

Chapter One: Parents

It wasn't the election of JFK, at which he was 15, or his death, when he saw people in the news talking about Mass and priests as though they were perfectly normal things that people on TV talked about all the time, which of course they weren't except maybe now they were. It wasn't the first time he kissed a Protestant girl because everyone knew Protestant girls were easier to kiss anyway, and hadn't he heard his great-uncles talking about kissing Protestant girls when they went to England? It wasn't even when he got to Yale in 1966, a real live Papist alligator, flapping about in an Episcopalian garden pond. He was enough of an activist by then that his Catholicism was more exotic than anything else, a point-of-entry to the Catholic counter culture, labor priests and worker-priests and nuns who played guitar.

It was when the ghetto died, or when the ghetto changed, and the they that we talk about become a they that wasn't us. His parents had moved to Bay Ridge in his first year of high school, and he came back and talked to a neighbor named Stanton, and he could tell that Stanton didn't have any family in Cork or stories about great-uncles who'd died on stairs outside of estranged wives' homes who'd warned them they wouldn't open up for nothing, no matter how cold it was, and then opened up anyway at two thirty because the knocking had finally stopped and there was Jimmy, the bastard, hand frozen to the door, his red face shining through a patina of snow.

Stanton had literally raised an eyebrow (which before then my father thought was only an expression) when he saw these two micks and their twelve kids moving in, at least that's what Uncle Jimmy had told him. When Dad met Stanton, it was at a neighborhood barbecue, and Grandpa was grilling burgers and Grandma was in the kitchen with other moms working on something and all the neighborhood kids were throwing around a football or watching or gossiping over by the swings. Dad got a beer from a cooler and opened it. He noticed Stanton standing nearby and offered him the bottle, lifting his head and holding it towards him like a trader with beads in a foreign land.

"Thanks," said Stanton, taking just one hand out of his pocket and nodding respectfully.

"Sure," Dad said, opening a second bottle and standing next to him. His brothers were dominating the neighborhood kids—most games were the McCandless boys against everyone else—and his sisters were pretty well mingled in with the rest of the neighborhood.

"You a friend of the family?"

"I'm the oldest kid."

"Another? Let me guess: Peter."

"Yep."

"I'm Stanton. You're the first apostle."

"You discerned the pattern."

"You Irish love your Church and your kids."

"They're both cheap hobbies."

He smiled. Dad wasn't sure if it was meant as an actual insult or a friendly jab, but he'd grown accustomed to jokes about the Irish kid at Yale. Cost of entry.

"They're cheap to make I guess. Not cheap to raise."

Stanton was tall, not taller than Dad, but certainly taller than Grandpa. He was skinnier than Grandpa too, and had long muscular arms like a tennis player's. He had neatly cut gray hair and was wearing a button down shirt with khaki pants.

"Depends what you think they need I guess."

“Food alone for twelve kids has to cost a fortune.”

“We were never hungry.”

“There’s more to life than not being hungry.”

“For some people, I guess.”

Stanton nodded thoughtfully. “You got a job?”

“I’m in school.”

“One of the CUNY’s?”

“Yale.”

“Oh.” Stanton paused and tried not to look at Dad again but then he couldn’t help it. “My uncle went to Yale.”

“Nice! Didn’t feel like the right fit for you?” Dad felt like an ass but not enough to regret saying it.

“Yeah, I just preferred another school.”

“Which one.”

“Just—one of the CUNY’s.”

“Good education there.”

“Yeah.”

“A lot of Irish. And Italians. And Jews of course.”

“Yeah,” said Stanton, looking at the sky and downing his beer. “They’re all fine I guess. Just glad I didn’t see 13 niggers coming out of that van of yours, what was it, five years ago?”

Dad had met a few freedom riders that first year at Yale, but he didn’t want to make things any harder for his parents, who probably agreed more with Stanton than him anyway. “I can see how you feel that way.”

Stanton shook his head. “I understand why you people are moving out here. The air’s better. It’s clean. The schools are good, and God knows we’re paying enough taxes for them. And you’ve been good neighbors. A lot of kids, but they’re good kids. And then there’s the niggers. They just keep coming. I don’t know what’s going to happen to Brooklyn.”

“They said the same thing about Catholics and Jews.”

“Yeah. I guess we did.” He drank the rest of the bottle and gave it back to Dad. “Thanks for the beer, and the party. Tell your dad it was nice. Sara! Maddy!” His two girls came running over, both just as freckled, just as straight-toothed, just as polka-dot shirted and tennis-shoed and tall and skinny and pretty as any of Dad’s sisters.

“Hi,” said Peter, knowing he would have to make the introduction if it were to happen. He knew, too, that he had dimples and broad shoulders, that he had messy brown hair that girls wanted to comb with their fingers, that he had brown eyes that looked sad until he smiled, that he had clean, strong American teeth that were as white as anybody’s, that he had a killer, a fuck-you, a GI-Joe-who-doesn’t-even-have-to-consider-apologizing smile. And so he smiled, and the girls smiled back, and both of them looked down and blushed, and Stanton said, well, we’ll be seeing you then, and then the girls walked away and turned around and giggled and kept walking, and Dad realized the WASPS were doomed.

They were, all of them, one long series of Irish twins, Petey born in 1946 and then a new baby, with the regularity of a subscription, every 14 months. Joey was the last, born in February of 1959, and after that Grandma said the parade was over. Grandpa said they could try condoms, but Grandma thought they were filthy and sinful, and so Grandpa became, at 42, the celibate his mother had promised God he would be. It wasn’t until Ada, years later, that Grandma realized this wasn’t precisely true. But the rest was in some ways more important than its source: this door’s been open and closed enough, she told Joan, who

realized, that day, that she was suddenly privy to her mom's private thoughts about her genitals.

Grandpa's mother refused to attend his wedding. She had promised God her first-born son would be a priest if the family survived the depression, or so she told her son. They did, and her son had broken the promise. Zach knew what he was doing was wrong: he knew not only that his mother had made a promise, but also that he had heard the call, in the morning, still in bed, with his eyes closed and his wood as hard as ever. He knew as the Eucharist melted on his tongue and in every moment right before he came—you have to be a priest, he thought, you must—and the violation made his eyes roll back in what the women beneath him mistook for pleasure, but which he would describe as divination itself. Grandpa knew who God was and willfully disobeyed him, not because he discounted Heaven or was otherwise unconcerned about the importance of keeping one's word. He simply liked to fuck.

Grandma eventually got pregnant—Grandpa was almost certain she had poked the rubbers—and that was that, though Grandpa wasn't entirely upset about it. He never cared too much about varieties of women: the key was consistency, and marriage was consistent, at least until he turned 42. The problem was that, saying the vows, he had formally sealed his doom with God, barring his wife's sudden death or some annulable offense, which seemed unlikely given the marriage's consummation before the fact. No, God was lost to him forever, a call clearly given and consciously ignored, and while he would continue going to Mass because a heretic father was no way to raise a child, he would refuse the Eucharist each time, crossing his arms in front of him and bowing like a visiting Protestant's supposed to do (but never actually does). Grandma asked him why he never took the Host after a year of marriage, and he said, "Because it wouldn't be right."

"Did you need to go to confession?"

"I suppose, but I can't."

"What is it? Are you having an affair?"

He laughed. "Of a sort."

She looked confused and worried. "Who with?"

"With you."

"What? You're not making any sense."

"My mom promised God I'd be a priest."

"Oh." She paused. "That crazy woman."

"That's my mother."

"She's no right to make a promise on another's life."

"I had a call. I could feel it. And I turned away."

"Then why did you marry me?"

"I believe his name is Peter."

"Is that all?"

"That's not all," he said, leaning in and kissing her forehead, tracing the outline of her nipple as she looked away.

"If you really were called to have been a priest, God would have seen you to it. I think you were called to be with me."

"I hope you're right," he said, kissing her neck.

"I'm right," she said, and then she kissed his lips.

Peter had been born only six months after they were married. While the wedding was sudden, Zachary and Margaret had been together for about a year and it was not altogether surprising, its shotgun status only obvious when the bump became unmistakable a few months later. They had twelve children and named all but one for the Apostles: Petey, Jimmy, Johnny, Andi, who was a girl, Matty, who was a girl, Barty, who was a girl, Simona, who was also a girl, Jimmy 2, but who everyone just called Paul, Tommy, Philly, who was a girl, Jude, who was a boy, and then Joseph, named for his father's middle name, because they didn't want to name one of their kids after the betrayer.

All the kids basically loved each other, at least while they were kids, but everyone was jealous of Dad's special thing for Joey, who everyone except Dad found annoyingly precocious. Joey was the only one to get into Regis, the only one tall and athletic enough to dunk, the only one, besides Dad, who seemed to attract any woman he wanted without ever really trying. After Jude left, Joey had the whole house to himself, and, the kids imagined him going from room to room, sleeping in a different bed each night just because he could. All of them went to college, and most of them to pretty good ones, but Grandpa couldn't stop talking about his two Ivy Leaguers, Petey and Joey, alpha and omega. What was especially frustrating was that this was the claim well before Uncle Joey was even of age: Dad got into Yale, and then it was simply assumed that the youngest son would follow the eldest. By the time Joey was on his way to college, Dad was already a lawyer, and Uncles Jimmy and Johnny were both engineers. Aunts Andi, Matty, Barty, and Simona were all enrolled at the same medical school, each one year apart. Paul had just graduated with a business degree, and Tommy, Philly, and Jude were at Fordham, Brooklyn, and Hunter, respectively. But there was something special about Joey, and everyone sensed it, especially his oldest brother Peter.

Dad used to come home and take Joey on long walks around New York, riding the subway to anywhere and walking to anywhere else. They'd talk about religion mostly, about whatever Joey was reading in class: Plato and Cicero, Aquinas and Aristotle and Kant. Dad would lend him Nietzsche and Freud and Marx too, just so he'd be prepared to take on the Jesuits, and then Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky and Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Day. They used to walk across the Verazano to get pizza somewhere in Staten Island, and then they'd take the ferry up to Manhattan and wander around the island until Dad used his lawyer money for Joey's cab ride home.

The conversations, the borrowed albums, the must-read books, the black and white movies in the village: all of them brought Joey up in a different social class than the brother who was providing them. Sometimes in their conversations, when Pete joked about being a potato-eater from Brooklyn, Joey didn't know how to handle what he assumed was simply false modesty. Joey knew he was from Brooklyn, but except for the occasional angry old WASP, nobody seemed to care too much about his being Irish, or for that matter, his neighbors being Italians, or even those other neighbors who were Poles, despite the odd Polock joke he heard in the neighborhood. Even Jews were basically okay, though many in his life, including his father, used the very "to jew" without any visible concern. Joey didn't even think of himself as middle class, though such was the telos of his family's American life: who, after, all could possibly be more than middle class? Well Joey could, that's who. And for that matter, so could Pete, who was a lawyer for a pretty major firm, though he did keep insisting he was going to quit and go back to being an activist once he got a nest egg. "For

now,” he used to tell Joey, “I’m not married. I don’t have kids. There’s no reason for me to stop working so much.”

Joey nodded, but out of respect rather than agreement. He sensed in his brother a need to validate his membership in the elite, something everyday evident at Regis. His high school was full of ghetto and ex-ghetto Catholic kids somehow stuck two blocks from the Met Museum of Art, Protestant New York’s High Cathedral. There they were, amidst its other seminaries—your Spence and your Dalton, your Brearly and your Manhattan Country Day—all of them about in their uniforms, brushing up against the Regis boys, all on scholarship, all trooping in from the 86th street subway stop, their mélange of accents a creole limited to one repeated phrase: but us too.

He studied all week for their Saturday and Sunday walks: one summer at the beginning of his junior year, it was *The Brothers Karamazov*, and they were set to talk about the whole thing as they walked. Joey was reading on Tuesday evening in the living room when Philly and Jude came home to get dinner with Grandma and Grandpa.

“Mom and Dad home yet?” Jude asked, already drunk.

“No. They’re both out.” It was seven o’clock.

“Bills, bills, bills,” said Philly, plopping herself on the sofa next to Joey and grabbing his book. “Dostoevsky! You ever read Dostoevsky there Judy boy?” She threw the book at him as he sat in an armchair across the room.

Jude caught the book and held it upside down. “Words are hard,” he said, talking slowly and with a slur.

Joe looked forward without saying anything.

“Oh come on Joey,” said Philly, leaning forward and tussling his hair. “We’re just giving you a hard time.”

“Could I get my book back?” he asked, still not making eye contact.

“Could I get my book back,” said Jude, repeating in a whiny voice. “Would it kill you to have a sense of humor?”

“I want to read my book. There’s food in the fridge if you guys want it. Mom said she’d be back at 7:30.”

Jude stared at his little brother. “You reading this book at Regis?”

“No.”

“So why are you reading it? Just for fun?”

“It looked interesting.”

“It’s for one of your fucking walks with Petey isn’t it?”

Joey didn’t say anything.

“It is! It is, goddammit. Does he even know the rest of us exist? Fucking Petey.”

Philly shook her head. “Whatever Jude, Petey’s an ass. He thinks he’s better than us and the only one of us who’s good enough is Regis-boy Joey.”

“Pete loves all of us,” mumbled Joey, not making eye contact.

“Pete loves all of us,” repeated Jude in the whiny voice.

Philly laughed and stood up. “Whatever. He’s not God, you guys. What do you care who he hangs out with or what he wants snobby Regis boy to read?”

Joey didn’t say anything and still didn’t make eye contact. Philly and Jude got up to go to the kitchen.

“Could I get my book back?”

Jude looked up. He turned to the last page of the book and said “You know what? I’m going to ruin it for you. The very last words are “Hurray for Karamazov!””

“Whatever,” said Joey, holding out his hand.

“You,” he paused dramatically, “are a humorless fuck.” With that, Jude ripped out as many of the pages as he could grab. “There, now you’ll never know the ending,” he said, putting the pages in his pocket.

“That’s bullshit,” said Joey, jumping onto Jude and pinning him to the ground, struggling for the pages. Jude was shocked at first but then head butted Joey with as much force as he had, disorienting him before he punched him, hard, in the nose. Joey stood up, clutching his bleeding nose.

“Go wash up Joseph. Gotta look good for your buttbuddy.”

“Fuck you,” said Joey, running to the bathroom, making sure he caught all the blood in his hands. Philly didn’t say anything. When Joey got out of the bathroom, he heard the two of them laughing in the kitchen. He went to his room and heard Grandma and Grandpa come home. He heard Jude say, as loudly as possible, “No Mom, Joey said he can’t make it to dinner. He said the ending of his book is so good, he just can’t leave it. He wanted you to save him a plate though.”

“Why don’t you spend more time with the other siblings?” Joey asked Dad as they started their walk that Saturday. They had decided to take the N all the way to Astoria and walk down through Queens and then Williamsburg and the park and then back to Bay Ridge.

“I don’t know. I have less in common with them I guess.”

“They’re jealous.”

“That’s stupid. I’m just a brother. It’s not like I’m Mom or Dad or whatever.”

“Philly and Jude are jealous. They want your attention. Maybe you could walk with them one of these weekends.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know. Seems fair.”

They walked into the 95th street station and bought their coins. It was a Saturday afternoon in the Fall and the station was cool and empty. It smelled more like piss than usual. “I don’t know what I’d talk to Jude about. He doesn’t really read.”

“You never encouraged him to read like you did me.”

“I had nothing to do with that. I always saw you reading. I just gave you good books.”

“What about Philly? Or the rest?”

“Everyone else is busy. I see them when I can. I call when I can, or... I don’t know man. What I do with my siblings is my business, okay? Did you want to talk about the book or not?”

The subway arrived and they stepped in. “I didn’t finish the last 40 or so pages.”

“That’s not a huge deal. The important thing is the three brothers: soul, body, and mind.

And then the whole Oedipus thing. Did you catch that? It was really important for Freud.”

The doors closed and they whooshed away.

They arrived in Astoria, another suburban section of a much broader urbs. Joey asked, “Why don’t we ever walk in the city?”

“We’re in the city.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I work in Manhattan. It’s basically all the same.”

“That’s not true. I get off the train in random parts all the time. The city’s amazing.”

“We’re *in* the city.”

“Yeah but—“

“We’re in the city. The coolest stuff is out here. In the boroughs. It’s where you hear the languages, the cultural shops. It’s where people are interesting.”

“There’s all kinds of languages in Manhattan. There’s Korea town and China town and East Harlem. There’s Jews and Italians and—“

“Yeah, yeah, fine. I prefer the boroughs. Plus, it’s less crowded out here.”

Joey realized then that a part of his brother still felt, like all those other Regis boys, a Catholic colored in a properly colorless world. It wasn’t that Manhattan lacked ethnics. Manhattan had plenty. It just had the non-ethnics too. The Protestants, the seculars, the people who grew up rich and whose only relevant identity could be contained in their names. Joey just didn’t care, and realizing this, as they walked past an Irish pub and then a Punjabi place, and then some sort of Korean laundry, brought him to another realization: my big brother is weaker than me. He’d realized he was smarter than his father a long time ago, and his mom had impressed him as a source of emotional sustenance but never as any sort of actual mentor. So who was left? Peter, the rock upon which his burgeoning adulthood had been built. And Petey was just another self-hating Papist. And just as Joey realized this, at the very moment, he saw the vision.

A grid of shiny green lines, about a foot apart, across everything, in every direction. As though the universe had been outlined first on three-dimensional graphing paper and Uncle Joey had been allowed to see the first draft. He turned around suddenly to see it all, everywhere, and he tripped, falling onto an Indian woman leaving the restaurant. He closed his eyes as they both hit the ground. Dad helped the lady up, and then him. “Did you see that?” he asked Dad, blinking, still not able to see.

“Yeah, you looked like an idiot. I didn’t even see what you tripped on.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” I’m not sure if Dad ever found out about why he really tripped that day. And even though the ability to see the grid is really what separated the two, Joey couldn’t have known that at the time. It was the Irish piece, the Catholic piece, the just another self-hating potato eater piece. It was 5:16 and 4 seconds.

It wasn’t until 5:16 and 6 seconds that Uncle Joey realized he still could not see. He kept blinking and Dad asked if there was something wrong with his eyes.

“No, no. It’s just,” he paused, moving his head around as though looking somewhere else might bring his vision back. “I can’t see.”

Dad sounded concerned. “Your eyes are open. What do you mean you can’t see?”

“I can’t see.” He was blinking furiously. Everything was black, though he occasionally saw glimpses of the bright green grid. He wasn’t sure if he was really seeing it again or if it was just a memory. But he wasn’t sure he had seen it before either.

“I just see black. And this bright green grid.”

“A grid?”

“Yeah.”

“Not, like, spots or something?”

“No!” Joey was getting panicked. “Just a fucking green grid. And I can’t see.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s get you to a hospital.” Dad looked around for a taxi. “Fucking Queens. You can never get a cab here.”

“There’s one coming around the corner, right now,” said Joey, pointing behind him, away from where he was looking, and Dad turned around and saw a cab coming around the corner.

“You bastard! You can see. You had me worried for a second. By the way, you have very impressive peripheral vision.”

“No I...” he started to talk but then he realized the grid was back and he could see the outlines of shapes around him. It was fuzzy, and he saw the blurred movements of everything, where it had been and where it would be soon. He only saw outlines, so he could see through buildings, people, cars, as far as the horizon. And he saw what resembled a small clock in the top corner, with characters he didn’t understand. He closed his eyes and the action made no difference. He saw what he saw. He was blind but was not. He noticed three people getting up at the restaurant through the wall, and then, with his eyes closed, saw the same forms leave the restaurant. He walked forward to touch one of them to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating.

“What the fuck?” said a voice.

“Sorry, sorry.”

The figure walked away.

“What was that about?” asked Pete.

“I think I’m still a bit disoriented. Sorry.”

Dad paused. “So you ready to go?”

“Yeah, sure. Where were we?”

As he took his first step, he heard a female voice whisper “You must seek justice.” He looked around but didn’t see any outlines near him. He was already freaking out enough and he didn’t want to ask Pete about it.

“Father Zossima.”

“Right.”

“Seek justice,” it said again. And then it didn’t stop saying it, the same voice, the same calm, quiet insistence. “Seek justice. Seek justice. Seek justice.” A one second pause between urgings. Joe walked with his brother, trying to make his way between outlines, which were hard to figure out since he saw the blur both of where they had been and where they would be, and he was never entirely certain which bits of the blur were the present. He couldn’t make out what his brother was saying over the woman’s voice.

“I’m sorry. I think I actually hit my head harder than I thought. I kind of want to go home and rest.”

“Wait, said Dad, grabbing his head. “I don’t feel a bump anywhere. You think it’s a concussion?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I just want to go home.”

“You can’t go to sleep if you have a concussion.”

“Seek justice. Seek justice. Seek justice.”

“Yeah, yeah, um. Right. I know. Just. Can we go home please?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll get us a cab.”

“There won’t be any for a while. Let’s just take the subway.”

“Okay.”

The voice neither increased nor decreased in volume, never pausing or stopping. Joey didn’t think it felt like any kind of schizophrenia he had heard of, which he thought had different kinds of voices and some sort of variety. But he was the right age for symptoms to show up, and he certainly did have a lot of crazy in the family. Maybe this was it. But the green lines? And the ability to sort of see in the future? He didn’t understand it. He wanted to sleep but

he was worried he would die. Without entirely understanding why, he told his brother, “No, we need to take the subway. We need to take it back to the 95th street stop, and we need to get out and go to an alley three blocks away.”

“That’s very specific.”

“Sorry, I just got a sense.”

“You’re being really weird. I think we should get you to doctor.”

The woman’s voice suddenly got louder, but not as though she was raising her voice. As though some sort of internal volume had been turned up in his brain.

“No, I’m fine. I just have to go to this alley. We both do.”

“Why?”

“We just do. We have to be there at 8:23 and 14 seconds.”

“That’s weird.”

“We do. We’ll be fine. We’ll catch the subway in 14 minutes, and then we’ll be there right on time.”

“All right man.”

The woman’s voice continued, but the volume decreased. They took the subway and, as predicted, the subway arrived in 14 minutes.

“Did you memorize the schedule?”

“Yeah, I figured we’d be coming here, so—“

“Okay,” said Dad, not sure if he believed him but not sure what other explanation there could be. “You keep getting weirder.”

“Sorry,” said Uncle Joey, who realized he was not sure if his eyes were open or closed. He checked them with his hand to be sure. They were closed. He opened them and stepped into the train, seeing the motion of his body completing the action before he stepped into the lines formed before him. On the train ride down, the lines blurred less and less, and he realized he could move the grid forward or backward in time, seeing discrete moments about ten seconds before or ten seconds after what he realized was the present. He began to suspect he was dreaming or possibly dead.

He did not speak for the entire train ride, keeping his eyes open because Peter insisted he not fall asleep. They got to 95th street at 8:20 and the voice was suddenly, excruciatingly loud, though with the same calm and insistent tone. Joey stood up and hurried out of the station and then up the steps and into the alley. He was able to navigate the crowd much better than his brother, who hurried behind, bumping into people and amazed at how his little brother could anticipate the moves of the crowd before they made them. He crashed through, apologizing as he went, and then ran up the stairs to catch up to his brother. “8:23. Right on time. This is fucking weird dude.”

“It’s just the schedule, that’s all.”

“Right. And now the alley.”

“Now the alley.” And then turned once, and then another time and there they were, a dark corner of Brooklyn with rats and empty grates and broken glass. A red brick wall trapped them. Joey walked in and Dad followed.

“What are we doing here?” Dad asked, and then he heard a woman’s voice, whimpering, and saw movement in a corner. “Please,” he heard the woman, say. “Please. Please.” And he paused and he realized it was Philly, and he ran the few remaining steps, and he yanked the man off, not seeing his face, seeing his knife only, and grabbing the knife, and not seeing the shock in the man’s face, and watching his left hand as though it was another man’s, and watching that hand slit the man’s throat so quickly it was like he was throwing a ball, and

watching the hand pull backward and drop the knife, and watching the man fall to the ground and the blood suddenly spurt forward all over everyone, over Philly and her underwear on the ground and his legs and the man's chest and his left hand, still inches from the man's face that somehow, still, had not had enough, and the hand widened out the index and middle fingers and shoved them as hard as possible into the man's eyes, and the fingers felt the squeeze of the eyes as they bled and popped and broke and came out of the sockets in bits and he somehow knew the sensations of that hand were his sensations and he felt himself smile and he saw the man try to scream in pain but no air came from his mouth and then the man was quiet and Philly continued to whimper and Dad did not know what to do.

Joey ran forward and picked Philly up. She had stopped crying and grabbed her underwear, holding it between her thumb and forefinger and just staring at it. Joey took it from her and realized the voice had stopped when Dad attacked the man. His mind was silent, and the grid was gone. Joey went to give Philly a hug and she resisted, shaking her whole body. She closed her eyes and said, looking down and hugging herself. "We have to call the police." Dad didn't say anything.

"I was raped. We have to call the police."

"Yeah, of course," said Joey. "Let's get out of this alley."

"I killed him," said Dad.

"You had to," said Joey.

"I—poked out his eyes."

"He deserved it," said Philly.

"I—"

"Come on," said Philly, touching Dad's soldier. "Get up Pete. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I killed him. I gouged out his eyes."

"Let's go," she said.

Joey blinked over and over, adjusting to his sight.

The cops said it was self-defense, and they told Dad that he must have misremembered and done the eye gouging first, before he got hold of the knife. Joey and Philly agreed. Dad signed the statement. He tried to go back to work, but all he could remember was the pleasure his left hand took in shoving the man's eyes out. He imagined the violence as a scurrying horde of insects, falling over each other from the two offending fingers up into his hand and onto his arm, climbing past his mouth and nose to eat, of course, his eyes. Sometimes he held a butcher knife over his wrist, imagining chopping the hand with that same motion he had used to open another man's throat.

It was the job he eventually cut, giving his two weeks notice for "health reasons." They told him he'd never work at a firm this high profile again, and they were right. Before he had killed a man, he would have responded with something flip, but now he only mumbled an acknowledgement whose words he forgot as he said them. He had money saved for retirement whose function was supposed to be reproduction rather than rent, yet he did not know what else to do. He sat at home for weeks, unable to read, uninterested in TV. He didn't go out, didn't return anyone's calls. He felt as though he should check on Philly, or Joey, but all he could do was lie in bed and feel the goo of the man's eyes, holding his left wrist so hard his hand often fell asleep.

His parents came after a week, and they broke down the door after a month, worried he might have starved or gone crazy. The home was not, despite Grandma's imaginings, the site of a mad man: dishes were put away, books were stacked. There were no take out wrappers. Dad was skinnier than he had ever been, but either because a month was simply not enough time or because he wasn't interested in starving himself, he did not look unhealthy. He had simply traded a rower's physique for a runner's: smaller shoulders and arms, less fat in his face. He was sitting on the bed in his studio when Grandpa kicked the door open. He didn't say anything.

Grandma rushed in, sitting next to Dad. "Petey! Say something! We've been so worried about you."

"Hi Mom. Dad."

Grandpa squatted, looking at the lock. "I don't think I broke it actually."

"That's good," said Dad.

"You should have opened the door the last times we came though."

"I didn't want visitors. That's what I said today too."

"You're not *well*," said Grandma. "You should see a doctor."

Dad sighed.

"You had to do it," said Grandma, massaging his neck. Dad kept leaning forward on the side of the bed. "Philly could have died."

"Yeah, well."

Grandpa walked over and squatted again, this time right in front of Dad. "I was hoping none of my boys would ever have to kill anybody. I was so glad when you weren't in the war, and your brothers. I was glad they got cushy jobs. After I found out Jude was safe too, I thought it was done. I thought you all were safe."

Nobody said anything.

"But you did it anyways. You killed somebody. Had to. I killed lots of people. Bombers do that. That's our job. We kill people. Sure, we destroy buildings and all of that, but fuck buildings. Destroying buildings doesn't scare anybody. We fucking end lives. And we do it with flair, son. The fires of Hell raining down. Fucking Satan saw the future and got the idea from us."

Dad still was not making eye contact, but Grandpa was looking right at him. Grandma removed her hand.

"But I never actually saw that shit. I mean, I did, later, in the papers, but not while I was doing it. I wasn't even a fighter pilot, so yeah, we saw some shit in the air, and our gunner took some fuckers out, but that wasn't really me. I turned a lever, pushed a button, made a big bird go up and then go down. Easy. Then one day we crashed. I was good, I was fucking good, and I got us down in a forest, over trees, and nobody died. There were five of us. And we radioed for help and couldn't reach anybody and realized we had a map and about 100 miles to walk. So fuck it, we walked. And that's when I did things, Petey. That's when I stole food from families who could die with one more missed meal. That's when I saw somebody getting raped and I just kept walking because I was too fucking tired and I had just, I had literally just stopped two other people being raped that same day. So fuck it. And then we got attacked. We were all out of ammo by then. We were dumb: we used it for hunting. And so these guys show up, and they're out of ammo too, and so it's just them and us: fists, legs, biting, hair. Everything. I saw a guy's eyes taken out there. You're right. It's terrible. And then I threw one of them on the ground and I took out my knife and I pointed it right at his chest and he just looked at me and he said *bitte*. Just *bitte* and I could see he was about my

age, about my build. You know, all of it. I looked around, and all of his friends were on the ground or had run off. The guy was fine. I could have let him go. He looked around, eyes all wide, but he just kept saying bitte. And I didn't even say anything. I just stabbed him, right then, in the heart, fast in, fast out. He said bitte one more time and he was dead. And you know what I did? I smiled. I felt such a rush of adrenaline. I had to fight the urge to get up and stab the other guys still on the ground. And then I stood up, and I took two steps, and I puked, all over the place. And I've never talked about it until today."

Grandma just stared at the ground.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Dad.

"Because killing will fuck you up if you let it," said Grandpa.

Grandma paused uncomfortably, walking to the window and then turning with an idea.

"What about all that volunteering you used to do in college? Weren't you going to go back and do that sort of work again?"

"I couldn't do that anymore."

"Bullshit," said Grandpa.

Grandma said, "Would you like to see a priest?"

Grandpa looked away. Dad hadn't made eye contact with anyone the entire time. "Thanks for coming. I'll call tomorrow. I promise. If I don't, you know where I live. There's a spare key in the desk by the door. Might make getting in easier next time."

Grandma said, "I love you" again and kissed his head. Grandpa left without saying anything. On their drive back to Bay Ridge, Grandma and Grandpa didn't talk but Grandpa kept thinking about his own father, who had died when Zach was only twelve. Great-Grandpa Abe had come from Ireland at 40, twelve years before Easter, at a moment when the only thing that seemed changeable was the feet within the British boot. Grandpa was born seven years later, after Abe had already set himself up in Hell's Kitchen, picking up heavy boxes in boats and putting them down again on land, as though paying a debt.

The promise had happened back in Cork, or close by anyway. Abe told people he was from Cork because the accent was close enough and nobody had ever heard of a little village called Ur. He told all of this to Zach in 1932, the year he was shot. He was a seventy-year-old man who could still lift a barrel on his own, who, except for the shakes, seemed incapable of any weakness. He never said who shot him. Every day Zach's mother Sara went to work and Zach would mind his dad, whose shaking hands made holding anything—a glass, a dick, a fork—impossible. Zach's were his father's hands, and he was also his father's priest.

"I was a shepherd, boy. You believe that? Your old man a shepherd?"

Zach didn't know what to say. He'd been told this so many times, and even the first time, he knew his father came from a small enough town that being a shepherd did not seem altogether ridiculous. He also knew his dad made things up and was not sure that his family had ever owned sheep. Yet he knew how his father wanted him to react. "No! Really?"

"Yes, yes. A shepherd. And did I tell you that God sent me an angel?"

This was a part Zach had not heard before. He worried his father was going mad.

"You mean mom?"

Abe laughed. "Oh, yes. Your mother's a fine woman, son. But I mean a real angel."

"With wings?"

"No, not with wings. It was a woman though. Her name was Gabrielle."

"Like Gabriel."

“Like Gabriel, but a woman. Beautiful. Irish too. Red hair, no freckles.”

“Was she beautiful?”

“She was, she was.”

“Well tell me about her.”

“A little sip first son.”

“Dad, the doctor says it’ll kill you.”

“It helps with the shakes.”

He found his mom’s whiskey and held it to his father’s face like he’d seen women doing with babies. His father closed his eyes, smiling as he suckled. “That will do,” he said, as Zach pulled the bottle away. “I’m not greedy.”

“The story.”

“Yes. Well, I was sitting in a field, watching sheep, which is a very boring thing to be doing. I didn’t have a lute or whatever they had in the Bible, and if I read books I would get too distracted, so there I was, sitting on a green hill and watching the fucking sheep when I turned and looked to my right and there was a woman right next to me.”

“She just appeared?”

“She did, she did. She didn’t *appear* though, like from thin air like they say. I just turned and looked and there she was, as though like there was some tree she could have just come out from when I wasn’t looking, which there wasn’t of course. So here’s this beautiful woman, just beautiful, and I don’t know what to say. I never had much trouble there, but I’m stumped. And she says, do you know who I am? And I say, no, but I’d like to very much. And she says, I’m Gabrielle. And I said, where are you from? I don’t place your accent. It was Irish, see, but it wasn’t clear from which part. And she said, I’m from Heaven. And I said, so you won’t be from Dublin then? And she laughed and said, no. She’s actually from Heaven. She’s an angel and she’s sent by God. And so I said well, that’s a fine thing, but aren’t angels supposed to be having wings then? And she said they have in the past, but they can look all sorts of ways in fact, and this is what she looks like today, and she wondered if I liked it. And I said of course I do, she’s lovely, I’d call her an angel anyway on account of how she looks, but surely she could tell me now where she’s actually from, and she says I’m afraid you’re going to have to choose to believe what I’m telling you, and I said, well, I’m afraid I’m not sure that’s actually possible, but I can certainly play along with a good story, and she said that will have to do, and I said all right. She said, are these your sheep, and I said aye, and I turned to point at one of them who’d been giving me hell and I looked back to see her eyes and she’d gone again, like as before, just as though that was all of it.”

“Did you ever see her again?”

“Yes, yes, but not for some time. A few years later, I was living in my father’s house, tending the farm and too busy for a woman, despite what my cousins, and the aunts, and the uncles all kept saying.”

“What about your brothers and sisters?”

“They’d all left, all of them, the bastards. Off to Cork, or Dublin, or London. They had more important places to be than Ur. But I’d made a promise to my dad, and that’s something, boy, a promise to your father. It’s something you keep.”

“What did you promise?”

“I promised to mind the farm.”

“So why did you leave?”

“Patience son patience. So I was in the farmhouse by myself, middle of the night, and I suppose you’re old enough now to know that I was doing something to my own body that a

man ought not to do but which sometimes he gets lonely and, well, I was in a compromising position when this same woman walks into the room, catching me, as it were, indisposed.” At this point, Zach decided the angel piece was simply a long story to occupy the time. “So I jumped up from the chair and I pulled up my pants and I said what is it you think you’re doing here, this is a private home! And then I recognized her, and she said to me, it not good that you are alone, and I said, what? And she said, it is not good that you are alone. And then she looked at my belt, and I looked too, and I realized my number was hanging out, clear as day, and I covered myself and looked back up and she was gone. Well after that I started to believe this woman really was an angel of some kind, and I’ll tell you what, I stopped touching myself for a long time after that day, because all I could think of was her looking at me like she did, not judging, loving really, but in a way that made me feel like I could do much better than my hand. And so I did. I met your mother and we loved each other and it was ten years later when we still hadn’t had a child that she came back, to the same house, when Sara was out tending to the animals. I was underneath the table, tightening the legs. I looked to my right and I saw a white dress, and this time I knew before even getting out. You’re back, I said. Yes, she said, not stooping down. I pulled myself out from under the table and stood up. What do you want? It is not good for you to be alone, she said. And I said, you said that last time, but I’m not alone. I’ve got Sara. And she nodded and she said again, It is not good for you to be alone. And I said so we’re to have children then? And she said you must sell all you own and go to America, and there you will have a child, and the child will have many children, and their children will fulfill a destiny. Though your child must be holy, or else all will be lost.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you have to be a priest, I always thought. I told your mother, and she didn’t believe me about any of it, about having a child, about moving to America, about selling everything. She just laughed at me and shook her head and said I’m as likely to have a baby as that bull, and she pointed at Babylon, who was our strongest, meanest bull. And then a year passed, or two, and we sheared sheep and milked cows and killed pigs. And we also made money off Babylon, who was a mighty sire. And then one day Babylon couldn’t do it, just stopped. Seemed not to care at all about cows, or eating, or anything at all. He died a week or two later, and we asked the doctor to cut him open to find what had happened. And there it was, right by his old hard-working cock, a huge tumor, the size of a baby, and with enough teeth and hair at the top to be a baby itself. And Sara starts laughing, she does, she says that’s the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen. And the whole town heard of it and worried, because a baby-sized tumor with teeth, that’s a bad omen. Well, it wasn’t too long before the other cows got sick too, and I prayed, which I didn’t usually do, despite having an angel as a regular acquaintance, and I asked God to send me a sign about what I ought to do, and the Angel came, right in the middle of the prayer, and she said You have had your signs. You must sell all you have and go to America, where you will have your child. And I said, aye, that’s what you said the first time, but Sara won’t have it, and I can’t force the woman to do anything. And the angel said this is your destiny, not hers. This is your line, not hers. She is of your house. The stars of the sky are hers through you. You must not fail. And then this time I wanted to see how she did it, so I just kept looking at her, but somehow I wasn’t looking at her and then she was gone. So I sold the house and everything else, against Sara, and I told her an angel told me to, and she said I was mad and would move back in with her parents, but I knew she hated them more than me, and I said we’re going to America, and you’re my wife, and you’re coming too, and she said she hated me, but she came. And so we came, and we had some money, and I got a job working the docks and she took in sewing,

but the child still hadn't come, and nor could you have, on account of your mother never being fertile back in Ireland, not to mention never wanting any part of me once I made her move. And so that was all I thought, and I wondered if the angel could appear in America as well, and one time, when I had just finished with myself, the angel was back, and she asked why I was wasting my seed. I've not another place to put it, I told her. Unless an angel of God is wanting me to traffic with hookers. And she shook her head and said your woman is yours, she is to be had. She must be the mother of your child. And I said but she doesn't want it anymore, she can't forgive me. And Gabrielle said are you a man or are you not? Is she not yours? Are you not the father of a great nation? And I said, I'm a fucking dockworker is what I am, I don't know about a great nation, and the angel said, no, you have been promised much. You are beholden. You are beholden. And I said, I don't understand. And she looked at me and she said, tonight is the night you will make your wife conceive, and for the first time she disappeared with me still looking at her, just faded away like sinking into water. And so that night your mother came back after spending time with friends and I told her we have to be together tonight, and she said she thought she'd made very clear she's no longer interested and I said she should be interested, and I kissed her neck and touched her breast while she was making dinner and she shook me off and said well I'm not, and I said well you should be, and I held her closer, and she said, well I'm *not*, and tried to turn around and push me away, but I wouldn't let her, and I pulled up her dress and she began a scream but I covered her mouth and I pulled up her dress and I pulled down my pants and I was hard, harder than I'd ever been, and it was done, there, in two minutes, and she cried, and said, please, are you done? And I said yes, and I went out for a pint, and as you've seen we haven't talked much since."

Zach shook his head. "That's not a good story Dad."

"It's not a story. It's true. Why do you think your mother hates me?"

"Because you're a drunk. Because you're always with gangsters. Because you're a gangster."

Zach had thought these things before but never said them.

"Why do you think I'm a drunk?"

Zach didn't know what to say. For reasons he did not understand, he held his father's hand. "You know I never once went to a priest when I came to America? I felt like the angel was enough, the mission was enough. And so I've never asked for confession. I don't feel I deserve it. But I think that's why the angel told me you had to be holy. You could be a father with many children. I could be your child, son. You could be my priest, and you could forgive me. Sara and I don't talk but she did ask me how I was shot when I was shot, and I said for punishment, and she said for what, I said you know what, and I'm sorry, and she said there's nothing to apologize for and went back to whatever sewing she was doing, but I know she didn't mean it. And I was in my bed then, just lying there, and I held out my hands to her, and I said the boy has to be holy. That's what the angel had said. She said the boy has to be holy. She looked at me and she said Abraham McCandless, why will you never be silent about that angel? And I said please, and I was crying I will tell you, I was crying, and I said please, I am not lying. I lie about so much, but I am not lying." And Zach saw tears in his father's eyes for the first time in his life, his father staring at the ceiling. "I had to, the angel told me I had to, and I did not know what else I could do. She promised us a great family, but you must ensure the boy is holy. If the boy is not holy, then everything is lost. That's what she told me. That's what we have to do. And she just looked at me like I was crazy and she shook her head and walked away."

Zach continued to hold his hand. He cried too. And fell asleep. He didn't know what else to do. As he rested his head against the wall, his father whispered, "I'm going to die, boy. I'm

going to die soon, and your mother doesn't believe me. The angel's never come back. But she promised me. And all I had to do was, well. Well." He closed his eyes. "I told your mother you had to be a priest, that it was the only way you'd survive the depression. I told her you'd be a spiritual father to thousands, maybe even a bishop. She didn't believe me until I heard her laughing, again, one night a few days back. She laughed and laughed, like a mad woman. She was out on the sofa, as she's been since she was pregnant with you, and she run in, her eyes wide, and she says I've seen your fucking angel. She came to me in a dream. And I said, she did, with red hair? Gabrielle? Yeah, yeah, the same, the same, she said. And she said, she told me our boy had to be holy, like *you!* *You rapist cunt!* *She wanted him to be a rapist like you!* *That's what she wanted!* *Holy doesn't mean a faggot priest, you shit!* *It means a man who takes whatever and whoever the fuck he wants, like you, like you, like you!* *And here's what I'll do, you dying shit, here's what I'll fucking do: I'll make him be a priest, he'll be a priest, and I'll convince him he'll have to do it. And that will be all there is. And he'll never fuck anyone like you fucked me, and your fucking line will end. And that's what I told the angel, and she screamed and her face shown red and I spat in her fucking face as she disappeared.* And I closed my eyes boy, and I hoped she was right." And the angel stood, watching them both, her hand gently on Zach's head, ensuring that nothing was heard. She smiled at Abe, kissing his forehead, and whispered, well done my good and faithful servant. Zach was holding a dead hand when he awoke.

"I should have been a priest," he told his wife, as they pulled into the driveway.

"Not that again," said Grandma.

"I'm worried I've betrayed God."

Grandpa stopped the car and looked at his wife, tears in his eyes.

She held his face and said. "God always finds a way back for us, no matter what." She kissed his lips, sweetly, and he rested in her chest and cried.