lives, and the current résumés that measured those same lives in the discerning eyes of the world. In the end we were but two men: a pair of old friends, who, in the grand design, after the big city buildings and bloated bank accounts and all the other material tallies over which we obsess were stripped down to their unvarnished wood, understood—and mortally feared—the invariable wither each of us would endure. Mine had only happened sooner.

Or maybe behind that nod of agreement and that gentle smile I'd known through both my incarnations, he was simply saying: *Fool.*

As if on-cue, Jeffrey strolled over, glanced at me and patted Rapoport on the shoulder. He stood between us the way a boxing referee might wedge himself between two fighters. Only then he smiled.

"Kind of like the good old days," he said.

JUDGED

It's so late, but also terribly early. So much that even the nearest things seem far—the dawn, the sunrise, a single fried egg and sausage patty on white toast. Along with a small Diet Coke, no ice, that I'll buy in a few hours from the boardwalk pizza place, for a buck-ninety, with two of my wrinkled singles. Two of the eleven I have left, plus a jangle of pennies, nickels and dimes—maybe a quarter, or two—on the filthy bottom of my shoulder duffle. The last of my cash until my first-of-the-month deposit hits. Thankfully, what's left should last me.

Two months ago I didn't budget so well. Found myself with just thirteen cents and starving, wandering the aisles inside the giant Publix Supermarket on Sheridan Street, a fifteen minute walk from this patch of beach. Slowly roaming, I eyed boxes of Cheerios and Special K and Cinnamon Life, a whole aisle of cookies and crackers, the deli department lined with rotisserie chickens, a glass case full of sandwich meats, black and green olives and salads—macaroni, potato, egg—sold by the pound in plastic containers labeled with prices similar to what I might have once tipped a bartender for a round of cocktails. Past shelves loaded with breads, a cooler of pre-wrapped subs, a salad buffet, half of whose choices I couldn't recognize. Looking for anything that could be eaten right away, without needing a knife or fork. Across every row of the store I traipsed, desperate and nearly feral, sensing, the entire time, this secret set of eyes on me, as I coveted, most of all, a magic potion inside some hidden casement with the power to turn back time.

What I wound up stealing was a kaiser roll and a half-pound package of Oscar Meyer liverwurst, only half of which I ate outside, behind the store, before the police hauled me in for shoplifting, vagrancy, and trespassing. For some reason, before carting me off, the officer let me finish my sandwich. I thanked him for his kindness before he pushed me into the back of the cruiser.

The following morning, the Honorable Judge Greenblatt, glasses perched near the tip of her beaklike nose, asked me why I stole the liverwurst. I was nervous and filthy, but no longer quite as hungry since they'd fed me in the cell. Standing slumped in front of the bench, I wore cargo shorts, flip flops, and a wrinkled black Hawaiian-style button-down, loose-fitting and open at the neck, the best and least wrinkled thing I could muster out of my duffle bag.

"Because I was hungry, your honor."

"You have no home, Mr. Weinrip?"

"Sometimes I stay in motels, your honor."

"You have no family, Mr. Weinrip?"

I stared at my feet but could not manage a reply

"Nobody who might help you?"

Again I couldn't answer.

Judge Greenblatt looked down at me from her perch of justice, her scolding eyes tempered only by the thickness of her lenses fixed inside their stylish black frames. Of all the judges I might have wound up facing that morning, as a nearly-homeless man who stole a package of liverwurst and a kaiser roll— a man who'd lost his family, his home,

his business and millions of dollars, his every defining element of self—every last shred of fucking dignity—what concerned me most, embarrassed me most, shamed the very depths of my soul, was not that this Judge Greenblatt was a woman, or even near my own age and, by the sound of her voice, a New Yorker, but that she was, by all indications, and by the reverberations of her surname, a Jew. A member of my so-called tribe. A sacred compatriot equal to me on that elemental level of privileged heritage, and yet one chosen, somehow, to cast the harshest of judgments, one in no way associated with the straightforward law I'd broken. One I'd violated out of necessity, but that was totally besides the point. It couldn't be any more simple: *Thou shalt not steal.*

"Mr. Weinrip, please look at me and not at the floor."

I glanced at the judge and then quickly away, at the American flag over her right shoulder, the Great Seal of the State of Florida adorning the back wall behind her, the pistol-packing Latino bailiff with the shaved head standing silent ten feet to my left, then back at Judge Greenblatt, and I closed my eyes. Knowing full well that, in some way, through some old friend, or a child's friend, or the cousin of a friend of some long-severed associate, by some short degree of separation, our circles could have been connected. That in another life, along a very different road, this very same judge and I could have crossed paths—at a little league game, a bar mitzvah, a dinner-party at the home of a mutual acquaintance—and everyone I'd ever known, each face I'd now be ashamed to confront from that other life, was embodied in her bearing and disapproval.

"You might have gone to a shelter, Mr. Weinrip. They would have fed you there and saved yourself quite a bit of trouble."

I stared back at my toes, bare and cold and aching in the courtroom air-conditioning, the nails uncut and curled yellowed with fungus. My only reply might have been to explain to this judge that I would rather spend the rest of my life on this tiny patch of beach, than stay even a single night in a homeless shelter. That a place like *that* was no place for people like *us*.

Instead I said nothing.

"For one year, Mr. Weinrip, you may not step inside, or be found on the property, of the Sheridan Street Publix supermarket."

"Yes, your honor."

"I don't ever want to see you in my courtroom again, Mr. Weinrip. Do you understand me?"

"I do, your honor."

And just like that I was free to go. Back to my strip of sand.

SACRED FARE

I guess the last thing even close to a paying job that I had—besides three times smuggling oxycontin pills on overnight flights to Amsterdam, thousands of them surgical-taped all over my body—was driving a taxi cab on Miami Beach. Sometimes on busy weekends, if I didn't park and nap a few hours in the back seat, I could pull in a hundred dollars, maybe one-fifty. Most of it coming from airport runs, or party kids on South Beach, club-hopping by taxi up or down Collins Avenue, Ocean Drive or Washington. Occasionally some half-drunk guy in a tight black t-shirt and sporting a fancy watch might even pass me a fifty or a hundred and then just hop out of the cab after his sexy little girl-treat, either forgetting his change or pretending to be some high roller. In guys like that I always recognized parts of my ancient self. *Can't bullshit a bullshitter*, I've always said. I should have branded that line when I had the chance.

Mostly the job sucked, particularly battling the Miami traffic, beach traffic, and the cars, more times than not, had shit air-conditioning and drivers' seats that wrenched your lower back into throbbing pulp. For most of the ten- to twelve-hour shift, my ass and back and thighs would sweat and stick to the worn vinyl of the seat. Paying for gas was no grand prize, and three quarters of the time on call behind the wheel I remained aware that I was still the son of a man who ran a small fleet of New York City taxi medallions. That I was of a people who owned the fucking cars, not drove them for meter clicks and people's extra nickels.

One night I remember best from my cab-driving times eight or nine years back was this ridiculously hot and humid September night, even by Miami standards. As usual, I was stuck to the seat, and *motherfuckering* the traffic, smoking one cigarette after another down to the filter, when the dispatcher broke in on the radio for a pick-up at the orthodox synagogue a couple of blocks off Alton Road. I mean the black-hats-and-long-black-overcoat-even-on-hottest-Miami-day-ever orthodox. Guys with side curls and bird nest beards, whose body stink I'd be able to smell all the way through the partition. I could never figure out how they walked around south Florida dressed for January in Minnesota.

"Roger that," I chirped into the radio. Putrid tip, I figured. If any tip at all.

Five minutes later I pulled up in front of the synagogue and two guys, dressed and looking basically as I first imagined, climbed into the cab. The older one, with a mostly gray beard, spoke the address in a firm voice with a New York Yiddish accent. Even with my eyes closed I would have recognized him as a Jew. Best I could tell, there was nothing about my face or graying-blonde hair or faded Hawaiian shirt that easily identified me as one. With these kinds of super-Jews, and their wrath-of-God attitude of superiority, I preferred it that way. I didn't need them to point out that I was a sinner.

I set the meter, said "You got it, guys," and swung a u-turn northbound toward their destination. That's when I realized my photo and name—*Larry Weinrip*—were posted on my ID badge below the meter. Immediately I began fiddling with the A/C vent and the FM radio, hoping to keep my face, but particularly my name, concealed.

We were heading up Pine Tree Drive, a divided four-lane lined with mansions, one more obscene and opulent than the next, when the younger one leaned into the partition slider, which I'd forgotten to close after my last fare paid. I could see him hovering there in the rearview mirror, and for an instant our eyes met. Even after I looked away, I could still feel his gaze burning on my back as I drove. My face and name on the badge lighting-up like a theater marquee each time the cab rode under a streetlamp or caught the glare of headlights from a car behind us.

"What's up, guy?" I said. I felt like quick-slamming the slider shut, but I was too polite, too reliant on the job and its meager stream of cash, to risk any significant customer complaints. "You need something, buddy?"

"Weinrip's your last name?" He pronounced the *W* like a *V*.

Jesus, I thought. *Here it comes.*

I hesitated as I slowed the cab to a stop at a four-way. "Yes." I was hoping the conversation would end there.

"You Jewish, Weinrip?" He sounded borderline ecstatic as he asked.

At first I didn't know how to answer, or if I even should. I certainly wouldn't measure as a Jew in a line-up beside these two guys. And was it really any of their goddamned business, this pair of fucking twelfth-century *kockers* in sweaty overcoats*?*

"Yes," I said and accelerated through the stop sign after a BMW and a Jaguar navigated the intersection first and disappeared on their fancy-ass way.

"Larry Weinrip," he said, his voice melodious with approval.

I glanced again in the rearview and could still see his thin bearded face, the oversized black yarmulke that stretched like a crown from his hairline and covered the entire top of his head. He might have been bald or shaved on top, like I'd seen with lots of these guys, but it was hard to tell in the half-darkness. One thing I've always been proud of was the full-sprout of dirty-blonde hair that covered my own crown.

"Larry Weinrip, that's me." I made sure to pronounce my *W* the regular way.

Just then the other guy, with the nearly all-gray beard, chimed in. "You have a Jewish—a Hebrew name, Weinrip?"

"I already told you I'm Jewish."

"Not a family name, a given name. The name how they called you at your bar mitzvah."

I was driving now at a near-crawl, in the left lane, while a three-car parade—a Mercedes, an Audi, and a Range Rover—all zoomed past us on the right. Their red taillights glowing like demon eyes.

"I remember my bar mitzvah!" I said, trying now to impress them, to somehow measure up. I was wearing shorts and could feel the back of my thighs sticking tighter to the vinyl seat.

"And so you have a Jewish name," the older guy said.

"Yes, it's Lazar."

"Lazar," the younger one said. Now that he'd gotten my attention, he reclined back onto his side of the back seat. "Do you know what this name means?"

Without hesitation, I said: "The one that God has helped." Soon as I spoke the words I thought of the places I'd been, the place I was right now and where I was headed. If any signs remained that I'd ever been helped by God— even but a single time. More than anything, I wanted to light a cigarette, but the dispatch didn't allow us to smoke with fares in the car. Forget losing this shitty job, smoking with these two in the cab would have brought even more plague down onto my bones.

"So you have studied, Lazar," the older man said.

"I've just always known what the name means. Since I was young."

"I mean studied the *Torah*, Lazar."

"Not really. A little bit, as a kid in Hebrew school."

By now we'd passed 31st Street and were less than ten minutes from their drop-off a little beyond forty-seventh, something I was looking forward to, but also hoping wouldn't arrive too soon. I didn't know why. Usually I wanted my fares gone and have some time alone until the dispatcher called, to nap or smoke or stop for a Diet Coke, or until I decided to cruise the South Beach avenues for pick-ups. With these guys, I suddenly felt attached, connected somehow. Like we were but three green leaves growing on God's massive Jew tree.

"Probably forty, forty-five years ago," I said.

The younger one with the wide yarmulke peeked back through the partition. I could see a slice of his face in the rearview, but I could feel his earnest eyes probing, as if my lot behind the wheel of this Miami Beach cab were of gravest concern. "Did you ever do *tefillin*, Lazar?"

"Never."

"Never, Lazar?"

"Not even once."

"*Tefillin* is a very good thing," the older one said. "For the heart of a man, and for his mind. To create balance."

"Would you like to do *tefillin* with us, Lazar?" the younger one asked.

At first I thought he was joking, but I knew *tefillin* wasn't a topic men like these would ever joke about. Then I imagined myself with those little leather-wrapped square boxes around my arm and attached to my forehead, bobbing forward and back as I prayed beyond my upheld hands. I couldn't believe I would even consider *davening* with these guys.

Then again, I needed any help I could get.

"Right here in the cab?" I asked. By now my legs were soaked with sweat.

"Pull to the side. We're in no rush."

Up ahead I could see the spread of traffic lights at 41st Street, a Chevron gas station to the left, a lit-up Walgreen's sign marking the entrance to their parking lot to the right. Palm trees swayed in the breeze, blowing off the ocean a few blocks east. For a second I focused on the tallest one and thought about Jerusalem, even though I'd never been to Israel. Since I was a Jew, even a failed one, I knew I could travel there any time I wanted and they'd welcome me.

The Holy Land, filled with guys like the two sitting in the back of my cab, and maybe even guys like me.

"All right," I said.

"Drive into the Walgreen's here," the older one said. "And park somewhere away from other cars."

"Keep the meter running," said the younger guy. "It's ok with us."

I couldn't believe I was obeying, but I parked in a far corner of the lot, against a hedge of tall ficus trees, and kept the meter ticking and the engine running. We all got out of the car and gathered by the driver's side door where the hedges met at a right angle. Both men left their overcoats in the back of the cab and were now only wearing white dress shirts and black vests, their sleeves rolled past their forearms. Except for their yarmulkes and the prayer shawl fringes streaming out from the gap between their shirts and trousers, they could have passed for bearded banquet waiters. Best I could tell there wasn't a single dot of sweat soaking though either of their white shirts.

As I stood there in my shorts and sandals, happy to feel some air on my sweaty thighs, I realized I needed to piss. I'd sucked down two Diet Cokes in the past three hours, and I reeked of sweat and nicotine.

"Give me your arm, Lazar," the older guy said. Without my even moving he gently grabbed my left arm and pressed a Hebrew-lettered wooden box to the inside of my biceps. Next he started wrapping the leather strap around my elbow, down my forearm, then in a weave around my left hand and fingers. He prayed as he assembled the arm *tefillin,* then quickly attached a similar black box, with a shorter leather strap, to the top of my forehead, pressed into my thick tuft of hair.

As the older man continued to chant his ancient prayer, the younger one told me to pray. To thank the one God for delivering me and redeeming me. Pleasant thoughts I repeated to myself, in simple English, as I bobbed like a skinny palm tree in a hurricane wind, needing like hell to piss, and smelling the stench of my own skin. After a short time with my eyes closed, I managed to forget these things—and a lot other things, too.

"The breeze feels cool," I said.

"*HaShem,*" a voice replied. I wasn't sure whose.

All these years later, as I lie here on this sand, and remember that night, I will forever swear, down to my bones, that each *tefillin* just materialized in the older man's hands. One at a time, they just—*became*. Maybe it was disbelief or even holy terror that was blinding me, but I can't ever recall either of those guys opening a satchel or sacred trove. Those little boxes just appeared, ready for my skin and skull. Meant solely for me as I swayed in the breeze and prayed for even one better day.

Soon as we finished, each *tefillin* stripped away, the three of us climbed back inside the cab without speaking. I gently closed my door. Compared to the heat of the night, the car now seemed refreshingly cool, those vinyl seats a little less sticky. I could even wait a few more minutes to relieve my bladder, find a free john right after I delivered my kind shepherds to their destination. I still had a good four hours to drive that night.

"Goodbye, Lazar," they said when we reached their place, and paid their fare with a pair of twenties. They told me to keep the change.

LANDED SOUTH

So another month is ending, blocks on the calendar dissolving. Yet on this cool sand, by this dark expanse of water, the moon now vanished in the sky behind me, I remain planted. As if I have a choice.

For a man who once appeared to have aced every barometer of the great American victory test, it's not as if I accepted defeat as a single lightning bolt that topples a tree. I didn't just strike the bottom of the quarry, break apart and surrender. At one time I saw Florida as my salvation, the place to resurrect myself as the man everyone knew me to be. And expected, most sincerely, that I would become again. After the almost-welcome month I spent in that cocaine sanitarium; after the battles, resentments and bitterness of the divorce; after my once-trailblazing business crumbled—from cruel competition, from mismanagement, from that sneaky cocksucker of a comptroller's decade of camouflaged thievery; after five years living with and splitting from a woman half my age, a bartender from a Midtown pub near the Manhattan condo I once rented at 30th & Park, I decided to journey south. Become the proverbial wandering Jew. On some cellular level I considered it destiny.

Without a home, with only my share of the money from the mortgaged 6-bedroom house, and the copper Mercedes 450 SL I'd originally bought in Taipei and freighted back to New York, I drove I-95 for 1300 miles into the warming sunshine. With some vague sense of freedom and excitement, liberated from the counterweights of responsibility, corporate partnership, and being a so-called *good* husband and father, I

headed for Miami. The long State of Florida. Land of palm trees and turquoise waters, boob jobs and face lifts, and the trove of scars hidden by countless human reinventions—cosmetic, or otherwise. A place, when viewed from space or the map that lay beside me on the passenger's seat, that seems like a massive phallus wedged into the warm convergence of the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea. On the southeastern tip of which I now lie in the muggy November sand. Little wonder Ponce de Léon believed he would find the Fountain of Youth on this five hundred-mile peninsula, or deSoto his elusive gold. But still a place that might fuck you. Or, more accurately, will—by the hand of man, or God, or self. I had a bank account worth $40,000, no plan or even a logbook of ideas, and barely a stitch of safety net if—or when—it all crumbled.

I drove that copper Benz from chilly Jersey, with the convertible top down all the way from North Carolina, and moved into my sister's house, a vast and sunny one-level perched on a wide inlet at the eastern edge of Biscayne Bay. A massive empty nest decorated with art and antiques, an ebony grand piano in the great room, full-on views of the rippling water from floor-to-ceiling windows spread along the back of the house. Nights I slept in the room that was the childhood bedroom of my nephew, who by that time was married and the father of a son and daughter, but who, as a kid, basically worshipped his cool young uncle, the amazing Uncle Larry from New York, who traveled to Europe and the islands with his pretty wife Jeanette, who could talk baseball and football like a television expert, and cracked raunchy jokes whenever he visited. Loved me for every possible reason that any of us love our favorite uncle. A man whose eyes would strain to recognize me now.

Two months into my new Florida life, I remained lost and rudderless, striding on a creaky treadmill that traveled nowhere. Bestowed with an endless loop of ideas in my head, each of which glowed for a few promising moments before quickly fading to black. Then on a cool morning, just past dawn, as the pink sky brightened, I was sitting out on the small wooden dock, smoking my first cigarette of the day. My fishing rod, one I'd bought at this salty anglers' shack off the 79th Street Causeway, stood upright against the side rail. I sat in a white plastic deck chair, my face welcoming, after many weeks of relentless heat, a cool north breeze from Canada. I was barefoot, shoeless, my feet and hands cold, and my chest ached from many thousands more cigarette coughs than my ribs could comfortably bear. In front of me, for miles to the left and right, the bay's murky green waters spread like paths to new worlds. Only I couldn't see even six inches into their depths. Couldn't see the shimmer of a single fish, or even the pod of porpoises I'd already spied arching over the water a few other mornings.

I didn't realize it then, but I understand it fully now, that I was out on that dock, beside that similarly unfathomable water, looking for a sign, an omen. For an answer to shine down like some divine spot beam lasering through the clouds, and point me in a precise new direction. I might have even mouthed a prayer as I smoked.

I lit a fresh cigarette from the burnt stub of the old, and sucked a long breath of smoke without, for once, exhaling with a violent cough. Cigarette dangling from my mouth, I knotted a shiny chrome lure onto the end of the line and cast ten yards into the water. The line angled from the tip of the rod, speared the surface and trolled unseen into the depths, the lure plunging into sand at the cold, dark bottom.

Sitting there alone, waiting for some aroused and animate thing to nibble, or even snap the line, I wondered about the long and littered path that had now deposited me on this creaky wooden dock, perched above that choppy water stretching into the sea. A stiffer breeze blew cool out of the north, slapped against my face and fastened me to the chair. In some oddly serpent-like way I'd shed most of my old skin. Gone was the illusion of *husband,* the disconsolations of being a failed *partner,* and every appendage of *father.* Only instead of growing larger, stronger, more supple and more elastic in helping me navigate the world I now inhabited, this new skin already felt worn and weighted, suffocating, heavier than a lead suit.

For a moment I glanced at the vast back side of my sister's house, the wall of darkened windows that separated me from the inside, the set of French doors that opened onto the patio and the pool, all of which had stood there thirty-odd years earlier, during a warm Florida Christmas-time. My wife, son, and I were visiting for the holidays. All week long, *American Pie* kept playing like a mantra on the radio. The boy was not yet two, and I held him in the pool with me, bobbing in the cool, chest-deep water. My brother-in-law stood beside us near the shallow-end steps. It all started out as fun, my young son giggling as we tossed him between us. Four or five times he flew before my hands, slippery with chlorine and suntan oil, lost their grip on him and he went under, tiny mouth agape, his terrified eyes gazing up at me as he plunged. Just as quickly I pulled him out, but he was already wailing, hysterical and trembling.

By then, my wife had rushed over from her sun chaise. She reached out over the water and grabbed the crying boy with angry hands. "Do you have to be so goddamned

stupid?" Her glare could have severed my skull. "For Christ's sake, Larry, he's only two."

I didn't catch a single fish that morning, landed precious few over many a morning out on that dock. One time I caught an eighteen inch snook, a couple of yellowtails another day out in a drizzle, a small and sickly barracuda with a severed pectoral fin, its lean silver body barely the length of my forearm, its toothy underbite still fearsome but mostly harmless. Most of the time I just sat out there and smoked on an empty stomach, waiting usually until noontime to scramble some eggs or drive to McDonald's, or for a submarine sandwich, a few slices of pizza and a Coke, to float me until dinnertime. Meanwhile, my $40,000 bank account was hemorrhaging from cigarettes and six-packs, and nightly dinners at restaurant bars along Collins Avenue or the causeway. The occasional jaunt I took to Pure Platinum for a $50 lap dance from some cosmetically enhanced little treat. All of it, somehow, bearing some faint resemblance to my one-time pleasure tours of Asia.

But that same cool and cloudy morning, as this parasitic worm of anxiety began to gnaw at my empty stomach, and those bay waters looked as dark as the days that spread ahead of me on an ever more meaningless calendar, I became convinced that I had received a sign—an omen. The inspiration I'd been searching for, waiting for, and for which I'd even prayed. As I reeled in the empty lure, I began to think, unexpectedly, about my mother—feel her presence in the cool air, she who'd been gone three years. I

remembered her thin and graceful fingers and how they might have painted the convergence of rippling water and eerie gray sky before me, the wind-whipped palm fronds that shimmied along the far shores, the bands of light that filtered through layers of dark cloud. On the nearly cold wind I could feel the displeasure that could have formed on her pouty lips, the degree to which that scene, in its turmoil and foreboding beauty, mirrored the slow decay of my own life and spirit. My half-speed free-fall that pained her to witness from realms unseen….

Her face inside my mind and memory was fleeting, but lasted long enough to deliver me my last best idea. One I'd bring to the world, and, at the same time, carry me back to spoils and graces I'd once known. The sudden inspiration that I should design a funky little flipflop created especially for the millions of Florida tourists. A whole new line of specialty shoes, mementos for the barefooted and the beachgoer, featuring little rubber mosaics of angelfish and toucans, and the unmistakable map of the Sunshine State itself, inlaid like a constellation of colorful jewels into the insole. Future bestsellers, I suddenly believed in my core, at the thousands of beachside and boardwalk stores lining Florida's three coasts.

And gems they were. Fashioned out of sleek rubber, colored in cool black, ocean turquoise, and parrot-feather red. Foot Flops, I called them, some of which were sold at these same shops less than fifty yards behind me, and dozens of stores, just like them, from Daytona to Key West, Tampa to South Beach. All until that hurricane night the gods unleashed—on Florida, me and my last great hope. A South Miami warehouse holding thousands and thousands of sandals wiped out between midnight and dawn by

200 mile-per-hour winds, a storm like some massive fist fuck that tore the bloodied hole right out of my ass.

I light a cigarette against the breeze and gaze across the same waters that carried that hurricane, this place, on the edge of nowhere, where the sands feel even colder now, the morning even longer hours off, the gnawing inside my gut an echo of my empty pockets. Here where the sum of every column totals zero.

COULD HAVE, WOULD HAVE, SHOULD HAVE

Nights like these I wonder what might have been. If I'd never set down my paint brushes forever, never let the pretty green-eyed girl from that Paterson, New Jersey, dance drive my '57 Thunderbird. Never snorted that maiden line of cocaine, and the many thousands after it, until my sinuses rotted, my sense of smell and taste obliterated. If I'd first gone to work in a clothing store, rather than a shoe store, and spent my best days designing shirts and jeans instead of loafers and boots. If that battering ram of violent clouds had spun a different course, demolished in but an hour or two the merchandise from some other loaded warehouse, scattering the bones and blood of another eggshell being. If I'd never succeeded in convincing myself that knife-plunge of a hurricane was exactly the fate I deserved. Because, deep down, I always believed I never deserved a single shred of anything in the first place.

Landed here, beside these waves, at this convergence of land and sea, I'm free to wonder why I never took a job as a design consultant for a few days a month, or even a head designer position, with any of my former competitors: Steve Madden, Kenneth Cole, Johnston & Murphy—any of whom would have swung open their doors for me, laid out a diamond-studded welcome mat, slit the others' throats to bring me in. To have in their ranks the vision and prescience I'd always had about the direction of style and trends in the industry. The first designer to put hiking boot treads on sneakers, that was me. A lug sole on a wing tip, a dress casual huarache sandal, fake leather loafers that

looked and felt so authentic they even smelled like cowhide. These were all mine, too. Now you see those kinds of shoes on mens' feet everywhere.

Sometimes those same thoughts spiral me even deeper down. To where it's a dozen years ago, I'm recently divorced and just as wayward, and even though my business has collapsed, I don't run off and hide in an off-season Jersey Shore rental, smoking three packs a day and drinking quarts of Absolut Vodka, eating mostly McDonald's and Italian takeout, and watching television sports from the sofa. Instead of breaking down, I stand tall and face the fire with my one-time partner, digest the agony, the embarrassment and shame and, despite my colossal failure and incomparable loss, I soldier forward, undaunted, and remain at the core of the industry I know and love, and where I'd made my mark. The world where I'm both admired and respected, and my designs are precious currency. Continue the work I'd always done with my singular talent, only without any of the pressures of owning the company—management, administration, finances, of trying to sleep a few good hours at night under the unrelenting pressure of a fifty-million dollar beast. Instead of cowering, I reach boldly to my dozens of contacts, guys who've helped make me as rich as I made them, and endure their condolences about the bankruptcy, before I cooly suggest how fantastic it would be to work together on a new line. Something that will blow away everyone from Payless to Bloomingdale's. That we'll sell millions of pairs of shoes together, and these guys who know and love me will buy right in to my pitch, because I'd already sold tens of millions of pairs in a consumer world that was anything but fantasy. And from one of those conversations, with all the industry's best and most prescient and talented, I accept my

top choice to work with, and without even the slightest blink of an eyelid they pay me a hundred and fifty grand a year, plus a generous royalty, to design their shoes. They send me, all expenses paid, on research trips to Milan and Paris and to their factories, and to my favorite whorehouses in the Philippines, Taiwan and the Mainland and, as promised, we do sell many millions of pairs. Sell that many, and even more, with each new line I create. Then after five or six stratospheric seasons, the company offers me a modest partnership, ten or fifteen percent to ensure my loyalty, but we continue to grow and solidify the brand, and improve the lines, until one of the corporate monsters swoops in and acquires us for nine figures. I retire at fifty-eight, optimistic and healthy, and parked with assets close to twenty-million.

In my best days, when my real life approximated the fantasy—when my company grossed untold millions each year, before the cocaine fully strangled—I used to listen to this one Lou Rawls album. I'd play the tape over and over in the car and the living room stereo, his voice like a gentle massage. Of all the songs on that album, the one I liked best, and always sung, the only one I still remember is "*If I coulda, woulda, shoulda."* It's about losing a woman, the bad decisions that led to that loss, and even years before I would lose everything myself those lyrics, strangely, became a kind of mantra. As if I were anticipating the lost and broken man I would become.

If I coulda woulda shoulda, that's what folks always say
If I coulda woulda shoulda, and it's always too late…
You know there comes a time in everybody's life
When they make that statement:
"If I would have just."

Or "I could have just."
Or the bottom line is "I should have just."
And you always wind up on the outside lookin' in.

Down inside the rabbit hole, in the alternate reality of this eminently plausible life I might otherwise have lived, I've never landed on this beach, of course—not, most certainly, in the manner in which I currently do. In the wake of seismically different choices, a few simple phone calls I never dared make in real life, I now have a Manhattan condo just a few blocks from Midtown, and a second house by the beach rather than this ragged blanket. Both homes have a quiet studio for me to set up an easel and paint. Each has a large, professionally maintained saltwater aquarium, widescreen TVs and vast outdoor spaces, and even though the divorce still tastes bitter on parts of the tongue, my kids and I have overcome the trauma of those storm-filled years. From the addictions I've struggled with and bested, to the deep love I've discovered and brought to surface. I take Caribbean and European vacations with them, set up trusts for them and their future children, embody a certain pillar of wisdom, a ballast of fidelity and stability, against the perplexing labyrinths that may be their lives. To put it most simply, I evolve into a man.

My son Jeffrey told me a story once, maybe ten years ago. Sometimes when I start thinking about it, I can't stop because it hurts, like the dull throb of an open wound. Or, better, one that defies healing and stings deeper each time the scab is torn loose.

The kid was living on South Beach, and after the hurricane demolished the warehouse, he worked for a short time as a bartender at the Fisher Island Club, a private island with a five-star hotel and multi-million dollar condominiums, a sub-tropical paradise that can only be accessed by car ferry, yacht, helicopter or seaplane. The kind of place where, according to Jeffrey, one of the full-time residents had a million-dollar condo just for his three military-trained German Shepherds. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts, he pulled draft beers and blended piña coladas at a wind-swept tiki hut. A locals watering hole, of sorts, where barefoot men in bathing suits, some with ten-figure bank accounts, puffed Cuban cigars and sipped Absolut martinis while jousting one another with the limp pricks they still held in such staggeringly high regard.

After moving south from New York and spending a year with me in Foot Flops, then watching it sink, the kid loved his new job. Jeffrey would tell me about it, with only the faintest whiff of condescension—real, or what I might have imagined. He loved working with an ocean view. Loved being the booze-pouring confidant to millionaires and billionaires, their sometime hundred-dollar tips, and other little perks like working parties on their yachts, or holiday bashes in their condos. Loved, more than anything, getting to flirt with the array of rich and beautiful women showing off their personal trainer-sleek bodies wrapped in minuscule bikinis.

And after all the promises I made to him about Foot Flops—after convincing him to move to Florida after college and be the vice-president of this new venture, and how we'd grow it big like my first business, and be rich all over again—I think he loved his newfound independence from me best of all.

One night, a guy I knew from my shoe business days, Ed Torini, sat down at Jeffrey's bar and started chatting, just the usual bartender-customer smalltalk over a couple of rounds of Chivas Regal on the rocks. It was summertime, an off-season shift, so they were alone as dusk faded into a moonless Miami night. At the time, Jeffrey had no idea who Ed was or what business he was in or that this gracious new customer knew his father from the very best of days. His old man who was now living in motel room on Collins Avenue, scraping it out, hand-to-mouth, driving a cab around Miami. To him, this guy Ed was just a friendly face with slicked back hair, wearing an elegant white shirt for a night out on South Beach.

As a conversation starter, my son asked Ed what kind of business he was in, the kind of easy banter that would often earn the kid an overflow of tips each night. Afforded him enough to rent an ocean-view apartment and lease a Japanese sports car. It's also the dark part of the story that makes that unhealed wound ache even worse.

"The shoe business," Ed told him.

"My father's in the shoe business."

Technically this was true, even in the present tense, since I'd salvaged five hundred or so pairs of sandals after the hurricane, and I'd still drop off a few pair to one of those beachside stores. I kept boxes of sandals stacked in that motel room closet and a pile of loose pairs in the trunk of the car I later abandoned. In the process I made a bit of extra cash.

"What's your father's name? I probably know him." The shoe business, with its conventions and trade shows, with most of its manufacturing limited to a few countries

around the globe was, for the most part, its own universe. For a long time, I operated in its very center, if not as its guiding star as a major planet.

"Larry Weinrip," Jeffrey told him.

"Your *father's* Larry Weinrip!"

"He is."

"Your father's a really talented guy."

A few minutes later, the rest of Ed's party arrived, and as he urged them to order drinks, he pointed to my son and showered down a cascade of acclaim as if the kid deserved some hereditary renown.

"Did you know this guy's father is one of the most talented guys in the shoe business?"

For years I had heard the accolades bestowed on me by my shoe business peers, had read the praise for my name and work far more than once in the pages of *The Footwear News,* the industry standard-bearer. But to hear these words, this story, coming off my son's tongue, and set at a million-dollar bar, felt like the final validation of my ticket to the bottom. The proverbial final nail of the coffin waiting only to be hammered shut.

"A genius," Ed added, to all his guests. "A real genius." And as Jeffrey told me this story, I couldn't help but remember the time, when the kid was two or three, and he took a shit inside one of the shoes in my closet. How in the moment I wanted to strangle him. I'd always believed stories like that were supposed to get funnier with time.

For a long moment now I don't feel the wind. No shifting sands that pack beneath my body, no permanence underneath bone. I feel only the deep abyss inside, the festering burn. A lack of breath that interrupts until I cough things back into place.

Was, is what he really meant. A genius *once*.

FOOT FLOP

Here in the hours before dawn, before even a hint of pink strung along the horizon, I can still feel the encroaching menace of a new day. The vicious shock of contact that old terrors stir inside me. Now on the trace of morning breeze, faint as a howl miles off, comes a single thought—a persistent thorn, lodged in unreachable flesh, a torment that always remains. One from which I never manage to shake myself free….

That the man I was, and lost, had been discarded by my own hand. That he would never again be found.

A grim sense I could intuit, one echoing in my heartbeats, even as Foot Flops, Inc. was conceived that morning out on the dock behind my sister's house. I could feel it during my trip to Hong Kong to create that first run of samples. I knew it even before my son joined me in Florida, just months after his college graduation, to be the startup's vice-president and salesman, positions for which he had not a shred of relevant experience. I could, somehow, even sense it, a year before that wrecking-ball of a hurricane demolished $100,000 of uninsured inventory and the slippery slope of confidence I already struggled to scale. As if some insidious force weighted my every action with a sense of impending doom that would deliver these bones to their rightful place upon this sand.

I remember this one morning, about a year before the hurricane, and I've ordered my son Jeffrey to report to work at 8 a.m., to my sister's house on Miami Beach, the so-called American headquarters for Foot Flops, Inc. In a wishful nod to the international

businessman I still fancy myself to be—or yearn to be again—the business card I designed in the shape of a foot lists both *Miami* and *Hong Kong* as the company's headquarters. I've had 500 of the cards printed for myself that read *Larry Weinrip, President,* and another box for my son with *Jeff Weinrip, Vice-President.* The cards are eye-catching and unique and would certainly make a credible impression on a buyer or a store owner. If only the cards represented a functioning company with offices on both American and Asian soil, instead of the TV room end table, littered with my sketches, notes and business cards, an ashtray overflowing with gnarled cigarette butts.

On this morning, like most others, I'm dressed in running shorts, a tanktop, and a sample pair of flip flops I now wear like a not-so-subtle advertisement for this convulsing little venture. Only like many of the days when I should be working in a thousand different ways to build this final lifeline, I'm waiting for Jeffrey outside, in the glass-walled atrium, a tiny oasis at the center of the house, where I sit on the ledge of the stone wall that holds the fishpond. Above me, a few streaks of sunlight finger through the palm tree growing out the atrium's open-air top, but mostly I'm sitting in damp shade, peering into the pool of two foot-deep water. Since I have no real home to set up an aquarium and watch fish through properly illuminated glass, this murky pond out in the ripe Florida humidity is the best facsimile I can manage to rekindle the one genuine boyhood interest I've carried with me.

As I wait, I listen to the waterfall trickle down the landscaped rocks and gaze at the rippling surface of the pond, looking for any of the tropical fish I bought a few days earlier from an aquarium store on Biscayne Boulevard. There should be four Jack

Dempseys, four red tiger oscars, and a channel catfish in there among the algae-lined rocks, but now I can't see a single one of the pond's new inhabitants, even after tossing in a few food pellets, too many of which will foul the water and slowly kill the fish.

I'm encouraged when something lumbering and black drifts from the rocks and gulps a couple of the pellets, then mildly thrilled when a different dark body streaks from a cave and swallows a piece of sinking food. After another second or two, the pond seems empty again.

I glance at my watch and it's 8:05. Jeffrey still isn't here, and I'm annoyed but hardly close to pissed, as both his father and his boss, that he's ignored my directive to come early. No matter if he lives nearly an hour away, or that Miami traffic resembles a parking lot, or that up until now we've rarely gotten started before noon, if we ever get started at all. There have been days when the kid and I just drive and look for stores, only never going inside and showing the samples to the owner or manager, then end up grabbing a burger or some pizza before calling it quits for the day. I can sense my son already feels, again, that I am failing him. That this fledgling little venture will never justify his abandoning a career launch in New York for the promise of some fantasy father-son success story in Miami. That he has come to Florida not for himself, but to please me.

Casting off the flip flops, I let my feet dangle in the cool pond water, something certain to scare any of the fish back inside the darkness of the rocks. The plan for the day is for Jeffrey and me to drive to the Hollywood Beach boardwalk, and show the samples, unannounced, to owners of a dozen or so bikini and suntan lotion stores lining the strip, a

workday requiring charm and grit and a cold-caller's undaunted fearlessness. A confidence I no longer have, if I ever did, and the forecast calling for a humid ninety-three degrees, an inferno even an Atlantic sea breeze barely tames, makes the thought of shlepping samples that much worse. In the near silence of the atrium, I know I'm sitting on the wrong ledge.

Even as I dangle my feet in water, despite the fact I've already invested nearly $30,000 on travel and design costs and production mold set-up and an attorney's help incorporating the business; even though I have coaxed my son away from his first job search in the diametrically opposed universe of television and radio, I can't resist pouring over the names of shoe business guys I might still call in New York, St. Louis or LA to unearth an opportunity to design shoes again. To do what made me feel like *me* again.

My wife, back in the few good days of our marriage, used to call me the *mad shoe scientist,* as even at home, I was always working on some new design, some detail, some flourish of functionality or style. Scissoring a gum sole loose from one pair so I could re-glue it to a radically different upper, swapping a certain tassel for another, buffing a nearly perfected sample with black or brown Kiwi shoe polish to "antique" the vamp. My brain juggling a thousand different styling permutations to find the fusion that clicked and made me calm until the next design called from inside the deepest and most restless parts of me. I'd even sleep with my creations-in-progress beside me on the nightstand, an ever-changing stack of loafers, boots and wingtips—all re-glued and restitched, cut up and recast—the lot of which my wife would jokingly call my *honeys*. And the truth is, as

if they were actual mistresses, I lavished a very real and fervent love onto each, until I was prepared to release them and be on to the next beautiful and new.

For years, over my entire shoe career, people in the business would tell me time and again that I had *the eye,* much the way a master perfumer has *the nose*. A feel, a knack, a divinely bestowed sixth sense that allowed me to see just inches ahead of the curve, anticipate the trend that hid beyond, and insert my designs into the muted but ever-changing spin of that style wheel. In all my trips to Asia, many dozens of them, my favorite place to be, even more than between the legs of some luscious Filipina, was working in the sample room tucked way in the back of our Taipei office—a hot, cramped and smoky shop packed with a crew of Chinese shoemakers—stitchers, sewers, and last-fitters—the glue smell of the room narcotically dizzying, the finished product virtually orgasmic, as little sun flares of inspiration became pieces of beauty, each targeted for a specific buyer from a specific company or store. A black calfskin boot for Kinney, a tasseled brown loafer for Thom McAn, charcoal dress lace-ups for Alexander's, each one and hundreds of others all sprung from the ashy grime and guts of that room. Nine thousand miles from home, one cigarette after the next dangling from my lips, and as a new shoe emerged complete from that cramped sample room, nothing else I knew could make me any more content.

Even happy, I'd dare admit.

Now lying here, literally at the edge—of both a frightening new day, and a continent—like the words of that Lou Rawls song, I *coulda, woulda, shoulda* gone back. Hat in hand, with my tail between my legs, pride gulped down and already digested, back

to my rightful world where I was known, respected, revered and even loved. Back to my blesséd shoes.

Instead I became the wrong man. Humping at a home-based startup that wasn't even in my own home, trying to sell something I created but didn't quite love. Lassoing my son into a life he never wanted, but made him believe, somehow, that he did.

As I sat on the that ledge beside the pond, watching for unseen fish, somehow knowing that Foot Flops, Inc. was already doomed, Jeffrey opened the atrium's glass door and walked from the cool air of the house into the rush of tropical heat and humidity. I didn't turn to him right away.

"Hey Pop," he said and snapped shut the atrium door but didn't walk any closer. I knew he didn't move because I couldn't hear his footsteps on the gravel path.

For a moment I still pretended not to hear him. I just kept gazing into the water, at my rippled reflection and at depths void of fish.

"*Pop*!" he said again. "You in there?"

I lifted my feet out of the pond and crossed them on the ledge in front of me for balance. Thin streams of water dripped from my toes back into the pond. I said, "Remember that big fish tank we had in the living room back in the old house?"

"Hundred and twenty gallons."

Many a Saturday afternoon, or Thursday evening, did I take him to one of the aquarium stores near the house where he grew up. I remember how watched the three men deliver and install that one-twenty in our living room. How he and I, when he was a boy, watched the fish we put in there for endless hours.

I said, “I miss those days, having a tank like that.”

I yanked the cigarette pack and lighter from my shorts pocket, tucked a smoke between my lips but waited to light it. The kid seemed to be waiting for my cigarette to be lit before saying anything else. The only sound was the waterfall trickling down the rocks and into the pond. If I closed my eyes I might have imagined a rainforest, or the toilet tank filling after a flush.

Finally he said, “What’s the plan for today, pop?”

“Show the samples.”

“It’s ten after eight in the morning. Who are we gonna show samples to right now?”

“We can go eat breakfast first.”

“I already ate breakfast.”

“What did you eat?”

“Cereal.”

“That’s not enough.”

“It’s enough for now.”

“Did you bring your business cards?”

“I’ve got plenty in the car.”

As I finally lit my cigarette, Jeffrey sat on the small stone bench in the corner of the atrium, planted his elbows on his knees and looked at me. He wore a pressed pair of khaki cargo shorts, brown leather fisherman sandals and an oversized short-sleeved white button down, untucked but neat. Sunglasses hung around his neck from an elastic black

lanyard. All in all, the perfect ensemble for a guy who intended to close flip-flop sales along a string of boardwalk bikini shops.

He nodded at me, my black running shorts, wrinkled gray tank-top, bare feet. As if on cue I dunked them back into the water. "You going out to the stores like that?"

My clothes might have spoken the words my mouth wouldn't form, and my face could well have betrayed every secret I held about the very places I'd rather be—a design suite, a sample room, a rickety China Air flight on route to a sweltering Taiwan shoe factory. To be reading my name printed, yet again, in *The Footwear News,* and the magnificent new line I created with my team in Taipei. The record-setting sales being generated, the reaffirmation of my vision and genius. I don't know if my son could tell how much I didn't want to be out hustling samples, schmoozing store owners, launching the same sappy pitches and stale jokes I might have made as a twenty-something shoe salesman in his cheap rumpled suit, more than three decades earlier. That even though I'd designed a cute little flip flop, eye-candy for a million tourist feet, that would sell like ice water on the hottest day in Hell, I simply didn't love them enough—or even just a little. Not like I loved my other shoes, or the life in which I'd created them. No matter if I were dressed in running shorts, a pressed Italian suit, or even Superman's cape, no matter if I could simply dive right through that pond full of elusive fish and emerge at the front window of one of those beachside bikini shops, I had barely a shard of interest in going out with those samples at all.

My feet, I knew, were dangling in the wrong pond.

NINETY-PERCENT EMPTY

I still don't know why I showed up at my ex-wife's house close to midnight a few weeks ago. Why I waited an hour-and-a-half for a cross-county metrobus, and then forty minutes for a second, one that would take nearly two hours to get me within a mile of her palm-lined fortress of a gated neighborhood. Why I spent my last six dollars and an assortment of nickels and dimes on the fare. Why I hid in the shadows on a steamy, moonless night, then snuck past the back side of the security gate while the guard stood occupied with a couple in a black BMW awaiting authorized entrance. It was easy, actually.

I wasn't there to steal anything. To take a single thing that wasn't mine, which is maybe why there were no roadblocks, no security guard-hassles, not a single red flag that slowed my beeline to the house. I simply wanted to see her, to look into her eyes and wish myself backwards to a time when an apology from the messiest chambers of the heart might have mattered. But it wasn't an apology I was there to give, either. After nearly twenty years, she would never have accepted anything so pathetically weak and premeditated, as if a soiled history reopened and exhumed like a rotting corpse could serve as reparations.

The paths I walked along the manmade lakes seemed like mazes in the manicured darkness, the lights inside the wide-windowed homes aglow like megawatt sunlamps illuminating outsized terrariums of human captivity. The souls living inside nestled in their confinement, enslaved by their obedience to luxury, the status of a German car or

Swiss watch, the designer accessories they believed branded them unique among the pampered. The artificial comforts of air-conditioning and hurricane-strength construction that kept the Everglades and its virulent breezes out of the lungs, its mosquitoes and biting flies off tender skin. In one instant, as I inched along the sidewalk, past three and four-car garage homes, I imagined the resounding fear inside those walls if the lights snapped off from more than just a summer thunderstorm. Just went black and remained dark. I wasn't superior by any conceivable measure, but at least I had lived outside, stared at the stars as they unlocked and cycled a sleepless stretch of dusk through dawn, until the first pale hint of light seeped into the morning sky. I knew both the roar of the sun and the whispers of the moon, held still as stone as an Atlantic wind sunk its claws into my neck. Like a feral cat, I could survive at the edge, empowered by nothing but guile and will.

I walked those immaculate and near-silent streets as if I belonged which, in a sense, I did. In my mind I had paid with my sins for those fine glass walls she inhabited. It was my money, from my vision and talent and toil, from the house she procured in the divorce, that enabled her to start her business, a chain of high-end day spas. Gave her the freedom to nourish it and grow it into the four-location success it became. I told myself this as I passed a woman walking her little white dog, neither of whom even paid me a blink of attention. In shorts and a tanktop, I looked mostly like an unfamiliar face from the neighborhood, out for a nighttime jog.

Just before eleven I found Jeanette's house, the one she shared with her husband Mickey, the lights of the circular driveway, and several inside still lit. She'd always been

uneasy in the dark, of rooms dimly lit and their shadowed fringes. Then before my heart could even start beating hard, I simply rang the doorbell and then rang it again, and again. Five times in all, until I heard the patter of bare feet, then a second, more lumbering set, on the tiled floor inside. When she opened the door, Mickey was standing behind her, a small silver pistol pressed against his right hip. By the look in his eyes, his easy but ferocious grip on the gun's handle, it seemed he wouldn't have any trouble squeezing its trigger. And some very distinct part of me wished he simply would, aim straight at my forehead or heart, and end me right there between those double front doors.

As soon as she realized it was me, Jeanette covered her mouth with both manicured hands, the blades of her burgundy nails pointed skyward. "I'm calling the police," she said. "Right now."

My heart felt ready to explode inside my chest.

Mickey put his hand on her shoulder. "It's ok, Jen," he told her. "Give him a minute to explain."

To my eyes, she looked as if she had just awakened after sleeping for a decade in suspended animation, while the rest of the world grew older on planet Earth. Her face looked both frail and beautiful, but mostly she looked furious, thirty-five years of rage unleashed like an arsenal of spears right into me, her pale green eyes, the color of shallow, storm-churned ocean water, ablaze. I was filthy and sweating, reeking but lucid, some silent force behind my voice needing to be heard like an insistent child.

Very softly I said, "You don't need to call the police, Jeanette." When I reached for her hand and to kiss her cheek, she wouldn't let me anywhere close to either. Mickey

still gripped the pistol against his hip, but now the thing seemed more like a movie prop than the deadly weapon I'd hoped would end me just a minute earlier. A lithe gray-brown gecko crept across the outside glass of her wide front window, and some flying insects hovered near the overhead light.

I tried to step inside, free from the mosquitoes and humidity, but she blocked me with an assist from Mickey. The air-conditioning swept my face as I stepped back into the night.

"What do you want, Larry?" she said. "You're scaring me."

I reached for and grazed the back of her hand but neither grabbed it nor let my finger remain for longer than that passing stroke. Then I dropped to the floor and sat crosslegged on the warm coralstone of the patio. After the bus trips, the sneaking inside, the walking and now this encounter, most of my strength had vanished.

On the ground, buried in my fog, I could hear Jeanette shriek. Then out of nowhere I could feel the grip of Mickey's strong hand yanking and lifting me back to my feet.

Jeanette said, "You really need help, Larry." She looked quickly at me, then away. At what specifically, I couldn't tell, but her gaze looked so detached and so distant, it seemed as if it stretched back decades, searching for the *me* she used to know. The *How?* and *Why?* that must have begun every question she asked herself about the man she once loved, and married, who gave her three children. A very real disgust, I can only begin to imagine.

"I'm gonna go," I said and stared at the ground. "I'm sorry. I don't even know why I'm here."

As I turned and started to walk down the driveway, the front door clicked shut behind me but I could still feel their eyes on my back. For a few minutes I inched back into the night, headed for the gate, the boulevard and the fifteen mile walk back to my stretch of sand.

A trip I didn't believe I would finish, had I taken it.

Maybe five minutes into my walk, a white Range Rover pulled up next to me. A chill of fear surged through my body. When the passenger side window rolled down I could see Jeanette's face looking toward me, but not at me. Mickey was driving with one hand on the wheel.

Jeanette reached out, and when I walked over to the car she passed me two crisp hundred dollar bills.

"We called you a cab. They'll meet you at the front gate."

When her window started to roll back up, I said, "*Wait!*"

"*What*, Larry?"

Mickey stared straight ahead, into the night. Except to protect Jeanette, he knew this wasn't any of his business. For a big mustachioed Italian, he was a *mensch*.

"The reason why I came here tonight—"

"You *really* don't need to, Larry."

When the window was fully open again, I placed my hand softly on the door ledge and inched my body closer to the car.

"Larry—"

"I just wanted you to know, Jeanette, that I should have stuck with you."

She looked at me quickly, then down into her lap.

"That it might have all been different."

With Jeanette's two hundred-dollar bills burning in my pocket, I did take that cab—for much of the way, anyhow. As the car drove south on I-95, I could smell the shame reeking from my sweat as I watched the red lights on the fare meter hit $40 dollars. No matter where we were, I told myself, I would get out of the cab at fifty, or so, and walk the rest of the way to the beach. Even though I had a social security deposit coming a few days later, I wanted to save as much of that money as I could. Buy some extra packs of smokes, a couple of quarts of beer to drink myself numb on the sand.

The taxi driver was a fat guy wearing a red baseball cap who looked older than me, and even worse than me, with stringy gray hair leaking out the hat's adjustable plastic strap. He barely said five words the entire ride, but he seemed happy when I'd first gotten into the car and told him where I was headed. He probably didn't have too many midnight fares thirty minutes away, and I could feel his excitement over an $80 or $90 trip. I knew the mindset of a cabbie all too well.

At one point I tried to chat with him, like some of my fares used to tell all sorts of things to the back of my head, my eyes glancing in the rearview. Like one woman, uglier than a lipsticked land toad, who told me she once blew a cop to get out of a traffic ticket.

Or this guy, some married banker in downtown Miami, who used to tell his wife he was going on business every month to Caracas, when he was really there visiting his Venezuelan girlfriend. Usually the confessions had something to do with cheating or sex or came with some wretched guilt attached. All of which, more often than not, went hand in hand. Considering all the sauce and slime I heard about inside my cab, I guess taxi drivers weren't all that different from priests in a confessional. Except they collected money instead of handing out penances.

"That was my ex-wife's place you picked me up at," I said to the driver's fat neck and the small constellation of black moles sprouting from the thick skin folds. I couldn't see anything but the bill of his red cap in the rearview. "That woman loved me, man, gave me three children. Believed in me, supported every goddamn decision I ever made. She's fucking rich now, and look at me. Dead man walking."

Even though we were still four or five highway miles from the exit, I could feel the guy slow, just a hair. He still didn't say anything, but I guess he was interested. Or could sense there weren't too many stories like mine.

"I fucked it all up man. My own doing. I fucked whores, I snorted piles of cocaine. Seventy-five grand in one year I blew up my nose. By stupidity alone, I drove a hundred million dollar business into the ground. I can't smell or taste a single fucking thing any more."

The fat cabbie adjusted the rearview and for a second I could see his eyes, like a pair of quizzical marbles, eyes whose intensity suddenly scared me.

"You got a gun in this car, man? In the glove compartment. Or under your seat. C'mon, you probably got one somewhere up there. All you cabbies carry these days."

I could feel the car speed up now.

"You can tell me. I used to drive a cab, I ain't gonna say anything. I get it, man. We live in a sick fucking world."

When I glanced at the speedometer, we were doing seventy-three in what was now a fifty-five.

"I'll make a deal with you. A simple business deal."

From the rearview, his eyes met mine.

"One that works for both of us. Those are the best, right? I got two crisp hundreds in my pocket, man. You got your pistol…"

I could hear the thud of his heavy foot tap the brake pedal, and felt the car slow.

"Just drive into the swamp, brother, off Dania Beach, or Stirling, park the car and keep it running. Pop one right in the back of my head, take your cash and drive off. Nobody finds me for days, weeks. Nobody knows any better. Nobody even fucking cares."

He hit the right-turn blinker and headed toward the Griffin Road exit, so I believed there was a chance he was actually considering the deal. Not that I knew if he even had a gun in the car. But instead of driving west towards the Everglades, he turned right onto US 1.

"C'mon, man. It's two hundred bucks." I pulled both bills out of my pocket and waved them through the partition to prove to him that they were real. "Who am I to you anyway?"

"Thou shalt not kill," he said.

I noticed now that the meter read $56.75. In my rant I hadn't been paying attention—hemorrhaging money, as usual. Even when the cash wasn't mine to begin with. "There's a gas station on the corner of Stirling," I said. "The one with the mini mart. You can leave me off there."

By the time he pulled in front of the store, the fare was $62.25. I passed him one of the hundreds and asked for thirty dollars back. Dirt fucking poor as I was, I still always overtipped.

With my thirty dollars of change, I bought five packs of generic brand cigarettes and two quarts cans of malt liquor. The mini mart clerk passed me back $6.82 through the stainless steel tray at the bottom of the bulletproof glass. I folded the other hundred in half again and tucked it away inside the wallet I still kept with the Social Security debit card and my expired driver's license. The loose change I stuffed inside my pocket. Smoking the first of those cigarettes and carrying the plastic bag with the two cold cans of beer, I began walking toward the beach.

After an hour or so, I got to an inlet bridge on a quiet stretch of the avenue, about a half mile from A1A, the beach road. Not far, maybe two hundred yards, from the

Publix Supermarket where I'd gotten arrested for stealing the liverwurst and kaiser roll. I decided to stop on the bridge and pop open a can. The beer was still cold and I downed most of it in long, violent gulps, a few streams dribbling down my chin and wetting my shirt collar. I lit another cigarette and polished off every drop. The alcohol soaked right into my blood, softening both my muscles and my thoughts, as I gazed at the neon green glow of the Publix sign. From where I was standing on the fringe of a mangrove swamp, the place looked like some mythical oasis.

By now the mosquitoes were biting, so I lit another cigarette from the first, hoping my smoky clouds might repel the bugs. It worked pretty well above my waist but my ankles and calves were getting devoured like raw meat. I decided to crack the other beer, drink it wrapped inside the plastic bag, and head to the Publix. I had money on me now, over $106, and I could buy things, instead of stealing them, if they were still open this late. I wasn't really even hungry; I just wanted to reaffirm my right to be there. Even if Judge Greenblatt had forbidden me.

When I got to the parking lot, I could see the store was closed. Only a few cars dotted the lot, a couple of junkers near the edges, so they were probably abandoned, or the owners were sleeping on the back seat, which guys like me did, if they still had a car. Somehow, for me, as long as it wasn't too cold or wet, I actually preferred the beach—the salty air, the sound of the waves, the stars overhead that seemed to watch me. Made it feel I wasn't totally alone.

Bagged beer in hand, I walked to the edge of the building and along the covered walkway across the front windows, then past the darkened entrance, the lines of locked-

up shopping carts, and over to the covered walkway on the right side of the automatic doors. For a few seconds I put my face up to the glass and looked inside. In the half light of the closed store, I could see rows of produce—oranges, apples, plastic containers of strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. What looked to be bins of peaches and plums and apricots. In a small area to the right was a display of potted plants and flower bouquets and a few brightly colored helium balloons with smiley faces and "Happy Birthday" and "It's a Boy!" I continued down the walkway, sipping the beer, past Bella Napoli, the Italian restaurant, and the dry cleaners. Soon I was at the far end of the building, turning the corner and looking at dumpsters, stacks of flattened corrugated boxes, empty fryer oil tubs behind Napoli, an empty concrete loading dock for all the supermarket deliveries. In contrast to the front, it was filthy, greasy-smelling and foul. As a warning, maybe, for people like myself to keep out, three spotlights cast beams from high on the building onto the asphalt below.

By now I needed to piss from the first beer and was starting to fill up even more from the second. It was stupid that I didn't wait to get to the beach to start drinking. Any time there I could take a leak on the sand or in the sea. Now I knew I'd be in major bladder pain soon. A few times in the past year I'd actually pissed blood.

"Fuck it," I said and walked over to the far side of the Publix loading dock. It was darker over there, by all measures secure as I unzipped and squeezed my stream in the corner where the pavement and white cinder block wall met.

I was ninety-percent empty when the sheriff's cruiser turned the corner and shined the spotlight. Half of that remaining ten percent wound up on my leg.

THE LAST WEINRIP

My whole life, but particularly the darkest stretches of these past years, I've wondered why we must always *be* something, subscribe to a label that defines us beyond just being human. Why must we call ourselves doctor, lawyer, salesman, designer, posturing to be more than nature's simple artistry? Right now, by those rules, I'd be a vagrant, a failure, a coward, a prisoner, a one-time genius, a supermarket wall-pisser, a dreamer who prefers lying on his back, staring at these stars. Or those white cinder block walls and fluorescent ceiling lights in the cell where the Broward County cops tossed me after catching me with my dick out, the second time I wound up in jail, only now with a prior, the encounter with Greenblatt, on my record. Chalk it up to my fear of confrontation, my lack of courage or even one puny shred of nobility, but maybe all I've ever wanted was simplicity. For a life of absolute purity, with no roles, no attachments, no expectations, except for the ones I could choose for myself.

Is that so goddamn wrong?

I remember waking up on the dirty cot, my bare legs cold from the A/C and covered with so many red bite welts it looked more like pox. Even when the officer appeared on the other side of the bars, I still didn't know where I was. I glanced at him and then away, back at the white walls, thinking for a second I was dead. That the jail cell was the antechamber where they decided if I was going down or up. As I saw it, there wouldn't be much debate over where they'd toss my scrawny ass for all eternity.

"Jeffrey said he'll be here tomorrow," the cop said.

"Jeffrey?"

"Your son Jeffrey. He's coming tomorrow."

"He is?"

"That's what they told me to tell you."

I forced my eyes open, looked at my feet, the outline of my bare toes against the white cement walls. Feet that carried me to that exact moment in life, alone in a tiny jail cell, waiting for my son, probably the last person on the face of the earth I wanted to see. I wriggled my toes, watched them twitch like tiny frags of coral at the edge of a dying reef. All I needed was a toe tag and this could've been the morgue.

Lying flat on the cot, I stared at the ceiling's fluorescent lights until my eyes burned. "What if I refuse to go?"

"Now I've heard everything," he said.

"I could reach through the bars, try to choke you, and they'll charge me with assaulting a police officer."

I sat up, turned and gazed at him through the steel bars, the harsh lighting turning everything into a shinier, cheaper version of its actual self. On the chrome plate pinned to his thick chest, I could now see his name was Velasquez.

"Or I could try to destroy my cot, tear off one of the legs and try to break down the walls and you'll have me for devaluing city property and attempting to escape."

Velazquez looked at me like the second head I'd grown had sprouted a horn, and cracked one of those phony police officer smiles, one that told me he wouldn't really give a holy half-shit were he not sporting his fancy blue uniform and chrome badge.

"You know, you get more and more entertaining by the minute. I'm going to be sorry to see you go."

"You could close your eyes and pretend I'm already gone."

"We'll come knocking when your son gets here."

He turned and I listened to his thudding footsteps as he walked away from the cell.

I shouted: "Tell him I don't want to see him."

"At this point, I'd say you don't have much of a choice, buddy."

When the security door clicked shut I closed my eyes.

"Miserable prick," I whispered, and ached for a cigarette.

One time, in that other life, I hired an old, homeless man named Thor Lovdahl to break down the wall between our TV and living rooms. Transform the space into one wide expanse that was being choked off by that wall. Even after what feels like a thousand years ago, I still hate that wall. It felt like a veil, a blood clot, an evil spell that needed breaking.

Part master-carpenter and part-magician, with a twist of bone-thin Santa, this Thor from Norway had been sleeping on the pool table at a dive bar in town when one of our neighbors, an older guy whose kids were all grown and gone, took him home and gave him a bedroom. Much to the protests of the guy's wife, I would drop a fat wager. Word then spread quickly about Thor's talents with a hammer and jigsaw, about his almost otherworldly ability to support, lift, or hang objects such as third-floor balconies or odd-shaped deck extensions, in manners both awe-inspiring and gravity-defying. In two

weeks, all by himself, the whole block watched him turn a neighbor's one-car garage into a double, with an apartment above it for the guy's mother-in-law.

Me, I didn't know which end to grip a screwdriver.

The wall in question bore half of the weight of the house's second floor, the side that supported Jeanette's and my bedroom, a vaulted ceiling above it with angular glass skylights. Without that one essential wall, our bed or master bath might have crashed through the floor onto the projection screen TV below, killed Jeffrey or one of his sisters maybe, and caused some insurance shitstorm in the form of a multi-million dollar lawsuit. The type of outcome I'd easily imagine were scripted into my defective stars.

So it all seemed impossible. Or obscenely expensive, according to a trio of local contractors who'd come, looked, and provided five-figure estimates. One guy suggested poles, another archways, while the third suggested two smaller walls to replace the giant one I wanted gone. Needed gone, even.

And then came Thor.

"In place of the wall you need a beam," he explained through the smoke of one of the Pall Malls he'd puff two or three times before stamping out. "A steel beam. To support the second floor." With his gentle Scandinavian accent, he spoke in a way that made me feel like a child, only not stupid, unwanted, or unnecessary. As if he were teaching me some hidden facet of manhood.

When I asked how much it would cost, he simply told me to have the beam delivered. We'd settle on a price in the end.

"How many guys you need to do it?"

"Just me," Thor said. I would have had a hard time believing anyone else.

I was home the morning the beam arrived by truck. It took three guys to carry the twenty-foot length of steel inside the house, navigate it across the foyer and up a small flight of stairs, then through a narrow archway into the TV room. Five minutes after they left, all sweat soaked and semi-wrecked from the August heat, Thor appeared, as if summoned by telepathy. He never used the doorbell. I would have trusted him with my heartbeat, the Hope Diamond or my naked wife.

Four hours later, the wall had vanished, the beam installed, sunlight filling the now wide open room. A little dusty from demolished drywall, Thor straightened his glasses and lit a Pall Mall.

I pulled out a folded stack of fresh hundreds from my shorts. Two or three thousand, which I hoped would be enough.

"How much you need, Thor?"

"Hundred dollars," he whispered with his thick accent. As if he were embarrassed. He reached to light my cigarette with the antique flint lighter he carried next to the pack in his chest pocket.

"A thousand, you mean?"

"One hundred is all, Larry." A glint of sunshine sparkled off his ice blue eyes.

Here was the one man on earth I wished I could be.

***

I can tell by the sky, as it pales toward dawn, that it's going to be a beautiful day. There's not a single cloud from the horizon to any spot overhead, just a gentle bluish-pink, the colors of Easter eggs. I'm hungry but I still have seventeen dollars to last the days until the deposit hits my account. Call me anything, but I've never been a beggar. Never once, even for a dull nickel, have I scraped the barrel and panhandled. I'd rather starve, maybe even die, than hold a can, carry a *Hungry* sign, or stick out my filthy palm to strangers.

Still I *was* something—so many years ago. I had genuine labels, ones most men would be proud of, attached to the ledger beside my name. I was a father, a husband, a brother, a son-in-law, a son. I was a founder and partner, the chief designer for an international shoe manufacturer, a man described by many of my industry peers as a *visionary.* I was a millionaire many times over. Who even knows how many men across America, even Canada and Europe, wore the shoes I created. It's impossible to count.

I remember, years ago, watching a movie on television, alone late at night in the the six-bedroom house I once owned, and shared with Jeanette, Jeffrey and his sisters. It was after the wall was gone. I don't remember the title or plot, but in the last scene this old Indian man with two long braids walks alone into the sea, at sunset, determined to die by his own will. On his own terms, I guess. First the waves covered his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders, until finally he disappeared as the water devoured the rest of his body. The beach behind him lay empty, the wider world unseen, as he went under. By any measure, there's nothing left for him, or so that final image suggested. I don't remember much of the movie that came before, but I'll never forget the way he strode

into the water, still fully possessed of all his dignity. The finest of things that makes us human. Even in the face of that final act, as the sun vanished with him beneath the waves, I understood something beautiful had taken place. It was the lack of all fear.

When Jeffrey arrived and signed me out of the police station, it didn't take long until we were outside. Inside the station, the silence between us had been vicious and dense, a concrete curtain that needed smashing. Out in the open air, despite the heat and humidity, at least there was wind and birds and traffic bustling along the four-lane boulevard. Even through his sunglasses, I could feel Jeffrey's eyes cutting into my skin. Standing beside him I felt small and shriveled, decayed, unhealthy. Still I lit a cigarette and looked across the boulevard to a patch of green, a park the size of a football field, with tall palms and footpaths shaded by banyan trees. In the center was a pond crossed by a gray steel footbridge.

"You must be hungry," Jeffrey said. His voice was quiet, even hesitant, but he looked tall and trim, muscular even, despite his gray t-shirt hanging loose. On his left wrist was a heavy stainless-steel watch. In the past three years, back in Jersey, he'd started a media consulting business, whatever that meant, making some decent money. Two of his clients were television networks. He and Alyssa, whom I'd never met, had a baby on the way. I didn't go to their wedding—never acknowledged the invitation, actually. At one point I'd said I never received it.

I pointed to the park, an oasis of green set against the boulevard's asphalt and its thick traffic. It seemed the kid wanted to talk. But for what?

"Let's go over there." I headed toward the crosswalk that led to the park and Jeffrey followed me into the shade to the bridge. A series of *No Swimming, No Fishing* signs were posted around the pond, but the water looked polluted, green with algae at the pebbly shoreline, murky brown where the water was deeper. Still, part of me felt like jumping in, flailing my arms and legs like some lunatic, something guaranteed to land me back in that jail.

I walked onto the bridge and Jeffrey followed me to the center, where we stopped. When I looked into the water, I could see the bluish-gold of my reflection—shaggy hair, long beard even grayer than the last time I saw it in a mirror. A face I wouldn't have recognized had I not known it was mine. A second later, Jeffrey walked beside me and I could see his discolored reflection, too.

Through a streak of sunlight cutting across the surface, I could see a big black fish dart toward the light, then re-submerge. The pond looked toxic but something actually lived in there.

"See the fish," I said and pointed. "It was a pretty big one."

Twenty-five, maybe thirty years ago, I'd taken the kid on a party fishing boat off Long Island, something I enjoyed though I'd never bothered to ask Jeffrey. Supposedly there were sharks in those waters and he was afraid of falling in after seeing *Jaws*. At one point, when the guy beside us was reeling in a catch, I put down my can of beer, grabbed Jeffrey around the waist and faked throwing him overboard. I remember how he shrieked in terror, and though I said I was sorry, that I was only playing around, the last two hours of that fishing trip were as quiet as right now.

All of a sudden I wanted to talk about that day, but I said nothing. I didn't know how Jeffrey would remember it, and I didn't want to dredge it up. If we were out drinking and eating pizza, some normal father-son thing, we'd probably just laugh, one of many memories, but instead one of so few.

From only an arm's length away, I watched Jeffrey rest both elbows on the rail as he stared into the water. I closed my eyes, felt a hot dash of sun through the trees and across my face, then warm wind. When I looked again I could still see our reflections, a pair of trapped ghosts beneath the surface.

"What kind of fish you think it was?" he asked and took his sunglasses off, wiping the bridge of his nose and brow with his forearm before sliding the glasses back on. I was sweating even worse.

Right then, inside our liquid reflections, a big black body, maybe a foot-and-a-half long, lurched from the shadow of the footbridge into the sunlight. "*There!*" I leaned over the rail and pointed as close to the surface as I could reach. "There's another one!"

He didn't seem interested. "That wasn't anything."

"It was a big one." Then I could see two more black bodies dart into the depths beneath our reflections. "An oscar maybe."

Jeffrey watched the water but still didn't say anything. In his reflection I could see the impatience spreading across his face.

"I wish we had some bread," I said, stamping out my cigarette butt. Jeffrey eyed it but didn't say anything, though I could feel he wanted to. "Something to feed them."

I could see even more fish churning and rippling in the water.

"Come on, Larry, let's get something to eat."

My mouth was dry from the smoke but I worked up a thick ball of saliva and spit into the pond. It landed on the surface between our reflections, when a wide black shape devoured it. A second later a hungry swarm of black fish had replaced our faces.

"They'll definitely eat spit."

Jeffrey didn't seem amused.

"Would you lighten up and fucking *spit*, Jeffrey."

The churning fish began to submerge but the surface still rippled. Jeffrey spit far out into the pond, more an act of disgust than amusement.

"The baby's coming in three months." He started to take off his glasses, then pressed them tighter against his face. "You're gonna be a grandfather."

"You seem to doubt that I'm up to the task."

"Long time ago I tossed any expectations."

"You've done all right now."

"It isn't about that—"

"It's *always* about that."

By now the surface of the pond had calmed, and a pillowy white cloud shaded the entire park.

"Anything else Jeffrey and you're kidding yourself."

He looked away for a minute but it felt longer. In the silence, he inched even farther away.

"I changed my name," he said, finally, and turned back toward me. "Legally, I mean. I wanted you to know."

I spit into the water and a fish glided, then vanished.

"It's Jeffrey Andrew now, not Jeffrey Weinrip."

"It doesn't sound Jewish."

"It's got nothing to do with *Jewish*."

I stepped back from the rail and looked down at my worn flip-flops, the fungused toenails sprouting liked gnarled mushrooms out the front of my browned feet. When I leaned over the rail and looked back into the water, I could only see reflections of clouds overhead. The two of us were gone.

"It's about the baby." Jeffrey took off his glasses and looked straight at me. "It's a boy, and I'm not passing the name down."

Dry as my mouth was, I managed to launch one last bead of spit into the murk but it just floated, like a body left to die at sea.

"Guess I'm the last Weinrip," I said. And once again I walked away.

HURRICANE ROBIN

Because Foot Flops was barely bringing in a dime, Jeffrey had found a bartending job. Not long after I started sharing a small two-bedroom apartment with a red-haired stripper named Robin and her cousin Bo, a little frail blonde guy who almost never spoke except to say *Good morning*, confirming life behind those sullen eyes, an actual heartbeat inside his sunken chest. Then he'd stir some instant coffee into a plastic thermos and walk the streets of Hollywood, Florida, doing what for eight, ten, twelve hours, I had no idea. He'd just vanish into the humidity while Robin slept till long past noon, and I watched ESPN or talk shows and thought one minute about ways to sell ten million pairs of flip flops, the next minute about bonfiring every last one of those pieces of shit. That and drink jugs of white wine.

The first time I fucked Robin, it was from behind and with barely a look-back kiss from her, for maybe ninety-seconds. But it was enough to enslave me. It was all her doing, a masterstroke of seduction inside a single-serve restroom in a boardwalk bar maybe a half-mile down the sand. By the next afternoon she and Bo and Midnight, her black Chow Chow, had moved in. At the outside bar, where we'd first started chatting, I'd told her I had an empty bedroom because my son had moved out. In the flickering tiki torch light, she looked prettier than any other time I saw her after that. A little like how I remembered pictures of Rita Hayworth.

"We were fighting all the time," I told her, about the bloodless war of resentment and bile being waged between Jeffrey and me. And she'd directed enough convincing

feminine sympathy toward me that I bought her a cocktail I couldn't really afford, a pink Cosmopolitan in a martini glass. With the last MasterCard I'd own, whose $25,000 credit limit was maxed out with bar tabs and Foot Flop expenses. I didn't dare tell her I was a sickening slob, a human chimney who never dumped an ashtray, how I'd turned half the apartment space into a warehouse for flip flops that barely sold. That I'd totally let my son down, and he was sickened, literally down to his bowels, by every shred of me—the physical, spiritual, biological. What I didn't tell her was that I'd moved in with him because I couldn't afford to stay in motels any more, and I didn't have anyplace else to go.

"I'm so sorry," she'd said, as I was ordering my future roommate and two-time fuck-buddy, her second overpriced cocktail.

Even though he'd moved out and gotten his own one-bedroom near the water, that first apartment was still in Jeffrey's name from the time he leased it. His mother had co-signed and loaned him the deposit. The accounts for the telephone and the electricity that powered the three eternally running air-conditioners were his too. So while technically, the apartment was mine, Robin and the dog slept in the larger bedroom, and I stayed on the living room sofa in front of the TV. Bo slept on the carpet floor in the second bedroom piled with fifty or so cartons of flip flops. The rest, twenty-odd thousand pair, were in a warehouse in Florida City, on the edge of a neighborhood where people kept getting shot.

Barely two days before the hurricane hit, the television news shows started warning, the talking heads verging on hysteria. We could see on the radar the round mass

of spinning clouds forming a Texas-sized wrecking ball out in the Atlantic. By Sunday it was a Category 5, and Jeffrey had packed up a duffle and headed inland. Robin, on the other hand, thought it would be fun to ride out the storm in the apartment. Bo shrugged and said, *Sure,* like he didn't really care if two-hundred mile-per-hour winds ripped the limbs from his torso and vacuumed his blood. I wasn't ready to leave the apartment or the two of them in it alone for who knew how long. Besides, I was still angling to fuck her again, and I hoped maybe a violent drop in atmospheric pressure might re-stir something for me inside her skimpy panties.

On Sunday afternoon, maybe twelve hours before the storm hit, Jeffrey called the apartment one more time before heading for the shelter. "You should come with me," he said. "They say it's not safe."

"We're just gonna stay."

"You and the girl and that little weird guy?"

On one of his final days as a Foot Flops executive, Jeffrey had met both Robin and Bo. My car, the last one I owned, was dead in the parking lot and I'd asked him to help me deliver refill orders to three Lauderdale beach stores that took them on consignment. Bo actually helped Jeffrey carry the boxes down to his blue Volkswagen while Robin and I sat on the sofa with the TV on, smoking cigarettes and drinking wine. My son was clearly less than impressed with the scene inside his former apartment, where his father had now become a character in the kind of degenerate drama you hear on daytime television talkshows where the people end up screaming and punching each other in the ear.

"Why would you even fuck that girl?" he asked me in the car on the way up to Lauderdale, after I'd told him. I was proud I'd finally nailed myself a stripper, even if only once, and in a dirty bar bathroom, but I didn't tell Jeffrey any of that.

"C'mon, she's a nice kid. She's just in a tough place right now."

"And what's up with Bo?"

"He's her cousin. He's harmless."

Then he asked me to put the electricity and phone accounts into my name, but I never bothered.

The night of the storm I sat on the sofa between Robin and Bo, a plastic jug of Popov vodka and cartons of KFC take-out on the coffee table spread amid the ashtrays and cocktails in oversized red Solo cups. Robin had waited for me for nearly an hour in her burgundy Honda while the to-go line for chicken and biscuits stretched across the parking lot and onto the sidewalk. We had ten packs of cigarettes for the three of us, enough to smoke ourselves numb if the roof blew off and we needed to wait out the fury for our Maker. As the seconds and minutes ticked toward impact, Midnight the Chow Chow alternately barked, paced, or plopped himself on the tiles in front of the glass balcony door.

For hours the three of us stared at the TV like people waiting to die, but too drunk to mind. On one channel a tieless weatherman shouted, "Just *go!*" into the camera. "Don't risk it. Don't be a hero. You're *not* bigger than this storm!"

At one point I shouted back: "Sounds like you need a tall drink, too, buddy! Come on over and I'll pour you one."

But nobody laughed.

As if on cue, he barked: "People, this storm *will* kill you!" The apartment lights flickered and vicious sheets of rain battered the roof. For the first time we could hear gusts clawing the window glass.

Close to eleven, after Bo went to the bathroom and disappeared, the dog nestled into his vacated cushion. I inched myself toward Robin, leaned a little closer and gulped vodka. Barefoot, she wore an army green tanktop and denim miniskirt with a frayed hem that she'd cut from an old pair of jeans. She'd spray tanned her unshaven legs and her hair was dirty. Which didn't matter to me since mine was, too. She hadn't danced at the club since the weekend before, mostly sleeping until this storm became the only news. Now she couldn't sleep at all, no matter how many vodka and cranberries she sucked through her KFC straw.

"This guy on the TV is *freaking* me out!" she said, and when she flung her bare feet onto the sofa and kneed her chest, I caught a quick glimpse of neon pink panties. "I *know* we're gonna fucking die tonight!"

The image on the screen cut back from the weatherman to the radar and its bright red spinning mass, like a seaborne buzzsaw, ready to cut into the southeastern edge of the Florida peninsula. The box in the upper right corner read: *Sustained winds 180 mph.*

Robin squeezed herself tighter. "Tell me what's gonna happen, Larry. You know better what this guy's saying!"

I glanced at the screen, the massive red swirl, the *200mph max* windspeed and knew we might all be dead before we ever saw the sun. That all four of the units inside that stucco apartment building and our mangled body parts could damn well be churning in the Everglades by morning. Still, as I sucked down the remnants of my vodka and poured a few ounces more, a wave of pure serenity, a calm I'd never known, swept through my body.

For a single instant there was no fear.

"We should be OK," I said. "The storm looks like it turned a little south of here."

Then, as if on cue, the electricity cut. The TV and every light gone, the apartment in darkness so deep it might have been a grave. Besides the roar of the hurricane, everything that wasn't part of the storm was still, silent, and waiting.

"Promise me, Larry?"

Believe me, I've never been a hero, not even close. But before two minutes clocked, the pink panties were off and I was fucking Robin, with any little love I held, for the second and final time, whispering that she wasn't going to die, while silently begging God that I would.

Two afternoons later, Jeffrey was pounding the locked door. The electricity was still out. Bo was walking, Robin sleeping, and I was sad I was still alive. Outside, shredded palm trees, shattered glass, and August heat made filthy, hungry and thirsty people basically want to kill each with jagged pieces of rubble. In the event of complete social

breakdown, I would have made easy prey, might even have volunteered for an early sacrifice, to unburden the viable members of the clan.

For five minutes, as I debated whether or not to answer, I could hear his voice shouting, "Dad! Dad! You in there, Dad!"

When I finally opened the door, the kid appeared reasonably clean, fit and in good spirits, despite what felt like the apocalypse in the world beyond. He looked ready to exercise, wearing gray gym shorts and a sleeveless shirt, running shoes and a Yankees cap that shaded his eyes. I felt particularly filthy standing in the doorway of the apartment that used to be his, now a flophouse.

"What took you so long to answer, man?"

"I was in the bathroom." I scanned Jeffrey's clean workout duds. "How are you looking so alive?"

"I was down at the beach and took a dip before a cop told me to get out. The water was still pretty rough."

I stepped outside into the shade of the overhang, where it was actually cooler, the air way fresher, than inside, despite the light breeze and rotting smell of ocean stuck to everything. I lit a cigarette and exhaled away from Jeffrey. Somewhere I could hear the beeping of a backing truck, as chainsaws buzzed and wood-chippers growled.

"I called a bunch of times," he said. "But it just kept ringing and ringing."

"The phones are out too."

He straightened his cap. I'd always thought he was a Mets fan like me.

"Can you take a ride with me? I want to go to my place." He gestured with his thumb in the direction of his new apartment. "See what's going on there."

"We should also go to the warehouse," I said. "Check on the shoes." Somehow I already knew there wouldn't be anything left. The last TV image I saw showed the storm's eye locked on that area. Or maybe it was just a hunch roused by the sticky film of Robin that still lay on my skin. She and I hadn't spoken since the storm cleared, when I stroked her ass and tried to kiss her. She'd swatted my hand away, said it was too hot.

"We can," Jeffrey said. "*If* we can."

Because the streets were still too flooded, they wouldn't let us near Jeffrey's apartment, so we headed toward the warehouse. For the entire thirty-minute drive, everywhere I looked the world we'd known had been destroyed, a wasteland of scattered trees and power lines, abandoned cars, random flood zones, and police car lights. Most of the gas stations were still closed, but Jeffrey had filled his tank a week earlier at the first storm warnings.

The entire ride he didn't say anything but "Damn!" and "Wow!" and "Jesus, look at that shit!"

All I could do was pretend I cared more than I did about that Foot Flops business, even though I knew the thing was already dead, doomed from long before that hurricane's slow swirl.

"Those shoes better be ok."

"What if they're not?" Jeffrey asked.

I stared straight ahead and smoked as he drove.

It would be a long, slow end.

One thing I know: There isn't one man, anywhere, who hasn't wondered what we carry with us to the other side. No matter what those Egyptians believed about their pharaohs, with all those jewels and gold for high times in the afterlife, no one can ever be the richest man in the graveyard, even if they erect the tallest, shiniest and most noble of headstones. Maybe it is better to leave it all here. End the game on zero with your final breath.

When Jeffrey and I pulled up to the twisted chain link gate at warehouse entrance, two men in a black Ford pickup were guarding the ruins. One of them held a shotgun, his finger planted near the trigger. The other carried a clipboard. There was looting everywhere, especially in areas like this, where people were already desperate long before any hurricane roared through.

Jeffrey rolled down the window and gripped the wheel with both hands as he looked at the man with the shotgun.

"This is my father. He's got a space here."

The guy with the clipboard peered at us through the driver's side window.

"Name?"

I leaned across Jeffrey and tried to muster some measure of authority. "Larry Weinrip. Foot Flops."

The guy fingered through pages on the clipboard, then peered back inside the car with a grim look on his sunburned face. "Good luck," he said and waved us through, past another gate and a mangled steel trailer I recognized as the former office, where I once paid up front for six months and got a seventh free. Clearly, I wouldn't be paying again.

All the warehouses were basically garages made of white-painted cinder blocks, a single barred window, and a roll-up steel door that cars, vans, and even small trucks could pull through to drop off or load up. Along the first row, the structures remained but the glass was gone, corrugated roofs torn from the walls and twisted into jagged edges that sliced the sky. I felt both hopeful and cheated. Without a working car, or even the inclination, I knew I could never unload 20,000 pair of flip-flops to beach stores all over Florida, but without the finality of total destruction, I was still technically in business.

"Looks ok, so far," I said, just as Jeffrey turned the car right, onto a long stretch of asphalt, where most of the spaces were leveled. Some of them were totally gone, but ours wasn't. A few shreds remained.

"I don't think so," he said.

Jeffrey pulled into the short driveway that used to lead inside the loading bay. The flattened steel walls were half their original height. On the ground near the front of the car, mixed with rubble, lay one soaked and topless cardboard box. Inside I could see maybe ten colorful pairs—mostly turquoise, plus a couple of reds and a black—each still wrapped in its shipping plastic. Something somebody might still buy.

"It's over," I said, without getting out. But I don't think I actually spoke the words. "Just drive the hell out of here, Jeffrey."

THE DAWN

A single pair of flip flops is all I have left. Like a reminder, some morbid vestige, a specter that haunts me but also keeps the sand, cement and asphalt from burning. On this morning, with its billion fading stars, the same day my scrap of government money hits my account. These days my feet are always cold. It's a different kind of hunger.

At the horizon's edge, at the crosshairs of night and day, the sky glows with the first sunlight in the east, a beauty I've never before noticed. Not on any of these mornings here on the sand: something true and sad, terrifying and damning, because I'm its only witness.

Could this be my greatest sin, that I never stopped to see the beauty? Especially in things that deserved it most? Would that have absolved all those other sins? I watch the sky and wonder.

From below the horizon the first brilliant sliver of sun appears.

I sit up and slide the flip-flops on, prepare myself to walk when the stores along the boardwalk open. Even without a watch I still pretty much know the time. Before I pack the sheet and blanket into my duffle, I check to make sure the bank card is still inside my wallet. It's November now, I realize, but the change feels more stark, more real than a page turning across the entire world's calendar. Jeffrey's son, the boy without my name, is coming in a few weeks. A child I may never get to see, whose birth name I don't know because I was too upset to ask. One thing I have is the kid's address and phone number, so I might still do some right thing.

Just a few blocks away is the apartment I used to share with those drunks. The rancid roach den where I was living that Father's Day when Jeffrey sent me the box of pastels I opened but never used. I know those guys are still living there, on their disability checks, cheap whiskey and fast food, and probably would be forever until their graves gape open. It's a place that never changes. Those guys don't lock their door.

In the now full sunshine, a cooler breeze at my back, I cross the boardwalk asphalt, past the playground and paddleball courts, to the little stretch of bungalows and motels, the old two-story where those guys stay, the same area I'll rent a room with my government money. It's not quite tourist season, so I may be able to sleep inside until almost Thanksgiving. I'll have to budget my food and beer and cigarettes, drink water instead of Diet Coke, maybe make a deal with the manager if I pay three weeks up front.

The street's still quiet when I get to their place, climb to the second floor, decide against knocking. The doorknob turns and I can walk right inside, into the stench of smoke, liquor and slowly dying flesh. In the half-light through the broken shades and the TV's glow, Dano is sleeping on the sofa, snoring like a chainsaw. Ralphie must be sleeping in the bedroom. Not that they'd really care that I'm here. They've got nothing to steal, and they know I'm not anyone's definition of a thief. Even Judge Greenblatt knew this, I'm willing to bet. She knew I was only hungry.

Still I walk gently past Dano, through the TV's blue light and under a little stuccoed archway into the kitchen. It smells like beer and rot and seaside mold, but I don't care. All I want are the pastels and sketchbook I left in farthest unused cabinet. I

left them there because I didn't want to carry them through the rain and heat, in my filthy duffle.

And they're still there, waiting for me on the back of the shelf, untouched like waiting treasure.

The sun is higher now, a full-on morning, the edges of the sand, the water and the palms all tipped in gold. I've bought my ham and egg on toast, a small coffee the counter girl, who I know but not by name, gave me free, and I sit under a blue umbrella at one of the patio's plastic bistro tables. I eat slowly, sip gently, and for a moment I feel like I own the right to sit in that chair. My meal over and a few sweet sips of coffee left, I open the duffle and pull out the pad and pastels: pale pink, cornflower blue, gold richer than wealth. The sun lifts and warms on my skin, and I forget for a while to smoke. I remember today's dawn and its sunrise, only *remember* isn't the right word. It's more like *living* that sand again.

Then somehow an hour is gone, maybe close to two, as the boardwalk bikers and joggers, people with their dogs and the early morning bathers all bustle past me, and none of us pays attention. The other tables even fill up, but I don't mind. I simply continue.

…The picture of this morning's dawn is not something I could have created forty years ago. Most all of that man first needed to die. In light and color some beauty remains.

I borrow a pen from the girl at the counter. On the back of the page I write:

For the boy's room. —Grandpa

I will mail it off to Jeffrey.

THE SILVER AND GOLD

I'm inside this time, lying in a bed under a roof, the second night of my three paid weeks, when the dream erupts. I think it's a dream because I feel swallowed, swamped like a plunge into water, a violent icy plunge. My skin damp and cold, like with sweat, a nervous sweat like millions of human eyes are watching while I must answer their endless questions. Only I'm dreaming. I think I'm dreaming, because I have no voice or light. There is only TV light.

But then I feel calm and warm, and I can breathe, just barely, under the water. Short breaths, at first, then gasps, like a caught fish, hooked and forced into dry air. Then somehow normal—gilled, and deep and easy—a lean body that sails along the algae and driftwood, a long green sword plant reaching toward light.

That angelfish, I realize, with long fins and simple black-circle eyes. Same one that swam in my boyhood aquarium. Hungry as I am hungry. Happy as I was, back fifty years, when I played baseball in Jersey City sandlots, sidewalked my green Schwinn to the pet shop near Journal Square, first noticed the curves on girls. My sister's friend Ellie, for one, whose skin smelled like cinnamon and sugar cookies. Who danced like a ballerina in our living room, her lacy bra strap slipping down her shoulder. I'd never miss another bare shoulder, another thigh or fleshy breast. But I missed too many smiles. Certainly the ones that mattered.

The spring sunshine slants through my little bedroom window overlooking Broadman, its easy slope downhill to the west. The room is quiet except for the hum of

my aquarium, silver cascades of bubbles churning across the surface. Here I stare through the glass, at the life swimming inside. The vague thrill of accomplishment that fills my twelve year-old self, knowing I manage all this bustling life inside. Without me it would all suffer, would all die. I deliver the nourishment, the clean water, the life that seems like joy for them. The angelfish passes me across the glass, silver and black and lean, a body as large as the packs of Pall Malls I've been stealing from my father's cartons. I watch him hovering, breathing water, eyeing me through glass. Waiting for more of whatever it is he believes I give.

Only there is no water, no breathing, no warmth. Just a burning, fierce and surging cough, like prying nails from dried-out hardwood. I heave and it tears my throat, flames my esophagus, the skin of my chest shining with sweat. Still I'm freezing from the rattling room air-conditioner, the spinning fan that clicks away time. So cold my legs are shaking, bare and nearly hairless, the left bent skyward. Knee and thigh bony like a schoolboy's, skin that's browned deep from months and years, endless summers on the beach.

Another raging cough weights a body that seems more leaden, wooden, part of the mattress, springs that pry. Bones held prisoner inside the TV's blue light. The red ESPN logo flashes a college football game, right after a halftime kickoff somewhere out West. Pacific time, still three hours earlier than here. Three hours earlier I was in this bed too, smoking a different cigarette, finishing a beer. There is pain inside my body. I miss the moon.

Some uniforms say University of Hawaii. The Rainbow Warriors versus a team from the mountains: Idaho or Wyoming, states I'll never get to see. Mysterious, wild places I only know from maps, a nature show on television. Or Montana maybe. I squint but I can't see that far away.

Yes, definitely Montana. University of, the bear paw stamped black on red helmets. Big Sky country, where Jeffrey spent one summer in college, working at a lodge inside a national park. He'd called a few times, talked about the mountains, elk and grizzly bears, this little blonde from Portland he loved screwing. I remember her doe brown eyes, somehow, from a photo he carried for a while. Remember how sad they looked on such a beautiful face.

Hawaii scores, their players dancing in the end zone, stadium fans in a touchdown frenzy. Hula girl cheerleaders smile moonbeams. So the game's in Hawaii. Where it's six hours earlier.

In Honolulu…

A place I visited many times, two- or three-day stopovers on the way to Asia. Brought Jeffrey that one time, and my older daughter another, back when she was fifteen, sixteen maybe. A wild one, that Liz, running with that long-haired guitar boyfriend I never liked, for no good reason other than she was my daughter. A trip to Hawaii and then Asia was my way to separate them. After I caught him in her closet, one night, after taking Jeffrey to a Mets game with company tickets. Gooden pitched and Strawberry homered into the warm June night. Inside her teenage bedroom, I can still see the blond

hair hanging in his eyes, that black Metallica t-shirt, arms far thicker than mine. Eighteen year-old fists that could've crushed my wicker ribs.

A week in Hawaii on the way to Taipei's shoe factories, eight thousand miles to keep Liz and that boy apart. We stayed a month, and on the flight home I had her carry a sample case with pirated Chinese Valium inside dozens of vamps. Hundreds of silver foil packets, two to a wrapper, that sailed right through customs. She'd start selling them for five-dollars a pack to her high school friends in Jersey. *Enterprising*, part of me was thinking. Only how fucking stupid, the way I condemned a sixteen year-old girl's puppy love. What would her mother have said if I'd gotten Liz arrested at JFK airport?

Her mother….

I cough and my body crumbles like ashes in wind. The room smells like sweat and ashtrays, ocean humidity, a dirty carpet. For the moment I'm too weak to reach for the pack on the cracked wicker nightstand. Too heavy to turn, to lift my head and watch the hula cheerleaders, to square myself that I am still the father of three. A grandfather to one before I'll ever know it. I may never get a call, may never see a face, but there will always be that drawing. One single thing that will endure.

All that feels so cavernous and dark, so close to shadow.

I remember when I was eleven or twelve having an oscar fish in that aquarium. It lived alone and I'd feed it goldfish, though I'd always feel bad for the victims, their orange scales that sprayed from the gills of the predator, as big fish devoured small. Skin shredded and expelled, sucked up a filter tube like disappearing years.

Eleven then, sixty-three now, tiny as I lie on the bed inside this morgue-cool room, alone. But eleven, I remember its simplicities. Bobby Darin. Red Ford Thunderbirds. The flying saucer and monster movies they always played at the Loews theater on Kennedy Boulevard. Back before it was Kennedy Boulevard.

1952. *Fuck*, 1952. I cough, taste the phlegm and cigarette lung bubbling into my throat, my drying mouth, the back of my tongue. And for a moment it feels like barely a breath separates now from the walls of my eleven year-old bedroom, that twin bed with the plaid spread, the late April sunshine flooding my face, the glowing aquarium light, the slow-motion fish, dusk still hours away.

A whole life, vanished like a single snorted line.

My legs hurt swinging them to the hard floor. Worse to bear my sour smell, the stinking tobacco stains on my fingers, the swamp gas oozing from my pores. Finally I do light that cigarette, cough away smoke— the millionth cigarette in my life, easy.

Inside my head I begin chiseling numbers. Molding each like little clay digits sucking away another breath. I count them the same way I might arrange transactions in a checkbook, back when I still had bank accounts. Forty cigarettes a day, twelve hundred a month, fifteen thousand a year, times nearly fifty years. Three quarters of a million cigarettes I've smoked. Millions of empty dollars I've shredded like confetti on cars, women, booze, coke and pills. Every attempt to know and not to know. Even when the love was always free.

I cough deeper but the phlegm won't budge. I drag again, try and pave the scars smooth. Pull twice more and stamp out the ash.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand. Cigarettes. I cough more gray, a few more seconds, a little more life. Something leaks out hot and down my thigh. I cough deeper, fiery from my groin, the pit of my spine and balls. Like a semi, eighteen roaring wheels through my chest. A swelling begins in my throat, blood tears burning tendons behind my eyes. As red turns black, black like road tar, coating bones, mazing through heart, through artery, vein and capillary. Until it all comes flooding in like pictures from a movie, all the cuts, near-kisses, tears that never came, words buried, hands never held and names never spoken, promises not kept and the wishes ungranted. Every song I might have sung out loud, pictures I might've painted with my daughters and made them smile, that one last pitch I could have thrown to Jeffrey at the batting cage. A home run instead of a strikeout, and the flowers I could have brought.

Another breath, one immense burst, and without blinking, back inside that dream again. Everything glowing like dawn under a new sun. The white walls, sagging bed, curtains, hands that lose their grip. All glowing, as you glide through water, hungry, gills breathing, breathing water and hungry, insatiably hungry but flying.

Up into the sky, the rippling clouds, clouds like bubbles, a silvery-gold light flashing, dancing and darting, calling to catch it, swim through it and consume it. To soothe that insatiable hunger and cure everything.

Light that darts and taunts, pulls like a magnet, a beacon, a safe channel to the stillness. Harbor where all the currents rest. Safely beyond body, beyond cold, caudal fin muscles pushing, pectorals steering, dorsal balancing, thrusting towards sky, to that

dancing flash of silvery-gold, the escape. A mouth that opens so wide it rips flesh down throat, crushing bones and collapsing chest.

In the silence a goldfish hovers, waiting, motionless, like some incredible burst of terror, mourning, joy.

Then in a flash of heat and light, an exquisite peace as your mouth stretches wide. Silver and gold exploding into blinding white, cell by cell, memory by memory, this invincible surge lighting down each rung of spine, until there is no more hunger.

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