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Muted

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of
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ABSTRACT**Muted**

Muted tells the story of George Osterman, a husband, father, brother, and son who was struck with a dissociative disorder brought about by an incident at a subway station. *Muted* begins with the death of George's father. As the story progresses, the reader will see the history and changing relationships within George's family. My goals are to investigate familial traits, those acquired and those passed down. How much of our identity is tied to our personality? Would it be a blessing or a curse to lose the ability to feel emotion?

The story is told in two sets of interlocking chapters. One set of chapters, told in first-person present tense, follows George the week between his father's death to his funeral. The other set, told in first-person past tense, highlights individual members of George's family, told in a loosely chronological order along with random facts and information George knows of the subject. With little ability to connect emotionally, George is in the unique position of being an objective narrator while also being tied to everyone in the story.

Influences for *Muted* are varied, but remained tied to objective storytelling, specifically Ernest Hemingway's short story work. Their power lies in not hand feeding the reader how to react to a situation, instead forcing them to decide for themselves. The reader will be presented with a lot of seemingly random information. But within that raw data resides complete characters that detail their relationship to George and to each other.

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Chapter 1

Friday, September 15th, 1995

My father died today. My wife called and told me. I was not invited to the hospital. Knowing the condition our mother would be in, my brother and sister felt it was best she not have to see or interact with me. Or with my condition.

When Karen called, she told me that he looked confused but comfortable. She said he didn't know anything. He didn't know that right outside his room, two of his grandchildren were there. He didn't know that surrounding him was his son Gregory, his daughter Lola, his wife of forty-one years, Patricia, and his daughter in law. My father would say he would rather be dead than be in a place he didn't know. Holding his wife's hand, he whispered the names of other women.

Edith. Elizabeth.

He forgot his wife's name three years ago. Eighteen months before that, he forgot how to use the bathroom. On the eve of their anniversary, she caught him trying to shave with the alarm clock.

Two weeks ago, he forgot how to breathe. He was placed on a ventilator. The

calls went out. A meeting was held. Or so I was told.

I have read how artificial ventilation machines work. They are positive airway pressure machines. A mask is placed over the patient's nose and mouth. A tight seal has to be maintained so that both necessary functions of breathing are made possible. The doctor times the rhythm of the machine to a normal heartbeat.

Each mechanical breath forces air into the lungs, a percentage of which contains pure oxygen. This same air pressure is used to keep the passageway open, whereby the machine inhales the carbon dioxide that would normally be expelled at the conclusion of a breath.

At approximately two o'clock, Karen told me, this machine was turned off. When a life support machine is relieved of its duty, ischemia is induced. Ischemia is cell starvation in the body due to lack of oxygen brought upon by a restriction of blood supply. The first cell tissues most affected are the kidneys, the brain, and the heart. As these cells die, they release toxins that poison everything around themselves. One by one, these dead cells disrupt the body's vital functions.

The body attempts to live on without oxygen. This can last from seconds to

minutes. Eventually, metabolites build up. The blood brain barrier is broken. Cells begin to die anew. Heartbeat lessens. Contractions become irregular. The heart loses power to move blood throughout the body, depriving the secondary organs and muscles of oxygen. With each deteriorating heartbeat, body and mind lose the will to survive.

Karen said his body took in a long, last breath, then closed his eyes. The monotone drone of the heart machine confirmed his death. The choking tears of my sister broke the silence.

Karen said that arrangements have been made for the wake to be next Thursday and the funeral Friday morning. She said she would stay at the hospital until Lola returned from meeting with the doctor.

"I love you," she said.

"Goodbye."

I put down the phone and stared at the picture of the lake hanging above the end table.

I am still standing there now.

Karen took the picture four summers ago when she began to practice photography. We had rented a summer house for two weeks in the valley of the Berkshires. The lake was serene with a slight ripple that distorted the reflective image of the mountain hovering above it. The left and bottom are bordered perfectly by the wood railing that went up the wall, creating a partial border that frames the picture and draws the eye towards the ripple which resonates at the tip of the mountain peak, bending the light-

The alarm grabs my attention. It is coming from upstairs.

I walk up to the second floor. The hallway is aligned with open doors: three on the right and two on the left.

The first door on the right is Chris's room. I look inside. It is his alarm. I stretch over his bed and shut it off. I stand and look around the room. His bed is made. My bed was never made at his age. Above his headboard is a reproduction of an 18th century atlas of the world. Resting on his alarm clock is a blown out reading lamp bulb. I vacuumed his floor this morning. Right after I did the laundry.

I leave his room and take another step down the hallway and turn left into the

bathroom. The seashells on the vinyl shower curtain match the pattern on the toilet seat cover along with the toothbrush holder and soap tray. They are small and silver with flourishes of blue along the contours of the shells. Three towels hang over the shower rod. Left is Christopher, middle is Rose, and right is Karen. My towel hangs on the other side of the door. The toilet seat is closed. The hamper lid is open.

I walk two more steps and look into Rose's room. The same three books, one for algebra 2, U.S. history, and a copy of *Canterbury Tales* have been on the floor for twelve days now. The pink blouse under the bed contrasts sharply with the beige carpeting.

I walk two more steps and turn right. I am standing in the doorway of our spare room. It used to be my home office, but after the incident, Karen turned it into her studio. On the easel is a partially drawn still life of the melted candles on the desk across the room. Five thin, red candles, all the same height, formed in a semi-circle, with the wax deposited onto two white, shorter, fatter candles occupying the center. On the wall behind the still life is a blown-up photograph of Rose peering behind a bush. Karen has not represented that in the drawing yet.

I walk into our bedroom. I made the bed this morning. Right after I took my shower.

I hear the phone ringing, and I walk downstairs.

"Hello?"

"Daddy?" Rose says, behind tears. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"Mom said I couldn't be in the room but I really wanted to."

"Perhaps your mother was right."

"But I just wanted to be there."

"There will come a time when you will get to be in the room."

"Mom wants to talk to you."

"Okay."

I hear Rose hand over the phone.

"Lola just spoke with me," Karen said. "And about the funeral-"

"She doesn't want me to go."

"George, I didn't want to make a scene at the moment, but I will talk to her-"

"If she does not want me to attend, I will not."

"You don't have to be that way, George."

"I am not trying to be any way, Karen. You know that."

"I'm sorry. It's just that he's your father, too."

"I will have my time and place."

"We will talk about this when I get home." She hangs up.

I look at the clock. 2:57. *Evermore Valleys* will be on in three minutes. I pour myself a glass of water and sit down on the couch.

Today's show opens with the Abigail Hollingsworth storyline. Abigail, the matriarch of the Hollingsworth family, recently remarried after her husband of nearly twenty-five years died at sea. Her new husband, Wilson, twenty-five years her junior, may or may not have been responsible for the death of her youngest son, Trevor, three years ago.

"Why won't you look at this?" Judith Hollingsworth-Baxtor says to her mother.

"You won't be happy until you have ruined my marriage, will you, Judith? You are just going to have to face the truth that your father is gone and I am in love."

"The truth? That is what I am trying to show you. This receipt proves your

newlywed of a husband was at the ski lodge the weekend Trevor died.”

“What are you doing looking through his things? You know, Judith, I have come to terms that you don’t approve, but don’t hold it against me that Wilson wanted me instead-“

Judith slaps her mother. There is shock on both of their faces.

I hear the front door open. I turn and see it is Christopher. He walks into the kitchen, places his school bag on a kitchen chair and opens the fridge. He walks into the living room, tall glass of orange juice in hand.

“Hello, Dad.”

“Hello, Christopher. Your grandfather died today.”

Chapter 2

Myself

“Mr. Osterman...may I call you George?” he asked.

“If you wish.”

“I want you to do an exercise for me right now. When I say begin, I would like you to smile for me and keep holding that smile until I say stop. Is that okay?”

“Okay.”

Dr. Shanktalusa picked up the stopwatch on his lap.

“Begin.”

I smiled. I held it for one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen seconds.

“You can stop. You see, George, muscle memory is tied to our emotions, just as our sights, sounds, smells, and thoughts are. Our brain anchors all of these facets of experience to our emotions. When you are happy, you smile. The muscles in your face contort into the position they were in just now. Studies have shown that you can trigger emotions by having your muscles in a position that is associated with that

emotion. Think of it as Pavlov's dog in reverse. Smiling for as little as ten seconds can bring those emotions forward because your muscles are telling your brain that you must be happy because your muscles are in the same position that they have been in thousands of times.

Now, I had you smile for fifteen seconds. Tell me, George, did you feel anything?"

"No," I said.

Dr. Shanktalusa smiled.

"I didn't think it would be that easy. You are a unique case, George. It's going to be tough, but I think we'll be able to make progress, step by step.

The first assignment I need you to do every morning is look in the mirror and smile for thirty seconds. Just stare at yourself, look at the smile, the lines around your mouth, look in your eyes, just keep your eyes on yourself, and smile. Can you remember to do that for me, George?"

"Yes."

"Good. And another thing I'll need you to do is to keep a journal. In this

journal, I want you to write about your life. Your friends. Your family. Moments in your life that meant something to you. Every thought has a connection. There is feeling in all of those things, George. We just need to mine them and bring them out and anchor them again. Okay?"

"Okay."

Dr. Shanktalusa stood up.

"Well, that is actually all I have for you today, George. This session is on the house. I just thought that we should meet briefly and get you started on your work."

He shook my hand, and I left his office.

My name is George Herman Osterman. I was born April 12th, 1957. I am thirty-eight years old. I am the eldest child of Louis George Osterman and Phyllis Rose Osterman, nee Pelletier. I am the oldest of three children. I have a younger sister named Beatrice "Lola" Chow, and a younger brother named Gregory Albert Osterman.

I live on 36 Celine Way with my wife of sixteen years, Karen, and my two children, my daughter Rose, who is sixteen, and my son Christopher, who is twelve.

Except for the four years I attended St. Anysia University in Watertown, I have lived in Barrington my entire life.

I met my wife Karen in college.

One night, my dorm mate Gavin came home with his new girlfriend, Karen.

He told me he only dated women so he could cheat on them. He enjoyed the thrill.

Karen, Gavin, and I were all enrolled in a course entitled "American History: From Plymouth to Gettysburg." I assumed for many years that was how we all met, but

Karen later told me that she first met Gavin at a bar a month into her freshman year.

When Karen stepped into the bathroom, Gavin asked me for a favor.

"Can you keep her company for a couple hours?"

"Where are you going?"

"You know Melinda? The girl with the tight ass in Physics?"

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, she just called and I think she's looking for some action. I'm gonna hop over there for a bit. I'll come back after it's over."

"What? Why not just tell Karen you can't go out tonight?"

"Just help me out with this, okay?"

Karen walked out of the bathroom.

"Hey, baby," Gavin said. "I just remembered, I got to go to the library for that study group thing."

"That's unfortunate," she said. "Do you want to do something tomorrow, then?"

"No, we can still hang later tonight. I just need to make an appearance there. You know how it goes. George will keep you company."

"Alright," she said. Gavin kissed her on the cheek and said goodbye. He winked at me as he closed the door.

Karen suggested we get a beer at The Beltway Pub two blocks over. Once there, we began to talk about the class and the upcoming final exam. The conversation then moved into other categories, like our hobbies and our family.

We realized we had similar backgrounds. Both of us had parents who were factory workers. We both enjoyed the music of Motown artists such as The Four Tops and The Temptations. We both liked the motion pictures *Close Encounters of*

the Third Kind but hated *Airport '77*.

"So, what do you want to be when you grow up?" She asked.

"I don't know...security?"

"Security? Like a guard?"

"No. A job that pays well. Get the rent paid with some spare change."

"Security is a peace of mind," Karen said. "Not a paycheck."

"Tell that to your landlord."

"That's bullshit. You can get a job waiting tables and afford a livable existence."

"If that's the case, then why are you majoring in Business Administration?"

"Familial obligation. My minor is in fine arts. If I decide to double-up my course load next semester, I can turn it into a double major."

"Then what?" I asked.

"I don't know...I kinda like that, and I kinda don't. We'll see how it all turns out."

"So how are things between you and Gavin?"

"I've only been on two dates with him. So far, so good. You know, it's been nice talking to you. We don't talk enough outside of class."

"I'm a little surprised that you two are seeing each other. You're both so different."

"Why do you say that? Is it because you really think that or because you feel you have nothing in common with Gavin and we seem to have many commonalities, ergo..."

"No. You guys are quite different."

"You don't like Gavin, do you?"

"What?"

"I see your facial reactions when we're in group and he flirts with me. I see the rolled eyes and the bemused smirks."

I pushed my glass of beer away from me. I did not want alcohol to be the reason by which I would try to explain my actions.

"It's just that...I see the way he treats women."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

At that moment, doubt crept into my mind as to whether I should continue. I hoped that she would pick up my suggestion.

"He dates a lot of women, you know?"

"Are you trying to allude to the fact that he is probably fucking some skirt right now? Is that what you mean? You think I don't know that?"

"You know?"

"What makes you think I came here to see him? Gavin's a fun guy, but he's part time, you know? He's not someone you have a serious relationship with."

More on impulse than any rational thought, I leaned in and kissed her. Her skin smelled of what I thought was amber. It wasn't until our tenth anniversary when I learned she used apricot face lotion. I would always make that mistake. As I pulled back, I opened my eyes and I saw a smile across her face. I smiled in return. We sat there for a couple seconds in silence.

"Gavin's gonna owe me twenty bucks."

"What do you mean?"

"I won a bet."

"What bet?"

"Whether you would make a pass at me. I said you would. He had more faith in his good friend and roommate. I told him never bet on your friends."

My body froze. I visualized them talking about me. Making the bet. Becoming the butt of some elaborate joke between her and Gavin.

"Look, if you don't want to be here, you can leave at any time."

"Relax," she said. "It was all in good fun."

I recall feeling emotions of resentment, anger, guilt, and shame. For the first of many times since, she read my eyes and body language with alarming accuracy.

"Hey," she said. "It's not bad. I cheated. He probably assumed I would try to get you to make a move on me. He didn't know that I knew that he was seeing other women and that I would inform you of that in an attempt to soften whatever guilt you had and allow you to rationalize the fact that you wanted to kiss me."

She leaned in to kiss me. In a motion I moved my head and swiveled off of the chair.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Go fuck yourself."

"I'm not gonna tell him." she grabbed my arm.

"I don't give a shit what you tell him."

"It wasn't like that at all, George," she said, laughing. "I do like you."

I walked out of the pub and went back to my dorm room. Once inside, I put *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac on the turntable. I lay in bed and stared at a poster of the stars that I put on the ceiling. Gavin arrived an hour later.

"Hey, George. Where's Karen?"

"She had to take care of some things."

"That's good. I got to shower before I see her, anyway." Gavin's grin grew wider as he spoke. "I got to tell you something. While I was railing Melinda, I kept thinking of Karen sitting here, waiting for me, and it took all of my will power to not blow my load in the first three pumps. So what did you guys do?"

"We went to the bar and had a couple drinks."

"Anything of note happen?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

A month later, Karen called and offered to take me out to dinner as an apology. After dinner, we went to the movie theater and watched *Jaws*. When speaking with our children, she refers to this night as our first date. To my knowledge, the children do not know the circumstances that made that night possible. We married six months later, with Rose coming six months after that.

My first sexual experience occurred weeks after my sixteenth birthday. I had begun working at Braden's department store, which was located on the other side of town. My father would drive me there at 5:00 every weekday afternoon and pick me up at 8:30 each night. He did not like this and would find a manner to bring this up at least once a trip.

"I don't know why you have to work so far from home" or "I'm not a fucking taxi, George," he would say driving me to and from work. I always told him it was because they offered great starting pay. I don't know if this was true. I applied there because my high school crush April Matchins worked there. I was hoping that by working there we would get to know each other. April was five foot two and between a hundred and twenty to a hundred and thirty pounds. Her red hair was partially

braided in the back in two large strands that connected at the bottom.

It was at Braden's that I met Melissa Gates. Melissa was around five foot five, and between one hundred and thirty-five to one hundred and fifty pounds, with brown hair and brown eyes. We would talk on occasion but I did not get any indication that she had an attraction to me. One night, she offered to drive me home. I accepted.

"Want to get a bite to eat?" She asked.

I said okay and we went to Blake's diner. After getting hamburgers, Melissa suggested that we drive around on the back roads. We drove around the outskirts of town listening to the radio. There was not much talking between us. I noticed it was ten o'clock so I asked if she could bring me home. She pulled the car over and asked me if I could get her book bag from the backseat.

"I want to show you something," she said.

I climbed into the back seat and grabbed her book bag, which was resting underneath the driver's seat. Melissa climbed over as well and was sitting on my lap, facing me. She kissed me, thrusting her tongue in my mouth while doing so. This

was my first kiss since kissing my cousin Nancy at a family reunion when I was twelve.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I just don't know about this."

"I notice you looking at me," she said. The top button on Melissa's blouse was always unbuttoned. Throughout the workday, I would come up with excuses to walk by her left side so I could peek down her blouse and see what color bra she had on. It was always pink or white. I assumed no one noticed.

"Let's have some fun," she said.

She started kissing me again. I put my hands on her hips. She grabbed my hands and placed them up to her chest. I began unbuttoning her blouse, revealing her white bra. She put her hands under my shirt and lifted it over my head. "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor was on the radio. She put her hand in my pants and pulled out my erection. She lifted her skirt and pushed aside her underwear. She positioned herself on me just as I was ejaculating.

She looked down for several seconds and then looked at me.

"Sorry...?" I said.

She rolled her eyes, wiped her hands on my shirt and threw it at my face. She told me to get dressed because she was taking me home. I quit Braden's three days later. My father was happy to hear about this. I have never spoken with April Matchins.

In my life I have had three friends that I referred to as my best friend. My first best friend was named Richard Hugo though everyone called him Ricky. We met in 2nd grade. He had a Flintstones lunchbox and I told him that I watched the show.

We never spent any time together outside of school. I also never saw him during winter or summer breaks. Ricky and his family moved a few months into the 3rd grade. The day he left, I cried. I have never seen nor spoken with him since.

My next best friend was Derek Laverdierre. We met in the fifth grade. I visited his house every afternoon after school. Most of the time, we would play basketball in his driveway. Derek began dating Pamela Hunter in the 7th grade. Though I never told Derek I was infatuated with her, I thought I made it abundantly clear through non-verbal communication that I was interested. Not long after they started dating,

we stopped talking to each other on a regular basis.

He called me the day of our high school graduation to offer his congratulations. He told me he got accepted into Michigan. He gave me his phone number and said we should spend some time together over the summer before we go off to college. I said that would be a good idea. After he hung up, I put his number on my mantle and went back to my nap. I never called him. I have not seen nor spoken with him since, either.

My third best friend was Hamilton Johnson. We met in our seventh grade science class, where we were lab partners. Hamilton mentioned how he really liked The Monkees song "I'm a Believer." I told him I had the 45 so he invited me to his house the next day.

In high school, Hamilton would borrow his parents' car and we would drive to the bars located just outside the city. We would sneak in with fake ID's that we bought from Hamilton's friend and see musicians like Three Dog Night, The Spinners, and Raspberries.

Whenever he came over to the house, Hamilton and my father would discuss

baseball. I always felt conflicted. Though I liked that my father liked my friend, my father never spoke with me about baseball, despite my attempts to engage him on the topic.

He was accepted into the University of Washington, where he studied pre-law. We spoke on the phone regularly and I visited him in Olympia on three occasions. After pre-law, he enrolled at UCLA for his law degree. I never visited him in Los Angeles; I could not arrange the proper logistics.

The last time I spoke with Hamilton, he was married with a child on the way. That was two years ago. He sent a card after the incident along with his phone number and a note to "call when you want to talk." I have not spoken with him yet.

After graduating college in the spring of 1978, I began working for Intelligent Technologies, LLC as a junior associate. They designed and manufactured mechanical and electronic systems for government and industry. I worked there for fifteen months and then left to begin work at Benetoment Facilities, which was where I continued to work until last year.

We bought our house in June, 1984, for seventy-five thousand dollars. It has

seven rooms including four bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, laundry room, living room, and a yard in the back. Karen was three months pregnant with Christopher when she said we should move out of our apartment. We turned the spare room into my home office. I had a separate line that I would use to contact our Asian distributors in the late hours or, when Karen was sleeping, for phone sex.

Last year, I attended a business conference in Boston. I went with Jared Foley, the Vice President of Marketing, Foster Acker, Vice Director of Intelligent Brand Conception, and Jamaal Robinson, Senior Officer of Dynamic Value Empowerment. The conference was designed, according to the workbook we were handed, "to enhance awareness of the ever-changing technological world in the contemporary age as well as strengthen global networking."

Our flight was delayed and we arrived at Logan Airport approximately thirty minutes before the conference was to begin. We had to take a cab directly from the airport to the conference center before checking into our hotel.

The orientation lasted two hours followed by a ninety minute "meet and greet" session.

"I've made more money at the bar than I ever did in the boardroom," Jared would say.

"How much are the escorts here?" Foster asked.

"You don't need escorts here, man," Jamaal said. "Trust me. I know some great clubs down by the Fenway. We'll go there."

"Fuck that," Foster said. "I don't want to have to deal with the fucking hassle of buying some gash drinks all night."

"It won't be like that, trust me. I went to school here. You just got to flash the cash and that's just as good. We're still young so it should be fine."

"Besides, Foster, you're the only one here not married," Jared said. "You can get laid any time you want. You don't have to beg your wife to turn over."

"I don't have to beg her," Foster said. Everyone laughed as Jared threw his straw at him.

"You're in, right, George?"

"Nah, I'm tired. I'll jerk off to some previews," I said, "if I don't fall asleep in the middle of it."

"A wise man once said that the eight seconds of bliss isn't worth the eight hours of bullshit," Jared said.

I checked into the hotel at eight o'clock. I was taken to my room. After putting my bags down, I stretched out on the bed and turned on the television. I ordered pornography and turned the volume down. I grabbed the phone and called Karen.

"Hey, it's me. I'm calling to check in."

"That's nice."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm sorry I didn't call earlier but our flight ran late and we had to go directly from the airport to the convention center. I just checked in, not even ten minutes ago."

"Okay."

"What? Is there a problem?"

"No."

Whenever Karen was upset, she would initially withhold the reason why. She told me once she did this because she knew when I would ask and she would reply "no," I would become aggravated. She said it was her invitation for me to be as upset

as her. Despite knowing this fact, it would work every time.

"I told you Karen, I just got in."

"So you're telling me that in four plus hours you've been in Boston you couldn't once grab a phone and just call?"

"Jesus, Karen. Is that why you're upset?"

"No. It's the fact that you saw this call as an obligation. I don't want you checking in because you feel you have to," she said. "I'm not your P.O. I want you to call because you want to."

"You are a mindfuck sometimes, Karen."

She hung up.

I turned up the volume on the pornography up. A woman was riding a man's erection while another woman was sitting on the man's face. The two women were making out with one another. I picked up the phone and called Foster's room. I told him I changed my mind and wanted to join them.

We met in the lobby and decided where to go.

We took the T to Landsdowne St. We got off and followed Jared to a string of

clubs. Jared approached a bouncer at one of the clubs, whispered in his ear, and gave him what I learned later was two hundred dollars.

“Two hundred dollars,” Foster said, once inside. “You said this was going to be cheaper than a hooker.”

“Will you shut the fuck up about hookers, Foster. We’re inside now and we’ll be able to meet some cute co-eds.”

The music was too loud to talk. We constantly had to shout in each other's ears, repeating everything we said. Foster gestured towards an empty table. As we approached it, a bouncer stopped us from sitting there. Foster and the bouncer began talking. The bouncer nodded his head and led us to an empty booth on the other side of the bar.

“What did you say to him?” I asked.

“What?”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY TO HIM?”

“WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW,” he said.

Once we sat down, Foster yelled something in the bouncer's ear and we

received our first round of drinks a couple minutes later. In the interim, Jared, who I didn't know had left the group, arrived with four women. They each took a seat next to one of us. The woman who sat next to me was named Traci.

I didn't realize I was drunk until I stood up to go to the restroom. At first, I thought I might have just stood up too fast, but as I began to make my way to the urinal, I was unable to stay balanced.

When I returned to our table, it was just Foster and two of the girls. He approached me and yelled in my ear.

"They left with their chicks. We should get going soon, too."

"No," I said. "Let's order another couple rounds."

We bought another round of drinks. Foster kept tapping my ankle with his foot.

"Let's go back to the hotel. What do you say, George?"

I nodded my head and the four of us left the club. It was considerably cooler outside.

"Oh my god," I said. "I thought I was gonna pass out, it's so goddamn hot in

there.”

“So, that’s your normal voice,” Traci said.

I leaned in and kissed her. We walked a little further towards the entranceway into the T. Once we were down the stairwell, I grabbed Traci and kissed her again.

This is the last thing I remember of that night.

For many years, my earliest memory was being four years old at a family barbecue. My mother and her brothers were all lined up to take a picture. I had dropped my Popsicle and started to cry. I ran into the frame of the shot just as the picture was being taken. But since the incident, I now remember an earlier moment.

My earliest memory now is of lying in my cradle, looking at my mobile hanging overhead. It is dark in the room and I am crying. A door opens. It is my mother. She looks into the cradle and sees me crying. She picks me up and holds me for several minutes, bouncing in a gentle rocking motion. I stop crying. She places me back in the crib and turns on my night light as she closes the door. The night light is of a boy wearing blue shorts, yellow shirt, red cap, and a bat hanging over his left shoulder. I look into the lamp’s eyes and become scared and begin to

cry again. I hear my mother's voice outside the door but she never reappears. I would have that night light until I was eleven years old.

My favorite baseball team was the Cleveland Indians, though my favorite player was Willie Mays. I joined little league when I was ten but quit after two months. Games were played Saturday mornings and I would miss my favorite cartoons. 9:00 A.M was *Casper*, followed by *Herculoids* at 9:30. *Shazzan!* ran from 9:30 to 10:00, then *Space Ghost* from 10:30 to 11:00, at which point *Birdman* would begin. When that finished, I watched *Atom Ant and Secret Squirrel*, which ended at noon, and then I would watch *American Bandstand*.

I did not join another team until I was fifteen, when I played for the junior varsity basketball team in high school for one year, as a backup point guard. My mother and sister would come to my games, sitting in the bleachers directly across from our bench. My mother and I would make eye contact several times throughout the game. I would try to avoid it but I always looked over to see if they were still watching me. Her face would change from one of delight and hope in the first quarter, to one of sadness and pity, as I went another game without logging any

minutes.

One night, I overheard my mother speaking to my dad while he was watching *All in the Family*. In the episode, Archie and Mike argued about social problems facing the country. When Mike, who Archie referred to as both “meathead” and “Polack,” stated that he planned on having no children, his wife, Gloria, got upset. She attempted to be consoled by her mother, Edith, but she was unable to do so.

“When are you going to go to one of his games?” my mother asked.

“I’m not going out to see him sitting on a bench.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” she said.

“All I’m saying is when he gets some playing time, I’ll start going to games.”

“But you don’t want to see him when he gets on the court for the first time?”

“If he makes an impact on the team, they’ll give him minutes.”

“You got an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“George doesn’t want us celebrating some minor achievement like logging a couple of meaningless minutes in some blowout.”

I told my mother that for future games she should sit behind our bench. I lied

and told her that to show school support you're supposed to sit behind us and not opposite us.

I received my first minutes during a game against the Banks High Cougars, three weeks into the season. I came in at 2:24 in the fourth quarter. I was on the court for a minute and twenty seconds, coming out once backup point guard Ricky Reed replaced his broken shoelace. My statistics were as follows: zero points. Zero assists. Three turnovers. When varsity tryouts came up a year later, I didn't sign up.

We decided on a small wedding. We invited thirty people. The ceremony and reception was held at the Forest Lounge, a private club of which my father was a member. Karen and I decided against a best man or a bride of honor, feeling it was too traditional.

My parents gave us a blender and a set of pots. Karen's parents also gave a blender as well as a set of knives. My cousin Branch bought us a plate set. Gavin gave us a 24-inch television and a check for five hundred dollars.

I opened my eyes. I was in a hospital bed with a television at the end. Fred Sanford was on, clutching his chest with one hand while his other was outstretched.

"I'm coming Elizabeth. I'm coming."

The audience laughed as he continued faking a heart attack.

I felt a hand over my right hand. I turned and saw Karen sleeping in a chair.

Her head was slouched down.

I turned my head towards the door. A nurse walked by and stopped. We made eye contact.

"Mr. Osterman?" she asked, walking towards me.

My mouth was dry and unable to speak. I nodded in recognition.

The nurse lifted my left arm and took my pulse. She put her hand on my forehead and checked my temperature. She picked up a trail of paper that was flowing out of a machine to my left, tracking my vital signs.

She stretched towards Karen and tapped her arm.

"Mrs. Osterman. Mrs. Osterman."

Karen woke up. Her eyes were puffy. She looked at the nurse and then turned her head to me.

"George? George."

She hugged me

"I'll get a doctor," the nurse said.

The doctor came in. He shut off the television and asked Karen to step outside for a few minutes. Karen leaned in and kissed me, then left the room.

He held open my left eye with one hand and held a penlight in the other. He told me to follow the light as he moved it left to right. He then did the same exercise with my other eye. While he was performing this, he asked me a series of questions.

What is your name? George Osterman. Do you know what year it is? 1995. What is your wife's name? Karen Osterman. How many children do you have? Two. What are their names? Rose and Christopher. Do you have any siblings? Yes. What are their names? Lola and Gregory.

"Has anyone spoken to you, Mr. Osterman?" The doctor asked.

"About what?"

"You've been in a coma for fifteen days, Mr. Osterman. May I call you George?"

"Okay."

"Thank you. Do you remember flying to Boston on a business trip?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember going to a bar with your coworkers?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember anything else from that night?"

"I can't remember."

"According to the police report filed, you and your coworker...do you remember his name?"

"Foster."

"Correct. You and your coworker Foster went to take the subway back to your hotel. According to him, both of you were standing at the edge. He walked back to check the proper line. He heard the subway car come in followed by screaming.

The incoming subway car collided with your skull, splitting it open at the base," the doctor ran his pen light up the back of my head. "all the way to just over the top ridge. Eleven inches. If the train operator didn't hit the brake, slowing down as much as she could, you wouldn't be here at all.

Miraculously, the paramedics arrived quickly and were able to keep you alive.

You spent the first four days in Boston but once your condition stabilized, you were flown back home. You are back in Barrington.”

The doctor stared at me.

“Is there anything you want to say, George? Any questions you have?”

“No.”

He allowed Karen to return to the room a half-hour later and he spoke to both of us.

“We have never seen anything like this, Mr. Osterman. The surgery lasted over twelve hours and there were times we were certain that we were going to lose you.”

Karen began to cry.

The doctor told me I should stay at the hospital for another week for more tests. People visited me. The first were Christopher and Rose. Rose made a get well card, using colored glue, yarn, sparkles, and a picture of me hugging her as a child. Then Lola and her husband, Akira, visited. Gregory came over next with some video

cassettes of movies and television shows. Foster visited with a framed picture of the staff and their signatures. In the back hung a giant banner saying "Get Well Soon, George."

"So, do you remember anything about that night?" he asked.

I told him what I had remembered of the incident.

"I was on the stairway, finger banging my broad," he said, "when I heard screaming. I paid no mind to it. Then my girl started screaming. I turned around and it was your girl. She had blood all over her face and neck. She ran right by us, and my girl followed suit. I looked to see what was going on and I saw you lying face down. There was so much blood...I can't believe...it's great to see you breathing. When the paramedics showed up, I didn't tell them anything about the girls. I just told them we were drunk and you stumbled just as the T was coming in."

I stared at him. He couldn't look me in the eyes. His body was stiff.

"I'll let you rest. I just wanted to drop this off. I'll see you back in the office soon, okay?"

"Okay."

The day before I was released, a meeting was held between the doctor, Karen, and myself.

“His verbal and motor skills are perfect, so I don't think we need any further physical therapy.”

“I'm worried about his demeanor, doctor,” Karen said.

“Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“He is distant,” Karen said.

“Our resident neurologist, Dr. Raefelson, has run a series of tests with George and he believes he might be suffering from a form of dissociative disorder, but he is not certain. We frankly haven't seen anything like it before.”

“What does that mean?” Karen asked.

My emotions have become muted. I am unable to feel happiness or sadness. Depression. Joy. Empathy. There is a permanent sense of detachment from everything I do.

“It could be temporary or permanent,” the doctor said. “We're not sure.

Sometimes, in events as traumatic as this, the body can show signs of shock lasting

months after the patient physically recovers.”

“There’s no way of telling for sure?”

“I’m afraid not. You’re like a modern day Phineas Gage, George. Have you heard of him?”

“No,” Karen said.

“He was a railroad worker in the 19th century. One day, a tamping iron shot through his head. The point of entry was his left chin and shot through his frontal lobes, exiting at the top of his head. The force of impact shot the iron ninety feet away. Phineas remained conscious from the explosion and he even stayed awake the entire forty-five minute ride from the site to the hospital. The doctor reported that his pulse never went above or below sixty beats per minute.”

He recommended a psychoanalyst that I should visit. Dr. Shanktalusa.

On August 12th of last year, I was released from the hospital. Karen drove me home. Rose and Christopher were waiting at the driveway when we pulled up. They hugged me and told me they missed me and they loved me. Karen took many pictures of my return, including a time release of all four of us together. In the

picture, I am sitting in the middle of the couch, with Karen on my right and Rose on my left. Christopher is on his knees in front of me. Rose's right arm is over my shoulder. Both of my arms are flat on my thighs, just as Christopher's are. Karen's left hand is over my right hand.

We then ate chicken cacciatore in the dining room. I told Karen on several occasions that it was my favorite meal. Gregory visited as well. He shook my hand and told me it was good to see me out of the hospital. Gregory then took the kids to the movies.

"The kids are staying at your mother's tonight."

Karen led me in the room and sat me down on the couch. She put Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* on the record player and lay across the couch, with her head resting on my lap. She wrapped my arm around her and we sat and listened to the record, not speaking.

When the record was finished, she stood up and took my hand. She led me to our bedroom and had me stand at the foot of the bed. She got on her knees and removed my pants. She put my penis in her mouth.

After several minutes, she pushed me on to the bed. She removed her clothes slowly. First, she unbuttoned her blouse and then removed her bra. Then she unbuttoned her dress and let it fall to the floor. She left her garters on.

"I bet you miss these," she said, referring to the garters.

She got on top and situated my erection into her vagina.

I looked up at her. Her hands were on my chest. Our eyes locked throughout the intercourse. She kept repeating "I love you. I love you so much." After several minutes, I ejaculated. She collapsed on me.

"We're happy you're alive."

I looked up at the ceiling and fell asleep.

When I awoke the next morning, Karen was standing at the foot of the bed, buttoning her blouse.

"Good timing. I was just about to wake you. I'll make us coffee," she said, kissing me on the cheek. See you downstairs."

I got out of bed and walked to the closet. I opened the door and saw all of my shirts hanging on hangers. Following them were my slacks, folded and hanging on

hangers. I stood there, looking at my clothes.

A couple minutes later, Karen walked into the bedroom.

"There you are. I thought you snuck back into bed. I brought up the coffee..."

She looked at the closet, and then at me.

"What's wrong?"

"There is nothing wrong."

"You know, I wouldn't mind you standing naked there all day," she said "But you got to throw something on, the kids will be here soon."

I turned back to the closet.

"What's wrong? Just grab something."

I stood there, unable to choose.

Chapter 3

Saturday, September 17th, 1995

I get in my car and back out of the driveway. Talk radio is on, which means Karen drove it last. She uses my car when Rose takes hers. Rose passed her drivers test five months ago. I only use the car on Saturday afternoons for my appointment with Dr. Shanktalusa.

Left turn on Valley Street. Drive four miles, then another left. This time onto Mammoth Road.

There is a slight drizzle outside. The tapping rain sounds like Morse code. I turn right onto the commercial park. Dr. Shanktalusa office is the fourth lot on the right. 5239 Persistence Park Way. I park my car and walk into his office. I check in with the receptionist, Judy, and take my seat in the lobby. Furthest seat on the left in the corner. Judy picks up the phone and tells the doctor that I am here.

"Dr. Shanktalusa will be with you in a moment." she says.

His office door opens.

"George, hello." He extends his hand. I stand up and shake it. "Come on in."

I follow him into his office. He motions his arm to the chaise lounge directly in front of his chair.

"So, George, how was your week? Did anything of note occur?"

"My father died yesterday."

"My condolences."

I nod in recognition.

"If I recall, he had been sick for some time?"

"Yes."

"You had not seen him much in the past few years?"

"I visited him once, last year."

"I recall. Were you able to see him yesterday?"

"Lola, my sister, said I should not visit because of the fragile condition our mother was in."

"While I understand your sister's concern, George, you need closure as much as the rest of your family."

"That is what Karen said."

"I assume she really pushed for you to go."

"She said she felt I should be there."

"How about you?"

"I assume I would want to be there."

"You mean if the accident hadn't occurred?"

"The incident. Yes."

"Well, George, I had something planned for us to discuss but under the present circumstances we can talk about your father, if you wish?"

"It is your decision."

"Did his death bring anything forward? A death in the family can bring a wealth of memories, and within those memories carry strong emotions."

"Not that I am aware of," I reply.

"I have learned to avoid asking you such direct questions, but I feel compelled to ask; do you feel any sadness over your father's death?"

I draw all of my attention and consciousness and direct it inward. Do I feel sadness? I am remembering many moments with my father. Holding his ankles as a

child while he did sit-ups. Him yelling at me to get out of bed. Getting enjoyment out of hearing his laughter.

In each moment, I focus on its core. What made me cry when he smacked me? What made me laugh when he tickled me? What made me angry when he demanded something? In the end. Nothing.

“No,” I tell him.

“Hmmm...okay. Perhaps we should move on then to what I had planned for today. Though it is unfortunate your father passed away, we can perhaps use it as a tool for further growth. As you know, next week will be a full year since we have begun seeing each other. I thought it would be good to kind of go over what we have talked about, see if we can assess what progress, if any, we have made.”

He turns the pages in his legal pad and rests it on his lap.

“Now I usually have a series of questions I ask my patients. You are, of course, a unique case, so I will be changing some of them but the purpose is the same. Let's get started.”

“Okay.”

"Has anything surprised you in the past twelve months?"

"I would not call it surprise, but since the incident my memory has improved.

That is to say that moments and experiences that I had forgotten have returned."

He writes on the pad.

"What kinds of memories?"

"Childhood memories, mostly."

"If you wouldn't call it surprise, what would you call it?" He asks, without looking up.

"I mention it only because I know it is something that would have raised my curiosity."

"Like a photographic memory?" He asks.

"No. It's as if these doorways that were closed for a long time are open again."

"Hmmm." Dr. Shanktalusa laughs.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You used a metaphor, George. That is something you wouldn't have done a

year ago.”

The thought did not occur to me.

“So I would imagine these flood of memories have been helpful to your journal. You are still keeping it, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been consistent with it?”

“Yes,” I reply. “I write for half an hour before I go to bed at eleven o'clock.”

“What have you been writing? Dreams? Random thoughts?”

“No. I don't have random thoughts. Certain memories trigger other memories but there must be logic to those chains, even if I myself can't comprehend what that chain is. I don't remember my dreams. I have been writing about my family.”

“Interesting,” he says, writing on the pad. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don't know.”

“You must have some theory,” he says. He looks up from his pad and looks me in the eye.

“I don't.”

He stares at me for another couple seconds.

“Okay...Have you picked up any new hobbies or activities?”

“I read more than I did before.”

“What are you reading?”

“Medical books about the human body.”

“How did that come about?”

“I was vacuuming our bedroom seven months ago. When I got to Karen's side, I noticed she had a book concerning the brain.”

“That's understandable. It is common for loved ones to become interested in matters concerning the body when something physically traumatic happens to someone close to them.”

“I sat down and began reading. I was still reading when Karen came home. She asked me about it. I told her I couldn't stop reading.”

“The body is an extraordinary machine.”

“Every two weeks, she comes home with a new book concerning the body.

The skeletal system. The central nervous system. The respiratory system.”

"It is good to hear Karen is encouraging your reading. It's an interest you have and we need to create anchors to those interests. They will go a long way to establishing likes and dislikes. Is there anything else? Isn't there a show you watch regularly? A soap opera?"

"I watch *Evermore Valleys*."

"You like the show?"

"I follow the characters."

"Is there any one character you relate to?"

"No."

"How about a storyline? Is there any subplot that draws your attention?"

"No."

"How did you come about to watching it?"

"Rose stayed home from school one day. She was sick. She sat in the living room and watched television. I used to dust on Tuesday's at 3:30. I was dusting the living room when Rose told me to relax and sit down with her. I sat down and watched. I have watched it every weekday since. Karen moved dusting to earlier in

the day, at 1:00.”

“Were soap operas something you were interested in before the accident?”

“The incident? No.”

“You still call it the incident.” He says. “What is that?”

“As I have said, that is what it was.”

“Wouldn't you call it an accident?”

“Accident is a matter of perception.”

“Do you believe in destiny, George? Do you believe you were destined to be in this condition?”

“I don't believe in destiny.”

“So you believe in randomness?”

“I don't believe in that either. Everything just is.”

“But you don't believe that,” he says. “You don't believe what happened to you was an accident.”

“What does belief have to do with it? As I said before, it is a matter of perception.”

"You just raised your voice at me."

I stare at him.

"Were you getting angry at me, George? Were you getting agitated?"

"I didn't feel anything."

"Forget about what I am asking you, George, and focus on what those questions are doing to you. You just raised your voice to me. For a brief moment, you were aggravated at me and you reacted in kind. That is why you are here. To draw whatever we can out of you and anchor them accordingly."

I run my mind back to the moment. I remember him asking me the question. I remember raising my voice. That is all.

"Examine it, George. Don't forget, that is why you are here."

"I am here because my wife wants me here. She says she believes this might help."

"So, you don't think this is helpful?"

"It is what it is."

He looks down at his pad and writes on it.

“So you are willing to suffer from this affliction for the rest of your life,
George?”

His eyes are unblinking and narrow.

“I am not suffering.”

The doctor writes on his pad.

“Let’s change gears a bit. What is your biggest fear?”

“How do you mean?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“You’ve asked me this question before, doctor.”

“I did. And I let it go. But I’m going to ask again. But this time I want you to tell me what your greatest fear was, before your incident. The aggressive kind of thought that, when it crosses your mind, startles you. Gives you a jolt.”

“It would be to die a violent death in front of all of my loved ones.”

“Please. Elaborate more, George. What kind of death?”

“I would imagine scenarios like getting electrocuted in the kitchen, or being struck by a car in front of my house while getting the garbage from the curb. I would

imagine falling to the ground and feeling the anxiety and pain slowly materialize as the shock wears off. I would see the horror on Karen or the children's face as they ran towards me. They would look me in the eyes as they said "everything will be okay" in a faster, high pitch. I would shake and..."

"George?"

I look up towards the doctor. He gestures towards my hand. It is shaking.

"Do you feel that George?"

"Yes."

"What do you feel inside you? In your stomach?"

"A trembling. A vibration that sickens me."

"Do you recall ever having this feeling before?"

"Yes. I remember."

"That is fear George. Now stay on that feeling. If we are going to anchor-"

"I don't want to."

"I know this is painful, George but-"

"No."

I stand up and walk towards the door. Dr. Shanktalusa calls my name once but doesn't follow me. I get in my car and drive back home.

* * *

I open the front door.

"Hey, Dad." Christopher is watching television with Rose in the living room.

I nod in recognition.

"You're home early," Karen says, walking in from the kitchen.

"I... made a breakthrough today."

"Really?"

"Yes. The doctor said...I could leave early." I can't remember the last time I lied to Karen. Or to anyone else.

"That's amazing. I want to know but...the doctor said I shouldn't quiz you on things like that. Well...we're gonna have to celebrate. We could go to the flea market. We haven't been there this summer and it closes in a couple weeks. What do you guys say?"

"Okay," Christopher says.

"I'm supposed to go to Tracy's today," Rose says.

"You'll have time to go later. We'll only be out a couple hours."

"Can't we go next week?"

"Please, honey? I think it would be nice to go as a family." Eyes sunken.

Head tilted to the right about twenty-five degrees. Two long blinks. Wide smile.

"Okay, mom," Rose said.

"Thank you, dear." Karen said. "We can leave in five. It should only be an hour or two."

We got in my car. Karen drove while I sat in the passenger's seat. Rose sat behind me and Christopher sat behind Karen.

The Woodward flea market was built in 1932, according to the sign at the entrance. It has been a tradition in my family to visit the market at least once a summer, though in my childhood I can recall visiting as many as five times in a single year.

"George, can you keep an eye on Christopher?"

"Okay," I say.

Karen and Rose walk off towards the back of the building. Holding my hand, Christopher guides us through the flea Market. We walk by various tables selling numerous items. Lamps. Baseball cards. T-shirts. Cassette tapes. Christopher stops in front of a table with long cardboard boxes on it. The paper sign taped to a couple of the boxes says "comics."

"My kids used to that to me, too," the vendor says. "Howdy, friend. How you doing?"

He extends his hand. I shake it.

He appears to be six feet, four inches. Two hundred and fifty pounds, maybe more. His hair is black, long in the back. He has wrinkles around his eyes. His tan ends where his widow's peak begins.

"The comics are a dollar. Three for two."

Christopher thumbs through the books.

"There's a chill through the air," the vendor says. "Summer really is over."

I nod.

Christopher turns his attention to a half empty cardboard box at the other end

of the table.

"The yearbooks are five, son," the vendor says.

"Why would anyone buy yearbooks?" Christopher asks.

"You know, son," the vendor says. "I'm not really sure. Perhaps it's a way to go back in time, see how things were." He shifts his gaze to me.

All I know is they sell. Those are the last five left from a batch of forty I got in the spring."

Christopher opens one of the books. The year 1973 is emblazoned in gold on the front of the cover. I read the front

"I went to school there," I say.

"If you graduated in 1982, I got your yearbook. Ha ha." He hands me the book.

I flip through the pages. Pictures of the graduating seniors with their names and goals. Missy Peterson: Goals; first female president. Clifford Stein. Goals: to sleep in after ten. Richard Standish. Goals: doctorate from Harvard.

There is a section entitled "community." Each page is a picture of a particular

club or team. Baseball team. Basketball team. Football team. Track team. Volleyball team. Field Hockey team. Cheerleading. Chess team. Science Club. Arts Club. Drama Club. Glee Club.

There is a section entitled "Memories." There are pictures of students in what appears to be spontaneous and staged moments. Below the pictures are captions.

Two students hugging a teacher. Julie and Vivica are going to miss Mr. Jacobs. Two students wearing black suits, black hats and sunglasses, staring directly into the camera, arms folded in front of each other. The Blues Brothers alive and well at the senior show. A student, mid-stride through a door, looking directly into the camera. Jeff is always on time. A student standing on stage, staring upwards, mouth agape, with her right arm across her stomach and her left arm outstretched. Candy showing her chops at the Spring Fling.

"Can I get these, Dad?" I close the book and put it back in the box.

"How many do you have?"

He thumbs over each one, mouthing his count.

"Eight."

"How much do I owe you?" I ask the vendor.

"That'll be six dollars. He can grab one more, too."

"Great," Christopher said. "I'll take this one, too."

"Pleasure doing business with you," the man says. He extends his hand and I shake it.

As we walk away, Christopher says we should find Karen and Rose. We walk for several minutes before finding them standing by rugs.

"What do you think, George? The rug in the living room is getting old."

I don't reply.

"What do you think, Rose?"

"I like it. It's nice."

"George?"

I continue to stare at the rug.

"...we'll wait."

"Can we get something to eat," Rose says. "I'm hungry."

Karen agrees and we leave the flea market and walk towards the car.

"Can I sit in the front?" Rose asks.

"Your father sits in the front."

"You don't mind, do you Dad?"

"I do not."

"See, Mom."

I sit behind Rose and Christopher sits behind Karen. Driving back,

Christopher reads the comic books I bought him. I look over at him. He hands me one.

It is Captain America. The upper corner of the cover says the price is thirty-five cents. On the front, he is being held down by several men in colorful costumes. He is struggling to get up from under them, but is unable to do so. His shield is out of arms reach. Under the title banner reads "Today, America falls."

Chapter 4

My Father

From the age of seven until I graduated high school, my weekday mornings would begin the same way. I would awake to the sound of knocking on my door.

“George, get up.”

My bedroom was under the stairs on the first floor by the living room. I would get out of bed and walk past my father towards the kitchen. He was sitting on his chair, watching television with his dinner tray in front of him.

The tray was cramped with little open space. A bowl of oatmeal. Or cream of wheat. Or corn flakes. Or cheerios. A cup of coffee. A cup of orange juice. Two slices of toast, heavily buttered. And an ash-tray with a half-lit cigarette.

On a regular day, I would come home around 5:00. He would be sitting on his chair watching the news or be in the kitchen preparing lunch so he could eat while watching the news. His lunch remained consistent. Tomato soup. Or chicken soup. Or vegetable soup. A pack of saltines. A cup of tea. A cup of water. And an ash-tray with a half-lit cigarette.

I learned his television schedule when I had the flu my sophomore year.

11:00-12:00 – *Price is Right*. 12:00-1:00 – local and national news. 1:00-2:00 - *Dinah Shore*. 2:00-3:00 – *Days of Our Lives*. 3:00-4:00 -*Evermore Valleys*. 4:00-4:30 - *The Andy Griffith Show*.

My father only smoked Marlboro Reds. He started smoking at thirteen. When he was sixty, my mother forbade him to have a lighter, so he was forced to quit.

It was in his teenage years that my father acquired the nickname 'loosie.' Like the single cigarettes they used to sell at my grandfathers store, my father was thin and white. My father didn't like the nickname but grew tired of stopping people from calling him that.

George Phillip Osterman was born February 27th, 1923. The third of seven children, he was the oldest of four boys. Along with my grandparents and his siblings Ruth, Henrietta, Marla, Oscar, Nikolas, and Richard, my father lived in a three bedroom apartment on the second floor above the family store.

The store was located in an area of Barrington then referred to as Pitch Town. It was populated mainly by black and Spanish residents. According to my

father, there was only one other white family who lived in that neighborhood, the Davidsons, and they were "assholes." That neighborhood, including my grandfather's general store, has since been turned into an outdoor shopping galleria.

Growing up a minority in his neighborhood, my father was always getting into fights, either to defend himself or to protect his brothers and sisters. My mother remarks that he made himself no favors by using the words nigger and spook as he did.

"So it's okay for them to beat me up for the color of my skin but it's inexcusable for me to call them that? I'm not gonna let anyone hit me with a smile on their face."

On March 14th, 1993, my father was admitted into the Blessed Sacrament Home for the Elderly.

Three weeks later, my cousin Branch married his girlfriend of six years, Marion. She was sixteen years his junior and was his second marriage. Karen and I attended the wedding and reception. My parents were invited but my mother always refused to go to any function without my father.

During the reception, I was sitting at a table by myself when Branch came over to visit me.

"So, where's loosie?" I could smell the scotch on his breath.

"He's got the flu," I told him. "But he sends his congratulations."

"What about your mother?"

"You know her. She's paranoid that she might pass on the flu to everyone here."

"I haven't seen them in forever. How are they doing?" he asked.

"Besides the flu?" I replied. "Nothing serious."

"Good to hear."

"It must have been difficult up there today."

"It's funny," Branch said. "You've seen people getting married a thousand times and it really is different when you are the one saying the vows."

"You mean impersonating a respectable person?"

"It's my wedding day and you're still gonna give me a hard time, huh?" He grabbed my head in a headlock and rubbed his knuckles on the top of my skull. It's a

routine he would do when I was younger. After several seconds, he let go.

“Man. I can't believe they're still together.”

“My parents?” I asked.

“Yeah. We were shocked when those two got together in the first place.”

“How so?” I rarely ever heard anything about my parents that didn't come from them.

“Well, he was shacked up with some black chick at the time.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. You never heard? He met her at the bars. The family flipped, as you could imagine. Your grandfather, especially.”

I never met my grandfather. He died when I was two.

“One night I get a knock on my door at 4 in the morning. It's the old man with just a suitcase and a black eye. She kicked him out, probably because he cheated on her. I never asked.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah. He moved into the living room. We lived together for a couple years. A

third story walk-up above a Chinese Restaurant.”

I was aware of the apartment as my father mentioned it on occasion.

“We would get into all sorts of shit.” Branch said. “I remember the one night it all changed, though. We were waiting for the bus to take us downtown to see The Ink Spots. Let me tell you, your father knew his music.’

‘While we’re waiting, this group of spics were hanging out. I think there were four of them.’

At first, I couldn’t remember what he meant by spics. It had been so long since I heard that term.

‘The little one comes up to me and says ‘nice shoes.’ People are always trying to test you, test your will. I played it cool but I knew what was coming.

I know they’re nice, that’s why I bought ‘em,’ I said.

‘What size?’ he asked.’

Without hesitating, your old man walks between me and the kid and says ‘You’ll know when he shoves them up your ass.

One grabbed his hair and the other went for his wallet. Spics always fight

dirty. We stayed tough until we heard the sound of a jackknife. I grabbed your father by the coat and we got out of there. We could hear them laughing at us as we left.

Your Dad had a large mouse over his eye. My white shirt had blood all over it. We decided to go back to the apartment. It felt like just another bad night. But it struck your old man very differently.

I'm getting old, Branch, he kept saying. 'I'm getting old.

We lived together for another four, five months and then he got his own place.

Fucking guy kept paying his share of the rent until I found someone else. I didn't want it but he would have none of it. You know how much that must have hurt him, too, because he's one tight sonuvabitch...what's that thing he says, pinching the nickel-

"Until the bull screams," we said in unison. We laughed.

"I never thanked him," Branch said. "For everything. When you see him, can you tell him I said thank you?"

"I will."

Branch looked down at his shoes for a second and then back into my eyes.

"I would love to stay and talk but I got to do this wedding thing."

I remember thinking that I wanted him to stay as I wanted to hear more stories about my father.

"Georgie, it's good seeing you."

We shook hands and he left.

When my father was thirty-one, he began working at Brownfoot's shoe factory, initially as a janitor and later as a machinist. According to him, it was at Brownfoot's that he met my mother, but she disputes this. Around that time, my father was living with her twenty-two year-old nephew, Branch, so I believe her memory of events. He always contended that it was just coincidence. "Everyone was related in that goddamn factory," he said. "The only last names I knew there were Peabody, Pelletier, Levesque, or Dumont. And even some of those bastards were related."

His recollection had him meeting her in the break room. He was short five cents for the cigarette machine and she gave him a dime. When he turned to give her the nickel, she had left the break room. Two days later, he saw her outside the

factory. People congregated there before their shifts began.

“I walked up to her and said 'I never thanked you for the change.' She said not to mention it. We talked a few minutes and when the horn sounded to get to work, I asked for her number. What was she gonna do? Say no? To this Adonis?”

As a teenager, my father got an outside job working as an assistant at Phelps's Pharmacy. He told me he hated the cramped apartment and did everything possible to be away from the house.

My mother told me that he would cover his ears the nights his parents had sex. Not from the sound of their panting and moaning, she said, but from the sound of his brothers giggling.

Not that they had sex often. They would fight constantly. When my grandparents fought at the dinner table, my father would see his siblings smirk and laugh. My grandfather would then punch my grandmother. She would run in her bedroom and lock the door. He would knock on the door hours later and apologize. She would unlock the door and he would tell the kids to go to bed. Then the giggling would start.

In high school, my father played baseball. He wanted to play shortstop but was always positioned at catcher, which he hated. Despite this, his offensive numbers prompted interest from local college scouts. Whenever my brother and I would ask him about his playing days, he would say his playing was unremarkable.

On March 12th, 1940, his school played against Trinity Valley. His team was up 6-4, bottom of the eighth. Trinity Valley was at the plate. One out, with a man on second. The pitcher gave up a blooper over second base. The third base coach waved the runner home. When my father stood up, his helmet fell off.

The center-fielder picked up the ball and threw to home plate. My father caught the ball and turned toward the runner, bracing for impact. The runner dived head first.

Their heads collided. They collapsed on top of each other.

Blood covered the runner's face and my father's head. The runner lost three of his front teeth. My father was unconscious. The ambulance arrived before anyone could revive him.

While both were being sent to the hospital, players, parents, and spectators

searched around home plate. They were looking to find the front teeth of the runner.

What they didn't know, and what the doctors would soon discover, was that the teeth were already on the way to the hospital.

They were in my father's skull.

My father's favorite color was blue.

My father had a falling out with his family around his twenty-eighth birthday.

The reasons for this I am not sure. To my knowledge, my mother doesn't know why either.

My parents were married on June 12th, 1956. The ceremony was held in the gazebo in the center of the Oldham Field downtown park. It was, and still is, a popular choice for weddings. My mother said she always thought it was beautiful.

"Yeah," my father would say. "Beautiful and free."

My mother jokes that the first row could smell the Wild Turkey on my father's breath.

The reception was held at my Aunt Henrietta's apartment, which was on the second floor. My father went onto the porch with my uncle Alden. As Alden would

tell me years later, my father seemed distant.

“Not drunk, but distant. His head was down and he was picking pieces off his wool suit jacket.”

“Are you okay, Lou?” He asked my father.

Alden said he's not sure but he believed he heard my father crying.

“I just don't know. I just don't know...don't know.”

“Don't know what?” Alden asked.

My father began to lose sway and Alden suggested they go inside.

Tonic-clonic seizures, then known as grand mal, are a classification of seizure that begins in an isolated part of the brain and graduates to the entire brain. The name comes from “tonic,” which is toned muscle in the body, and “clonus,” the Greek word for a “violent, confused motion.”

Tonic-clonic seizures are made up of three stages. In the first stage, known as the aura, the recipient feel a number of differing symptoms. Those include: dizziness, strong emotions, visual and audio illusions, and déjà vu.

Alden said my father collapsed, dropping his beer with his upper body

hanging over the railing. During the tonic phase, the patient becomes unconscious and their muscles tense up.

During the clonic phase, the tensed muscles spasm uncontrollably and, in some cases, the patient swallows their tongue. My father did not swallow his tongue, but his violent shaking jerked his body over the 2nd floor railing. When everyone ran downstairs, he was motionless.

He came to and initially resisted help, not wanting to stop the reception. My mother tried to get him to rotate his right hand, but when he couldn't she drove him to the hospital. The party continued.

Sitting in the hospital room with my mother, the doctor asked him questions about the situation. How much had he drunk? Just a few beers and some whisky before the wedding. Was this his first seizure? He remembered having two such instances in his life.

My father was diagnosed with a sprained wrist and multiple sclerosis.

He went back to work that Monday with a soft cast and pats on his back for his nuptials. Five months later, he had another fit. This time, he was at his machine.

The alertness of a fellow co-worker, who shut off his machine, prevented it from puncturing my father's hand.

In November of 1956, he was deemed physically handicapped and would receive benefits from the state. I was born seven months later.

His strain of multiple sclerosis causes a degeneration of his brain, beginning with his short term memory and expands, over time, to loss of motor skills and vital functions.

He first called me Archie during my junior year of college, in 1979. I called home to check in on the family.

"Hello, Archie...I mean, George. How are you doing?"

I just took it for mistaken identity over the phone. As we continued talking, he kept referring me as Archie. Sometimes, he would correct himself and other times he wouldn't.

My brother Gregory later told me he had begun calling people, including our mother, Archie frequently.

"We used to stop him, but now we just go with it."

To our knowledge, he doesn't know anyone named Archie. The only Archie me and Gregory could think of was Archie Bunker.

As the years progressed, my father began calling people other names, such as Fred and Jim and Otis. When he was talking to someone, he would cycle through a series of names before settling on the correct one.

In the winter of 1988, I called the house and my father answered the phone, "Hi Archie...Fred...Andy...Christopher...George."

After that, whenever I called and he answered the phone, I hung up.

In August of 1987, we had a family dinner. Karen, the kids, and I visited my parents and Gregory. My sister Lola was still estranged at that time.

Eating dinner, I began to smell the odor of feces. It was pungent. I turned towards Karen and her face suggested that she smelled it as well. She leaned towards Christopher, who was four at the time, and whispered in his ear.

"No," Christopher said.

"Let's go check," Karen said to him.

"No. I didn't doodie."

"Christopher pooped himself," Rose said aloud.

"I did not."

"It's okay Karen" Gregory said to me. "It's not Christopher."

Karen and I looked up at the table. My father had his head down but he continued eating.

"Let's go upstairs, honey," my mother said to my father.

"Why?"

"We'll get you changed."

"Changed? I'm not a fucking baby."

"Let's go," my mother insisted.

"No. Nothing is wrong. I'm gonna sit and finish my dinner."

"Come on, Dad," Gregory said.

He slammed his fist on the table.

Karen took Rose and Christopher into the other room. Everyone else sat at the table and finished dinner, with the smell of feces in the air.

One day, my mother came home from work and saw water running past her

shoes. The living room floor had a thin coat of water. It was running down the steps.

As she walked up the stairs, she heard the tub running at full speed and her

husband talking to someone. When she got to the bathroom, he was standing in

front of the mirror, in just a t-shirt, talking to himself.

Chapter 5

Sunday, September 18th, 1995

Third and twelve on the twenty-six yard line. The Eagles quarterback drops back from the snap, pauses, and throws the ball to his wide receiver running a slant route. He gets tackled at the thirty-six yard line. It is fourth and two. They replay the throw and catch two separate times from various angles.

The Eagles special teams unit is on the field. They line up for the snap. The football is long snapped to the punter and he cocks his arm back in a throwing motion. They are attempting a fake.

The door opens. It is Karen followed by Christopher and Rose. They are carrying boxes.

"Watching football, dear?" Karen asks.

"The television was on."

"What did I tell you kids about leaving the TV on?"

"Sorry, Dad," Christopher says. "I was watching cartoons this morning."

"You used to watch the games every Sunday," Karen says. "I knew to never

schedule anything on Sunday's during the season. Can you give us a hand, George?

We have a couple more boxes in the trunk outside.”

I walk outside and grab a cardboard box in the truck. It is open on the top and filled with records. I walk past Christopher, who grabs the last box and shuts the trunk. I walk back into the living room.

“Just put those down by the record player,” Karen says, gesturing towards our entertainment center next to television. I put the records down and sit back on my spot on the couch.

“Lola says she will be dropping by tomorrow with a couple more things. I know your mom is a bit of a pack rat, but your father had more stuff than I would have thought. Oh, Chris, could you put that box next to where your father placed his. Thanks.”

“You're father had a great taste in music, George,” Karen says, thumbing through the records. “Oh, I haven't heard this in ages.”

She turns the volume down on the television. She pulls a record from the sleeve and puts it on the platter. She drops the needle on the outer edge of the

platter. There is hissing followed by a backing vocal group. Dum-dum-dum-dum-e-doo-wah. It is the song "Only the Lonely." Karen hugs the record and closes her eyes, mouthing the lyrics.

"I don't know why you just don't get CD's," Rose says.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Karen says. "There's a warmth you can't feel without vinyl."

"All I hear is hissing and pops."

"As a child, I imagined those sounds to be the door into the singer's world opening up, inviting me into their world."

"If that's the case, why do they keep opening and shutting the door?" Rose asks.

"Quiet, you," Karen says, throwing a dish rag she had in hand. "Go upstairs and get ready."

Rose's laughter is heard in conjunction with the sound of her running up the steps.

"Dum-dum-dum-dum-e-doo-wah," Karen sings. The song has finished. "I'm

telling you, George, Roy speaks the truth. Remember we would get a bottle of red wine and just dance to Roy all night long?"

"*That's not all we would do,*" Karen says, imitating my voice. She looks down at her hands.

"Hello?" It is the voice of Rose's boyfriend, Kevin. "Oh...hi, Mr. Osterman."

I nod in recognition

"Hi, Kevin," Karen says. "Rose just went upstairs. She'll be down in a minute.

Where are you two going today?"

"We're going to pick up Vicky and Steve and then head to the mall to catch a movie, then probably a bite to eat." His eyes turn towards the television.

"Great. The game. Are the Eagles winning?"

The score is 24-17, Steelers.

"No," I reply.

"You moving some stuff, Mrs. Osterman?"

"Kinda, Kevin. I'm sure you heard from Rose that her grandfather passed away. We are just collecting some of his things."

"There's a lot of records there," he says.

"Yeah. Rose's grandfather loved music. Her father used to as well, didn't you hon?"

"I listened to records. Yes."

"You used to listen to records constantly. I could always tell how your day went by what was on the stereo. If it was *Lionel Richie* then it was a long day. If it was *Desire*, then I knew you were still thinking about work. And if it was *Graceland*, I knew you made a big sale.

"Working for the Man" is now playing. Karen begins swaying, eyes closed. Her shoulders are gyrating along with her torso, but her feet remain planted. Kevin is smiling, but his body language suggests he is uncomfortable. Stiff. He turns to look at me and we stare at each other. He turns his back towards my wife.

"What are you doing? Rose says. "You're scaring Kevin."

"Hush, you," Karen says. "Your father and I are reliving our glory years."

"Yeah, right. I don't know how you can hear over all of that hissing and popping."

"What did I tell you. Kevin, get her out of here before I kill her."

"Yes, Mrs. Osterman." Kevin laughs.

"Come back in one piece. I love you, hon."

Kevin and Rose say goodbye and leave.

"The nerve of her," Karen says, smirking at me. "Come on, baby, let's dance."

She extends both her arms towards me. I grab them and she pulls me up.

I sway back and forth. I bounce my head in a relaxing motion in time to the drummer's kick drum.

"I mean dance, George. You used to dance...well, you used to be drunk...but you danced..."

"I was self-conscious of my dancing."

"But I always said you were a good dancer. Maybe this will jog your memory."

She gyrates wildly, in an almost violent motion. We lock eyes and she takes a couple steps back. She lifts her sweater revealing her navel.

"I would go higher, but Chris is home. Remember, we would dance and I would slowly strip my clothes. You must remember that."

"I remember."

"Then come on, George, remember how to dance."

I lift my arms and move them in circular motions in time to the rhythm guitar while I thrust my torso in step to the snare drum. The song fades out. The song "In Dreams" has begun.

"Just hold me."

I put my arms around her. She nestles her head into the crevice of my shoulder.

"No. I mean hold me."

"I am holding you." Her body tenses against mine and then becomes slack. She lets go of me.

"That's not what I meant." She stops the record player and turns the television back on. "Sit and watch the game for a while. I have to take care of some things around the house and its best if you're out of the way."

"There are two penalties on the play," the referee says. "The first is offsides, number seventy-six on the defense. That is a five yard penalty. The second is

holding, number thirty-two on the offense. That is a ten yard penalty. The penalties offset each other. It still remains third down.”

Chapter 6

My Mother

My mother doesn't have her driver's license. She is afraid to drive. She would always take the bus to work.

According to her, she has only ridden a bicycle once. When she was seven, my uncle Richard put her on his bike. The seat was too high up for her feet to reach the ground. Holding the bike up for her, he started pushing her to build up momentum. When he let go, he shouted at her to pedal. She was too scared and just screamed for someone to stop the bike. The wall of a neighbor's house several feet down did so for her. She never got on a bike again.

My mother grew up on the third floor of an apartment building that on June 14th, 1943, burned down. According to the newspaper clipping attached to my uncle Goran's picture hanging in my parent's house, the gas heater in the basement exploded. Everyone got out except for him. My mother broke her ankle and my uncle Charles broke his wrist falling from the third floor window. Ever since then, my grandparents, as well as my mother, refused to live anywhere above the second

floor.

She still has the Raggedy-Ann doll that her father gave her on her fifth birthday. The last time I was in my mother's bedroom, it sat on the bureau, overlooking the bed.

My mother collects beer steins. She received her first stein when she was a teenager. It was a gift from her older brother, Steven, who had brought it with him from Germany after World War II concluded. She still has it. It is about eleven inches tall, made of earthenware, with a tan and black diamond-checked pattern. The thumb-lift is broken.

My mother has never expressed an interest in anything else, so for Christmas or her birthday, Karen and I buy her another stein.

After I moved out of the house, my bedroom was converted into a display room. She has over 300.

My mother's full name is Patricia Annabel Fuller. She was born sixty four years ago to Donald Fuller and Arianne Clancy. She is the fourth of six children and the only girl. Her brothers are, in order of age, Alden, Steven, Richard, Goran, and

Charles. She, along with all of her brothers, was born in Barstow, which is an hour's drive away.

In the spring of 1952, Brownfoot's shoe factory opened a new plant in Barrington. My grandfather heard that the starting salary for the same position he held was going to be thirty cents more per hour. Based on his experience, he got the job, and he moved the family. Along with his job, he was able to arrange positions for my grandmother and his four children. Word spread and eventually seventeen other family members moved to the city.

When my mother turned sixteen, she was taken out of school. She was eligible for full-time employment and my grandparents told her they needed the income.

I could never understand how she would quit school. She has expressed to me that she enjoyed school and that, if she were able to continue, she would have liked to have become a veterinarian.

"Family was all you had back then," she would say whenever stories about the past came up. "And if family needed you to work, you worked. You don't know

how easy you have it now.”

She retired four years ago to care for my father full time.

On weekends, she would organize family functions like card night or barbecues where cousins and uncles would attend.

It was at one of these family functions that my mother first met my father. She had just walked through the front door when she saw him talking to Branch. He was wearing black slacks, a clean white t-shirt, and a brown felt hat.

My mother asked my aunt Marion who the man was and she introduced the two. They spoke for several minutes but my father never recalled any part of that conversation.

“Maybe because you were only thinking about taking me back to your apartment,” my mother would reply.

My mother continued to work through all three of her pregnancies, missing only the last two weeks before delivery.

“We didn't have a choice,” she said. “The bills don't stop coming just because you're pregnant.”

In 1971, she was promoted to floor manager, the first woman in the company's history to attain that position. Her higher salary demanded more hours so she wouldn't get home until after six o'clock on most weekdays.

My mother would drink a large iced coffee mixed with brandy every day after work. On Fridays, she would drink two.

I have only seen my mother drunk once. It was Christmas Eve, 1970. My uncle Alden threw a Christmas party at his house. I stayed home and babysat Lola and Gregory. I fell asleep in the living room watching *A Christmas Carol*. The version with Patrick Macnee of *The Avengers* playing Jacob Marley. I woke up to my mother singing Johnny Mathis. His Christmas album was a yearly tradition in our house and my mother was interpreting "Sleigh Ride."

"Quiet down," my father said, laughing. "You'll wake up Bea."

"Are you okay, Mom?" I asked.

"I'm more than okay, George, I'm in love. I love you and your father and Bea so much that I just can't stand it."

"Come on, honey, time for bed."

My father directed her towards the stairs.

"You better go back to bed," my mother said to me, "or Santa will see you."

I can't remember ever seeing my mother happier than that night.

Her ice cream flavor of choice is strawberry.

My mother smoked Marlboro Reds, like my father. She has told me on numerous occasions that she never smoked when she knew she was pregnant.

At a family function at our house when I was fifteen, my uncle Steven visited from out of state. He got a foreman's job seven or eight years prior and his infrequent visits were always a cause for celebration. That night, he came into my bedroom drunk and woke me up.

"Hey kid," He said. "Why aren't you out there having a good time with all of us? Do you think you are too good for us?"

"It's almost 2:30."

"Aaagh," he said, waving his right at me dismissively. "Do you love your mother?" he asked.

"Yes."

“Good, because she’s a good woman. All of my brothers, your uncles, they are good people, too.”

He sat down at the foot of the bed for several seconds with his head in his chest

“Do you know much about your uncle Goran?” He asked.

“Not really,” I said.

“You should know how brave your uncle Goran was,” he said. “I know your mom gets upset whenever he’s mentioned, but it needs to be said.

I shared a room with your Uncle Goran. Your mom used to be afraid of the dark and she would try to sleep in our parents’ bed but they wouldn’t let her. Your uncle Goran would let her sleep with him. She was sleeping there with him when the heater blew up.

Me and your Mom hid under the bed together. Mom and dad ran right by us with Leo and Richard. The smoke was blinding. It all moved so quickly. We heard Goran at the door scream ‘Charlie, Patty.’ We crawled from under the bed he grabbed us on each side as we huddled together down the hallway, but the fire

already around us. He ran us back to the bedroom and opened the window.

We're gonna have to go out the window, he said.

I kicked the building on the way down and landed on my back. I looked up and saw your mom fighting with Charlie. She didn't want to go down. I put myself underneath her and held my arms out... She landed right on top of me, breaking my wrist. We looked up, waiting for Goran to jump, but he never did.

When the fire trucks arrived, we all just stood there, staring at the 3rd floor window. Waiting... when the roof collapsed on the building..."

Uncle Charles sunk his head in his chest again. The door opened and it was my mother.

"Charles, what are you doing? The boy was sleeping."

"What," he said, standing up. "I can't say hello to my nephew?"

"You did earlier. Now come on."

"Alright." He stood up and walked out of the room without saying goodbye.

Though he has visited on at least three occasions since, I have not spoken with my uncle since that day.

The last time I saw my mother was this past Thanksgiving. Karen arranged to have the family dinner take place at our house this year.

When Lola and her husband Akira arrived with my mother, it was the closing minutes of the fourth quarter as the Detroit Lions were going to defeat the Buffalo Bills 35-21.

"Hello, mother," I said.

"Oh, George," she replied. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tight. Her tears soaked through my dress shirt.

"How is Dad?" Karen asked Lola.

"It was...it was a bad day for Dad. He didn't really know who we were until we were getting ready to leave."

Before dinner was served, we sat around the table and ate appetizers and drank beverages. Throughout the dinner, she would look at me. Everyone talked with one another, informing everyone of their current events and sharing old stories.

"Dinner is served," Karen said, placing the turkey in the center of the table.

"Let's say a prayer for Dad," Lola said.

"Yes," my mother said. "He needs God's attention right now."

"Dad doesn't believe in God," I said.

"Don't say that about your father," my mother said.

"But he doesn't," I replied. "You and father spoke about it numerous times."

"Shut up, George," Lola said.

"He would always say, 'It's a big fucking joke.'

"George," Karen said.

"He did," I said. "He said he thought there was no after-life, that one day you just ceased to exist."

My mother placed her napkin over her plate and bowed her head.

"Very good, George. I wish you didn't exist," Lola yelled. "Ma?"

My mother got up from the kitchen table and walked into the living room. Lola followed up after her.

Gregory and Rose looked at me. Their eyes were small and their mouths were straight lines. Karen put her head in her hands.

"This isn't right," I heard my mother say to Lola, whispering in the other room.

"I just don't know. This isn't right."

"Would you like to go home, Ma?"

Akira walked into the living room.

"George didn't mean anything by it," he said. "why don't we stay for a while longer, okay?"

Gregory rubbed his hand over mine.

"I remember him saying that, George." He smiled at me.

"I think we should just go," Lola said.

"The Cowboys game is on," Gregory said. "I'll have dinner in the living room with George and we'll watch the game. Okay?"

"Can I watch the game, too, Mom?" Christopher asked.

She said yes, and Gregory, Christopher, and I watched the Dallas Cowboys play the Green Bay Packers. The Cowboys won 41-32.

Chapter 7

Monday, September 18th, 1995

I open my eyes. The alarm buzzes. I turn over and shut it off. 7:30. Karen is at the end of the bed. She is dressed. Beige business jacket and long skirt to match.

White dress shirt underneath.

“Get up, George.”

I roll out of bed and walk into the bathroom.

I set the egg timer for fifteen minutes and step into the shower. I turn the cold and hot dials to the line marked on the shower by Karen. Once the water hits my body, I begin to urinate into the drain. In the shower, I first wash my hair, then my face, then my body and torso, then my legs. The timer rings and I shut off the shower. I grab the towel hanging on the door and wrap it around me.

I then set the timer to eight minutes and begin the second half of my morning routine. I apply shaving cream to my face and then with my razor blade, shave my face. I start on the left side and go with the grain. I then shave the area between my upper lip and nose, and then continue on to the right side of my face. I then finish

with my chin and neck. I splash three handfuls of water on my face and then dry with my towel.

Then I brush my teeth. I apply the toothpaste and start on the upper teeth on the left side. I brush in a circular, counter-clockwise motion. I count each motion.

When I reach 25, I move to the lower teeth on the left, and repeat the process for each section until I have brushed all of my teeth. I fill up the night cup with water from the tap and put it in my mouth. I gargle, internally counting for ten seconds, then spit.

When that is done, I do my smiling exercise.

I walk downstairs. Rose and Christopher are placing their breakfast bowls in the sink.

"We're off, Dad," Rose says. "See you after school."

"Bye, Dad."

"Goodbye."

I look at the list of duties written on the refrigerator. My Monday schedule has been the same for many months.

I put the box of Cheerios back in the shelf, on the far right.

I tie up the garbage bags and place them out by the curb. I then line the waste bucket with new garbage liners.

Next, I wash all of the windows, starting with the kitchen, then the dining room, then the living room, then Christopher's room, then Rose's room, then the office, and then the bedroom. There are seventeen windows, in total.

After that, I go in the closet in the hallway on the first floor and pull out the vacuum cleaner. I sprinkle the living room carpet with the carpet powder, plug in the vacuum, turn it on, and pick up all of the powder. Once done, I repeat that process in our bedroom, then the studio, then Roses room, then Christopher's room, and finally the hallway on the second floor.

I put the vacuum and carpet powder back in their locations. I wash my hands and face and then begin to make lunch. Karen wrote that I will be eating tomato soup today, along with ten soda crackers and a glass of water.

I grab a can of tomato soup in the cupboard. I place the can under the electric can opener. Once open, I pour the contents into my bowl, the same bowl I ate

breakfast with. I fill half the tomato soup can with water and pour it in the bowl. I stir the contents of the bowl slowly with my spoon. I put the bowl in the microwave and set the timer for ninety seconds. While that is running, I take ten salted-top soda crackers from the package and pour myself a glass of water from the pitcher. The microwave rings, and I pull out the bowl and place it on the coffee table. To its right are the ten salted-top soda crackers and on its left the glass of water. It is 12:00. I sit down and turn on the television.

“Good afternoon, I am Amanda Williams. More shocking news coming out of the town of Woodland as the body of police officer Wade Phillips was found this morning in an abandoned house off of Camus road. An anonymous call placed to the police department led authorities to Phillip’s body. He had not been heard from since early Sunday morning when his shift ended. This is now the sixth death to occur in the small town over the weekend.

Though an official autopsy has not been administered, investigators believe that this murder is connected to the 12-hour rampage that began late Saturday with the deaths of two men, Peter Finch and Corey Harper, in the parking lot of the

Trestle Bar and concluded with the horrific murder of three teenagers just several miles away.”

The screen flashes the pictures of the five victims.

“The tragedy has rocked the sleepy trucking town of Woodland, with a population of just over 5,000. We are now live with WMUR correspondent, Roger Fender. Roger, the press conference just concluded?”

“Yes, Amanda. A press conference was held today on the steps of the municipal courthouse. Police offered new details today, notably that eyewitnesses at the Trestle bar confirmed that one of the teenage victims at the Faraway house, Russ Cooper, was in fact one of the two people police were looking for in connection to the two Trestle bar homicides.

“Because of this new development, police are once again pressing on the community to distribute the sketch artist drawing and be on the lookout for this individual.”

On the screen is a drawing of the man along with a list of his physical descriptions.

“He is a man in his late 30s/early 40s. He is six foot three, between two hundred and fifty to two hundred and seventy-five pounds. The suspect also has a full beard but officials believe he may have since shaved it, to avoid identification. He is believed to be driving a beat up red pickup truck. If you or someone you know sees anyone matching this description, please call the number below.”

555-746-8787

“They stress again, however, do not approach him, as he is believed to be armed and very dangerous.”

“Police also had more details regarding the tragedy that occurred at the Trestle Bar on Saturday night. New information released by the police today-“

The phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Hey, George, it’s me,” Karen says.

“Hello.”

“I’m calling to remind you that Lola will be over this afternoon. Please don’t start until I get home. I’m coming home early, so please just tell her to wait.”

"Okay."

"Also, I got you something."

"Something?"

"Yes...anyway, I keep seeing it at the store and I keep going against my better wishes about this. But I finally broke down and bought it. We would be having a laugh right now."

"How come?" I ask.

"George, open the drawer on the end table."

I pull open the drawer and see a book. *War in the Valley: The Unauthorized History of Evermore Valleys* by Adam Doppler. The cover says he is the president of the largest and longest running *Evermore Valleys* fan club.

"Tell you what, George, take the rest of the afternoon off and just read the book until the show starts at 3:00, okay dear?"

"Okay."

She says goodbye and I hang up the phone. Sitting back on the couch, I begin to read the book.

Evermore Valleys began as a thirty minute daily radio serial in 1952. Its success led to its transition to television in 1956. The overarching plot of the series is the heated rivalry between the Hollingsworth and Barrett families. The Hollingsworth family has lived in Evermore Valleys for eight generations; first establishing themselves in the area in the mid-1800's to mine for diamonds, of which their massive family fortune is based on. The Barretts made their money in shipping. They moved to Evermore Valleys around the same time and the small town of Evermore Valleys has been the battleground for their constant warring.

When the show began to decline in popularity in the early 1980s, a third family was introduced as foil for the Hollingsworths and the Barretts, the Petermores. The highly promoted storyline brought an initial bump to the ratings, but the decline continued steadily again. Ultimately, the Petermores and their interaction with the established characters, with their rich and extensive back-story with one another, only served to magnify the diluted storytelling and further move away from the show's long running feud.

In the fall of 1986, the producers decided on another bold move. With no

promotion beforehand, a Halloween -themed episode (October 31st, 1986) saw the Petermore mansion destroyed by a bomb planted inside. The explosion occurred during a Petermore Halloween party, killing most of the Petermore clan along with several other supporting characters. The last shot of the burning mansion remains an enduring image for many fans.

The resulting storyline, "Who killed the Petermores?" was a ratings bonanza that the producers stretched out for seven months. The storyline concluded with the revelation (air date: May 18th, 1987) that the explosion was perpetrated by Chester "Chip" Hollingsworth, the youngest son of Abigail Hollingsworth's 2nd husband, Chester Brolin.

The highest-watched episode in the show's history was the wedding between Elizabeth Barrett and Trevor Hollingsworth. The two had begun dating in secret during the 1987 season. In the spring of that year, their relationship was revealed to both families when Elizabeth was struck by a falling rock, putting her in a coma for several weeks. Trevor refused to leave her hospital bed. When she came too, she did not know who she was. Trevor nursed her for months until she was healthy. On

the anniversary of their first secret date, he proposed and she said yes.

Despite the obvious tension in the chapel, no one spoke up to dispute the marriage, not even Mace Barrett, Elizabeth's half-brother who harbored an unrequited love for her. Immediately after the priest proclaimed them man and wife, a woman who looked exactly like Elizabeth yelled to stop the wedding.

It was revealed in later episodes that Trevor had actually married Sara Barrett, Elizabeth's long-lost twin sister. She had joined a cult in the 1970s and was not heard from for several years. She escaped the cult but in the process lost her memory. Elizabeth, who had maintained contact with her sister, faked her own death in order to go undercover for the C.I.A to overthrow a Colombian drug lord which she had sensitive information on. Elizabeth explained it was always her intention to return but for the time being she needed someone to take her place. When she heard that Jeremy and Sara were to wed, she flew back as soon as she could to stop it.

In the intervening months between awaking from the coma and the wedding, however, Jeremy fell in love with Sara. After several weeks of deciding what he

would do, Jeremy choose to stay with Sara. In that same episode (November 12th, 1988), Sara was killed by a Colombian assassin mistaking her for Elizabeth.

I hear the door open. It is Christopher.

"Hello, Dad."

I nod in recognition.

"Are you going to eat that, Dad?" Christopher asks, pointing to the dinner tray.

I stare at it.

"I'll take care of that," he says, picking it up and taking it to the kitchen. "Don't forget, *Evermore Valleys* starts in two minutes."

I put down the book and turn on the television.

There is a knock at the door. Chris answers it. It is Gregory, Lola, and Akira, Karen's husband.

"Hello, George," Akira says. I nod in recognition.

"What is that, George?" Gregory asks.

"It's *Evermore Valleys*. Dad's favorite show," Christopher says.

"I thought you couldn't have favorites?" Lola says.

"It is just a show I watch on a consistent basis."

"He watches it every afternoon," Christopher says.

"Where's your mother?" Lola asks.

"At work."

I turn my attention to the television. Antonio and Elizabeth kiss. There has been a suggestion of their impending relationship over the last several weeks.

Elizabeth hired Antonio as the chef for the new restaurant she opened, Destino.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Antonio says.

"I don't care about what I shouldn't be doing," Elizabeth says. "From now on, I only care about what I want to be doing."

We continue to watch the show in silence.

"I wish Karen was here," Lola says. "We need to discuss the arrangements for Friday. We just came from the funeral home."

"Karen arrives home between four and four-thirty," I say.

"Could you stop watching this for five minutes so we can discuss this?" Lola asks.

"The show ends in less than ten minutes," Christopher says. "His therapist says routine is very important for him. Would anyone like something to drink?"

We all decline.

"George, Karen feels you should be at the funeral."

"Let's just wait until Karen gets here, okay Lola?" Akira says. "Nothing is going to be solved until she comes home."

"What's going on here?" Gregory asks, gesturing to the television.

"That is Penelope Hollingsworth. She was attacked on Friday. She didn't see her attacker even though it was in the daytime."

"Of course she doesn't," Lola says.

"Come on, Penelope," detective Winters says. "You must remember something...what is it?"

Penelope's stare is blank.

"He had on...a silver watch."

Antonio wears a silver watch handed down to him by his great uncle. The suggestion is that it is Antonio who attempted to kill her.

Fade to black. Credits roll.

"Can I change the channel?" Gregory asks. I say nothing.

He grabs the remote and changes the changes it to channel 42. The E!

Channel.

"I want to hear what is happening with O.J."

The female anchor welcomes us to the show. According to the host, today is the 184th day of the trial. She is detailing the events that have occurred during the day. The prosecution has conditionally rested its case, which means they reserve the right to call more witnesses in order to rebut testimony from whatever witnesses the defense calls.

"I can't believe you watch this shit," Lola says.

"He's gonna get off."

"No fucking way," Lola says. "You don't actually believe he didn't do it, do you?"

"I didn't say that," Gregory said. "I said he was going to get off."

"Just because a cop makes a racist statement doesn't mean he's a crooked

cop. What do you think, hun?"

"I don't know," Akira says. "Never underestimate the power of race in this country."

"I guess I have a little more hope in the humanity of people to think that a jury wouldn't let an obviously guilty man go scot-free."

"What do you mean?" Gregory asks. "Innocent men go to jail all the time, why can't it be the other way around?"

The door opens. It is Karen.

"Good. Everyone is here," Lola says. "Can we talk about this?"

"Okay, Lola. Just let me get my coat off. Christopher?" Karen asks. "Could you go upstairs? The adults need to be alone."

"Okay." Christopher turns around and walks towards the stairs. Once he is out of view, Lola turns toward Karen.

"Simply put, I don't think mother could handle seeing George."

"I understand that, Lola. That's what you said at the hospital, but in spite of that, I think it's important that George be there. He's his father, too. And he's been

making a lot of progress. The funeral is an opportunity for him to not only say goodbye but also help him recover over what happened.”

“So you want him to go as an exercise for his rehabilitation?”

“No. I want him to go because there’ll be a day when he’ll be able to look back and appreciate that he was able to go.”

“No,” she says.

Karen looks to Akira.

“Remember, dear,” he says. “We were going to be open and make no firm decisions?”

“I know, but I can’t in good conscience let him go.”

“Why not?” Karen asks.

“Because he’s a fucking zombie,” Lola says. “Look at him. He hasn’t said ‘boo’ this whole time. He just sits there. The last time he saw either of our parents he left them in tears. I am not doing that to our mother. Not on that day. I’m sorry. No.”

Lola stands up and looks down on me.

“I only regret telling you now when you can’t feel anything about it, but you

don't give a shit about this family. You never did. Dad was in the hospital three fucking years and you never once stopped to see him.”

“I visited once,” I say.

“Once. Once. And you left him a miserable mess. He cried for hours. And what about the two years before your accident?”

“It was an incident.”

“I don't give a fuck what you call it. You didn't care about Dad, you didn't care that whenever we visited he would ask about you, or that he would make excuses for you. 'George can't visit because he's busy,' or 'George is an important person.' When he remembered your name, that is.”

“Lola,” Karen said.

“No, Karen,” she said. “I know your heart is in the right place, but this goes back a long time.”

A tear forms in the corner of Lola's right eye. She is shaking. Akira stands up and puts his arms around her.

The door opens. It is Rose. Everyone stops and turns.

Chapter 9

My Sister

My sister has had many different hair styles. As a child, our mother put it in pigtails. As it grew longer, it was held back by, or put into, one large braid.

Lola's hair wasn't cut until she was twelve when she tried to do so with kitchen scissors in the bathroom. When she returned from the salon with my mother, her hair was shoulder length.

When she turned fifteen, she bleach-dyed her dirty-blond hair to a shade of white that reminded me of kite string. Several weeks after that, she dyed it a natural red. Then a blood red. Then black.

Her hair now is its natural color. Dirty auburn. It stops around her shoulder blades and is held back in a pony tail.

When Lola was eight years old, she wandered into my bedroom with the crayon in her hand and colored in Jim Morrison's white shirt on *Morrison Hotel* into a deep purple. When I discovered it, I was very upset. I went into her room and put permanent marker mustaches or black eyes on all of her Partridge Family and

Jackson 5 album covers.

And though Lola only colored on one of my albums, I began regularly marking up her new albums. Pirate Caps, Penises. Missing Teeth. Lola began hiding her records to prevent further damage. Years later, when I would come home from university for Christmas or summer break, I would find her albums and Kevin them up.

Once, she walked into her room and found me putting hair on Debbie Harry's legs from the Blondie album *Plastic Letters*.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Hey, you pay the price for crossing me."

"Jesus Christ, George, that was years ago."

"Some mistakes have lasting repercussions."

I don't know exactly when Lola and my father reconciled. I saw her again at Easter dinner in 1988. It was the first time in many years. She arrived with her husband Akira Chow.

Akira was Lola's English professor at Hammond community college. In the

years we did not speak, Lola received her G.E.D and was in her second year majoring in social services when she met Akira. He is twelve years her senior.

My father and Akira had a rapport from their first meeting.

"He's a nice man," he told me. "A stabilizing figure in her life."

Lola was working for a city funded social outreach group. I asked her about the job and she told me that she felt it was her calling in life.

"I help those in need. Homeless, Addicts. Sex workers. There are people out there who need help and don't know where to go. I walk the streets and try to help get them back on the right track."

She has since been promoted to department manager.

"The only help that really matters is the help you give yourself," I said.

"What does that mean?"

I must admit I did not know what that meant. I only said it to aggravate her.

"Come on, Lola, the people who are on the streets choose to be on the streets. They may not know that, but it's true."

"Is it now?"

"Yeah. Wherever we are in our lives, Lola, is the result of all of the choices we made leading up to and including now."

"Have you ever heard of conditions of opportunity, George? The idea that some people have a slim margin of error in relation to those choices? That one mistake they made when they were younger put their life in a tailspin?"

"There is always a way out and the first step comes when you, as a person, no longer choose that lifestyle. Look at you, Lola. You choose to put direction in your life and you are now happy and comfortable."

"George," Karen said. "This isn't the time. Can we just have a nice dinner?"

"No, it's okay, Karen. Nothing's gonna bring me down today. I don't want to get in a fight, George. Maybe some other time."

We all sat down and had dinner without incident.

Gregory told me that Lola and Akira would go over my parents' house for pay-per-view fight nights. All five of them, including my mother, would sit in the living room and scream at the television, cheering on their favorite fighters.

"You and Karen should come over sometime. The Tyson-Spinks fight is in a

couple weeks.”

I watched the Muhammad Ali-Earnie Shavers heavyweight title fight with my father when it was broadcast live on September 29th, 1977. During the fight, Lola walked downstairs.

“This guy isn’t fighting,” my father said, gesturing towards Ali. “All the guy is doing is leaning on Shavers. Muhammad Ali is the most overrated fighter of all time.”

“You call him Muhammad Ali.” Lola said. “But his birth name is Cassius Clay.”

“The guy is a fucking troublemaker.”

“But you still call him Ali. He changed his name and you respect his wishes by calling him that.”

“I prefer to not talk about him at all.”

“What about Kareem Abdul Jabbar? He was born Lew Alcindor”

“Another troublemaker. You wanna put yourself with that group of people?”

Beatrice Louella Osterman was born May 29th, 1962. Her first name is taken from Beatrix Potter, the author of Peter Rabbit. As far as I can remember, Lola never liked the name. I asked her once when she was twelve why she didn’t like it, and she

replied that "it sounded like an old woman's name."

She christened herself Lola when she was fourteen. Our father refused to refer to people by their nicknames, including our cat, Bradley, whom everyone else called "Bucket."

Our mother would call her Lola when he was not around, but would call her Beatrix when our father was present. Lola appreciated this gesture, so she would answer to Beatrix only to her.

"Listen to me, Beatrix," my father once yelled after she refused to leave her room. "If you don't get down here now, I'm throwing your fucking dinner in the garbage."

During my years at university, I would come home for summer break. One day, I came home from work and found Lola and our father standing face to face.

"Don't you dare ever call me that again, you hear me?" she said.

"If you're gonna dress like a whore, I'll damn well call you one."

I found out later from my mother that Lola was going out to spend the afternoon with her boyfriend, Charles. She was wearing tight blue jeans and a brown

plaid shirt that was tied above the navel. She asked our mother how she looked, and my father said she looked like a hooker.

“I’ll give you one more chance to apologize,” she said.

“I’ll never apologize to you for anything.”

She slapped him. My father cupped her, making a loud clap while doing so.

She fell on her side, holding her face.

“Don’t think for a second, little girl, that you can hit a man and get away with it.”

“George!”

“I don’t care. I’m not gonna take that shit from anybody. Least of all in my own goddamn house.”

She ran upstairs. My mother attempted to follow her but my father told her not to.

“Let her sulk in there and think about what she did.”

He sat back down and began to watch *Bewitched*, which had just started. In the episode, Samantha and Darrin go to a hotel to inject some romance into their

relationship, with Samantha going so far as putting on a brunette wig. Unbeknownst to either of them, Darrin's boss Larry is watching them. Samantha uses her magic to go home to retrieve something. When Larry discovers that Samantha is at home, he concludes that the brunette is actually his wife, Louise. Larry confronts Darrin and even punches him.

My mother went to Lola's room an hour later and found out that she was packing her things.

She moved in with our cousin Marlene, who is four years older. That was in 1978. She was sixteen years old. I would only see her one time in the next nine years.

On the day we moved our father into Blessed Sacrament, I arrived late. When I opened the door, I saw Lola carrying two boxes down the steps.

"Nice of you to join us as we are finishing the packing," she said.

"Where is everybody?"

"Greg couldn't get out of work and Mom is upstairs with Dad."

"You packed everything?"

"Mom did some of it and I did the rest."

"Okay, well let's get-"

"It's already in the car. No worries, George."

My mother was holding my father's hand as they were walking down the stairs.

"Does he know?" I asked Lola.

"He knows."

Our mother walked down with our father, holding his arm as they took each step.

"Can you kids go outside for a second?"

"Sure, Mom," Lola said. "We'll see you outside. Okay, Dad?"

We stepped outside and walked towards the driveway.

"I'll follow in my car," I said.

"Actually, we don't need you there."

"Excuse me?"

"Everything is handled, as you can see," Lola said. "You do your best work

when you aren't in the picture.”

“I'm going.”

“Look. You don't want to be here. That's fine, but don't patronize us by showing like you give a shit.”

The front door opened. Lola walked towards our parents and grabbed our father's arm and walked him to the car. She put him in the back seat. Our mother got in the other back seat and held his hand. The passenger seat in the car was unfilled.

“Well?” Lola said from the car, gesturing towards the empty seat.

“I'll follow in my car.”

Lola smirked and then looked down on the ground.

“It's what I thought.”

She got in her car and started it up. I got in my car and pulled out onto the street behind them. Lola turned onto the road and took the first right onto Laurent Ave. They continued for six blocks. I stayed right behind them. At the intersection between Laurent and McNamee St., Lola drove through a yellow and the light turned red by the time I got to the corner.

Sitting at the light, I saw the car continue driving straight. I began to lose sight as it continued getting every green light.

When the light turned green, I took a right and went to a restaurant.

I only visited my father once at Blessed Sacrament. That was last year.

December, 1994. Coming home from that visit, Karen met me at the door.

"It's Lola."

She handed me the phone.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Visiting Dad. The home called. He hasn't stopped crying. What did you say to him?"

"We spoke of several things," I said.

"Like what?"

"We talked about Redd Foxx, and boxing-

"Cut the bullshit."

"Now wait a minute," Karen said. She was on the phone in the kitchen. "He

has every right to see his father like you do.”

“I don't want him near our father or our mother if he is going to upset them.

That's it, Karen.”

When our brother Gregory was born, because we didn't have any spare rooms, he lived in my parents' room for the first two years of his life. After that, he was put in my sister's room. Lola did not like that and protested.

“Why can't he stay with George?” she asked once during dinner. “They're both guys and George is always at school or at work.”

“It's not gonna happen,” I said.

Whenever Lola wanted to be alone, she would pick up Gregory and put him in our parents' room.

One day, Karen called me at work and asked me to buy groceries. I don't remember the year but we were still living in our apartment on Doreen Avenue.

Walking out of Standard Supermarket, I saw Lola but I didn't recognize her at first. Her hair was in braided rows. She was sitting against the building by the soda vending machines, knees in her chest. She had a sign by her legs and a hat in front

of her. The sign read "Food? Change? Anything will help." Sitting next to her was another woman who looked to be about her age. She had stringy blonde hair and was playing a guitar.

Lola turned her head towards my direction by I stepped back inside the store.

I don't think she saw me. I exited quickly and turned right, even though my car was parked on the left side of the lot. I walked along the edge of the parking lot until I couldn't be seen. Then I walked to my car and drove home. I didn't tell anyone I saw her.

Chapter 9*Tuesday*

“Detective Vanatter, so we are all clear, this brown glove is the only glove of a dress description that was found inside O.J. Simpson’s residence,” defense lawyer

Mr. Shapiro says. “Is that correct?”

“To my knowledge, yes,” the detective says.

“And this is not the same glove, based on lining, stitching and other material, as the gloves you’ve described as the gloves found at the murder scene?”

“That is not the same glove as the Aris light, no, it is not.”

“And the other gloves that you found, the defendant’s black gloves were found in a ski closet with other ski equipment. Is that correct?”

The door opens. It is Karen.

“Hi, honey. Did you start dinner?”

“I read the note. The pasta is in the water now.”

“Great. I’ll be down in a few minutes.” She walks past me towards the hallway.

I hear the egg buzzer. I get up and walk into the kitchen and shut it off.

The ravioli are floating on top of the water. They are golden brown. I put the strainer in the sink. I grab the pot by its rubber handles and walk towards the sink. I have the pot over the strainer and turn it over.

I begin tilting the pot towards the strainer. The right handle breaks and the pasta and boiling water begin pouring down my hand. The pain is intense. I drop the pot on the floor, making a loud bang on the linoleum. With my left hand I turn the cold water on and run my hand under it. The feeling of relief overwhelms me. But it is temporary. The pain has returned. I can see the skin on my thumb bubble.

“George, what happened?” Karen is standing in the kitchen staring at me.

“The handle...the handle broke.”

“I’ll get Christopher. Just stay right there.”

Driving to the hospital, Karen keeps asking me how it feels, looking over from the driver’s seat. She first looks at my hand, wrapped in a dry cloth, and then at my face.

We are in the waiting room forty-five minutes before I am escorted into a

room.

“You have sustained 3rd degree burns on your hand and minor burns on your left ankle from the water soaking your socks.”

The doctor wraps my hand in gauze and prescribes me ointment for the burns. We get the ointment at the pharmacy at the hospital then drive back home.

“Oh shit,” Karen says. “I forgot about dinner. George, can you go inside and clean up the kitchen? I’ll get some KFC or something.”

“Okay,” I say.

I open the door and walk into the kitchen. I kneel down and begin picking up the raviolis on the floor. I hear a faint noise. Coming from upstairs.

I walk up the stairs. All of the doors are open except Rose’s, which is ajar. Music is emanating from the room. I walk into the doorway.

“DAD,” Rose yells. I see a pair of legs kick up and run into a dark corner. I hear another voice.

I walk downstairs

I stand in the living room. I hear footsteps on the stairs. Kevin walks fast

towards the door and then sees me and stops.

"Hello, Mr. Osterman."

I nod in recognition.

"I apologize."

"For what?"

"For being...upstairs."

"Okay."

Kevin continues to stand in front of me.

"I don't know...what to say," he says.

"Just go, Kevin." Rose says, walking. "It's fine. Just go."

Kevin turns towards the door.

"Hey," Rose says.

Kevin turns back around. Rose walks to him and kisses him. Kevin looks at me for a second and walks out the door. Rose faces me. I try to go over what my reaction would be. Would I yell at Rose? Would I forbid Kevin from being in the house when no one is home? Would I tell her that I was younger than her when I lost

my virginity? Would I tell her mother and have her deal with it? There are so many choices.

“Dad...”

“You don’t have to say anything, Rose.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” I look at her face. It is asymmetrical. Her left eye is football shaped while her right is a basketball.

“No. I am sorry you walked in but I am not sorry for having sex. I love him, Dad.”

“Does your mother know?”

“I...I think she might, but I’m not sure.”

Would I tell Karen about what happened? Would I corner Kevin the next time I saw him and tell him that if I ever caught him with my daughter like that again I would make his life miserable? Or would I give him the impression that I was angry only to scare him and then tell him to treat my daughter with kindness and respect? I never got to know Kevin.

"Dad?"

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

"What do you think I would have done in this situation before?"

"I think...I think you would have screamed at both of us. I think once Kevin left you would continue yelling at me and we would keep fighting until Mom came home. Then mom would have tried to calm you down and you would begin yelling at her and you would argue with her until we all went to bed."

"I see."

Rose walks over and embraces me.

"I miss you, Dad."

"I'm right here."

Chapter 10

My Brother

After our father was admitted into Blessed Sacrament, Gregory began visiting me on a regular basis. He would arrive with a movie rental on Saturday afternoons.

On occasion, Karen would join us, but that stopped because Karen couldn't hear the audio over our talking. If it was a film we had seen, we would recite the lines. On the days we had never seen what we were about to watch, Gregory and I would discuss the characters and plot while it was playing.

"How can you two even follow the film?" S\she would ask.

When Gregory was ten, he and our father started a weekly tradition of watching movies together on the weekends. *Raging Bull. Midnight Express. The Godfather. Car Wash.*

"A boy his age shouldn't be watching those kind of films," my mother would say to both me and my father in conversation.

"C'mon, Pat, it's no big deal. There is never a bad time for a child to catch up on the classics."

Gregory was sent home after telling his seventh grade science teacher "Kiss me. I like to be kissed when I'm being fucked," a line from *Dog Day Afternoon*. My father and I found this to be funny but my mother did not so Gregory was forbidden from watching anything above PG after that incident.

Gregory visited me twice in the hospital. On the second visit, he brought with him a copy of *Dog Day Afternoon*. Sitting in my room, with the lights out, we watched. I remembered the lines, but the desire to recite them was gone. He attempted on several occasions at the beginning of the film to recite them along with him, but quit after I did not yell "Attica, Attica" during the hostage negotiation scene.

In May of 1993, my father suffered a mild stroke while at Blessed Sacrament. He lost partial use of his right arm, unable to lift it above his shoulder. I did not visit him, though Karen and the kids did.

A week after the incident, Gregory came over to the house. We watched *Lethal Weapon 3*. He did not speak much during the film, answering the occasional question I asked him throughout the feature.

"You should have gone to the hospital, George."

"I don't think...I could see him like that," I replied.

"Do you think anybody liked to see him like that? Jesus, George. Stop being so fucking selfish."

"He wouldn't want us to see him in that condition. It makes him feel weak."

"If you are only going to think about yourself, then think about your future.

Think about the people you love and who you would want standing by your bed."

"I wouldn't want anyone there."

Gregory shook his head and turned his attention towards the movie. When it was done, he took the videocassette and left the house. I would not see him again until I was in the hospital.

It was Gregory who first spoke to Lola about the possibility of putting our father in a nursing home. He would find our father doing strange things, like hiding under the bed or walking in circles in the middle of the living room.

"Everyone only sees these slips on occasion," Gregory told me. "But I'm with him every day. One time, I found him standing in your old room and he was crying.

When I asked him why he was doing it, he just replied that he didn't know."

As I understand it from Gregory, Lola was hesitant about the idea.

"I told her we can't take this to Ma unless we were in agreement on this. Lola kept saying we would be turning our back on him. I had to tell her we would only be turning our back on him if we choose to never visit him in the home, which I know we wouldn't do."

When they both spoke to our mother, she agreed it was the right decision.

"I was surprised she was as accepting of the decision as she was. I think maybe she thought the same thing, too, but she could never bring herself to do it, you know? "

Being the only child living in the house during his adolescence, Gregory received lots of gifts from our parents. He had most, if not all, of the MEGO World's Greatest Superheroes line. He received an Atari 2600, and then an Atari 5200, and then an Emerson Arcadia 2001, then a Nintendo Entertainment System.

When our father moved into Blessed Sacrament, he took the television from the living room with him. Gregory replaced it with a 42" television with a Dolby Surround-Sound Stereo for a "movie going experience," he said.

"It's amazing. With the lights out and the sound up, you'd swear you were at the movies. I don't know why we're watching this here. We should be watching these movies at my place."

Gregory still lives at our parents' house, along with our mother. A couple years ago, I asked him when he planned on getting his own place.

"Ma has never lived alone in her life. Could you imagine her in that house all by herself? With all of those memories?"

"How are you gonna get laid living with your parents?" I asked.

He gave me a long, unblinking stare.

"I don't leave my loved ones behind," he said.

When he was in high school, Gregory was dating a woman named Sibylle. They both worked at Videoline Video. They broke up many years ago for reasons I am unaware of. She is the only woman I can recall him dating.

Gregory enrolled in Fairstaff College, on the other side of town, a year after graduating high school. He first majored in criminology, then psychology, and finally film studies. He received his bachelor's degree May 12th of last year, six years after

enrolling. The following fall, he was hired as an adjunct professor of film history at the college.

Over the years, Gregory and I have debated what the ten greatest films of all-time are. His top four have always remained the same

1. *The Godfather, Pt. II*

2. *On The Waterfront*

3. *The Elephant Man*

4. *The Godfather*

After pleading with our mother, Gregory took my father to see *The Godfather Pt. III* at the movie theater in the winter of 1991. Our mother relented on the condition that it was a matinee. He took him on a Monday afternoon.

“He couldn’t follow it,” he said. “But certain lines got him excited, like when Pacino pulls in his arms and says, ‘Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.’”

On October 12th of last year, Gregory visited the house. I had just returned from my appointment with Dr. Shanktalusa.

"You two going to watch some films?" Karen asked. In his hands were three videocassettes.

"Well, I wanted to stop by to see how you guys were doing and to talk to George about visiting Dad."

"Is that a good idea, Greg?"

"He's slipping. I think it would be good for both of them to see and talk to each other. Don't you?"

"What do you think, George?"

"I have no opinion."

"Just go and sit with him and watch a couple episodes."

Gregory began recording all of our father's favorite shows. *Sanford and Son*. *The Honeymooners*. *All in the Family*. *The Andy Griffith Show*. *Maude*. Whenever he visited our father, he would have one or two more compilations of episodes for him. Gregory told me that he would become more lucid watching them. That he would laugh hard and loud, like he was seeing them for the first time.

"You can't help but laugh when he cracks up," Gregory said. "I burst into

tears. When was the last time you laughed?"

"I don't remember," I said. I have thought about this question on several occasions since and I can still not accurately remember the last time I laughed.

My brother was born on March 8th, 1970. His full name is Gregory Albert Osterman. For the first few months of his life, whenever my father looked at him, he would quip, "You're the cutest little mistake I've ever seen." Our mother would tell him to be quiet but whoever was in the room would laugh.

Gregory spent most of his childhood with our father. Our mother worked during most of the day. When he was three, I moved out to attend college. When he was seven, Lola moved out as well.

When Gregory turned six, he settled into a routine that ran concurrent with my father's. They would both wake up around 6:30 in the morning. While Gregory sat watching *Bozo the Clown*, my father would make breakfast. They would then sit together and watch *Looney Tunes*. Gregory's favorite character was Daffy Duck but my father enjoyed watching the shorts involving Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner.

"That Coyote is a hot shit," my father would say.

After *Looney Tunes*, my father would drive Gregory to school and pick him up again at 2:00. After school, they would both take a nap. My father would wake up first and begin making dinner.

Our father would also allow Gregory to stay up through the first half-hour of *The Tonight Show*.

One night, four years ago, I received a call in the middle of the night. It was Gregory. He had been arrested and he asked if I would bail him out.

Not knowing if they accepted checks, I went to a bank ATM and withdrew five-hundred dollars. I arrived at the booking station, requested to bail out Gregory Osterman. I was told to sign a form stating I understood that if Gregory did not appear at the court appointed date, I would forfeit the five-hundred dollars. I signed the form, paid the bail, and was asked to sit down in the lobby.

Twenty-five minutes later, Gregory appeared. He was wearing a white dress shirt, tucked, black slacks, and matching shoes. He had mousse in his hair, which I had never seen before. I didn't see any black eyes or bruises on him. He kept his head down, clasping his hands the entire time.

I offered to take him to an all-night Burger King down the street but he refused.

"Did they impound your car?"

"No."

"Where's your car? I'll drop you off there."

"The car is at home. I took a cab."

"Why'd you take a cab?"

He remained silent.

"So...you aren't going to tell me what happened?"

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

"I understand that. Seeing as how you haven't said a word, I assumed that was the case. I was hoping however you would tell me."

"And I was hoping you wouldn't press me on it."

"Oh, so I'm just supposed to just make night calls, throwing five hundred bucks around without any explanation?"

"If you love someone, you respect their wishes for privacy."

"So that's why you called me? Because I'm a sap who won't ask questions?"

"I called you because I don't want the family to know."

"To know what? You got to fill me in, Gregory."

"I don't want the family to know, George, and that includes you."

"Oh, so that's what I am?"

"I'll pay you back."

He looked up at me. His eyes were welled up. He blinked, and a tear fell. He looked back down. We didn't speak for the rest of the trip. When I dropped him off at the house, I didn't see his car in the driveway. Upon returning home, I told Karen that he was picked up for a drunken bar fight.

I still do not know what he was arrested for. We have never spoken of that night.

Several weeks later, I received a personal check from the Barrington city government for the five hundred dollars, which I deposited into our bank account.

Chapter 11

Wednesday

I open my eyes. The room is dark, with soft blue light illuminating parts of the room. Light from the street lamp filters through the curtains, bathing the room in a navy glow. I feel the sensation to urinate, so I go to the restroom. I wash my hands and walk into the hallway.

I step into Chris' doorway. He is lying on his bed, reading a book. It is *Truman* by David McCullough. He looks up.

"Hi, Dad."

I nod in recognition. Christopher scratches the back of his head.

"How is your hand?"

"It does not hurt."

"That's good," he says.

"Your mother would like you to be asleep before midnight." The clock on his bureau reads 2:36 A.M.

"I know. I'm going to bed after this chapter."

"You stay up late every night."

"I like the night," he says. "Everything stays the same. Ten P.M is the same as three A.M. During the day, everything is constantly changing. The light. The shadows."

"Christopher?"

His head looks up.

"I turned off your alarm last Friday."

He continues to look at me.

"Do...you...set your alarm...to that time?"

"Yes."

"Even though your mother wants you to be asleep at that time?"

His eyes soften along the edges.

"Yes."

What would I do? Would I tell Karen? Would I tell him to keep it a secret?

That I wouldn't say anything but if he got caught, he was on his own? Or would this

be the 3rd strike over a series of offenses from prior events I should have noticed but

didn't? Would I think about my childhood and how I had to be asleep by eleven o'clock and when I was child I said if I became a parent I would let my child stay up all night? Or would I think about how in my mid-20's I realized that this thought was just a thought that ran consistent with the child I was?

"I understand."

"Dad?" Christopher puts down his book.

"Yes?"

"About tomorrow. I don't understand the purpose of a wake."

"It is a ceremony that began centuries ago--"

"No...I mean...what is the point of being in a room with a dead body?"

"To see the person you are mourning for the last time."

"I don't really understand it," he says. "We sit in a room with a dead body for hours and act like it isn't there?"

"You are aware it is there. No one acts to the contrary of that."

"Do they look like themselves? Will it look like Grandpa?"

"It will look like your grandfather is sleeping."

"Mom said I will have to kiss him. Do I have to?"

"It is customary for those close to the deceased to say their last goodbye with a kiss."

"But I never kissed him when he was alive."

"If your mother says you should kiss him, you should follow her decision."

"Okay....Dad?"

"Yes."

"Do you miss grandpa?"

"I...I..."

I don't have anything to say.

"I miss him already, too," Christopher says. "I'll go to bed now, dad.

Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I walk downstairs.

The front door is ajar. Not by much, but the street lamp outside sends a shaft of light into the living room, reflecting off the couch. I open the door and step onto the

walkway. I look up to the street lamp. There are hundreds of insects flying around the light. It reminds me of an atom.

I learned of the cloud model of the atom in my 9th grade science class. In that class was a girl named Cassandra Parks. She wore skirts almost every day. She was seated behind my right shoulder and several times throughout the class I would turn my head to try to look up her skirt. For many weeks, I was never able to see her underwear. Her left leg always obstructed my view. So one day, I went into class before everyone else and tilted her desk a few degrees in my direction. That day, when she sat down and crossed her legs, I saw her underwear. It was white with little butterflies on them. I was so overwhelmed by the discovery; I left the room and walked to the nearest men's room and masturbated.

The sound of a car engine grabs my attention. It's a blue sedan. It turns right off of the street and drives away in the distance. I continue walking, past the sidewalk and then onto the street. I begin following the tail lights.

I hear a car engine behind me. I stop and turn. The head lights increase in size as the car draws near. The car is parallel to me. It is a green station wagon. The

driver is a man. Sandy blonde hair. Thick frames. Pockmarks on his face. We make eye contact for a moment, and then the car drives away.

The light of the Petro gas station can be seen in the distance. Three blocks. Every step I take puts me closer to it.

I am at the entrance to the store at the gas station. I open the door.

“Good evening,” the clerk says. He looks young. Skin blemishes. Small eyes.

His auburn hair dangles over his eyes. His name badge said Scott.

I nod in recognition.

“I’ve been there,” he says, nodding his head towards my feet. “Sometimes you just have to have cereal. Ever notice those are the nights you have no milk?”

I continue to look at him.

“The milk is in the back.”

He points to the far corner of the store and I walk there. I am in front of the cooler door. It is thin and rectangular. My eyes move across the rows top to bottom, left to right. The smaller volumes are on top and the larger volumes are at the bottom. I look at all of the choices. Half-pint. Pint. Half-gallon. Gallon. They are also

color-coordinated to signify percentage of fat. Orange, heavy cream. Violet, half and half. Red, whole. Yellow, two percent. Dark blue, one percent. Powder blue, skim.

“Is there one missing?” Scott asks. “I stocked it a couple hours ago, so every percent should be in there. I rotate them so if you are looking for fresh ones, they should only be about one or two back.”

I see my reflection in the mirror. I have pockets of puffiness under my eyes. My hair is unkempt. My pajama shirt is unbuttoned by two at the top. A bead of sweat is running down my face.

“Sir?”

I look past my reflection and see into the back of the cooler, the walk-in refrigerator. There are two different stacks of blue and black crates, each carrying milk. The stack on the left is four crates high while the stack on the right is five stacks high.

“Sir”

“Look, sir, I’m gonna have to ask you to buy something. If not, you’re going to have to leave.”

"Sir?"

To the left of the milk crates is a rack. On the top rack are egg cartons. 100% FDA Fresh Brown Eggs, according to the label. On the rack below are stacks of six-packs of beer in cans. Budweiser. Bud Light. Schaeffer's. Schlitz. Michelob. Michelob Light. Coors Light.

I had my first sip of beer when I was seven years old. At a family barbecue, my father put down a can of beer so he could play his turn in horseshoes. I grabbed the beer and took a sip. It tasted awful. As I stood there thinking why all of the adults were drinking it, my father slapped me in the back of head, causing me to drop the beer.

Flashing lights grab my attention. I turn around and see a police car parked by the door. The door opens along with a beeping sound. An officer walks in and Scott points at me.

"Good evening," the officer says.

I nod in recognition.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine."

"Come with me, sir."

I walk towards him but he tells me to stop. He has me turn around with my hands behind me. He handcuffs me. I feel a pain in my stomach. A quivering. I begin to shake a little.

"Are those okay? They're not too tight?"

"No."

I turn around and walk outside. His hand remains on my shoulder. He escorts me towards his vehicle. Three more police cars are driving towards us. The flashing lights are distracting.

He asks me my name. George Hermann Osterman. He asks if I have any identification. I do not. He asks me if I have been drinking. No. He asks my address. 36 Celine Way. He asks my phone number. 555-846-3942. He asks what I am doing out tonight. My front door was ajar. He asks me to sit in the back seat. I oblige.

The back seat smells of vinyl and sweat. The scanner radio makes intermittent noises, from beeps to an unintelligible voice at a high volume.

The officer gets behind the driver's seat.

"We've spoken with your wife, Mr. Osterman. I'm going to bring you home now."

The car turns onto the street. The drive lasts under two minutes.

Pulling into the driveway, I see Karen standing on our front step. Her bath towel is wrapped around her.

"Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Osterman," the officer says. He steps out of the vehicle and walks towards Karen, who meets him halfway. They are talking to one another. Throughout the conversation, Karen looks over his shoulder and into my eyes. The officer walks back, opens my door, and leads me out. He turns me around and removes the handcuffs.

"Oh, god," Karen says, covering her mouth.

"Here you go, ma'am."

"Thank you, officer."

"As I said, once I arrived inside, I realized it wasn't the guy, but I had to take full precautions."

"No, I understand completely."

"Well, I hope you have a good night."

"You too, officer," Karen says. "Good night. Get inside, George."

She leadd me up the stairs and told me to lie down. Walking past his room,

Christopher is standing in the doorway.

"Is everything okay, Dad?"

"What time is Christopher? Go to bed."

"Okay, Mom. Goodnight."

Once inside the bedroom, Karen closes the door behind us.

"George," Karen asks. "What were you doing out?"

"I don't know."

"It was your decision to leave on your own?"

"I walked downstairs. The front door was ajar. I opened it and just kept walking."

"You scared the shit out of everyone, George. The kid at the store thought you might have been the guy the police were looking for. You practically had the

entire fucking police force converging on you.”

I remember the report from the Monday afternoon’s news.

“But I don’t look like that man.”

“That doesn’t matter, George. What, am I supposed to worry every time someone is not here to look after you?”

I continue to stare at her.

“Just...just, go back to bed, George.”

I lie down and close my eyes.

Chapter 13

My Wife

Karen Kristen Holmes was born thirty-eight years ago to Rose Dillinger and Peter Holmes.

She is an only child.

She does not say much about her childhood. When we began dating, she would change the subject when the topic would come up. As we became a more committed couple, she would ignore my inquiries. After we became married, it never came up.

I have met her parents on only five occasions. Our wedding. Rose's birth. Christopher's birth. The wedding of one of Karen's cousins. And at Christmas dinner four years ago.

The only explanation I have ever received was when she said, "When you grow up, George, you move away from the nest and you start living your life." An hour before we had gotten into an argument about the presidential election and I brought up her parents because I knew it would upset her.

I don't know much about her life before we met, but over the years I have learned certain things.

Her best friend as a child was named Marybeth. Her favorite doll was a Raggedy Andy.

She finished twelfth in her class.

She did not want to go to Elysian but her parents refused to pay her tuition for any other school she applied to.

She found the institution of marriage to be outdated.

"Marriage is patriarchal bullshit," she would say. "Why would I want to get married? So I can take your last name?"

"What makes you think I would marry you?" I said.

"Oh yeah, like you could do any better. Besides, it's all over your face."

Since we began dating, the longest I have not spoken with Karen is three days, if you don't count the time I was in a coma.

I was studying for finals at the time so I didn't realize it had been that long until Karen called and asked if I could visit her. I remember thinking she wanted to

break up with me.

"Can't you just tell me what you want to tell me now?"

"No, George. Please, come over."

When I arrived at her dorm room, the door was unlocked and I walked in.

Karen was lying on the bed, looking at the ceiling.

"So...what is it that you have to say to me in person?"

"I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

She turned to look at me.

"I'm sorry, I said. "I just don't know what to say."

"That makes two of us."

"Well...I'll pay for the abortion."

"I'm not having an abortion."

"Why not?"

"I would never have an abortion."

"What do you mean? You're always going off about those pro-life nuts."

"I believe in a women's right to choose, and I choose life -"

"Yeah, alright."

"Fuck you."

She sat up on the bed and started crying.

"You graduate in two months, so it won't affect your studies."

"Great. So at about the same time my friends are entering the workforce, I'll be home breastfeeding."

I sat on the bed and held her. Neither of us said anything for several minutes.

"So it looks like we'll be getting married, huh?" I said.

Four years ago, Karen began working for Synnex, a telecommunications company. It was her first job in twelve years. Though she started out as a junior associate, she has received three promotions in that time and is now executive manager in the design department.

This past February, Dr. Shanktalusa invited Karen to sit in our next meeting.

"I thought it would be a good idea to have a discussion with you and George today."

"I'm glad to be here," she said.

"Let's start today with you...may I call you Karen?"

"Of course."

"Great. Let's start with you Karen. How would you describe living with George?"

"Well, it's a challenge at times."

"Have you noticed any changes, bad or good?"

"Well, you can't keep him away from *Evermore Valleys*."

"The soap opera?"

"Yeah. He watches it religiously."

"I had no idea. Why didn't you tell me this, George?"

"I don't know."

"Anything else?"

"Well, everything has to be planned and organized. We worked out a

schedule during the week when no one is home in 30 minute blocks.”

“I know you had problems with decision making, George, but this is something different entirely.”

“It’s not really a problem anymore. We have a full schedule and things for him to do in the afternoons when everyone is away.”

“So, there has been progress in that respect?”

“Oh, definitely. I was afraid to leave him alone for a long time. When he came home, right after the accident, I took my vacation time and spent it with him.”

“I was thinking, since Valentine’s Day is approaching,” Dr. Shanktalusa said.

“If you could tell me what’s the most romantic thing George ever did for you...if it’s not too personal.”

“No. Not at all, doctor. I had just started working at Synnex. Seven, eight weeks. Now I know I was at the bottom rung of the ladder, but I just felt I was getting all of the shit.

It was another late day at work. I was usually able to shake off the tension, throw on some talk radio and just relax. But not that day. I got home and everything

was loud. Rose was talking over the television to someone on the phone. George was in the kitchen, cooking dinner.

'We sat down to eat but the phone wouldn't stop ringing. First it was for George, and then for Rose. I just wanted to have a calm, quiet dinner but it just kept ringing. I asked George if he could unplug the phone but he said he was expecting one important call before 6:30 so had to keep it on.

And the phone rang again and I just blew up. I yelled. I didn't know what to do. I stormed out, got in the car and drove off."

"Where did you go?"

"Actually, I was still hungry so I went to Burger King." She laughed. "I was gone for about an hour. When I got home, however, all the lights were off except the table light in the living room. I saw a note there. I also noticed there were rose petals on the floor. The note read "follow the path to relaxation." I followed the petals up the stairs. There was a bubble bath and lit candles around it. And a bottle of champagne on the toilet cover with a note.

"Do you remember what the note said?" Dr. Shanktalusa asked.

"I do. Do you remember, George?"

"It said, 'Take the night off on us.'"

"And it was signed 'Love, George, Chris, and Rose.'"

"That is very romantic of you, George," Dr. Shanktalusa said. "How did you get the roses and the champagne so quickly?"

"I asked him this countless times and he never told me," Karen said. She turned to me. "How did you get the roses and the champagne so early?"

"The champagne was in the freezer and the roses were under the sink."

"What were they doing there?"

"I knew you were having difficulty at work so I bought the champagne and roses on the way home and called Gregory to pick up the kids at six o'clock after we had dinner."

Karen started to cry.

"Are you feeling anything, George?" Dr. Shanktalusa asked.

"No."

"What happened that night, George?" Karen asked.

"What night?"

"The night of the accident...incident? What happened at the night of the incident, George?"

"We went to a club in downtown Boston."

"I know that part of the story. But I never believed it. Four drunken, married businessmen out on the town decide to call it an early night."

"Jared isn't married."

"So what? I don't give a shit, George. Whose idea was this?"

"Foster's."

"I caught Foster staring at my ass at one that company holiday party a couple years back. He's a fucking scum bag. Were there women there?"

"Yes."

"Did you kiss one of them?"

"She kissed me."

"Yes."

"Then what?"

"All four of us walked down into the subway. At the bottom of the stairs, I grabbed her again and kissed her."

"Then what?"

"That is all I remember."

Karen drops her head. There was silence for several seconds.

"I'm sorry doctor to keep cry-"She stopped. "You know already, don't you?"

"We have discussed the events of that night before, yes."

"Had you ever done anything like that before?" She asked me.

"No."

"Tell me the truth, George."

"No," I reply.

More silence. Then Karen stood up.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Karen said. "But I can't...I just can't do this anymore. I'm going to sit in the car. I'll take you home when you're done, okay, George?"

"Okay."

She collected her things and walked out of the room.

Chapter 13*Thursday*

"Hello? Yes, officer. My name is Abigail Hollingsworth. Last year, my son, Trevor, went skiing at the Ivory Cap Ski facility in your town. He went missing. I wanted to know if you have found any new evidence or leads related to his disappearance."

She nods her head while listening to the phone.

"Yes...well, I think I learned some new information and I wanted to pass it along."

The phone is ringing. I get up and answer it.

"Hello."

"Hello, George? It's Lola."

"Yes."

"I'm here at the wake...everybody's here but you, I know we...I know I have my differences with you, but I know now that Dad would want you here and I was

wrong in not allowing you to attend.”

“Okay.”

“He will be showing for another half-hour if you would like to attend. I am bringing Ma home in a few minutes.”

“That is fine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will stay here.”

“You don't want to see him one last time?”

“My last opportunity to see him has passed,” I say. “All that remains is a body.”

There is silence on the phone.

“George, I am trying to understand you. Maybe that is my mistake. Fine, don't come. I don't expect you at the funeral tomorrow. If it's just a body then I don't want you to attend.”

She hangs up the phone.

I sit back down.

"Hey, get your hands off me," Natalyie yells.

She struggles with Brock, attempting to push him off. Then her body goes limp. His arms are completing around her. He loosens his grip. She looks up. They kiss. She begins rubbing her hands through his hair.

The door opens. It is Karen, Christopher, and Rose.

"Hello, Dad," Rose and Christopher say, overlapping each other.

I nod in recognition.

"Did Lola call?" Karen asks. "I spoke with her and she said she changed her mind."

"I spoke with her on the phone, yes."

"So let's go."

"I will not be attending."

"What happened?"

"Lola and I spoke. She got angry."

Karen frowns.

"Everybody asked where you were. I told them you couldn't attend and I left it

at that.”

Rose walks past Karen towards the door.

“Rose, could you bring Christopher with you?”

“Really?”

“Yes, just today. I need to talk to your father. It's only for a couple hours and you could drop him off back here. Okay sweetie?”

She comes back down several minutes later wearing a different outfit. Pink skirt past the knee, white t-shirt with no pattern, white socks and red shoes.

Christopher is in his same outfit as before with the exception of his clip-on bow tie.

They leave, saying goodbye while doing so.

“The wake was nice. The priest offered anyone to come up and say a few words. No one got up. After a couple minutes, Branch stood up and told this story about your father at a family function. Your father was drunk and wouldn't stop dancing in the backyard, dancing with everyone. Your grandmother, your uncles, their kids. He was pulling people from the tables and having them dance with him.”

‘Branch said anyone who has seen him dance knows that he was the last

person to get near a dance floor.”

“So, after a couple of hours of this, your father tried to get Branch to dance with him. Branch, of course, said no. After multiple attempts, your father pulls Branch up there and begins dancing around him as Branch stands like a statue.

And Branch said...” Karen catches her breath. “...and Branch said he told your father that he will never let him live that night down...even after he dies, he said, he would tell the story at his funeral.”

Karen crosses her arms and bows her head. She lifts it up and I see her eyes are glassy.

“Have you ever heard that story, George?”

“No.”

“I know you like...you liked, to hear stories about your father.”

“That is true.”

“Oh...George, we need to talk.”

“Okay.”

“This isn't working.”

"What isn't working?"

"Us, George. We're not working. I can't do this anymore. I want us to separate. You've been going to your sessions for about a year now. At first, I had hope, but I just don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. Last night, as we were driving to the hospital, I couldn't stop looking at your hands. They were red and peeling. I looked up saw your eyes. And...Do you remember the time you stepped on that nail in the backyard?"

"Yes."

When Rose was eight, we bought her a little playhouse to be built in the backyard. The directions were complicated and there were parts strewn about. Looking for the tiny package of wood screws that were included in the play set, I stepped on a nail that went directly through my foot.

"It went right through your foot. And I knew it hurt, but Christopher and Rose were there and you just clenched your jaw. Even driving to the hospital, I looked in your eyes and you had these eyes that said "Help me." It was one of the times in my life where I couldn't have loved you any stronger. I wanted to be there for you,

comfort you, hold you in my arms.

'But when I looked in your eyes two nights ago, it wasn't there. I knew then that you couldn't change.'

She wipes the tears from her face.

"We can turn the basement into a studio apartment. It's properly heated down there so we'll just have to get a carpet and a bed. Your benefits at Benemont run out in six weeks. They called two weeks ago and they wanted to know if you were coming back. I called them this morning and said you weren't."

"Is this because of last night?"

"No, George. It is something I have been thinking about for a long time.

Though last night does raise a bunch of new questions. Should I not let you drive anymore, George? What if that happened on the street?"

"I don't know what happened. My attention became fixated."

"I thought we got over those problems already. Are we back at square one?"

We stare at each other

"Is there anything you have to say?" she asked.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say anything. Scream. Yell. Throw a fit. Anything, George, do anything and I would know that we might return to what we were."

"What were we before?" I ask.

"We screamed. We fought. We fucked. We resented each other. We do none of that now. None of it."

Her eyes are large.

"I don't want a divorce.....," she says. "I don't want to separate...."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know. I just know I don't want this anymore. I'm sorry George. I just can't..."

We stare at each other for several seconds.

"I think, starting tonight, you should start sleeping in the office until we can get the basement set up properly."

"Sleep in the office?"

"I'll bring the cot up. I'm sorry, George. But I can't sleep in a bed with you,

anymore. You're not my husband."

Karen quickly walks out of the living room and up the stairs. I sat down on the couch. Uelman is speaking to the judge.

"You can bet that the Defense will argue that there was more than one perpetrator involved in this homicide, and that's a very relevant fact. But what the jury is not to speculate on is why such other person is not here on trial. And there is the risk that adverse inference can be drawn against the Defendant from the absence of another person on trial and the jury should be told you simply should not speculate about that, that is not of concern to you in this case."

Chapter 14

My Daughter

Rose became potty trained August 12th, 1981. To commemorate the moment, Karen took a Polaroid of Rose sitting on her plastic, red toilet which sat beside our regular toilet. Rose is looking up to the camera, grinning with all of her teeth showing. Karen wrote the date on the back.

When she was seven, she said her favorite color was yellow. When she was ten, it was pink. In an argument with her at age fourteen, she said, "My favorite color has always been magenta, Dad. You don't know anything about me."

When Rose was nine, Karen brought home a kitten, a red and yellow checkered tabby. The Wardners, a family that lived four houses to the left of us, were giving them away after their cat gave birth. Rose named the cat Sabrina.

"It's a boy, sweetheart," Karen said.

"I know." Rose said, "But he looks like a Sabrina."

Karen was given the task of feeding Sabrina while Karen and I changed his litter box.

One day, I was sitting in my home office, looking over some accounts when Rose ran into my room.

"Dad, Sabrina is missing," she said.

"Are you sure she's not hiding?" I asked.

"I looked everywhere. I think she's missing."

I told Rose to continue looking until her mother came home and if she was not found then we would look outside the house. Karen came home a couple hours later and there were still no signs of Sabrina. While I looked around the back yard and around the house, Karen and Rose got in the car and drove around the neighborhood. We did not find him that night.

Sabrina was missing for a week when he returned. I heard scratching at the front door and when I opened it, Sabrina hobbled in on three legs, his right hind leg mangled. I picked him and he cried. I was hoping to find out what was wrong before Rose would see him but she ran into the room.

"Is that Sabri-"she said, stopping when she saw his condition.

"He must have been hit by a car," I said.

I have never seen that look on Rose's face, before or since. In that moment, I recall feeling so helpless. Though I have tried several times in session to recall those feelings I have been unable to do so.

"Get your mother and Christopher," I said. "We're going to the veterinarian."

We arrived at the veterinarian on Anderson St. in about twenty minutes.

"I have some bad news," the vet said. "Sabrina has a broken leg with what appears to be serious nerve damage. She'll never be able to walk on it again."

"How much will it cost to amputate?" I asked.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Osterman, that your cat has also suffered internal injuries.

Based on his breathing it would appear one his lungs is punctured.

"Oh no," Karen covered her mouth. "Rose will be devastated."

"What are our options?" I asked.

"Well, to be up front, one of the options is a costly emergency surgery. We would have to operate immediately. It's a miracle he's survived as long as he has. He's in a lot of pain."

"And the other option is sleep?" I asked.

"Yes."

I turned to Karen to see she was already looking at me.

"I'll give you a few minutes," the doctor said.

"So?" Karen asked.

"There really is no 'so,' is there? You know it, too, Karen."

"Rose will be shattered."

"I know. But we'll let her grieve for a couple months and we'll bring home another kitten. She played with him more when he was small, anyhow. Also, her birthday's coming up in three months."

"So, that's what this is? A built-in present?"

"Karen," I said. "You know I don't mean that. I want her to have another cat. I love having a cat in the house. I forgot how much they relaxed me. We'll get another cat, Karen. But you know as much as I do that it would be expensive and foolish to waste this kind of money."

When the doctor returned, we told him of our decision to put the cat to sleep.

Though we were given the option to say goodbye, we both thought it would be best

to just tell Rose that Sabrina died on the operating table.

Rose cried the entire trip back to the house. Karen sat in the back and held her while Christopher sat up front.

For several days after, I noticed Rose was distant towards me. I was at the kitchen table, eating cereal, when Rose walked in and grabbed her bagged lunch from the refrigerator.

"Could you grab me some O.J, sweetie?"

She shut the door and walked away, ignoring me.

"Get back here," I yelled.

She walked back into the kitchen.

"What is wrong, Rose?"

"You killed Sabrina."

"Me? It was an accident dear. If I left the door open too long, I'm sorry."

On a couple of occasions, when the front door opened, Sabrina would try to run outside.

"We could have saved him."

"There was no other choice. He was in pain, sweetheart."

"Liar. Mom told me we could've gotten him an operation."

"We weren't spending thousands of dollars to save him," I yelled.

Rose ran out of the room.

"What is going on in here?" Karen asked, walking in from the kitchen.

"What are you doing telling her we could have put him in surgery?"

"I'm sorry George, it just came-"

"I don't recall you putting up much of a fight back there. You could have said something."

"You wouldn't have agreed to it."

"You're goddamn right. We're gonna...what, Karen, take money out of Rose or Chris' savings account so the cat can live another seven years and break her heart then?"

"Yes, George. Yes."

"Bullshit," I said. I got up and put my empty cereal bowl in the sink. "From now on, no more of this good cop/bad cop shit. We're supposed to be on the same side."

I walked by Karen, who stood motionless in the entranceway, and upstairs to our bedroom. But the time I was back down to leave for work, everyone was gone.

We haven't had another pet since Sabrina.

Rose Patricia Osterman was born November 11th, 1978. She weighed in at seven pounds, six ounces. At the time, Karen and I were living in a studio apartment. We didn't have room for a crib so for the first few months Rose slept in the sink.

As a child, Rose had a personality that Karen described as "gregarious." She would talk to strangers with the familiarity of family.

Karen was always worried that Rose would unknowingly get herself kidnapped. On a Saturday afternoon ten years ago, the front door opened with Rose running by me, crying. Two steps behind her was Karen with a stern face.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do with her."

"What happened?"

"She went missing at the mall."

The Bonaventure Mall is now the third largest mall in the state, but ten years

ago was just a small collection of stores contained within one building.

"Okay," I said.

"Is that all? *Okay?*"

"Well, you found her. Would you rather that I get upset that you lost her?"

"So it's my fault?"

"We're getting off topic," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"We were in Stripes. She wanted to go to Kay-Bee's, of course. I told her we can look at the toys after we did a couple other things. I'm holding her hand the whole time. I brought her into the changing room with me and everything. I go to return the blouse, I let her go to hand it over to the clerk, and she's gone. I yell out her name but nothing."

"How long were you talking to the clerk?"

"Not long. Just a couple of sentences. When I looked down and she wasn't there.." Karen stopped. "...I just felt this panic come over me."

I got up and held her.

"I was so scared, George," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "I was a wreck.

I'm running around the store, yelling her name. I'm looking under hangers, in the dressing room. All of the staff began helping me. I was too scared at the time to be embarrassed but...they must think I'm a terrible mother."

"Children are hyper, Karen. They know that. You let go and she started hiding."

"We looked for what felt like forever and then I just felt this impulse. I started thinking all of these horrible things, George. These horrible things. I ran out of the store and was looking for a security guard, a cop, anybody. I found one and just as I caught my breath...there she was, holding a man's hand without a care in the world."

The man said that Rose came up to him and started talking to him in the store and asked if he had any kids. When he left the store, he noticed Rose was walking with him, asking him more questions. That's when he asked her where her parents were. He took her back to Stripes but I had already left."

Karen told me the incident lasted ten minutes but said it felt like hours.

"We were walking back to the car and there was a man putting a shopping bag in his trunk. I look down at my keys for one second and when I look back up,

there she is talking to the man two cars over. 'What did you buy at the store?' she asked him. I was so angry that I just grabbed her by the shoulders and just started yelling at her. I just...I didn't know what to do."

Rose is a member of the art club in high school. She is also in the Honor's Society.

Rose has been dating Kevin for two years. I first met Kevin at Rose's 10th birthday party. She invited all of her friends and we had a cookout in the back yard along with ice cream cake. I walked down the stairs into the living room and saw Kevin sitting on the couch by himself, his left index finger firmly up his nose. Finding the situation humorous, I stood there and watched him.

Kevin looked up and saw me. He quickly pulled his finger out, and whether by scratching inside his nostril or just the sudden motion, his nose started to bleed.

"Are you alright?" I asked him.

"Uh oh," he said.

"It's okay. Pinch your nose, tilt your head back, and follow me." I walked Kevin up the stairs into the bathroom on the second floor, away from the rest of the

children.

"You gotta watch what you're doing there, kid" I said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"No need to say sorry for me. You're just lucky that didn't happen in front of everyone. So, how long have you known Rose?"

"We met in class this year."

"And how is she, in school?"

"She is good. She always gets her homework done. She's helped me on my own sometimes to."

We made small talk for another couple minutes until his nose started to bleed.

I washed his face and sent him back downstairs.

Rose has a bump on the bridge of her nose. Karen said it comes from her side of the family, as her grandmother on her father's side as well as her aunt, also on her father's side, had similar bumps on their noses. Though it was noticeable, I always thought of it as a defined physical trait, the kind of defect that adds character to a face.

When Rose was seven, I took her to see *101 Dalmations*.

Waiting in line at the concession stand, I noticed a group of young girls standing off to the side of hallway leading to a theater room. There were five of them and all looked to be around Rose's age. They were all looking at Rose. I looked down at Rose and noticed she was looking straight ahead. I bumped her shoulder, getting her attention, and then gestured towards the girls.

Rose looked in their direction then quickly snapped her head back forward.

The girls were giggling.

"Do you know those girls, Rose?"

"No."

A woman walked over towards the girl. She was holding a tray with a couple of buckets of popcorn and six drinks. She gave the drinks to the children and walked by us.

The group of girls continued staring at Rose.

One of the girls said the word "rhino" and the others began to laugh.

I looked down and saw Rose staring at her shoes. As we approached the

front of the line, Rose asked if we could just go home.

"Why is that, dear?" I asked.

"I don't know."

I ordered a large bucket of popcorn, no butter, and a large root beer.

We walked into the theatre and saw the group of girls sitting on the far left side of the aisle. The girls giggled as they saw us and I directed Rose to the other side of the theatre. The entire time Rose did not look up.

"I'm pretty, right, daddy?"

"Of course you are, dear. What's wrong? Do you know those girls?"

"Two of them went to day-camp with me."

The summer before, we enrolled Rose in a day camp that would pick her up at nine in the morning and drop her back off at one o'clock.

"They called you names in camp?"

"They called me Rhino." As she said this, she began rubbing the bump on the bridge of her nose.

The notion that she would be ridiculed for her nose never materialized for me

until that moment.

The lights dimmed and the coming attractions began before we finished our conversation.

I patted her head and kissed her cheek.

Ninety minutes later, the film ended and I had forgotten about the events in the lobby. Rose said she had to go to the bathroom so I waited outside the bathroom door.

"I'll watch her for you," I heard a woman say. It was the woman with the four girls. I thanked her and she went into the bathroom with the four other girls.

"Thank you again," I said to the woman.

"Not a problem," she said. "So, are you gals ready to go?"

They said yes and they walked by us. I watched as each one walked past Rose, who kept her head down the entire time. The last one said "See ya, Rhino" under her breath and the girls started giggling again. Though not overweight, the girl was the biggest of the four girls. Rose started crying. I told Rose to wait by the bathroom door. I walked over to the woman and the four children who were now by

the exit.

“Hey, lady, could you tell the fat one to put a muzzle on it.”

“Excuse me?” the woman asked.

“The fat one there with the chocolate around her mouth. Tell her to-“

“Who do you think you are?”

“These girls have been staring at my little girl and calling her names under their breath and I just want-“

“That’s not true.”

“It is true.”

“That’s not-“

“It is true. They went to camp or something. And I’m sick of having to see it, so tell the butterball there to keep her mouth shut for a change. It will do her some good.”

“What is wrong with you talking to her like that?”

I crouched down in front of the overweight girl.

“How does it feel, you little tub of lard?”

Tears rolled down the girls face.

“Get away from these kids,” she yelled, drawing passerby’s attention. She told the kids to move quickly to the car. I walked back to the restroom and took Rose’s hand. Once inside the car, I double checked her seat buckle and wiped her eyes with my thumb and ran my fingers through her hair.

“Do you feel better?” I asked.

“No,” was her reply.

Chapter 14

Friday

Evermore Valleys is back. There is a snowstorm. Two men walk into the shot and stop. They are bundled in winter clothing, goggles, backpacks, and snow shoes.

One lifts up his goggles.

“Do you really think we should go down this trail? I can't see five feet in front of me.”

“It's alright,” says the other man, removing his goggles. “It's a simple trail. I've done it a million times. Just follow my lead and everything will be good.”

I have not seen these characters before.

“I don't know.”

“Peter, I'm your brother-in-law. Would I want to make my sister a widow?

Besides, I'm going with you. Everything will be fine.”

The second man moves off screen. The first man stands for a second, sighs, places his goggles over his eyes and follows in the first man's direction.

The doorbell rings. I answer the door and it is Hamilton.

"Hey, George. Long time, no see." He extends his hand.

"Hello, Hamilton."

"I'm in town to visit my folks. Show off the kid. How are things?"

"Everything is the same."

"My parents told me about your father. The obituary was in the paper. My condolences."

"That is fine," I say.

"Good..." Hamilton stands at the door. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No. Come in, if you wish." I open the door further and step out of his way.

"Wow. The place looks as good as ever."

Hamilton steps in the living room and looks at the television.

"It's been how many years?"

I think about this for a moment.

"We last saw each other in 1990 when you visited for your nephew's wedding."

"That's right. Good memory."

He turns and looks at the television.

“Watching soaps? You retire early and all of a sudden you’re a housewife, huh?”

“I watch it every weekday. Would you like something to drink?” I ask.

“No, I’m fine.”

The commercial break has begun. I grab my glass and walk into the kitchen.

“Have you been following the case?” Hamilton asks.

“Case?”

“O.J Simpson?”

“Yes.”

“Can you believe that they are trying to say he was framed? All because one cop said “nigger” how many years ago? This race stuff has gotten out of hand. Even if the whole police department was racist, the man killed his fucking wife. There was blood everywhere for christsakes.”

I return into the living room and Hamilton is sitting in my place on the couch.

Instead of sitting down, I choose to stand.

"What happened to your hand?"

"I spilled boiling water on it."

"Jesus. How are you?"

"I am fine."

"So...how are things?"

"They are as they always are."

"It looks like you've adjusted since the accident, huh?"

I look at him.

The theme of *Evermore Valleys* grabs my attention. The title screen fades to

Quinton Barrett sitting behind his desk. He pushes a button on this desk.

"Send him in, Theresa."

A gentleman walks in. I have not seen him before.

"Have a seat," Quinton says.

"No. I think I'll stand. I'll make this brief," the stranger says. "I have some information for you that I think would be of high value."

"I gathered that from the phone call, Mr...?"

“Let’s be straight about something, Mr. Barrett. You don’t care about my name. And I don’t care about your business or your livelihood. But one thing we both care about, intently so, are our self-interests. And it’s in this shared desire to look out for ourselves that I come with some information for you that will-“

“Are you going to continue with this soliloquy or are you going to tell me what your business is here? I have things to do.”

The stranger laughs to himself.

“I’m sorry me or Cecilia couldn’t see you when you were in the hospital,”

Hamilton says. “It can be a real bitch to get time off of work, even during emergencies. I’m taking vacation time to come here. Did you get our card?”

“I did.”

Hamilton leans in.

“Is everything okay, man? You seem distant. It’s like your eyes are looking away from me.”

“I have learned not to look.”

“Excuse me?”

"When I awoke in the hospital, I would stare at a person in their eyes until something else grabbed my attention. I forgot that people feel uncomfortable with direct eye contact. I use a tactic that works in sales and that is to look between their eyebrows."

"...That wasn't what I meant, but maybe that's what I'm thinking."

I turn back to *Evermore Valleys*.

"What are you doing here, Orson?" Jessica Hollingsworth says in a loud whisper.

"I'm on to you," Orson Barrett says. "You didn't think I'd find out you went to the investigators? Remember this. If you think I'm taking this alone, you're sadly mistaken."

"You have nothing. Get out of this house now, or I'll call the cops and tell them you broke in."

Orson smirks.

"That's a good story. I have one, too. Maybe I'll stay then. When the police arrive, I can tell them how I got this."

He pulls a key out of his pocket and waves it in her face.

“Or maybe I can grab the tape from home and just show them.”

Jessica slaps Orson, who just grins while rubbing his face.

“Remember the time we crashed Patricia Heaton’s birthday party?”

Hamilton asks. “We got really drunk and we snuck in the basement and you shit in her dryer? Do you remember that?”

“I do.”

Hamilton stares in my eyes for two seconds, then looks away.

“...Look. I don’t want to interrupt anything. I just wanted to stop by to see how things are. I hadn’t seen you in so long while. I was hoping to catch up with you but when they said you weren’t going to the funeral I had to track you down.”

“You said that already.”

“Yeah....I guess I did. I better get back to Cecilia and the boys,” Hamilton stands up. “We’re going to be in town until the end of the weekend. Maybe we can schedule something, like a cookout.”

“Perhaps,” I say.

He extends his hand. As I shake it, he puts his other hand on my shoulder.

"It was nice seeing you, Georgie."

I nod in agreement.

I walk him to the door and shut it behind him. I go back to the couch and sit in my spot.

"Why don't you tell mother your role in this little tete a tete?" Orson says.

"What is going on?" Abigail Hollingsworth yells, marching into the living room.

"What are you doing in my house, Orson? Leave immediately."

"Jessica knows all too well about what happened in the mountains," Orson says. "Because she was there with me. She invited Trevor to go skiing. Things got a little too hot for her and now she wants out but she doesn't want to be implicated."

The scene cuts to close-ups of the three characters, face frozen in a look of shock, horror, and amusement, respectively.

The scene fades out. We are back with the two men who are walking through the storm, which appears to have gotten worse. The sound of ripping wind overlaps.

The man on the right taps the other man on the arm and points in the distance. Cut

to a cave about fifty feet away.

“We're not gonna make it any further tonight,” Chester yells. “We'll stay in here and see if we can beat it out.”

“But we might get trapped in there in die,” Peter says.

“We'll die if we keep going.”

“I can't believe you. How did we get so far off trail?”

“We don't have time to argue. I made a mistake. We need to find warm shelter and this is as good as it's going to get.”

The two men walk into the cave. Cut scene to inside the cave. It is low hanging, but they are able to move with no real difficulty.

“We'll huddle close for warmth...”

Chester stops speaking.

“What is it, Chester?” Peter asks.

Chester crouches down and picks up a piece of chopped wood.

“There's wood in here, and it's dry.”

“Let me get my matches.” Peter drops his backpack and begins going through

the pockets.

The sound of a match striking can be heard. The two men turn their heads to the right. The camera jump cuts to the burning match. A man's face appears over the flame. He has long hair and a beard.

"Who are you?" Peter asks.

"My name is Trevor Hollingsworth."

The screen fades to black. The credits begin rolling.

Chapter 15*My Son*

Christopher Louis Osterman was born March 17th, 1983. He was born four pounds, seven ounces, which I understand is small for a baby carried to full term.

They kept him in observation for another two weeks. We brought him home July 12th.

As per tradition in my family, he was to be named Hermann Stephen Osterman, with his first name coming from my middle name and his middle taken from his maternal grandfather. I told Karen of this tradition while she was six months pregnant with Rose. For our first child, we choose to not know the sex until the birth.

"Absolutely not," Karen said. "I am not going to name a son of my Hermann."

"What about his middle name then?"

"No."

"Come on, Karen. You're being unfair."

"Tell you what," she smiled. "When you carry a baby to term, you can name it anything you want. We are going to pick a name we both agree on, and I don't agree

with Hermann.”

I experienced relief when we learned we would have a daughter. We compromised with her name, with Rose being Karen's middle name and Patricia being her paternal grandmother's. My mother was very touched.

“I like it,” said my father. “Very clever.” I did not tell him why we did that in the first place.

When Karen was pregnant a second time, I suggested we should know the sex of the baby. At the beginning of her second trimester, we visited the doctor, who administered an ultrasound.

After the appointment, I brought Karen home and drove to visit my parents.

“So, will it be a Hermann?” my father asked.

“Well...it will be a boy but we decided not to name him Hermann.”

“Why the hell not?”

“We decided to go with something a little more modern,” I said.

“What the hell does that mean? More modern?”

“We don't like Hermann.”

"We don't like Hermann?" He asked. "Or she doesn't like Hermann?"

I paused.

"You answered my question." He turned back to the television. Good Times was on. J.J, a nickname for James Jr., had just done something his father, James Sr., disapproved of, and orders him in the bedroom to receive a spanking. J.J walks into room with his head down as the audience laughs. His father follows him in. There is a brief silence, followed by J.J screaming. More laughter from the audience. When J.J returns, he is unable to sit down.

Whenever we would visit my parents with the kids, he would call Christopher "Hermann." This upset Karen but she never said anything to my father directly.

"Can you talk to your father about calling him Hermann. His name is Christopher. And I also don't like him offering him ice cream at all hours of the day, either."

Regardless of the time of day we visited, my father would offer the kids a bowl of vanilla ice cream. "How's my gentle flower? How's my little Hermann?" He would say, rubbing their heads at the same time. "Would you like some ice cream?"

She told me it was my responsibility to ask him to stop. I never did.

When he was four years old, Christopher proclaimed "I'm your Hermann" to my father. His pronunciation of the name stressed both syllables so it came out "Her-Man" instead of "Hermann."

"Yes you are, and you always will be."

If Karen had any desire to have my father stop calling Christopher "Hermann" after that day, she never expressed it to me.

Because of work commitments, I never attended parent/teacher conferences or go to the school to discuss Christopher's progress. On one occasion, however, I was able to visit Mrs. Turner, Christopher's elementary school counselor, with Karen to discuss an important matter regarding his grade status.

"We have decided to put young Christopher into readiness."

"You're holding him back?" I asked.

"It's not holding him back, Mr. Osterman. He will be learning the same material as the other first graders, just in a class with other students who-"

"It sounds like you're holding him back to me," I said.

"How many other students will be in that class?" Karen asked.

"I believe it will be twelve. The classes are smaller."

"Because most children don't get held back from Kindergarten?" I asked.

"George."

"I was going to say the classes are smaller so that way the students will have more interaction with their teacher and creates an environment where the students will learn to open up more. The problem isn't that Christopher can't understand the material, Mr. Osterman."

"Damn right."

"George."

"It's that he is too shy, and if not addressed early it can develop into a problem as he moves his way up the ladder. That can cause alienation with other students which could make him lose interest in his studies."

"That won't happen," I told her.

"How do you know that?" Karen asked me.

"Chris always has his nose in a book. He loves learning. He is always asking

questions.”

“And that is fantastic to hear, but if he has trouble making friends or speaking out, it could begin a path that leads to anti-social behavior.”

“Because Chris isn't a loudmouth and has manners he's gonna be shunted?”

“I have spoken with his teacher, Mrs. Fletcher, about this. She keeps track of all of the student's progress. When Christopher is asked a question she knows he knows the answer to, he refuses to answer, opting to stay silent. That's a red flag, Mr. Osterman.”

“Where is Mrs. Fletcher? Shouldn't we be speaking with her about this instead of you?”

“It is my responsibility to handle these situations, Mr. Osterman, on the recommendation of our teachers and to speak with the parents and hope we can work out a solution. Remember, we're all here for Christopher's betterment.”

“I don't agree with this,” I said.

“Well I think we should consider it.” Karen said. “Is it possible Mrs. Turner for us to put him in readiness for say, half the year? And if he shows improvement to

move him into the first grade?"

"I do want to stress Mrs. Osterman that Christopher would still be in the first grade."

"That's why it's called readiness," I shot back.

"I think we are getting caught up in semantics," Mrs. Turner said. Her smile was in shape only.

"You're the one calling it readiness, not me."

"George," Karen said. "I think she might have a point...Chris is a shy and if this might help him-"

"Whatever," I said, getting out of my chair. "You two have already decided what you want to do. We'll talk outside."

Karen repeated my name and implored me to stay in the office but I left.

Walking down the hallway of the school, Karen caught up with me and grabbed my shoulder.

"George," she said in a loud whisper. "Don't ever walk away like that, ignoring me. I'm your wife."

“Why the fuck did I come down here if you two were just going to do what you wanted anyway?”

“George.”

“Don't you ever make decisions regarding our children until we have agreed to it,”

“George, there are still children in the classrooms.”

“Do you think that putting him in readiness can make him feel more alienated? Yeah, he's a shy kid. So was I. You grow out of it.”

“But not everybody does, George. Just listen to reason. Haven't you noticed that he has no real friends? That he never talks about his day? He comes home, stays in his room and only comes down for dinner. Please, George. I'm asking you to just give it a chance.”

Christopher was put into readiness the next year. After completing it, he was put in the second grade along with the rest of the other students from his class.

For Christmas, 1991, Karen and I bought Christopher a Super Nintendo Entertainment System. He did not ask for it, but Karen and I thought it would give

him a common ground with his fellow students and would help him make friends. He never played it. Three months later, I lent it to Gregory, with the unspoken understanding it would never come back.

“What did you do that for?” Karen asked.

“He doesn't play the thing, Karen. I didn't spend three hundred dollars to watch it collect dust. Besides, if he wants it back, I'll just get it from Greg.”

“He's not gonna ask for it back, George.”

“He's probably not going to know it's gone.”

“You don't just give away someone else's gifts.”

“What do you want from me, Karen? He wasn't playing it. It's not that big of a deal.”

“Then have Greg bring it back. If he wants to play, he can play with Christopher.”

Greg brought the system back and we connected it to the television in the living room. Greg bought the game Mortal Kombat for Christopher's birthday. After a half hour of playing, Christopher said he didn't really like playing. When Karen came

home from grocery shopping, she saw Greg and me playing Mortal Kombat. She said Greg could keep the machine.

Christopher started an intense interest in American Presidents when he was nine years old. His school had a book fair and Karen gave him ten dollars to buy whatever he wanted. He came back with *Our Presidents*, a book with facts about the presidents, including birthdays, children, and other various trivia. He carried the book with him, wherever he went. When he went to school. When he went grocery shopping with Karen. When we took a family vacation to Disneyworld. He would look over each page intently, slowly turning the dog eared pages. Going over the information again and again .

One afternoon, Karen came home with two more books. One was a children's history book on Abraham Lincoln and the other was a book on Christopher Columbus. I have never seen him read the book on Columbus, but Christopher carried the Lincoln book in the same fashion he did with *Our Presidents*.

During dinner, he would recite random facts about presidents. James Buchanan was a Presbyterian. Franklin Delano Roosevelt owned seven dogs:

President, a Great Dane, Blaze, a Mastiff, Major, a German shepherd, Tiny, an English sheepdog, Fala and Maggie, both Scottish terriers, and Winks, a Llewellyn setter. Calvin Coolidge died of coronary thrombosis. Martin Van Buren's nickname was "Old Kinderhook," and his signature, "O.K.," is the basis for the term of acceptance used in everyday parlance.

Around his seventh birthday, I began noticing he developed a habit of hugging his knees against his chest and rocking himself. He would do it watching television on the couch. I would also see him do it on his bed when I would walk by his room. Or in the backyard, which was rare.

He rests his nose in the crevice between his knees, stares straight ahead, and uses his feet to rock himself. He maintains a steady rhythm close to half-notes.

One evening, he began to rock while we were watching a movie in the living room.

"Stop that, Chris," Karen said.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked. "He wants to rock. Leave him alone."

"It's distracting."

"He's not picking his nose or anything. He's just relaxing."

Karen turned back to the film but after a couple minutes was distracted again.

"I'm sorry, Christopher, but you're gonna have to stop doing that.."

"Okay."

"What's the big deal?" I asked.

"I can see it in the corner of my eye. It's very unsettling."

The next day, I was driving him to the barbers to get his hair cut. Sitting in the front, seat buckled, he bundled up his knees and started rocking.

"Why do you rock like that?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"Do you have any control over it?"

"Not really."

"When did you start?"

"I don't know. A long time ago."

"You don't do that in school, do you?"

"I try not to," he said. "But if I feel it coming, I go to the bathroom and do it

"Alright. A buzz cut it is."

The laces on Christopher's shoes are always two inches too long. When he was learning to tie his shoes he kept breaking his laces. On the day he retained the muscle memory necessary to consistently tie his shoes, Karen had put a pair of Rose's old laces on his shoes. When he tied them, he had to cross the laces twice underneath his shoe to the appropriate length necessary to have a tight knot. Since then, he has requested only long laces.

*Chapter 16**Saturday, September 24th, 1995*

"Please, have a seat." Dr. Shanktalusa gestures towards the chaise lounge. "What happened to your hand?"

"I spilled boiling water on it."

"Ouch. You're fine, I presume?"

"It stings, but it is adequate."

"Did you go to the funeral?" He opens his leather-bound notebook.

"I did not."

"Who's decision was that?"

"Lola said she did not find it appropriate that I attend."

"Lola is really protective of your mother."

"She is protective of the family."

"Have you been to the site?"

"It is the family plot. I have been there before."

"I mean since your father's funeral?"

"No."

"What are you doing today? Perhaps you should go."

"It will always be there."

"George?"

"Yes."

"I think you should go to the site today. Pay your last respects."

"Okay."

I adjust myself on the couch, sitting up and crossing my arms on my legs.

"So, how was your week? Besides the hand, of course?" He smiles for a

second.

"Karen said...Karen said...I do not quite understand of what she said."

"How do you mean?"

"She came home from the wake and told me she wants us to be separated, but she doesn't want to divorce me. She doesn't want me to leave the house, either.

We are going to convert the basement into an apartment and I can live there."

"HMMMMM..." He begins tapping his pen against the top of the notebook.

“George. Her feelings for you have obviously changed. Did you have any problems in the marriage prior to the incident?”

“We argued on occasion, but she never spoke of wanting to separate.”

“How do you feel about this?”

“I don’t want to lose her, doctor.”

He takes his glasses off and looks at me.

“You would feel a sense of loss, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How did you feel when she told you about this new arrangement?”

“I felt...”

I don’t complete the sentence.

“Do you love your wife, George?”

I have not been asked this question once since leaving the hospital.

“I know I don’t want to lose her.”

“It has taken a year, George, but I finally think we’re getting somewhere.

Here’s what I want you to do today. I want you to go to your father’s grave and pay

your last respects. After that, I want you to tell Karen that you don't want to lose her and that you'll be more aggressive in your efforts to repair your emotional disconnection."

"Okay."

"In fact, I think this is something you should do now. You can only get so much out of our discussions, George. You have to practice and create anchors at home and with your loved ones. Go visit your father and then your wife, okay?"

He stands up and extends his hand. I stand up and shake it.

"Don't worry, this session's on the house." He laughs.

I leave Dr. Shanktalusa office and drive toward the graveyard. I turn into the Javelin Pines graveyard. The Osterman family plot is in the back right end.

There is no headstone. Instead, there is a bronze plaque fastened to the ground, with roses carnations and violets surrounding it.

Louis George Osterman. February 12th, 1927. September 16th, 1995.

I fold my arms and bow my head. My eyes are closed. I stand here. Nothing.

I recall in my mind the last time I saw my father. The nurse walked me down

the hallway. I could hear Fred Sanford screaming through the door, followed by my father's laughter.

"That's him," the nurse said. "He loves his *Sanford and Son*."

The volume exploded out of the room when the nurse opened the door.

"Louis. Louis."

My father turned his head towards us.

"You have a visitor, Mr. Osterman. Why don't you turn down the t.v.?"

"Okay," my father said. He grabbed the remote with his left hand and stared at it intently, as if he had never seen it before. His right index finger hovered over the buttons as he looked for the appropriate function. He pushed a button a few times and the volume subsided.

"You know your son."

"Of course. Hey, George...I mean Greg...I mean George. How ya 'doin'?"

"I am well."

He hugged me.

"Now, remember, Mr. Osterman, you have a class in an hour."

My father mumbled "okay" as he closed the door and turned towards me.

"What's that in your hand?"

"Gregory visited me today. He gave me these tapes to deliver to you."

"Oh, good," he said, taking the bag. "Have a seat. I'm watching Sanford."

He gestured towards the chair that he was sitting in. I sat down as my father sat at the edge of his bed.

"I can't hear anything." He turned the volume back up to the previous level.

"You could stick your face in dough and make gorilla cookies," Fred Sanford said. The audience laughed. My father's laugh was louder.

"That Redd Foxx is a hot ticket."

He had the same smile I remembered.

"Are you alright, George?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You seem different."

"An incident occurred."

"Oh, really? What happened?"

"I was hit by a subway car."

"A subway car?"

"Yes."

"Jesus. When was this?"

"Five months ago, in Boston, Massachusetts."

"What were you doing in Boston?"

"I was there on business."

"What happened?"

"I was drunk and standing too close to the edge."

"You could've died."

"I know."

His eyes softened.

"I spoke with Branch," I said.

"Branch?"

"Your former roommate."

"Bran....Ohhhh yeaaaah. How 's he doing?'"

"He got married."

"Really? Wow. Was it to that girl? What's her name....?" My father tilted his head and looked up. This lasted for several seconds.

"I don't think it is anyone you are thinking of. He met her five years ago."

"It could be who I'm thinking of. Now, give me a minute."

He mumbled under his breath.

"Was it Cecilia?"

"Yes, it was."

"I knew I'd get it. Jesus Christ. I knew it. I'm not that gone." His cheeks reddened as he smiled.

"He wanted me to tell you that he says 'Thank you'."

"Who did?"

"Branch."

"Thank you?"

"Yes. That he says thank you for everything."

"Branch?"

"Your old roommate. Mother's cousin."

"Oh yeah...people would always give him a hard time because he was so small."

His eyes glazed as he stared straight ahead.

"One night, we were going out to see something.....and some kid...now who were we going to see?"

"The Ink Spots?" I asked.

"Yeah. They're a good group."

"And you protected him."

"Who? Branch? He didn't need protection. He was a tough sonofabitch. I remember this one time...we were at my sister's....no, wait a second...it was your aunt's. So, we're in the back playing horse shoes and Maurice...I mean Kevin...I mean...?"

"Branch?" I asked.

"No...the story's about him...I mean the other guy...the guy across...throwing the horse shoe...oh...what the fuck was his name...?"

"Uncle Charles?" I asked.

"No....but he was a friend of his...we once went on a road trip together....it was me, him, my brother Jimmy....God damn if I forget..."

"Where did you go?" I asked.

My father's eyes stayed fixed to an object. I followed his line of sight to the leg of the chair I was sitting on. His gaze was direct and firm.

"I don't remember," he cried.

"Me neither," I said.

He dropped his head. I could see the tears fall on his knee. His sobbing became louder than *Sanford and Son*.

The door opened. It was a different nurse.

"Is everything alright in here?"

"Father?"

He continued crying.

"Mr. Osterman?"

He wouldn't stop crying.

I stood up and walked towards the door. The last image I have of my father is him crying. I let the image stay in my head. I attempt to extract feeling from that moment. The nurse sitting on the bed beside him, putting her arm over his shoulder. She looked up at me in disbelief as I backed out of the room.

Nothing.

I squeeze my eyes tight. Still nothing. I raise my head, keeping my eyes shut.

I focus all of my energy around my eyes

Lacrimation is the process by which the body lubricates and cleans the eyes.

It begins at the lacrimal gland, which resides right above each individual eyelid. The gland secretes its fluid which through the pocket in the eye.

The tear, which is made up of three layers, consists of water, sodium, glucose, potassium, and several anti-bacterial fluids.

I feel condensation around the corners of my eyes. I feel a drop on my cheek.

I open my eyes and recognize it is starting to drizzle. I bow my head down and watch as the singular droplets drop around my father's nameplate. My head is covering the plaque from the rain.

The rain has increased. I feel the rain water running down my back as it has entered through my shirt collar. My hair has fallen over my face and is dripping water on the plaque. My socks have become moist.

I put my hand in my coat pocket and grab my keys. I walk towards the car and step inside. I start the car. I turn left onto the main driveway and exit on the right.