George's Islands

or, The Clonal Pluralization of the Self

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Art work: Maura McQueeney, *Moody Harbor, 2020*

To MC, who was brave enough to go to Paumanok.

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Prologue

If cells are sentences, organisms are the story. This, then, is the story of George T, an organism that accomplished very little. A human being whose family relations were troubled and whose judgment was poor. A young man who was careless and resentful, who struggled but was not heroic. Yet George had skills, some simple pleasures, and was not unlikeable. He had friends. He found love once, in his own way, and had a child from that love—depending on how you look at it. George was not an important organism, though not an entirely ordinary one. The truth is, his heritage was somewhat complicated, confusing even. And granted, confused is the norm in this world. He had an unfortunate illness which he did not let define him, yet it defined him. He had a twin, from whom he tried to escape as well. He traveled some, though most of his life was lived on islands—one long, anchored by tunnels and bridges, dense with highways, the home of soldiers and poets; the other a mere speck in the sea. In the end he died exiled on the mainland, not old but with his body spent and worn away. This is the story of what he found, and what found him in return.

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Oimè, Oimè!

Separation

And in our moment of parting,
This is all I want you to know.[1]

I.

Limping aboard the ferry, George found a seat with a view of the harbor and peeled off his wet jacket. His face was flushed. He was on his way home after a trip to the mainland for syringes. He did not feel particularly well, and was not happy at the prospect of an hour's ride without a cigarette. Rain speckled the ferry's windows like the residue of a pox. Outside in the mist, hawsers looked like snakes coiled around the dock pilings. Beyond them rose the masts of fishing boats, radar antennae and hoists, a gray shack, a thin curtain of sky. The air was heavy and sluggish. Even the boat seemed reluctant to move and had to be prodded from its mooring. It was an old boat, its lounge plain and sparse as the New England coast—wooden benches, metal walls of antiseptic blue, a snack bar—half full of islanders and a few desultory tourists. The harbor waters lay dull and listless. It was off-season.

He wanted a beer. In his plaid flannel shirt, faded blue jeans, Mets cap with tattered brim edges, he was in island dress except for the name of the baseball team. George sidled up to the refreshment counter and made his request with a polite smile. "No alcohol till the boat is out of the harbor," said the young attendant, pointing to a sign on the back wall. George was well aware, but asked anyway. The attendant looked down at the floor as if to apologize.

Once past the breakwater the boat pitched smoothly in trim, slicing through a steady urge of swells that raced toward shore. Overhead hung a ceiling of quilted ash, an inverted sea. He got his beer. Ribbed cliffs of the approaching shore, the fragile clay of eroding moraine, rose gradually on the horizon. A tourist stepped on deck, took a

photo or two, returned inside with windblown hair and reddened cheeks. Islanders gossiped over coffee as they nibbled the edges of their styrofoam cups. Steady time of an uneventful passage, deceleration at the breakwater, then the town. The ferry spun its slow half turn and backed into the slip. First the supply trucks, then cars bumped from its exhaust-filled hold onto solid pavement. Seagulls scanned the dock for scraps. Back again. He looked for his wife. But first let me tell you where he came from, and how he got there.

George T[1] is thirty-five years old, though at first glance he seems much older—gaunt, bald, and slightly stooped. His teeth are bad but the corners of his mouth don't droop in that look of contempt that stamps bitter men as they age. And his eyes, a placid brown, still observe the world with interest. His voice is soft, his manner gentle and composed, his outbursts of rage are not displayed in public. George is handy with most any kind of tool. His twin, Frank, living a thousand miles away in the flat sprawl of the Chicago suburbs, hasn't spoken to him in years. His three sisters live on Long Island near their mother. He still speaks to one of them, Amanda, the youngest. Not a day passes without his mother praying to God that he's all right and for the Almighty to relieve her anxiety. She tried her best, but a child with diabetes overwhelmed her. It wore her out. She could love him, that was easy, but she could not care for him. That was asking too much.

When George was four years old his body, they say, attacked itself. As if something tricked it, setting off a fifth column planted in his genes. As if his antibodies went rogue and turned against him. Or maybe it was a case of friendly fire, mistaken coordinates, trigger-happy sentries spooked by their imaginings—more research is needed on this. It happened quickly. One minute he's running through the house, jumping off the furniture, chasing the cat across the yard. The next he's too weak to climb out of bed and dying of thirst. He was in the hospital two weeks. The nurses were kind. Poor kid they whispered. So young, even for juvenile onset. They whispered about his mother too, but not as kindly. How at first she wouldn't even touch the

[1] George's family name has been redacted throughout this document to comply with Federal law as required by the Privacy Rule covering Protected Health Information (PHI) of Title II of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Pub.L. 104–191, 110 Stat. 1936, enacted August 21, 1996.

syringes, but finally learned to fill them though his older sister had to give the injections until he could handle them himself. After surviving that initial insult he faced his lifelong struggle. This enemy that was silent and steady as it lapped away at his nerves, his kidneys, his heart, that filled his days with needles and alcohol swabs, that alarmed his teachers and classmates to the point where he finally said fuck this and dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. And the struggle's final outcome was never in doubt. He didn't like to think about that. His doctors too, busy with their numbers, didn't like to think about it. Always wondering, why did he get the short straw? Why not Frank instead, or why not both of them? His incredulity helped him deny it really happened even as he bunched his skin in tight little mounds once, sometimes twice a day when he cared to (and was supposed to), and pierced his thigh or belly with the short, thin needles. Even when he felt flushed and dizzy and suddenly slow-witted, fumbling through his pocket for a piece of candy. A denial that sustained him, and the anger he wouldn't acknowledge quite yet.

His wife wasn't at the dock. He phoned her but got no answer. He lit a cigarette and waited in the shelter of an overhang by the restrooms until the last of the passengers had dispersed, watching surf-spray on the breakwater swirl the fine drops of mist hanging in the air, smelling the brine and diesel fumes. Five minutes, ten minutes, still no one, and he set out across the parking lot. As he walked through town the drizzle moistened his eyes. Shops were closing for the season and the sidewalks mostly empty. Through cafe windows reflecting a murky sea he recognized faces from the ferry nestled into booths and sitting at the bar, pantomiming speech, beginning to relax but still impatient for their drinks. He entertained the thought of taking a cab but decided to keep walking home, turning from the dock and its seascape up a quiet lane that curved away from the shops and restaurants. At the top of the hill the houses thinned out. A pond to his left was rippled by rain drops, silent save for ducks muttering at its edge. The water exhaled a musty scent of fern and stonewort. He trudged along rock-walls encrusted with lichens blue as if they'd been painted on, past split-rail fences beaten down by the seasons, down a long slope toward the sea on the other side of the island. When he finally reached his house—a small shingled cottage, grey like the weather, gabled above the second floor bedroom in the island style—he

was soaked and out of breath. The lights were out, the door locked. George's first thought was that his wife must be at her friend Rosalind's house. She spent more and more time there, he remarked. This time when he phoned someone answered. No, Nikki wasn't there. Didn't she tell you? She left you a note. Didn't you see it? Yes, there was a note in the middle of the kitchen table that had escaped his notice, which said she had left him. Couldn't take it. Still loved him but couldn't take it. It didn't surprise him. He had pushed her away, little by little, disgusted by his own steady decline and the brittle tension of the moods he couldn't control any better than his blood sugar. He could tell her devotion was exhausted. Still, he hadn't expected her to steal away like this. It seemed too cowardly. If it was her guilt that prompted it, he thought, so much the better.

He checked the house. There was nothing missing but her clothes. He ate a dinner of leftovers he didn't bother to heat, staring at the steady drizzle outside the kitchen window until it was only a soft tapping in the dark, feeling the envelopment of that darkness and his own sense of a sightless future. That night, undressing for bed, he noticed a blotch on one of his socks, a crust dried at the edges of a thick yellow goo. He examined his feet and, touching lightly, traced his finger over a small depression in the pad of his right forefoot. It was hard to see. Walking on his heels, rolling side to side, he maintained his balance into the bathroom where he propped his right leg on the sink for a moment's rest before raising it in front of the mirror. There it was, a small hole with its pallid halo in the pad of his forefoot. He pressed its edges and expelled a clot of blood and pus. He pressed harder and still there was no pain. This is not me, he thought, contemplating the face in the glass as he set his foot down on the floor.

II.

Drs. Gastine and McGuire, husband and wife, and their friends the Powells, also both doctors, two couples middle-aged and casually dressed, sat together on a restaurant terrace that overlooked a small harbor with its marina of small craft. It was a

warm summer evening, the time of day when sunlight is soft and clear, the kind of evening when, after a pleasant dinner like the one they had just enjoyed, gentlemen would leave their wives to smoke cigars. But of course none of them smoked, and did their best to discourage their patients, and it had been years since smoking was banned in restaurants and much longer since the sexes parted after dinner or the word 'gentleman' was used for anything but lavatories. They ordered decaf cappuccinos and watched the sunset slowly unfold over the quiet waters of the Long Island Sound, trading anecdotes about their patients with a collective concern and an unconscious sense of their own well-being. Their notions of confidentiality, despite the strict privacy rules recently enacted, were long-formed habits as casual as their clothing.

"…I didn't know what to do for him anymore," said Gastine, speaking in his smooth doctor voice, trim in his pink polo shirt and khakis, savoring the last of his wine as he took up the story, referring to a patient whose family he'd known for years. "His transplant doctors were looking after his kidney and an endocrinologist was managing his diabetes." Gastine, an internist, routinely managed these things himself until complications arose. He was not possessive. "So I just handed him some blank cassettes," he continued, sitting back comfortably in his chair as the others finished their dessert, "and told him to tape whatever came to mind. Talk about his family, his diabetes, about fishing." The doctor knew the intimate revelations of young men were usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions, as his once had been. "He loved to fish, you know. A little memoir, because he didn't have much time left." The Powells smiled their approval. Gastine shrugged. "I didn't think he'd really do it. It was just an offhand suggestion. Give him something to do. I didn't have much else to offer." The other doctors nodded, knowing only too well their own silent admission when there's nothing much left to offer. "Then he left town and I never saw him again." Gastine paused and gazed west toward the horizon, past the Sound stretching before him like a blue canvas stippled pink by the sky's reflection, as if seeing something on the other side of the water. "But I got the tapes. It was right before he died. He sent them to me from Bridgeport. That's where he went after his sister kicked him out. He was living with his ex-wife—I think she was more like his home health aide by then—

and her baby. I just put the tapes aside. When I looked for them years later I couldn't find them."

"What a shame," said one of the Powells. "After all that trouble. So what were you looking for?"

"I don't know," said Gastine. He set his decaf on the table and leaned forward as his voice trailed off for a moment. "That's why when I remembered the tapes, I was curious."

"And didn't you care for his mother?" asked the other Dr. Powell.

"Yes. But that's another story."

"George had some interesting complications," said Dr. McGuire. "He was a textbook of medicine."

"After his angiogram," said Gastine, "when they told him his transplanted kidney failed, he jumped out of bed and took a swing at the Chief of Nephrology. I thought damn, that's the last time they'll accept a referral from me." Gastine chuckled with the others and called for the check. Night had settled over them and distant lights were winking along the Connecticut shoreline. He could have gone on about George's complications, but it was time they were heading home. He rose slowly, and with his customary courtesy gestured for the rest of the party to pass on ahead. His wife smiled to show her tolerance for his old-fashioned civility, even as she acknowledged its roots in patriarchy. She could afford to, being an anesthesiologist who made twice what he did.

III.

Standing with the other guests in the backyard of Nikki's suburban home, Mrs. T sipped a glass of Prosecco that had lost its chill in the grip of her fat fingers. It was a hot and humid August afternoon. Sweat dripped down the side of the glass and beaded on her forehead. "George can be stubborn, you know," she said. "Sometimes he just does what he wants."

“I like that about him,” said Nikki. Her voice was light and cheerful, with a girlish hoarseness. She was well on her way to getting drunk. When she married George six months before her parents refused to come to the service. Now they were hosting a small reception for both families and she was determined to be nice to everyone. She wore a white summer shift for the occasion, her shoulder straps framing the bright tattoos on her chest and upper back. She had a diamond pin through her right nostril that she called her wedding ring. Her hair, dyed black in high school, was back to its natural auburn and she had given up the notion of shaving her head.

“Sometimes he’s not easy, believe me.”

“I know.”

“I wish you luck, Nikki,” said Mrs T, raising her glass.

Because Nikki was short, Mrs. T always thought she was younger than she really was, just as people assumed Nikki was frail because she was slim, or that her health was bad because she was pale. This may help explain her affinity with George, though the attraction that held them together was never clear to anyone, including themselves. She decided she was in love with him the day he dropped out of school. Maybe she admired his courage, because she hated high school as much as he did. “Frank, you always freak me out,” she said, turning to her brother-in-law, George’s twin, as he arrived with a plate of antipasto for his mother.

“Why, are my eyes glowing red?”

“You know what I mean,” said Nikki.

“I’m just faking it,” said Frank.

“Faking what?” asked Mrs. T

“You’re doing a good job,” said Nikki.

“Frank never faked anything in his life,” said his mother.

“It’s okay, Mom. Just kidding.”

Frank asked Nikki if she still painted, since she had dropped out of art school the year before. After art school she followed George with the carnival a few times until she got tired of living out of a truck and standing in line for a shower.

“Not much. I’m making jewelry now.” She held up her arms to show a tangle of bracelets. She never did understand George’s contempt for his twin. Frank seemed like

a regular guy, dull by comparison but hardly someone to despise. She wasn't so sure about Carole, George's older sister, standing tall on the other side of the yard in an earnest discussion with her father. You had to be careful around Carole. Truth is, you had to be careful around everyone.

"Those are lovely, dear," said Mrs. T.

It wasn't long before the newlyweds were making plans to leave Long Island for a quieter place where no one knew them.

IV.

Gastine had searched all the boxes in the storage closet but one. He lifted its lid carefully and, unlike the orderly boxes of financial records, medical journals, textbooks, and correspondence of the others, the contents of this one, musty-smelling like the stacks of an old library, were jumbled together. Creased photographs, desktop bric-a-brac for which he had no use, birthday cards from his kids, pen sets, a Swiss army knife, a plaque of appreciation for his stint as president of the county medical society—but not George's tapes. That was the end of it. He was sure he had saved them, but they were nowhere to be found. He was frustrated at his negligence though still hoping to stumble across them, if for no other reason than to restore his own sense of competence. Oddly distraught at the loss of something that had come from an offhand suggestion, and disappointed that his curiosity was not satisfied, he returned to his office to retrieve George's medical record. It was poor consolation for the human voice he had hoped to hear but was still something tangible, an old paper chart, a real artifact, not just pixels on a screen. What was he looking for? The chart's initial entry was made in the clear steady hand of the early years of his practice before he dictated his notes, long before his practice went, under his futile protest, to an expensive and annoying computer system. Back from the time when he used a thick oversized pen to steady his grip, carefully printing each large letter until he eventually learned to prize speed over legibility to increase his efficiency, and returned to a cramped scrawl. "34 year old white male, hx DM since age 4, presents with c/o dizziness and low blood

sugar." He read through the record, the list of medications (already antiquated and almost quaint), medical complications, lab values, x-rays results, procedures, brief notes on education, employment, family history, even a hand-drawn three generation pedigree with proper squares and circles for male and female, lines for marriage, divorce, and offspring, the triangle shape for monozygotic twins, all neatly organized. As he leafed through the pages he came across a note from the nephrologist who headed George's transplant team buried deep in the correspondence section at the end of the chart, typed from casual dictation, a note Gastine always appreciated for the clarity of its simple candor, appreciated the more because he rarely heard anything back from specialists in big hospitals. Technical as the note was, of all the extensive documentation in his thick chart it seemed to capture the depth of George's struggle. It's presented here as Gastine found it, medical jargon and all, for the sake of completeness if not economy. (See Appendix: Glossary of Medical Terms)

Discharge Summary - Mr. George T

The patient is a 37 year old juvenile onset diabetic, status-post living-related transplant in 198-, admitted for evaluation of renal dysfunction, hypertension and a question of either rejection or transplant artery stenosis.

History includes: 1) Juvenile onset diabetes, insulin dependent with diabetic nephropathy, autonomic neuropathy, urinary retention, BK[2] amputation left leg, and retinopathy. 2) Status post living-related transplant from a sister in 198- with initial good function, creatinine 1.6 to 1.8 with progressive increase to 3.5 mg/dl. 3) Mucormycosis of the sinus treated with amphotericin successfully in 198-. 4) History of Klebsiella sepsis times several from the urinary tract. 5) Lacunar infarcts. 6) Status post fracture of the left femur. 7) Hypertension.

[2] below knee

The patient was admitted with plans to do an angiogram to rule out renal artery stenosis. His creatinine on admission was 2.9 with a BUN of 59 which represented approximately half the function that he had in his kidney prior.

His medications on admission included NPH insulin 20 units qAM, 10 units qPM, regular insulin on a sliding scale, Catapres 0.2 mg tid, captopril 50 mg bid, nifedipine 10 mg tid, prednisone 10 mg per day, Imuran 25 mg per day, Basalgel with meals, Transderm-Nitro 5 mg bid.

His blood pressure was 140/84 on admission and his diastolic periodically rose to levels over 100. He had a II/VI systolic ejection murmur. His lungs were clear. His abdomen was benign. His extremities had trace right ankle edema and he had a loud bruit over the graft which was firm and non-tender.

His creatinine was 2.9. His BUN was 59. His HCT was 29%, white count 9,400, platelets 407. Urinalysis had 1+ protein in it.

The patient was admitted 4/16 and an angiogram was done on 4/17 which showed a tight renal artery stenosis. A repeat angiogram with attempt at angioplasty on 4/21 caused an intimal tear of the renal artery and required a very large contrast load due to the multiple films taken to define the anatomy. Subsequently the patient became anuric to oliguric despite the fact that he had reasonable perfusion on the renal scan. Because the patient was oligoanuric with a low urinary sodium and fractional excretion of sodium this was felt most likely secondary to contrast nephropathy. When told of the complications of the procedure the patient became agitated and tearful. He was evaluated by psychiatry and diagnosed with depression. He was started on Zoloft PO 50 mg daily and Haldol 2 mg PO q8h.

His subsequent course was the following: Because he was oliguric his renal function deteriorated and he required hemodialysis. However, shortly before each hemodialysis treatment the patient would become fluid overloaded, develop ischemia and congestive

heart failure. It was felt that fluid overload had led to failure which led to cardiac ischemia during each episode that was readily treated by vasodilators and by dialysis through a femoral catheter. Because this recurred, however, a peritoneal dialysis catheter was placed and he was well dialyzed with his weight being stable. On a daily regimen of peritoneal dialysis his weight remained at 56 kilograms and he had no further episodes of heart failure or ischemia. The peritoneal dialysis is a Tenckhoff catheter and he has good inflow but slow drainage. However, on 6 dialysis exchanges per day and done over a 10 hour period his weight remained stable at 56 kilograms and his chemistry remains absolutely stable and he feels well.

His chemistries on 5/29 showed a sodium of 134, a potassium of 4.7, a chloride of 97, a bicarb of 16, a BUN of 90, a creatinine of 7 and a blood sugar of 117. HCT is 29%, white count 10,500, platelets 450,000.

The long-term plan for the patient is to run him on a peritoneal dialysis machine and train him to run the peritoneal dialysis himself which hopefully will keep him out of heart failure and cardiac ischemia by fluid removal. It is hoped that his kidneys will regain function from the current nephropathy. His urine output was increasing at the time that he left the hospital and there is hope that his kidney disease is reversible in terms of contrast nephropathy.

He is transferred to B- - - - - - - Memorial Hospital for followup by his nephrologist Dr. John R- - - - -, his endocrinologist Dr. Marie E- - - - - - - , and his Internist Dr. Leo G- - - - - -. They will keep in close contact with the S- - - - - - - - University Hospital Transplant Dialysis Service.

He was given a list of psychiatrists from which to choose for follow-up of depression.

GBS/mjg/RR
D 6/1/8-
T 6/2/8-

Gastine went home and searched his boxes again, and again found nothing but clutter and a old, musty smell.

V.

George, as his doctor knew, found solace in fishing. He had learned to fish from his father's older brother, a journeyman electrician prone to bouts of melancholy, surfcasting with cousins and his brother Frank from the rocky shores of the Sound and the sandy beaches on the ocean side of the island. Fishing came easily. Somehow he knew exactly where the fish would be and exactly what it would take to land them, as if there were a piscian component to his brain or he had been singled out by some marine deity. It was a strange gift. He caught fish so effortlessly that one day his uncle handed him his own rod and reel and spent the rest of the day watching George haul in striped bass. His cousins got madder and madder. "How come George gets to catch all the fish?" they complained to their father, throwing bait at each other out of sheer boredom, shouting casual insults and splashing in the surf to liven up the day. Frank just threw his rod on the rocks out of frustration. Parallel play bored Frank. He'd rather be playing baseball. Watching George that year, even his uncle lost confidence in his own fishing skills and instead spent summers raising tomatoes and his winters making wine. When not fishing, George found an escape in plastic models. He labored over them painstakingly, sometimes for months, building elaborate sailing ships and spacecraft, spreading the pieces over old newspapers on the living room floor or the dining room table. Their detail fascinated him. He was happy to attach a piece or two a day, and some days to simply watch and add nothing at all. Each tiny part was an enigma until it found its proper place among its neighbors, the model gradually taking

shape as the contours of the larger sections were laid out and the final product snapped together as a whole. While he worked he imagined his models taking part in stories of his own invention, space operas and sea battles, a habit that continued after childhood and a diversion that gave him pleasure equal to that of building them. He liked to fish alone, but he would take anyone's help with a model. Though sometimes his mother cleared away the pieces before he was finished. She didn't like the smell of glue, and didn't have patience for them lying about. And Frank would break them up, or finish them behind George's back, just for the fun of it.

VI.

The island morning was windy and clear. A ferry leaving the harbor bobbed like a toy in the choppy water as soon as it passed the breakwater, appearing to George as a small washed-out blur in the distance. Closer at hand, as he rested for a moment on a stone wall crumbling between abandoned farm fields, were deer paths running through a glade thick with goldenrod and the scent of sage. Ticks, he reminded himself, raising a cigarette to his lips—aware of their promiscuous cycle through deer and mice, yet still amazed at the bed of yellow spread before him that contained them—better check for ticks. The surrounding air was busy. Butterflies crossed the meadow without a sound, blots of color that drifted about neither restless nor relaxed. Dragonflies swooped like tiny bi-planes. And check my foot while I'm at it, he added. He knew the infection could mean amputation. The wind sent sparks from his cigarette swirling high in the air. He thought about his wife's note. Couldn't take it? Same old thing. But she still loved him. Of course. Same old thing. He hadn't changed, and neither had the world. Enough. He rose and continued on his way, passing rushes by a marsh, an apple orchard, a field of milkweed and thistle, a house with vines trellised in the yard, feeling numb and taking long pensive drags on his cigarette. It wasn't his fault, he ruminated, none of it. His sin was his wish for the ordinary. He dropped his cigarette butt and ground it into the dirt as if extinguishing the past. He would stay here, on this speck in the sea. Life had cut him off from everything else. He could fish, and build his

models, and fight his blood sugar here as well as anyplace else. He put off seeing a doctor for his foot until the smell was so bad people recoiled when he walked into a room. He hadn't noticed, his sense of smell all but gone from decades of tobacco smoke.

VII.

The island, they imagined, was a place where a young couple could set themselves off from the past. There was work enough for George. There were off-season rentals. There were lighthouses for Nikki to sketch and seascapes for her to paint if she wished. There were no carnies doing battle with the locals at every stop and no family members to appease when home. The novelty of it sustained them through a dull winter of sleet and ice, through long stretches of silence broken by storms that raced up the coast and lashed the island with a fury that seemed personal. Their islander neighbors were cordial if not friendly, and didn't concern themselves much with other people's business. Their native reserve was undergirded by steady doses of alcohol, antidepressants, and stimulants that gave them an edgy stoicism. George and Nikki were cordial in return. They had few visitors, none of them family. Nikki bought a winter supply of jigsaw puzzles to pass the time, and started painting again. They stayed warm by the gas burner. They had regular meals for the first time in their marriage, blunting the erratic swings of George's blood sugars. Summers were brief and frenzied. Nikki waited tables and sold a few watercolors; George worked two jobs. They became regulars at a bar for locals, and made friends with other mainland transplants and a few remnants of the old island families.

"C'mon in," said Nikki, waving from the breakers. She wore a string bikini that displayed the brightly colored tattoo on her chest like a large medallion. George waved back from the beach. "It's not so bad," she shouted with her hands cupped to her mouth, straining to be heard over the noise of the wind and the surf.

“No thanks, I’m fine here,” George shouted back. He watched her drop to her neck in the water, then spring up with a splash high enough to show her tan belly glistening above the waves.

“C’mon Roz, what about you?” called Nikki.

Roz centered Nikki in the lens finder of her camera, focused and snapped a picture just as Nikki turned to dive into the curl of a breaking wave, and took one again as Nikki’s head emerged from the water. Satisfied she had the shot she wanted, Roz slipped on the lens cap and set the camera back in its case. She sprang from the blanket with a laugh and raced toward the surf, kicking up sprays of sand along the way until she was splashing in the surf with Nikki. The water was too cold for George. He looked down the beach for the other member of their party, Sebastian, an Australian who had paused in his travels around the country to wait tables for the season. Sebastian was flying a cheap kite that kept nose-diving in the sand. Then George looked again at Nikki. She was further out now, beyond the breakers, swimming parallel to the beach with firm, steady strokes. George like to watch her in the water. She was a strong swimmer. He wished he could see the outline of her bare shoulders as she raised her arms, a sight which always gave him pleasure, but she was too far away and his eyes were too weak. Sebastian dropped down next to him in the sandy depression left by Roz.

“The bloody wind’s too gusty,” he said. The wind was always tricky by the shore. Beyond the swimmers the open ocean was studded with whitecaps.

“Are you going in?” asked George.

“No, I’m spoiled,” said Sebastian. “Can’t get used to the ice water in these parts.”

George looked at Roz, treading water in the swells. Roz was tall and trim, but not much of a swimmer. She lacked the Nikki’s firm compactness, and didn’t like saltwater wetting her hair or flushed up her nose. He opened the cooler and foraged for a soda. When he looked up there was no sign of Nikki. He looked down the beach to see if she had come on shore. He squinted behind his sunglasses to look more closely at the ocean glinting with light reflected off the waves, distorting and obscuring objects on the surface of the water, but still she was not there. He rose and walked down the

beach in the direction he had last spotted her bobbing head but she was not there either. Then he heard her call his name. He turned and saw her in the water next to Roz, in front of the blanket and cooler where he had just been sitting. She was waving something over her head. “Look what I found,” she said. When he got closer he saw it was a necklace she had scooped from the sea bottom. “I think there’s more,” she said, and disappeared underwater once again.

George returned to the blanket and lay back to look at the clouds. “What happened to your foot?” asked Sebastian, pointing to George’s wound as he, too, returned to the blanket after dipping his toe in the surf.

George bolted upright and tucked his foot under his leg. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe I stepped on something.”

“Not a snake bite or anything? We have some pretty nasty snakes in Australia. You wouldn’t want to step on them.”

George laughed. “Not here. Just garter snakes.”

“Or a spider maybe.”

“Yeah, a spider maybe,” George conceded. Though there were no brown recluse spiders on the island, either.

VIII.

The third winter was too much for Nikki. “We have to get out of here,” she told George as they lay in bed till noon one Sunday, feeling her will sapped by the shortened days and the iron cast of the sea and sky. “If we stay any longer we’ll end up drinking ourselves to death like everyone else.”

George lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, looking out their bedroom window at a heavy bank of snow clouds gathering on the horizon. Drinking was not his problem. “It’s not so bad,” he said. “And it’s not like it’s better anywhere else.” In truth he found the isolation soothing. But in truth he also resented it, the need for it at least, the fact that it had been forced on him though he maintained it was his choice.

“It’s warmer someplace else,” said Nikki.

“Warmer sure, not better.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

“Then go,” said George. He tapped his cigarette in the ashtray resting on his belly. The fact of his isolation seemed as inevitable as his body’s breakdown, just one more step in the trajectory he was meant to follow. There was no need to resist it, he thought. There was no need to resist winter, to resist Nikki, to resist anything.

“And leave you here by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“The hell you will.”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘fine’,” he said.

So she stayed. She bought more puzzles. She bought more wine. She dabbled in her paints while George smoked. George got a job as a security guard and the year went by and he was ‘fine’.

The winter of Nikki’s puzzles. A sun barely rising above the horizon, nights falling fast, islanders drinking like fish, George falling apart. There was nowhere to go except a bar or to church if you didn’t like frozen walks on the beach. She kept at her puzzles to distract herself from visions of life in the Sun Belt. As a kid she always liked jigsaw puzzles, pictures of cats or castles mostly. Drinking coffee in her bathrobe, scattering the pieces on the floor next to George’s models, laying out the straight edges, working first on a corner, smoking a joint, finding some random piece that fit smartly into another, fragments that coalesced into larger ones, matching colors and shapes, sipping a glass of wine. She quickly became bored. Five hundred piece puzzles gave way to a thousand, then two thousand. Their coherence seemed false. Their pieces seemed more interesting scattered haphazardly on the floor. She tried to mash them together in different configurations. The days passed in a medium thick and dark as syrup. If she saw more puzzles of woodland cottages or mountain meadows she’d scream. If George talked about fishing again she’d scream. She slept till noon. Stir crazy, indeed. Cabin fever. Early March, and spring nowhere in sight. She started a puzzle without a picture. A large empty canvas, a tessellated blank. But the rains came, the nights shortened, the slush turned to mud. She woke to daylight. She started

sketching. Puzzles without a picture are a challenge. She never finished it. She liked to keep it unfinished. She thought unfinished projects were more interesting. Every winter she set it out, unfinished.

IX.

A calm morning along George's island shore. Seaweed-draped rocks, dreadlocks waving with the tide like heads of the drowned. The hiss of foam, the clack of stones worn smooth as shells. Over a sandy rise to a line of shrubs, beach roses and blackberries, dragonflies crisscrossing their shadows in the clear light, the scent of honeysuckle. How do you avoid a high school reunion, an ex-wife, a mother's denial, the sister who will give you her kidney and the sister who can't? One at a time, I suppose. Trees on this island are short and gnarled, well adapted to the gusts that play across it. And your estranged twin. How do you avoid him, or he you? The real one or the other self, imagined. His legs began to feel heavy. Keep going Georgie-boy, he told himself, keep walking and you'll find the right spot. He rounded the point on the island's north side to a small cove, searching for a place to complete his isolation, and felt his heart beginning to race. He dropped his fishing rod and fell to his knees on sand still wet from the ebbing tide. Sandpipers skipped before him, skirting the surf as they pecked. Lightheaded, he fumbled through his tackle bag for a soda and a sandwich. And if I never leave here, he asked himself, meaning this spot in this cove, sickened by what seemed at that moment the endless indignities of human company, so what? He ate and drank. He lay supine on the beach. His foot was swollen again. His vision began to clear and the clouds slowly came into focus. Still alive, he realized, as if he'd been washed up there. He sat up and baited his hook. Even if he were the last person alive, he would never starve as long as he had his rod and reel. And there were clusters of mussels for the taking, handfuls covered by seaweed in the shallow tide pools. A Robinson Crusoe on insulin, a lone survivor, exile and castaway. Or so he imagined himself, without his dark reflection, ignoring his life's dependence on the science that sustained him, on the chain of industry that produced and distributed his hated

polypeptide. He cast his line and waited. Catch and release. The bluefish were lucky that day.

Amputation

Yes, he's nearby and he doesn't sound as if he's some happy shepherd, living in the fields and playing his pipe…[2]

I.

He'll have to transfer. We don't have the personnel to care for him here. The district determined that he can't take the school bus. We can't allow him on field trips unless you go with him, and we can't allow him to participate in sports.

They had him doing his injections in the boys' bathroom. His doctor's orders said he had to be supervised, but he wasn't. I had to pick him up from school every time he was high or low. Most weeks, I picked him up.

You can't be an astronaut. You can't be a pilot. Diving? Forget it. I wouldn't even try snorkeling.

You can't just work the booth. Come see me when you get your commercial driver's license.

Pre-existing conditions aren't covered.

II.

Food stamps helped, disability helped, odd jobs helped, do-it-yourself divorce helped. Every little bit helps. It had been a year since George's wife left, a year in which he lost weight and the weather seemed more extreme, a year of premonitions, a year of

thirst and unsteadiness and the painless oozing from his foot. A year spent on the couch, gazing out the living room window with a diet drink in one hand and a Marlboro in the other. Gazing out the window now at heralds of the approaching storm. A wave of grackles swirling from the trees, whitecaps in a slate-colored sea. A storm that arrived true to its forecast. When it came the wind slashed hard, beating flat the pampas grass on the edge of the pond. He heard pounding on the windows like angry fists, and jumped to check the sashes once more to be sure they were shut tight. The remnant of a hurricane, a tropical storm, veering northward up the coast. At the bottom of the slope across a narrow strip of road the sea roiled anxiously, crashing on the rocky beach, surging further toward the pavement. Ferry service was suspended, the ships recalled to the safety of their harbor on the mainland. The island streets were empty. When the rain began it whipped sideways against the house and cracked like a hail of pebbles. The wind rose from a whistle to a shriek, bending trees like bows, gusts tearing at their leaves, and through the clouds the sun at mid-day was paler than the moon. He felt the house shudder. Unmoved by the storm, a solitary seagull floated over the road, neither rising nor falling, its beak set calmly against the gusts with the surly look of its kind. George watched a moment as the bird hung motionless, suspended in the current, then turned away with a dismissive flap of its wings as if it were just another windy day at the beach. Then the power went out.

With the power went water and heat. George watched the storm from his post on the couch until dusk, the entertainment provided by nature's mad show giving way to a restless tedium as the wind and rain held steady. On the end table, photographs with Nikki—posed at their wedding, on the beach, at a party with friends, most taken by Roz—became obscured as the last light of evening faded. Was that really him? He picked up a photo and held it close to his face. It was hard to tell. Though he had candles, and lanterns, and flashlights, he chose not to use them. He had an ample supply of food, which he chose not to eat, and insulin, which he chose not to use. He thought of the finality of his divorce, now concluded, and the increasing frequency of his bouts of hypoglycemia. It was time to check the foot wound that wouldn't heal, but he didn't feel like striking a light, or moving from the sofa. He was afraid he might explode. He was afraid the slightest spark, the slightest shiver, would set off a charge

set inside him ages ago. He knew now he could not keep going on this island the way he was. He resigned himself to a trip back to Long Island for medical care, and all the drama that entailed. The storm meandered back and forth for two days before it expired. His foot swelled up and his leg turned red. It took a week to get the power back, but by that time he was gone.

III.

A woman's voice burst loud over the intercom, "Orderly to Room 2". The orderly rolled his eyes, set down his mop, donned a new mask and gloves, and went to the room as ordered. The procedure was almost over. The surgeon of record had already turned away from the patient on the operating table, and a medical student was closing the skin under the scrutiny of a sleep-deprived resident. The orderly entered, all but invisible, and stood against the green-tiled OR wall watching and waiting for instructions. Nurses' eyes peeked above their masks, striking in their heavy makeup—dark liner that trailed off like tear drops, long thick lashes, eyelids colored powder blue and violet. The Casbah.

"Not so tight," said the resident. "You'll strange the tissue." The medical student continued to struggle with his knot. "Christ, who taught you to suture?" The resident undid the student's stitch, and the student took another tentative bite with the needle. "Not like that. Perpendicular." The anesthesiologist was getting impatient. The circulating nurse paused to shake her head. She came around the table and whispered sharply to the orderly, pointing to a bundle wrapped in green towels on a stainless steel cart standing against the far wall of the OR.

"Take that down to pathology."

The orderly picked up the bundle and cradled it in his arms like a log of firewood. It was surprisingly heavy. He could feel l the last of its warmth through the towels.

"What is it?" he asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

"Just take it down."

The orderly backed slowly out of the room with his hands held high like a surgeon who had just scrubbed, and made his way to the service elevator careful not to bump anything with his load. He hoped he would run across someone he could gross out before he delivered it—an orderly from a medical floor or someone from housekeeping—but the only people in the elevator were nursing staff and hospital volunteers. The elevator took him to the basement. As he trudged down the long corridor toward the pathology lab at the far end, he saw an older man in the blue uniform of the maintenance staff coming toward him. The orderly stopped and lifted his bundle to eye level to get the man's attention. "Poor guy, doesn't have a…" The maintenance man veered off without a word before the orderly could finish his sentence. He delivered his package. The specimen was stored in a cold locker. The next day a pathologist made his gross examination, a tech prepared the slides, and George's amputated foot was sent to the incinerator.

IV.

George woke to the rattle of a cart in the hallway, though woke might be the wrong word. He spent his nights half dreaming in a restless twilight. George opened his eyes at any rate when he heard the rattle of a cart in the hallway. A faint light was coming through his window. He checked the clock radio on his bedside table: 7:35 am. His nursing home roommate, a stroke patient in the bed by the door, was asleep. George lay on his back perfectly still, arms at his side, looking down the length of sheet that covered him. On his right the sheet was tented up near the footboard. On his left it fell flat to the mattress. He wiggled his toes and the right side of the sheet moved; the left side did not. He felt he could send commands to his left foot as he always had, but there was nothing there to receive them. He moved the stump below his knee the way he'd been instructed, raising and lowering it like the bucket of a backhoe. He was determined to walk again and didn't want contractures. A nurse appeared at the bedside with his medication. He sat up and searched the room for his crutches and his

temporary prosthesis. They were right where he left them, in the corner on the other side of the window.

"Morning, George. Time for your meds."

George threw back the sheet and exposed his abdomen. The skin was loose, without much padding underneath. He took the insulin syringe from the nurse and injected himself with a deft motion, then sat up on the edge of the bed and swallowed one by one the handful of pills he was given.

"PT says you're making great progress," said the nurse.

George grunted. He had been two weeks without a cigarette. He wanted to tell the nurse to fuck-off but said instead, "What the hell do they know?"

"They say you're doing well enough to go home soon."

"Home?"

Despite the irritability of his nicotine craving, George was feeling better. The heavy fatigue that had enveloped him the past year seemed to be lifting. His sugars were under better control. He had an appetite again, even if it wasn't for the nursing home food.

"Someone will be here in a minute to take you to breakfast," said the nurse. An aide soon appeared and helped him swivel into a wheelchair for the trip to the dining room.

The nursing home physician kept asking George if he was depressed. She asked in a variety of ways, straight-out and indirect, with questionnaires and without, tallying up points and using her own judgment to find the right level of severity to document in her progress notes. The nurses and therapists wanted to talk to George about his body image, about his feelings of loss. No, he wasn't depressed he told them, if that's what they were getting at. And just so they knew, he told them he was glad to get rid of that foot. It was good riddance to that piece of shit. His wife and friends had started to reject him the moment it acted up. The rotten thing was bad luck and no, he didn't want to talk about it. He didn't need medication for his mood, he just needed a cigarette. His caregivers thought he was simply in denial, another angry young man who wouldn't or couldn't express the feelings he was not in touch with, so

they didn't believe much of what he said except for the part about the cigarette, which to them just showed how depressed and self-destructive he really was. After all, he had no visitors. He said he had family but didn't want to bother them. All his friends were far away. He talked on the phone once or twice with his mother to tell her not to worry. He didn't have a job to go back to and wasn't sure he'd be able to return to his own home. Yet he told them he felt better. He spent most of his days in the activities room by himself, building a plastic model of Nelson's *HMS Victory*, observed closely by the staff to be sure he wasn't sniffing glue. It was displayed in the dining room for a few weeks after he left, until a resident's walker bumped it off the table.

"That's it, George," said the physical therapist. She was muscular, cheerful young woman. "Keep going. You're doing great." George passed down the length of the parallel bars lurching slowly, his first walk on his temporary prosthesis. He eased his stump carefully in the socket with each halting step, holding himself steady with a strong handgrip on the bars, afraid the newly healed skin would burst open or the prosthesis would buckle if he put too much pressure on it. By the time he got to the end of the bars he was exhausted, and fell into his wheelchair for a rest.

"How did that feel?" asked the therapist.

"Not too bad," said George. "No worse than crutches."

"Want to try again?"

"Sure. In a minute."

The therapist was always happy to have young patients, and George was by far the youngest on her list. When he was ready, she helped him back to the bars with an easy strength that made his own weakness even more embarrassing. "Any pain?" she asked.

"Pain was never my problem," said George.

He passed down the bars a second time with more assurance, determined to show his grit. After another rest in the wheelchair the therapist tried to prod him into one more pass which he politely refused, afraid this time he might fail and anxious to check his stump. He examined it thoroughly as soon as he was back in his room. It was swollen, but there was no blood and the thick-scarred skin was intact. The aide

who helped him back to bed slipped his shrinker on it, and he fell into a quiet sleep for the first time since he could remember. When he woke his arms were sore and it was time for lunch. He hobbled into the dining room on crutches, his youngish looks turning the heads of three old women with well-coiffed hair sipping soup at a table by the door. He lurched to his table at the far end of the room listening to a familiar tune playing over the sound system, set his crutches against an empty chair and joined his roommate.

"You know who that is?" George asked, pointing at the ceiling.

The man, slumped in a wheelchair, looked up from his sandwich. "Who?"

"The singer," said George.

"Who's the singer?"

"Yes, the one playing on the sound system."

"I don't hear so good. What did you say?"

George spoke up, loud and slow. "The song that's playing here in the dining room."

"The song? *There Will Never Be Another You*."

"I know. Who's singing it?"

"The singer? Nat King Cole."

"That's what I thought."

V.

George was discharged from the nursing home back to his island, eager to test his stamina and his new prosthesis. A week after his return he ventured a mid-morning walk on a path along the cliffs, winding through clumps of stunted oaks and bracken on his way to one of his favorite fishing spots. There was not a ship in sight across the long arc of the horizon, nothing on the smooth blanket of sea covering countless wrecks below. For centuries his island had been little more than a hazard in the coastal sea lanes. He listened. The sound of the surf was muted by the ocean's deeper discord. Though this was self-exile, he could not help but feel some power had left him

behind. And what of his bitterness watching others live in their vitality, or harming themselves without a clue what they forfeited? The trail dipped away from the water through a bower of black cherry and black gum where the air took on a sudden chill as if night still hung on the ground, then rose sharply to overlook the sea mirroring its matching blue sky. He stopped and turned, pausing briefly in each of the cardinal directions. There was not a soul in sight. He closed his eyes and lingered there above the surf roiling on the beach below, feeling the breeze brush his eyelids, feeling the sun warm his lips. His prosthesis held firm, his breathing was deep and steady. All in all a good day to fish, a good day for anything. A calm exhilaration told him not to rush, told him there was plenty of time to fish and plenty of time not to fish.

The tide was in when he reached the jetty. Three boys were there, casting their lines. He waved and they waved back. When he got closer he recognized them by their voices. They knew him as well. “Hi, George,” said the youngest of the three. The boy seemed bored, twirling his line in the air while the older two continued casting with their backs turned.

“Any luck?” said George, pausing behind them.

“Naw, just rocks.” The young boy balanced himself on a boulder, holding his rod in one hand with the hook dangling, then hopped to another boulder and balanced there on the other leg.

“Watch that hook,” said George.

One of the older boys turned around. “Brian, if you don’t want to fish just go home.”

Brian hopped to another rock. “I want to fish,” he said.

George looked over the water and gauged the tide. “C’mon,” said George. “Let’s try another spot.” They went further down the jetty and chose a place on the opposite side from the boy’s brothers. “Don’t run,” George called, steadying himself as a wave washed over the top of the rocks. “What are you using for bait?”

“Worms,” said Brian.

George nodded. “Here, help me with this.” He had trouble seeing the end of the hook. “Let’s try some squid.” Brian baited the hook for him. George made a short cast

with a light flick of the rod and reeled in slowly. The line tugged and ran. A minute later George pulled in his first striper.

“How did you do that?” asked Brian.

“Here, I’ll show you,” said George. He stood behind Brian and grasped his rod just above the reel. They drew it back in one slow fluid motion and flung the line cleanly into the waves.

VI.

The two physician couples, Gastine and McGuire and their friends the Powells, enjoyed an evening out whenever their schedules allowed. It was a fall weekend, the sun had set, and a gas fire was flickering in the restaurant fireplace. After his second glass of wine Gastine drifted again to the subject of his old patient George T. His wife and the Powells had heard it all before, with minor variations, but they were all relaxed and happy to listen. “Like so many things,” said Gastine, marveling at the changes in medicine since he’d been in practice, “insulin pumps say, or stents, or *in vitro* fertilization, Viagra came along too late for George. And too bad. It would have been just the thing for him. But I don’t think he was really interested in sex. At least not at the end when he got back with his wife.”

“Still, if he had Viagra maybe his divorce never would have happened,” said Powell, the surgeon. “Who knows?”

His wife, the cardiologist, did. But what she said was, “I had a patient who went blind in one eye from Viagra. A young man too, in his fifties. A soccer coach. I felt terrible.”

“What do the commercials say?” said Dr. McGuire. “If you have sudden visual problems see your doctor right away. Something like that.”

“Right,” said Powell the cardiologist. “But right away is too late.”

Gastine sighed. “Knowing George’s luck it probably would have happened to him and then I’d be responsible. So just as well. I’ve caused enough harm trying to please my patients.”

“That was the last time I ever prescribed it,” Powell continued. “It’s contraindicated for most of my patients anyway. I let them know the risks and tell them to talk to their PCP.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Gastine.

“And who knows how George felt about it, anyway?” said McGuire. “Maybe he was glad to be done with sex.” She winked at her husband. “Maybe he talked about that in his tape.”

“I doubt it. Would you?” said the surgeon.

“But if you step back and look at the big picture here,” said Gastine, shaking his head, “maybe it’s not such a bad thing. It he can’t have sex he can’t reproduce, and that’s the end of the line for his diabetes genes. Natural selection. Not so bad as far as the species is concerned.”

“Too bad it doesn’t work for diseases that start after people have kids,” said the surgeon.

“I wouldn’t complain if I were you,” said McGuire. “If it did there’d be a whole lot of doctors out of business. Of course in that case, we’d have to keep finding new diseases. Job security is a great thing. Let’s not take it for granted.”

They raised their glasses in a toast to job security. And that was the last time Gastine talked about his old patient George T with the Powells, or with his wife, or with anyone.

Nikki and Frank

This is our last dance together
Tonight soon will be long ago[3]

I.

Frank T, George's twin, was also bald, but not stooped or gaunt. He was, in fact, solidly built and putting on weight as he eased into middle age. Frank taught high school chemistry on the outskirts of Chicagoland, in a suburb bounded by looping expressways where the only hint of recent cornfields was the flatness of its now asphalt-covered terrain. He sat at his dining room table in gym shorts and tee shirt, grading final exams, glancing up from time-to-time to appreciate the color of the lilies flowering red and yellow in his back yard. His students found Mr. T. an uninspired but decent teacher, a fair grader for the most part, and the occasional science-minded sophomore imagined him cute enough to merit a crush for a week or two until his or her attention wandered elsewhere. He paused to stretch and loosen a kink in his neck. He had been at it all morning, Saturday, and wanted to finish by noon to have the rest of the weekend free. The grading had become so automatic he could process each question in a reflex arc. The scores tallied quickly to their final sum written large in red marker and circled with a flourish at the top of the page. He had been teaching long enough to know at first sight which of his students understood the material, which ones faked it, and which didn't care. He once had a passion for chemistry, and for teaching, that had cooled into a dull routine which on most days did not degenerate into any obvious contempt for his work or his students, just as he once had a passion for his wife that had settled into a partnership sustained by their daily transactions. As he stretched, he recalled the unanswered invitation to his high school reunion sitting on

the kitchen counter, and reviewed his ambivalence once again. His first impulse had been to dismiss it. Why bother? It would just be old classmates playing out the same roles they played when they were seventeen. For god's sake, he thought, look at the reunion committee, the same people who planned the senior prom, not realizing that was exactly the point. He had gone to a reunion ten years before when everyone seemed intent on parading their success—income, travels, pictures of their new babies, all looking for an opening to drop a name or two it seemed—or if they weren't becoming successful in the conventional sense acted cool like they didn't care. Feeling neither, he returned to the chemical reactions on the exams before him that balanced out so neatly, and followed their logic and symmetry for a few moments until he considered that his brother George, at least, would have no reason to be there. He did not want to encounter his twin. Their last meeting had not gone well. He didn't want to dwell on that. The kink in his neck loosened a bit, and needing a break he put down his marker for a moment to indulge the impressions of his Long Island adolescence triggered by the unanswered invitation. A school play he had acted in, a bizarre night with drugs, a girl he wished he'd pursued. The flicker of nostalgia made him pause and reconsider, as the images of people he had not recalled in twenty years appeared like fresh head shots from his high school year book. Here in the Midwest, in midlife, he had thought himself beyond all that. He shook his head wryly and picked up the marker, realizing he would never finish grading papers by noon. His lawn, a lush patch of green covering the remains of a great prairie, still needed mowing. There were errands to run and kids to ferry about. True, he was long overdue for a visit to his mother. Her fear of travel, of crowds, of the unfamiliar, kept her from leaving Long Island, which all things considered was fine with him. The next day he made up his mind. "Honey, I decided to go to the reunion. Anyway, I should visit my mother. Do you want to come?" His wife did, but did not know what they would do with the kids. In the end she decided to stay. Besides, she was not keen on a visit to her mother-in-law.

II.

Frank's suitcase lay open on his bed. He was packing for the trip east, doing his best to fit everything into one carry-on. He folded his clothes carefully and contemplated the arrangement. His suit was the problem. He had bought it specially for the occasion, a suit like the one he wore in his senior yearbook picture except the lapels were not as wide and the waist not as narrow. Which tie to wear was the problem. Unable to make a final decision—not knowing what his mood would be at the time of the reunion dinner, or the company he would keep—he kept his options open by selecting three that could go with the suit in different ways. Conservative stripes, a '60's paisley, and a contemporary '90's with Looney Tunes characters on a black background. Though in the end he chose to go to the dinner tieless, a decision deferred till the last minute, rendering all his compulsive tie packing a waste of time and space. He tried closing the suitcase. It still bulged more than he would have liked.

"Is that new?" said Laura, his wife, referring to the suit, eyeing it curiously from the bathroom while she fixed her hair.

"Yes," said Frank, unsettled by the question without knowing why.

"Really? Who are you trying to impress?"

"No one," he said. "It's a goof. I wore a suit like this in my yearbook picture."

"You seem to be taking this reunion thing seriously," she said, returning to the mirror.

"Not really. I said it's just a goof," he answered, realizing she had hit upon something he was not quite ready to admit.

"Like I said," she said, giving her hair one last look from the side.

Frustrated with his packing, Frank emptied his suitcase as if ridding himself of any concerns about his motives, and refolded each article of clothing with greater care. He smoothed out the wrinkles on his pants and shirts, crammed his socks deep into his shoes, and pressed his underwear into the cracks that lined the edges of the bag. It was a tight fit, but the case no longer bulged. He stood back and examined it with satisfaction, as if he'd just entered the last word of an acrostic or balanced a particularly vexing equation. It was getting late. He trundled the suitcase off to the front

door and went to say goodbye to Laura and the kids before heading to O'Hare and the evening flight to Long Island.

Frank was relieved to find that expressway traffic has eased enough for him to reach the airport in good time. And finally, on the plane in his window seat with his suitcase snug in the overhead compartment directly above him, he could unwind with a drink. Hell, he thought, two drinks. His sister Amanda was picking him up at the airport. He was going to a freaking high school reunion. Why the hell not? He tipped his seat back as far as it would go, as unconcerned with the knees of the man behind him as was the passenger in front tipping his seat back onto Frank's lap. He had brought a book, had even brought his lesson planner, but felt fine just looking out the window at the dark hole that was Lake Michigan. He thought of high school, and all that happened since—college, marriage, his job, his kids. He remembered his brother, though he tried not to. His brother, an intrusive thought, a tiresome shadow. Remembered how it once seemed normal for the two of them to dress alike and be mistaken for one another, the fun they had fooling people with their identities. Recalled how George was the bolder one, how it was almost like having a stunt double. They were inseparable until when? Junior high probably, when George started skipping insulin doses and his moods swung as wide as his blood sugar. Eighth grade, when he no longer wanted to be identified with a twin whose stigma he began to recognize. Recalling there was always the fear it would happen to him, and that it could happen at any moment—a fear not the least unfounded, to the point where he would sometimes sniff his urine just to assure himself it did not smell sweet, and worried that every cough and sore throat announced its onset. And any number of times, when he felt run down and imagined he was peeing more than usual, he was taken to the doctor for a blood test. Until the day he decided he was nothing like George, and would not let himself be contaminated by his brother's disease.

"Sir?" The flight attendant set down his second drink on the tray table and waited while he roused himself and fished his pocket for cash. "If you have exact payment, singles would be greatly appreciated." He did, feeling helpful. He hoisted the plastic cup and drained it, reclined again on his narrow seat, closed his eyes and drifted off a bit further. His high school reunion, he recalled, returning to his original

thread, now there's a fucking joke. And just why was he going? Because it was his twentieth perhaps, a significant year, commemorating the fact he had lived more years since high school than he lived before it. No shit, he remarked as that fact sunk in, his life had doubled. A sobering thought that was even more reason for a second drink, or a third. He tried to think of some classmates he would actually like to see, though he hadn't stayed in touch with any and knew of none living in the Midwest. The handful who managed to leave Long Island had moved to the City, or migrated to the Coast or the Sunbelt, not to flyover country as he had, making Illinois a fitting place for his escape. There was Linda, the girl he never pursued, who last he heard had married a real estate developer in Queens. There was his friend Jimmy, who enlisted in the Army the moment he dropped out of college. Jimmy, sent to language school to learn Russian, who spent his tour of duty in a bunker listening to Soviet military communications instead of in the jungle like classmates who didn't return, the ones who listened to the thump of Viet Cong mortar shells. Lucky Jim. And there was George and Nikki, again intrusive fucking George, the perennial outcast who had no reason to show up but with George you never knew. George now divorced, he had heard, and self-destructing no doubt on that little island where he hid himself away. And what if he did see George at the reunion, what if he was confronted by his twisted double, what would he say to him? Glad I'm not you. That's cold, he thought, very cold. An alcohol-induced but honest sentiment he was not proud of. But was it petty? No. And what if he *is* you, asked a voice in the Russian accent of a cartoon villain from some childhood TV show. Frank opened his eyes as if the plane had hit a pocket of turbulence. Where did that thought come from, he wondered? Must be the booze, he figured, and drifted into sleep until the flight attendant instructed him to return his seat back and tray table to their full upright position.

Amanda was at the airport waiting for Frank as he strode past security with his carry-on, signaling him with an eager wave over the heads of the thinning crowd. She looked even younger than he remembered, her face unblemished, her long loose hair hanging past her shoulders like an adolescent.

“Hey Frankie,” she said, smiling up at him after their hug. “About time you came for a visit. How long has it been?”

Frank realized he had no idea.

“Almost three years,” she said.

“It doesn’t seem that long.”

“No? Just ask Mom.”

Friday night traffic was light, attenuating near the island airport like gravity beyond the dense pull of New York. They reached the Long Island Expressway, the notorious LIE, the island’s clotted aorta, in good time and headed west. The scenery grew more familiar with each passing mile, like time rushing backwards. It was land as flat as the prairie of his adopted state though the trees were scrubbier, the soil not nearly as rich, the developments more crowded and sadder looking. Finally back in his hometown on an island they say had flowered long ago, for the Dutch anyway, though he doubted it. Viewed from the highway it was hard to imagine it was ever forested, or green, or new.

“Why aren’t you staying with Mom?” asked Amanda.

“It’s safer at the hotel,” said Frank. “No driving home after the party.” He gave her a knowing wink though Frank was not known for partying, or excess of any kind. “Don’t worry, I’ll pay my respects. By the way, have you heard from George? Is he going?”

“To the reunion?” asked Amanda. “I don’t think so. He’s in the hospital. His kidneys aren’t working.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Frank. He was relieved, and only slightly curious.

“Maybe you should visit him while you’re here,” said Amanda.

“I don’t think so. Neither of us want that.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I don’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get,” said George.

They pulled up to the portico of a hotel towering over old farmland just off the expressway. Frank hopped out, met by the smell of freshly cut grass from the Hyatt’s

manicured grounds. He was surprised by the activity in the lobby this late at night, until he noticed the signs for half a dozen reunions from surrounding high schools. Homecoming Weekend indeed.

"You want to come in for a drink?"

"No thanks," said Amanda. "I'm going to bed. I have a race tomorrow." Amanda ran marathons, but tomorrow's race was just a 10k along the beach.

Frank went straight to his room, not ready yet to face the task of greeting dimly remembered classmates. He pulled back the heavy window drapes and peered down for a moment at the darkened golf course that extended from the hotel grounds like an oasis among a desert of densely packed houses. It didn't feel like his old hometown. There was no hotel there twenty years ago. If he closed the drapes it could be any hotel room in any city in the world, and he could be any man in the room. Damn, he thought, I forgot my yearbook. His oversight bothered him. He knew he should have packed it the night before and had forgotten it in his rush to the airport, cutting the timing of his flight too close in order to avoid a day off work. He had wanted to impress people with his memory. Now he'd have to stare awkwardly at their name tags. He considered dulling his irritation with a drink from the minibar until he checked the price. Not on a teacher's salary, he told himself. He wondered who won the homecoming football game that evening, though he really didn't care. He thought about his wife and wondered if he was being selfish to come alone. He thought about what he wanted to do tomorrow to pass the time before the reunion dinner and fell asleep with his clothes on.

III.

Frank's high school reunion was not held at the same season as his high school graduation, the time of the summer solstice, when twenty years before he and his classmates roamed clueless through nights smelling of dogwood and beer. Rather the graduation committee had chosen homecoming weekend and the more temperate evenings of the equinox, had opted instead for a football game and slightly better hotel

rates. Frank T had no interest in Friday night football, or a bowling alley welcome party, or any of the other side activities the committee had dreamed up, hence his arrival late Friday evening. He slept soundly enough but woke in mid-dream struggling with a sense of emptiness, unable to recall the people who figured in it who, like the phantoms they were, kept slipping the grasp of his memory when it came close enough to clutch at them. Letting go of the dream, he found himself awake in a beige room with beige drapes and beige carpet, a beige bedspread and beige paintings on the wall. Daylight was shining through the sheer curtain that covered the room's floor-length window. He rose and pulled back the curtain to view the morning and was greeted by the sight of tractor trailers streaming down the LIE, recognizing the faint hum in his room as the sound of traffic reaching him from the roadway. To distract himself from the sense of incompletion that followed his sleep, he considered his options for the day. There was a tour of his old high school. No, he decided, he spent enough of his working life in that same kind of space. Then there was his mother, but he could not bring himself to visit her quite yet. He could in good conscience put that off till tomorrow. Pacing the room gradually gathering his thoughts, he wondered what made him so reluctant to get on with the day. A sense of loss perhaps, but loss of what? It certainly wasn't high school. Not even subconsciously, he assured himself. On his way to breakfast he looked down from the windows by the elevator bank to the golf course that abutted the hotel grounds. It seemed a nice enough day outside, summer on the cusp of fall, with clear sunlight and air that hinted of the ocean not ten miles away. As he wandered through the hotel lobby he remembered there was a golf outing. Though not an avid golfer, a duffer in fact, he was eager to find something to fill the day's void. He bumped into a member of the reunion committee in the hotel restaurant who was kind enough to find him a tee time.

Frank would have to rent his clubs, and his sneakers would have to do. His clothes were not regular golf attire, which was a bit embarrassing, but they met the dress code. He made a foursome with classmates he barely remembered. One owned a car dealership, which he announced the moment they met. The other and his wife, he soon learned, were both lawyers. The three of them were clearly good friends, and by their equipment most likely good golfers Frank assumed, comfortable displaying the

success they'd achieved in the past twenty years. The men retained the easy movements of athletes—Frank vaguely remembered they had been football players—and the lawyer wife had the figure of a woman who worked hard at staying fit. He wondered how many classmates he had no memory of as if they never existed, or had occupied the same waking space for four years in parallel, alternate universes.

"What's your last name again?" said the lawyer, offering Frank his hand as they stepped up to the first tee, a man who made a point of being at ease in the company of strangers.

"T," said Frank.

"T," said the car dealer, reflecting on the name as he warmed up, stretching his back and shoulders. "Didn't you have a brother?"

This is exactly it, thought Frank. This is why I should know better than to attend a high school reunion. This is why I should not be on Long Island. It portended a long evening at the reunion dinner.

"That's right," said the lawyer. "George, wasn't it? You guys are twins."

"Something like that." Frank set his ball on the tee and stepped back to take a practice swing.

"That's so interesting," said the lawyer-wife. "Fraternal or identical"?

"Identical," said her husband. "Right, Frank?"

"What's it like having an identical twin?" she asked.

"I wouldn't know," said Frank, speaking over his shoulder as he stepped up to address the ball. "I haven't seen George lately." He pivoted smoothly into his back swing and drove the ball straight down the fairway. It was by far his best shot of the day, and served the purpose of getting the rest of the foursome off the subject of his twin.

When they finished their round Frank was relieved he shot passably well. He had no passion for the game but enjoyed its civility, took pleasure in the park-like scenery of the course and the easy escape it provided. Those pleasant trappings balanced out the banality at the heart of it. He knew he would not have much to say to his golf companions in any other venue, but on the links they could fall back on the cordial banter of "nice shot" or "too bad" when his classmates weren't reminiscing about their

varsity football team. Frank did, however, decline the invitation to join them for a drink. He felt oddly tired, mentally fatigued, and returned with a heavy feeling to the beige walls of his hotel room for a nap. He did not sleep long, his dreams vivid enough to wake him long before his alarm was set to sound. This time they did not escape him.

IV.

The main event, dance and banquet, was held that night in the hotel ballroom. After his nap, the emptiness he had felt since morning was now a familiar presence. Frank showered and shaved and dutifully phoned his wife. As he prepared to leave his room he paused by the full length mirror on the closet door to check his hair, what was left of it, grown long on the sides and streaked with grey, pulled back in a short ponytail. He ran his palm over the top of his head. Excess of testosterone he thought, mocking his image as he felt the smooth slope of his scalp. He examined his image more closely. Other than baldness his looks had barely aged, but baldness alone was enough to make the image returning his gaze in the mirror contrast sharply with the youth in his senior yearbook photo. As in that picture, as planned, he wore his new beige summer-weight suit, and unable to choose a tie after trying all three in turn, he decided to go without one. It was, after all, a more contemporary look, even if he had to sacrifice the exactitude of the yearbook allusion. Twenty years. He undid the top buttons of his white dress shirt to bare a slit of chest down to the bottom of his sternum, reconsidered and buttoned it half way up, checked his teeth, turned sideways for another look at his hair, pulled on the bottom of his suit jacket, took a deep breath and decided he was ready to go. More than half his life. When he touched the door handle a sudden reluctance froze him. His limbs resisted the next move. He felt suddenly exposed and ridiculous, an insecurity dredged up from adolescence he thought he had outgrown long ago. The feeling, familiar as it was, seemed to strike from nowhere, to be triggered by nothing, but perhaps it was the primping. He wondered why he had bothered with the ridiculous suit, why he had bothered to place himself alone in such a foolish position. I'm such a jerk, he thought. Who am I doing

this for? He wished he had not been so quick to accept his wife's decision to stay behind. All too late. He closed his eyes, gathered himself with a deep breath and pushed through. As the door shut behind him and he walked down the bright hallway, descended silently in the crowded elevator, crossed the noisy lobby, he was sure he'd made a mistake. Nothing would stop him from returning early to his room. Approaching the welcome table by the ballroom entrance he recognized a familiar face. Slipping the lanyard of her name tag over her neck, smoothing back her auburn hair, poised and cheerful, there was Nikki. He stopped dead and watched her. She was enjoying herself, taking a moment to share a laugh with the women at the table before she eased into the ballroom without glancing back. He felt drawn to her, but the din of the room—blaring music and the loud voices talking above it—disoriented him as soon as he entered. Nikki had receded in the crowd.

"George, man. How the hell are you?" Frank felt a slap on the back and turned to face a pudgy man with a thick head of gray-flecked hair holding a bottle of beer in his hand, grinning at him pleasantly. "I thought I saw Nikki, too. How the hell are you guys? How long has it been?"

Frank stepped back and checked the man's name tag, holding up his own like a tiny shield. "I'm Frank," said Frank. "Hi, Jimmy."

The man slapped his forehead playfully and rolled his eyes in self-reproach. "Jeez Frank. I never could tell you two apart."

"I'm the one who graduated, remember," said Frank. Jimmy was instantly familiar. The guy you'd like to have a beer with after a round of golf, a guy who never takes himself too seriously. He would pass into old age with his teen smile unchanged, thought Frank, dimples and all. But he was glad to see Jim. They had been friends. Jim had been friends with George, too.

"Sure," said Jim. "I got confused. I thought you came with Nikki. She looks great, by the way. Hasn't changed a bit. So how the hell are you?"

Frank looked past Jimmy to see if he could catch sight of her, but all he could see was a throng of people milling about the room.

"I'm good. Real good."

“C’mon. I want you to meet my better half.” He hustled Frank across the room to a circle of women near the bar.

“Frank, this is my wife Cheryl.” A short-haired woman with fashionable glasses looked up from her rum and Coke. The wife, thought Frank. Jimmy stepped back and smiled as if anxious they should like each other instantly.

“Nice to meet you, Frank,” said Cheryl. She took his hand gamely, as friendly as her husband but more composed. “Jimmy’s been telling me all the crazy things he did with you and your brother.”

“Not all of them, I hope,” Frank replied dutifully.

“You’re twins, right?”

“Identical twins,” said Jim. “I never could tell them apart, could I Frank?”

V.

That’s exactly what it was, Frank realized as he edged his way to the bar after breaking away from Jimmy and his other half, the impression that had lodged in him the moment he entered the ballroom: Nikki looks great. Better than she did in high school even. But Jim was wrong, she had changed. Given up the wan artist look, now dressed in black as a mature woman rather than a beat-inspired waif. A cold beer now firm in his own hand, Frank wandered the room in the vague hope of running into her by what might be deemed chance. At every step, it seemed, he bumped into a familiar face, or a familiar name on a tag attached to a face he barely recognized, and with each encounter smiled and nodded while he looked over the room, catching sight of Nikki among a group of women by the far wall or chatting with a couple in the midst of the crowd. The odds of a random encounter, he calculated, were vanishingly small. Button-holed for what seemed like an eternity by a dimly recalled drama club member who insisted on detailing his roles in community theater, Frank finally excused himself with a polite tap of the man’s elbow and snaked his way to Nikki’s side. It did not take

long for him to feel foolish hovering unacknowledged on the fringe of her small group, and he was about to ease away disappointed when she turned to him with a start.

"Oh my God, Frank," she cried. "You scared me. For a second I thought you were someone else." She laughed anxiously and sloshed her drink on his pants.

"I wonder who that would be," said Frank, brushing the Margarita from his trousers as it soaked its way through.

"I'm so sorry. Here." She took a napkin from her nearest classmate, and with a gentle pressure blotted the wet spot on his thigh.

"George isn't here, I take it."

"I don't know where George is."

"Let me get you another drink."

Feeling awkward in her presence, Frank was relieved to have a reason to recuse himself. Her took her glass, weaving his way to the bar and back with a Margarita for himself as well, careful not to get waylaid in the crowd before he found her again. She had not slipped away, waiting where he left her. He had the time he needed to recover his composure. They clinked glasses and were soon talking over the noise of the crowd to the exclusion of those around them. They had a lot to catch up on. Before long Nikki had recounted her divorce, and Frank his marriage.

"If you don't have other plans, why don't we sit together at dinner," he asked, without considering the implications of his request long enough to have second thoughts. With the same impulse, Nikki agreed. They chose a time and a table for their rendezvous and, a bit too self-consciously perhaps, turned away from each other to circulate in opposite directions until the cocktail hour was over. Walking about, shaking hands and slapping backs, Frank recalled the simple irony that two decades ago he had wanted to go out with her, and that while he hesitated, gauging her interest, she had taken up with his brother. He had forgotten all about it until then. Forgotten his disappointment and the anger he directed mostly at himself, though he had gotten over it soon enough and moved on. And now twenty years later, this.

Frank was first to arrive for their dinner rendezvous. He tipped a chair against the ballroom table to save a place for Nikki, giving a polite nod to the couple across

from him as he sat down and placed the napkin across his lap, flicking his fingernails under the tablecloth as he waited. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. He smiled weakly at the couple, discreetly checking their name tags. He had resigned himself to making small talk with strangers when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and Nikki slipped into her seat carrying a glass of wine for each of them.

Nikki laughed as she set down the glasses, telling Frank she imagined everyone mistaking them for husband and wife, enjoying the joke on the school and all the people she never cared for, enjoying her sense of transgression. She eyed Frank curiously with that thought, observing the features that could have been George's, the solid figure her ex-husband never acquired, the white teeth that were still sound and straight. Only the voice, it seemed, and the baldness, remained identical.

"What's this?" she teased, pulling on his ponytail.

"The last shred of youth," he said. They raised their glasses to the six other people now filling the table.

"To the last shred of youth."

VI.

By midnight the energy of the evening was spent. A few couples remained on the dance floor, swaying to old songs whose lyrics they murmured in each other's ears as if reciting in their sleep. Others chatted in pairs and small groups along the walls of the room. Frank and Nikki huddled at their dinner table recalling lost classmates—casualties of war, of car accidents, of suicide and cancer—as well as the ones still alive somewhere who, perhaps wanting to forego this version of their past, refused to come, the strange selection process that choses those who attend and those who don't.

"She said she would never come back to this place," said Nikki, referring to a friend, a cheerleader who, when last heard from, was somewhere in California. "She said everyone was so unfair to her."

That seemed odd to Frank for a girl who seemed popular enough, though her drinking and drugging were an open secret.

“And what about you?” he asked.

“I hated this place, too,” she said. “For my own reasons. I knew what people thought of me and George, especially after he dropped out. Not that I cared.”

“Why did you stay with him?” asked Frank, hinting at his feelings for his brother though for most of the evening he had tried to appear neutral for Nikki’s sake.

“That’s not a fair question.”

“I’m sorry.” Frank looked at the couples on the dance floor and took a sip of wine, wishing he had not broached the subject. Nikki knew he was chastising himself, and rightly so. It emboldened her.

“I had a little crush on you, you know,” she said.

“No, I didn’t,” said Frank. “You went for George.”

“He was more fun.”

“How do you know, you didn’t give me a chance.”

“Should I have?”

The last song of the night was announced by the opening bars of “In My Life”. Frank took Nikki’s hands and pulled her to her feet as the old Beatles’ standard, on cue, filled the half-empty room. He guided her to the far edge of the dance floor where they held each other for a moment without moving. Assured of their balance, they began to slow-dance in a tight little circle of light, enjoying the warm touch of their hands, the soft pressure of each other’s bodies, the song’s simple sentiment and pleasing melody, the silly nostalgic cliché they knew they were acting out, the cliché that was being acted out all across the continent to the same tempo of the same song with the same regrets at countless high school reunions that night.

Frank and Nikki were in the last group to leave the ballroom, standing among the stragglers all shaking hands in the hotel lobby and waving good-bye to people they hardly knew. The finality of the event seemed to arrive too soon, just when they had come to sense the possibilities of the night. Arm in arm, they went for a night cap in the hotel lounge, slipping into a corner booth. Before their drinks arrived they had kissed, and before they finished the round they were groping each other like half-smashed teen-agers, well beyond concern for the eyes or tongues of any lingering classmates.

“I can’t let you drive home like this,” said Frank.

“Who said anything about driving home?” said Nikki.

They rose together without a word, leaving a large tip and half their drinks, embracing long and hard in the elevator on their way to Frank’s room before the doors had even closed. The lights of Long Island shone clearly outside his hotel window—the developments and schoolyards, strip malls, lines of cars winding along the expressways. They dropped on the bed, tangled in each other, kicking off their shoes. Frank kissed her eagerly. “Don’t move,” said Nikki, pulling away. He started to sit up but she pushed him back. “No, don’t move,” she said again. “Just for a minute.” He lay back on the bed while she unbuttoned his shirt and loosened his pants. “I want to get a good look at you.” She reared up on her knees to view him from above. Self-conscious as he lay there undressed, observed, he placed his hands behind his head to strike a casual pose. “Don’t,” she admonished. “Stay the way you were.” She leaned forward with her arms braced on his shoulders, examining his face for a moment while he stayed still with his eyes closed, then let herself sink slowly on top of him, laying the full length of her body against his. He replied by pulling her more firmly against him, feeling her breath on his neck, releasing his hold and pressing again, lost in his simple drunken arousal. Nikki gave a long sigh, a voiceless groan, a stream of air released from the remote spaces of her chest, and her sense of transgression expired with it. In its place emerged a feeling of lightness, of both freedom and control, while Frank felt himself crossing into a strangely familiar space he had not known existed. They’d reached the point where only desire mattered, perhaps a desire that was not even their own. They were soon naked under the sheets with their bodies coiled together, half delirious. Each gave and took an easy pleasure according to their own needs, in their own way, to snatches of old unbidden songs that flitted through their movements like birds.

Frank lay back on a pillow and pulled the crumpled sheet to his waist. Outside it was still, the dead of night. The great machinery of the hotel was silent. Nikki propped herself on her elbow next to him with the sheet wrapped across her breasts like a chiton, studying his features now in deep shadow. “It was never that hard to tell us

apart, you know," said Frank, aware of her intention. "Most people aren't very observant."

Nikki inched her body close enough to feel his warmth. "Like how?" she said, sliding her finger slowly down the length of his nose, curious at this contradiction of her thoughts as she felt the contours of his face under her fingertips. "What's the secret?"

"The secret is there's no secret," he said, kissing the palm of her hand before she pulled it away. "For one thing, I'm right-handed and George is left. Our teeth are off line on opposite sides, and our hair whorls in opposite directions."

Nikki laughed at his seeming seriousness. "Give me a break, Frank. It's hard to tell that by just looking at you. Your dentist maybe."

But Frank did not know whether he was being serious or not. "Most people don't want to tell the difference. They're amused by two people looking alike. Clones are almost as popular as zombies. They think we have telepathy or something."

"Don't you?" she asked in her girlish voice.

"Of course not," he said, missing her tone. "Shared habits and tendencies, that's all."

"What a relief. I was afraid George already knew about tonight. I thought he might get a news bulletin beamed directly from you."

"Not funny, Nikki. And suppose he did know."

"Not my concern."

Easy for her to say, thought Frank.

Nikki had no interest in following this thread of conversation. She had summoned her graphic artist's eye, pondering the spacial differences Frank had just pointed out. "So when you face each other it's like looking at yourself in the mirror."

Frank nodded and lay back to look at the ceiling. "Something like that."

"Then you're not really identical twins," Nikki concluded. "You're opposite refections of each other."

Frank put his hands behind his head and sighed. "In a way, I guess. But then, there's no such thing as identical twins. Even with the same genes."

"The same DNA."

“No, the same genes. Nobody has the same DNA,” said Frank, no longer speaking in the tender tones of a new lover, sounding more like a high school science teacher. Frank had his own personal interpretation of DNA and its replication. He thought of himself as the leading strand read smoothly from the 3’ to the 5’ end, while George was the lagging strand with its short Okazaki fragments. It seemed a logical way to account for George accumulating more mutations, and however wrong it was at the molecular level it served its purpose as metaphor, if not as an explanation that he did not bother to share with Nikki.

“Or you could say we all have the same DNA,” she said, turning on her back with a sudden desire to sleep. “It’s all the same molecule, isn’t it?” Frank heard her, but was at a loss for an answer as they both drifted off to their separate dreams.

Nikki woke in the morning as startled as she was when first encountering Frank in the ballroom. Her throat was parched and her head pulsed with a dull ache, yet she felt a childish delight like a wayward fantasy. She almost laughed out loud. As if Frank heard that laugh, he turned and pulled her gently, still naked, against him.

“Do you want to go to the brunch?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” This time she did laugh out loud. She closed her eyes and kissed him. Don’t call him George, she reminded herself. Whatever you do, don’t call him George. “Frank!” she said, just to emphasize the point.

Nikki slipped home in her evening dress. Frank went down to the farewell brunch in the ballroom, sitting next to Jimmy and his wife and trading stories about their children.

VII.

“Laura couldn’t come with you?” said Mrs. T. Frank had come straight from the farewell brunch to see his mother. She was sitting in her bathrobe on the living room sofa, surrounded by her magazines. He was still hungover, and didn’t want to think of his wife at the moment.

“No, Mom,” said Frank. “She’s home with the kids.”

“You couldn’t bring them with you?”

“Not really. School and all that.”

“Always something.” His mother’s bulk dominated the cushions though she was not a tall woman. She knew her daughter-in-law was not eager to come. She lit one of her menthol cigarettes and inhaled deeply while another still burned in the ashtray. “So how was the reunion?”

“Oh, you know,” he answered. “What you’d expect.”

“Things have changed a lot since you left.”

“I guess. All the new construction.”

“I mean those people.” She waved the back of her hand as if to shoo something away.

“What people?”

“Those people. On the other side of the expressway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean they’re not like us. It’s like a foreign country over there.”

Frank had no interest in listening to his mother’s views on those people. “The reunion was fine, Mom,” he said.

“I suppose. Too bad your brother couldn’t go. You heard the news about George?”

Frank knew it was only a matter of time before the conversation would be steered to his brother. “His divorce?” said Frank. “Yes, I know.”

“Not his divorce, his transplant. A kidney transplant. Didn’t Carole tell you? He’s in the hospital. He needs a kidney.” She tamped out her cigarette and looked at him with the question hanging on her lips.

“Amanda told me. No surprise. It was just a matter of time,” said Frank, failing at first to appreciate his mother’s appeal. When it dawned on him, he could not disguise his revulsion. “No, Mom. Not me,” he protested. “He doesn’t want one from me. Don’t even think about it.”

His mother threw up her hands. “That’s what Carole said. Not that I know why. She says she wants to give him one of hers.”

“Fine, let her. I’m sure she’ll feel good about it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Mrs T, raising herself from the couch to tuck her robe under her legs.

“Nothing. You know she’ll always do the right thing.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t know,” said Frank. “It depends on why you’re doing it.”

“What’s wrong with wanting to give your brother a normal life?”

“George will never have a normal life.”

“Give him life, then. His own life.”

“I give up. Whatever Carole wants to do is fine with me.”

His mother picked up a magazine. Thinking of George’s illness gave her a headache. “So was Nikki at the reunion?”

Frank started at the sound of her name. His mother was thumbing through the magazine, looking at the pictures. “Nikki, why?”

“Just wondering. George said she still has stuff at his house. She needs to get it or he’ll throw it out.”

“Yes, she was there.” Frank felt embarrassed by his discomfort. He hadn’t had time yet to reflect on their night together. He would save that for the trip home. “She’s living at her parents’ place if you want to know.”

“Good. Would you give her the message? I don’t want to talk to her, and it’s hard on George.”

“Sure, if you want,” said Frank. He rose from his chair to wrap-up the visit.

“I pray for you, Frankie. I pray for you every day. You and George.”

“No need, Mom. I’m fine, and I don’t think it’s done George much good.”

“Don’t say such things. God doesn’t like it.”

“I don’t think it makes much difference what I say.” Frank smiled and gave his mother a kiss.

“You’re wrong there, Frankie.”

“Good-bye, Mom. Don’t mind me. Pray all you want.”

Much as it troubled his mother, when it came to questions of God Frank T did not believe and could not be bothered to doubt. To him the questions themselves were

absurd—not the truth of God's existence or non-existence, which was another matter entirely. As his taxi whisked him along the LIE to the airport, watching gas stations and strip malls slip by under low clouds blowing in from the ocean, he wondered why people have wasted so much time on them. Better to waste it on chess or advertising he thought, giving due credit to Raymond Chandler's quip. So Frank T had no religion and the moral universe did not collapse, did not even budge, which was no surprise. What difference would it make, one way or the other? None he was convinced, looking out the window now of his Chicago-bound plane at the smattering of clouds over Manhattan, the ships at anchor in New York Harbor, the flat Jersey coast as the plane continued its climb. The world would be exactly the same. So he had no problem with his mother's religion. It made no difference to him what anyone had. He thought that was fair to all, that was justice. But there was a school teacher from their fish-shaped island who once lived near his home town, a man more concerned with grandeur than justice, who said there's no character or life worthy of the name without religion. That man was entitled to his opinion too, Frank supposed. Frank T was not one to care or to argue, he was too pragmatic for that. Pulling down the window shade and reclining in his chair for a short nap to ease away the last of his hangover, he was quite happy to let everyone thrash about in whatever direction they'd like. He knew it wouldn't change a thing. When he closed his eyes he finally let himself think of Nikki.

VIII.

It was Laura who answered the phone. "Frank, it's for you. Nikki, of all people," she called from the kitchen.

"Who?"

"Nikki Russo."

Frank tried his best to sound indifferent. "Nikki? Why?"

"I don't know. Something about George."

"OK, I got it." Frank took the call in the bedroom and closed the door, incensed by Nikki's intrusion into the privacy of his home life. He listened impatient, then grave,

to the raspy charm of her voice while she came straight to the point and calmly laid the situation before him.

"You can get an abortion," Frank whispered, cupping the receiver.

The long silence on the other end gave him his answer.

"Right?" he persisted.

"I could," said Nikki. "But I won't." She had put off calling with the news of her pregnancy because she intended to handle it herself. Her phone call was merely the courtesy of an announcement, his right to know. Frank was not caught completely off guard. The dice had been rolled—that was his part, his agency—and he knew the way they tumbled was beyond his control. When they stopped, their face value was just another small piece of the world and he accepted that. And though he knew better, he could not help feeling that some nameless power had induced him to attend his reunion, that he was led there against his will, that he was tricked in fact. Though to what end and why, the musings of his right brain were wordless. It had not occurred to him the dice could be loaded.

Now it was Frank's turn to pause, gauging the futility of any further prodding or protest. "Really? Is this a moral issue?"

"No. It's a choice," she said simply. "I want to have this baby. That's the only issue."

"Nikki, that's nuts," he stammered. "I can't be part of this."

"I know. But you are. And there's nothing wrong here. I know what I'm doing. No need to get yourself all worked up." Nikki felt another wave of nausea. She didn't know how long she could continue the conversation, or if her morning sickness would last into the holidays.

"So what do you want me to do?" asked Frank.

"Nothing," said Nicki.

Frank did not believe that. He could not believe it, and he couldn't talk about it anymore. "I have a message from George," he said. "He says you need to get the rest of your stuff off the island or he's going to throw it away." He thought it strange that he had forgotten this message from his mother for so many months, and curious that it came back at that instant, curious that is was the last topic of their conversation.

“So what in the world was Nikki calling about?” asked Laura when Frank returned to the kitchen.

“Something about getting her stuff from George. I don’t know how I got in the middle of this.” He found an excuse to get out of the house. Driving through the neighborhood, then out of town, then speeding along the interstate, he obsessed about Nikki’s news and his lame response until he could finally declare a ceasefire with his conscience and return home.

Paternity and Transplant

Expertise | *Personalized* | *Shorter Wait Time* | *Close to Home* | *Latest Advances* | *Life Changing*[4]

I.

Dr. Gastine, dressed in his customary blue blazer and rep tie, put down his fat pen and peered over his glasses at George. They were seated across a small desk in an exam room. “No, I never knew your father was a drinker,” said Gastine. “He didn’t have any health problems I could relate to alcohol. Could be, though. Much as I hate to admit it, sometimes I’m the last to know.” He shook his head slowly to emphasize his admission, or omission. It still bothered him when he missed such key information.

“My mother said he was a drunk. That’s why she kicked him out.”

“She never told me about that,” said Gastine, discreetly checking his watch to see how late he was running for his next patient. “It’s hard to know why people tell you some things and not others. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” said George. “Something my sister said.”

Gastine knew he should have pursued that opening, but chose not to. He had enough on his plate for the time allotted. Maybe he’d get to it at their next visit. “Let’s get back to your blood tests,” he said. “How long were you on that island, anyway?”

“Ten years.”

“And did you ever see a doctor while you were there?”

“A few times. Like for that foot infection.”

“Yes, your amputation. How about for diabetes?”

“Not really.”

“You just kept giving yourself insulin?” Gastine could not hold back the note of censure in his voice.

“Sure, why not?” said George, hardly fazed by something as familiar as a doctor’s disapproval. “I didn’t have health insurance. And no offense, but I don’t like doctors.”

Gastine was not offended, he was merely curious. “How did you know how much to give? Were you checking your sugars?”

“No. I did fine even before those meters came out. It’s not *that* hard,” George explained. “You get to know your body. I could tell when my sugars were up. You can feel it, you know. Sometimes I’d give myself a little more, sometimes a little less. Depends on what I ate. I don’t know why diabetics have to see doctors all the time. I didn’t have any problems till last year. Then my sugars started going low. That’s what scared me. I cut back on the insulin but it kept happening. That’s why I’m here.”

Gastine saw no point in arguing. The horse was out of the barn, and as far as be was concerned had galloped off to another planet. He pushed his chair back from the desk to better face George, folding his hands in his lap for effect. “Well, your kidneys are shot. That’s why your sugars are bottoming out.” Shot to the point of failure and the need for dialysis, Gastine continued. George nodded politely, certain that doctors exaggerate to drum up business for themselves and their buddies just as they churn out needless visits with diabetics. And looking at it purely from the business point of view, he couldn’t blame them. He would do the same in their shoes. So he dismissed Gastine’s prognostication and assumed he would get better as he usually did. If he needed less insulin, how could things be worse?

“You need to get ready for it,” said Gastine, after briefly explaining what dialysis entailed, “so I’m sending you to a kidney specialist. Sorry—I know this is a lot to take in, but the sooner we get started the better.”

“Hold on,” said George, holding up both hands to signal this train to stop. “Not so fast. I need to think about it. I mean, does it have to be dialysis? Isn’t there anything else?”

“I wish,” said Gastine, “but once the damage is done there’s not much you can do.” Gastine glanced at his watch again and started writing out instructions.

“OK.” George waited patiently while the doctor scribbled. He had already made up his mind. He would never go on a kidney machine. As long as he had bothered to see a doctor though, he was determined to get something out of it.

Gastine read over his instructions oblivious to George’s inattention, and handed them over with a stack of prescriptions. George took them absently. He was busy formulating his next question. The doctor rose from his chair, headed for the door and his next patient when George, still seated, said, “I almost forgot. There’s one more thing.” Gastine stopped. However tempted he was to keep going and end the visit, he had resigned himself years ago to his patients’ doorknob questions. So he turned around. “I’ve been having, you know,” George stammered, “having like a little trouble with …”

Gastine sighed. “With what?”

“You know, like ...getting hard,” said George.

Gastine sat back down. “You mean like erections?”

“Yeah, like erections.”

“That’s not surprising,” said Gastine.

“Maybe not to you,” said George.

Gastine apologized. He did not mean it the way it sounded. He merely meant he was resigned to the extent of George’s complications.

“Can you give me something for it?” said George.

“I don’t know,” said Gastine. “Chances are it’s your circulation. But first let me ask you a question. Are you having any relationship problems? You know, something that’s causing stress in the bedroom?”

“Ha,” said George. “Not anymore. I’m divorced.” The question seemed absurd to him. People had sex with people they didn’t like all the time.

“Divorced?” said Gastine, rubbing his chin. He knew it was no use checking his watch again. “Sorry to hear that. There must have been a lot of tension there. Counseling could help.” Gastine stood up again and searched for an exam glove. “Hop up on the table.” George dropped his pants and complied. The glove felt cold. The doctor pressed firmly in his groin and touched lightly on his scrotum. After Gastine

finished the exam, his back turned as he shed his gloves in the wastebasket, he said, “The most important thing is to stop smoking.”

George almost laughed. “Right, doc. Anything else?”

“There are a few things out there that might help,” said Gastine. “Implants, suction devices, injections. I know a little bit about them, but it’s not exactly my specialty.”

“I was hoping there was a pill or something.”

“There is, but with your medical problems it’s not a good idea. If you really want to know your options, I can refer you to a urologist.”

“Let me think about it,” said George. He had the familiar sense of being brushed off as Gastine ushered him to the door. Leaving the office, George nodded politely at the receptionist and dropped Gastine’s instructions in the waste basket.

He must be out of his fucking mind thought George, driving his mother’s car back to her house after his doctor’s visit. Take my blood and pump it through some machine? No fucking way. He slammed on the brakes as a stop sign seemed to appear out of nowhere. Like who knows what shit they put back in you. I’ve seen this movie and I don’t like the ending. It was his central vision that was poor. And there were the floaters. He turned his head to the side to get a better look at the roadway. So later for you, nigger doctor. I thought maybe you were looking out for me. Fuck you and your bow ties. He felt a headache coming on. It was lunchtime. He couldn’t feel his foot on the gas pedal. And why are you even in this town? Why aren’t you on the other side of the LIE or better yet, in Roosevelt, or Harlem? Oh, right. Cha-ching. No din-ero in the ghe-tto. He felt for the candy in his pants pocket, just in case. The image of Nikki flickered before him for a moment, as did a dark empty room with a hospital bed. He forced his concentration back to the traffic around him. For Christ’s sake he continued, steering his thoughts back to their original thread, go back to Brooklyn or Newark or wherever the fuck you’re from. God knows why my mother started going to some slick nigger in the first place. My dad must be turning over in his grave. George rolled down the window and spat. The wind splattered his saliva on the backdoor window. A Black man putting his hands on her, making money off us. Making money off our bodies.

How low can you get? George was glaring at the road, concentrating on it, speeding down it as he rocked back and forth in the driver's seat, pounding the steering wheel with his fists. To hell with you, to hell with all of you, niggers and doctors. You don't have a clue what it's like to deal with this shit, no fucking clue. You just do your tests and tell us how to run our lives and charge us up the ass and drive around in your fancy cars. Without signaling he made a wide turn and lurched into the winding streets of his mother's development. There were children's toys, scooters and tricycles, scattered on the sidewalk. You won't even live in the same town with us. You wouldn't even say hello if you saw me in the grocery store. How can you trust someone who makes money off your body? Why would you ever trust a Black guy who looks like he has a pole up his ass? George was slowing down now, his spleen vented, his energy spent. All I want to know is how to dose my insulin and get a decent hard-on. Is that too much to ask? He pulled into the driveway. And now this. Fuck me. I just need some rest. Then I'm out of here. No more of this crap. Doctors will just fuck you up. Niggers too.

II.

So all George wanted was to get back to his island and find a quiet beach where he would not have to hear about lab values that were off-the-charts and the vast array of technology that awaited him, a place where he would not have to confront a phalanx of the concerned, Black or white, eager to 'help'. He stayed on Long Island at his mother's house waiting for his strength to return, slouched in front of the television, smoking her cigarettes, with no interest in the world outside or even the model kits she bought him, expecting the improvement that never came. When he found himself out of breath as he walked to the bathroom he thought he needed exercise. When he lost his appetite he assumed he was depressed. His breath took on the musty odor of old fruit and his skin became sallow—signs he needed more fresh air as far as his mother was concerned. "Georgie," she said. "you're not yourself." He agreed. Something was happening, something strange but interesting. Whether it was bad or good was hard to

say. A month after his visit to Gastine he dreamed he was surf-casting from a beach on his island, alone in a sheltered cove. He had an appointment to meet a stranger, a nameless woman, on the mainland that night, and realized with some anxiety he was late to catch the ferry. As he reeled in his tackle there came a strong tug, and the heavy braided line raced out to sea. Though he had hooked something large and powerful, the water where the line ran out remained calm. George tried to release the rod but it stuck to his hands. He prepared to resist what he saw coming as best he could by sitting down and bracing his feet against a large rock, but when the line reached its limit it flipped him headfirst into the surf. As he was dragged under he managed to let go of the rod, but was now tangled in the line. The sea creature, if that's what it was, dragged him deeper into the ocean. He held his breath until he felt he would burst. When at last he gave up, indifferent to the drama, he exhaled not a lungful of air but of water. He breathed water in, and breathed water out. The farther he was pulled from shore, the easier and more natural it felt. But when he bolted awake in bed he was gurgling a frothy pink fluid with the certainty he was drowning. He arrived in the emergency room bloated and blue, his lungs edematous and his kidneys all but dead. When he could finally breathe again the hospital social worker assured him that medical expenses for dialysis would be covered by Medicare, and not really believing her he let them start anyway. He didn't care. He didn't care now that his blood was run through a tube in his neck while they sewed an artery and vein together in his forearm. Didn't care that the fistula this made would take a month to mature. Didn't care that when the fistula failed a graft was inserted in his upper arm. Didn't care that two months later the graft was ready for dialysis and the line in his neck removed. Didn't care that four hours a day, three days a week at the dialysis center, he was hooked up to a machine that cleansed his blood. Didn't care that he was given a diet he couldn't stand or follow. All he cared about was going back to his island where there were no machines. The doctors told him his best hope, for that or anything else, was a new kidney. They referred him to the transplant center at the university hospital on the North Shore. His sister Carole drove him to his first appointment. It was the first time he had talked to her in years.

III.

Carole, true to form, stepped in at the prescribed time. She played the part of older sister well, organized and upbeat, taking on responsibilities like a ship takes on freight without a clue she might load herself past her limit and take others down with her. Unlike her twin brothers she was tall, with gray eyes that, like her motives, never questioned themselves. From the time she could walk she went striding through life like a youth soccer coach about to receive a trophy. “Who made you the boss?” George complained as a kid, though he knew her demands, arbitrary as they seemed, were mostly his mother’s proxies. Carole was not humorless but rarely laughed out loud, smothering her laugh with a tight little smile while she wrinkled her forehead. And she had a habit of not quite finishing her sentences, leaving off with an open palm to indicate the rest of what she had to say was too obvious to state, or perhaps a gesture meant to give her listeners the pleasure of filling in the blank for themselves. It was she, as mother’s helper, who saw George through the first years of his disease while Mrs. T took her sedative every eight hours as if she were the patient. Carole had a two-year fling in California after college before she settled drug-free back on Long Island to get a degree in speech therapy and married Ray, a high school classmate, who had his own roofing business. Ray, with his stint in the army and an associate’s degree from the local community college, didn’t mind the fact that his wife had more education than he did, only the assumption that she was smarter than him because of it, which she knew was not the case, and in that respect they always saw each other as near equals. How near depended on the argument they were having. They had three kids and lived a mile from her mother, who she visited three times a week, and a mile from Ray’s parents, who she saw every weekend. She never thought Nikki was right for George, and Nikki was never at ease around Carol and her competence.

IV.

“At least let me speak to him,” said Carole to her mother. “How many people are lucky enough to have the perfect donor?” She insisted on coming over to visit George despite the fact he had avoided her for years. George was not happy to find himself facing his meddling older sister among the porcelain cat figurines of his mother’s tobacco-stained living room.

“I’m not lucky,” George told her, “and Frank is not the perfect anything.”

“Come on, be serious,” said Carole. “You need a kidney.”

“She’s right,” said Mrs. T, sitting on the end of the couch with a magazine on her lap. She would not contradict her daughter despite her own misgivings, despite being confused by the whole transplant business as if it were some form of black magic or science fiction. “Listen to your sister. You need a kidney.”

“Not that bad,” said George. “Besides, he’d never do it.”

“Maybe not,” said his sister. “But no harm asking.”

“No harm, Carole?” said George, patting his shirt pocket for the pack of cigarettes that was not there. “You have no idea.”

“Get real,” said Carole, her frustration showing though she had thought herself prepared for the opposition she expected from him. “Of course I do. It’s always been so obvious. You think he never gave a damn about you.”

“That’s no secret. So why do you think he’d give a damn about me now? Or about you, for that matter. Or about anyone in this family.”

“That’s not true, Georgie,” said Mrs. T. “You know that’s not true.”

“And that’s not the half of it.”

“Frank does care...,” Mrs. T tried to say.

“You think you got stuck with the short end of the stick,” said Carole, ignoring her mother, cutting off her feeble defense of her other son. “Maybe so. Maybe he has the kind of life you wanted, but that doesn’t mean it’s his fault. Anyway, here’s your chance to get something back, and his chance to give you something. Don’t you get it?”

“No, I don’t. I never wanted his life. I don’t want anything of his.” George rose from his chair and took a step toward the door.

“Look at it this way,” said Carole, jumping from her seat and catching his arm, meeting him eye to eye, lowering her voice as if keeping a secret from their mother. “It’s your kidney just as much as his.”

George smiled, showing the tips of his yellowed teeth. He seemed almost amused. “Don’t be ridiculous. He’s not me.”

“You’re the one who’s ridiculous,” said Carole. “Both of you. I’ve watched you go at each other for years like two little brats. Time to give it up.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. T.

“Forget it,” said George, jerking free. “I decide what goes in my body. Or who. End of discussion.”

“Okay, get your kidney from a stranger. Get it from some corpse…” She let George fill in the thought for himself as he punched the door open and stumbled down the front steps.

V.

Amanda was there at the right time too, and did her best to avoid the drama. She deserves to have her say, more than most. “When Carole said George needed a transplant,” she told her shrink, “I thought it was a bad joke. He still seemed like his old self. A little more tired maybe. More pale. That’s all. Then I thought there must be some mistake. You know, a lab error or something. Maybe they got the wrong patient. It happens. It’s not like he was in pain or anything. Except for the bandage on his neck you couldn’t tell there was anything wrong by looking at him. Especially since he fell apart so steady and gradual you got used to it. Then I burst out crying. I don’t know why. I didn’t feel bad for George, I just didn’t believe it. The news seemed to come out of nowhere but of course it didn’t. I was upset that someone was awful enough to say it. I cried because I was so mad. I was mad at his doctors. How could they let this happen? At least that’s what I wanted to think. I couldn’t face my real thought, that I’d

failed him. I failed him? I was just his little sister. Everything failed him. Our mother failed him. The doctors failed him. Frank failed him. When you get right down to it, nature failed him. I think God lets nature makes mistakes just to see what happens, like it experiments on us. But it wasn't really nature or his doctors I was mad at. It was George. Mad at him for what he did to us. Mad at his disease for what it did to all of us."

VI.

Carole poured another coffee for herself and Ray and set the mugs on their kitchen table still cluttered with breakfast dishes. She had waited to make her announcement until they'd finished eating. Her husband's reaction was not as supportive as she'd hoped, not that she was surprised. "Are you crazy?" he said, sloshing his coffee onto the floor as he banged the mug down before taking a first sip. "Why are you even considering this?"

Carole shrugged as if her decision was not momentous enough for such a violent reaction. "I don't know. Someone has to help him."

"What about Frank?" said Ray. The sound of the TV droned absurdly in the next room as if to prevent any silence in the gaps of their conversation. It was the weekend. The kids sprawled on the floor of the family room in their pajamas, glued to the screen while their parents debated the care of their ailing uncle.

"That would be too easy," said Carole. "We tried. George won't even consider it. And Frank would never agree."

Ray took a deep breath to calm himself and consider his reply. "So why does it have to be you? Let him stay on the transplant list. It's not like a cadaver is taking any risks."

"He could die first," said Carole, clearing the plates and setting them in the dishwasher.

Her husband rolled his eyes. "No, he won't. He's on dialysis."

“That’s no way to live,” said Carole, slamming the dishwasher door shut much harder than she’d intended.

“So what? It’s not forever. Just till the transplant.”

“But an organ from a stranger?” She stood up to her full height, facing him squarely with her hands on her hips. “There’s something Frankenstein about that. As a last resort, maybe.” She sat down opposite her husband and took a sip of coffee. The blare of a commercial filled the silence.

His wife’s charity troubled Ray at a level deeper than he could say. Beneath it he sensed a reckless pride, a dangerous need to correct any defect that confronted her. “Come on, this isn’t science fiction,” he answered, sarcastic now and bristling without intending to, still thinking he was making a reasoned argument as his expression hardened and his voice boomed across the table. “If they’re compatible, what’s the difference? And what about Donna? What about Amanda?”

“What about them?” said Carole. “Donna couldn’t care less and Amanda’s not mature enough to make a serious decision.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Why do you always have to be the one? This shouldn’t be your problem, or anyone’s. He brought it on himself. He’s been trying to self-destruct for years.”

Carole sighed and shook her head. “What he did was not strange for a kid with diabetes,” she said. She’d been waiting for this obvious objection, the natural tendency to blame the victim when it suited one’s purpose, but was still startled by the vehemence of Ray’s opposition and the glimpse of his contempt for George that lay behind it. She thought it cruel.

“Not strange when he was fifteen,” said Ray, “but he never grew out of it. A guy who never took care of himself and now he wants a bailout? I don’t feel sorry for him. And what about you? You should be taking care of *your*self. And our kids—you should be thinking of *them*.”

So it’s not just blaming the victim, thought Carole, staring down at her coffee. Now it’s about me. Or rather now it’s about him. “Of course I do,” she said, angry because she’d been dwelling on this for weeks, mulling over every implication she could imagine for herself and her family. She wanted to tell Ray of course she’d been

thinking of their kids. He should have known that and given her credit for it, if he wasn't so wrapped up in his own fear. Why couldn't he see her fear as well and at least given her credit for that, too? And it was sad, because the husband who should be proud of her decision had just dropped a notch in her esteem. "I wonder, what would they think of me if I let my brother die?"

"A mother who cares about her kids and her husband," he answered.

"A sister who doesn't give a damn about her brother."

"So why all of a sudden now? For a guy who wouldn't talk to you for years."

"That's not even a consideration. We're talking about his life."

"Give me a break. He's not going to freakin' die."

"Of course he's going to freakin' die," said Carole.

They glared into their mugs. Each had made their point. There was no more to say, but they were not quite done. Finally Carole looked up. "This is a stupid argument," she said. "I can lead a normal life with one kidney."

"Then why did God give you two?"

"One's a spare."

"There's no such thing as spares."

"I don't care. It's the right thing to do."

"You're letting him con you, Carole. Don't be a fool."

VII.

Standing up to Ray had tested her courage, and Carole was grateful for the chance to prove her resolve. 'The Gift of Life'. What better phrase to quell her doubts, to see her through the endless slog of medical encounters? She had been on edge all week awaiting results of the transplant compatibility tests and now, finally, they were in. No turning back, she told herself. She felt a strange elation while Ray, who detested the idea more than ever but had given up fighting it, had moved from anger to a profound pessimism. Despite his foreboding, he stood by his wife. He agreed to drive Carole and George to the meeting with the transplant team. Ray's concentration on

highway traffic was broken by his vision of ugly scars running across the flesh of his wife's soft flank like railroad tracks, by his fear of fatal complications—strokes and heart attacks and worse—that would leave him wifeless. Carole, seated next to him, and George, seated in the back, did not say a word, making the trip feel more like a hearse ride than a trip for the 'gift of life'. After circling the parking garage till a space opened up, rushing to the hospital fearing they'd be late, spending an hour in the waiting room, George's nephrologist called them to a small consultation room crammed with plaques and diplomas, piles of journals, photos of wife and kids on ski vacations framed on the desk. The doctor was a tall bookish-looking man, prim and remote in a neat white lab coat. Reading glasses dangled on his chest from a neck strap, and his breast pocket was lined with pens. Though they had already met several times, he shook their hands with an exaggerated formality. The family's tension was obvious, even to someone as inured to it as he was. When his brief attempt at small talk failed he came straight to the point. "I double-checked the results," he announced, addressing Carole. "In fact, I asked the lab to run the tests again. I'm afraid you're not compatible. But it's not all bad news," he continued hastily, turning to George. "Amanda is a great match."

Carole was stunned as it she'd been slapped. This was simply unimaginable. Not compatible? It sounded like a reprimand. She could not accept it, not after all she had gone through to get to this point. And Amanda? This wasn't about Amanda, she wanted to say. Amanda was an afterthought. Amanda was not a serious option. Amanda could not be trusted to follow through. And there had to be a hitch. Weren't she and Amanda both first degree relatives? "You mean the HLA match?" she asked, reasserting herself. "The way I understand it, that doesn't exclude me. I could still donate if the antibodies…,". She had done her homework. She held out her hand to invite the doctor to finish her thought.

"It's not the HLA match," said the doctor. "It's the blood group."

The blood group? Carole was struck dumb. The doctor had donned his reading glasses and was thumbing through the chart with a look of concern or curiosity, she couldn't tell which. George merely nodded. Ray was careful not to say a word. "How is that possible?" she asked. Her mind could not process this last piece of information,

stuck like a curser frozen on a computer screen. There must be some mistake. They had no right, she thought, to deny her sacrifice.

The nephrologist looked up and removed his glasses as if to assure them he had confirmed the accuracy of his information. “Different antigens. That’s the way they assorted. Why one way and not another, who can say?” He shrugged with a modest smile like a priest accepting God’s inexplicable ways, or a gambler the luck of the draw. Carole felt crushed by the weight of an immense humiliation. It was not a thought or even an emotion, rather something purely visceral pressing down to her core, pressing down to the level of her cellular machinery. She slumped deep in her chair until a surge of anger revived her. “Could I please have a copy of the results?” she asked, bolting upright, correcting her posture, trying her best to smile politely.

“Of course.”

Carole was too shaken, too confounded to question further. Her faith in the whole enterprise was gone. The meeting began to feel unreal. She could see that George was talking with the doctor and that Ray had brightened up and joined the conversation, but she couldn’t make sense of what they said. Her vision seemed to narrow. Her hearing echoed mere fragments of sound, snatches of conversation, nonsensical terms gleaned from medical journals and magazines, and she realized she was trembling. Different antigens? The blood group? The words kept spinning through her brain. She left the conference in a daze and kept to herself the whole way home, clutching her printout of the lab results. She paid no attention as George and Ray rehashed the meeting while they drove. When they dropped George off at her mother’s house she leapt from the car and snatched his arm.

“It’s Mom,” she said. “We have to talk to Mom.”

George had no idea what she was talking about. Carole seemed agitated and confused, things he had never seen in her before. It frightened him. He yanked his arm away with a troubling premonition.

“About what?”

“About us. You and me.”

VIII.

Her mother was impatient for Carole to arrive. Mrs. T was a heavy woman—stout in the solid old-fashioned way that was distinct from the soft, round forms of present-day obesity. Her cheeks, though, had been round since childhood and were simply a family feature, not the result of the weight gain that came with each pregnancy and beyond. With her figure and her cheeks, her fair skin and her last name, people said she looked Polish, whatever that is, which she was not, her ancestors hailing from various parts of the British Isles and France via Canada, while her husband was only half Polish on his father's side. As a girl and young woman her full cheeks made her look cheerful, but as they drooped with age they made her look severe, which she became, a look emphasized by her thinning hair, dyed black and teased up the entire circumference of her head like a puff ball. Of course five children, two of them twins, and a husband who deserts the family can take the cheer out of most women. But the cheer might have gone out of her merely with the sagging of her cheeks the way a person can shift their mood by making their face form a new expression. When the kids got home from school they'd find her lying on the living room couch with her menthol cigarette smoldering in an ashtray on the coffee table, fanning herself with an old Life magazine and staring at the ceiling, not saying a word until they greeted her and asked if they could get her something. "No," she'd reply. "I just need a little rest, that's all," and she'd close her eyes. She'd always ask George how he was feeling, and whether he'd taken his insulin, and he always said fine and yes. After half an hour or so without moving she would rouse herself to make dinner. She liked to cook and she liked to see George eat. He was always such a skinny kid, so she made only the kinds of meals he liked, which was the only kind of treatment she could understand—not hormones or units or food exchanges—enduring the daily complaints of the rest of the family though in fact she was a very good cook who lost interest once the kids were gone.

Mrs. T perked up when she saw her daughter. "You got my fries?"

"Of course, Mom."

Carole strode to the living room with gifts for her mother—a bouquet of flowers, a large root beer, and a styrofoam carton full of french fries. Mrs. T, lying on the couch

with a damp cloth on her forehead, sat up and swiveled her feet to the coffee table. She placed the fries in her lap, squirted a packet of ketchup in the open lid and, without a word, began to eat, holding each fry daintily between thumb and forefinger like little tea cups. Carole returned from the kitchen with a vase and arranged the flowers, replacing the bouquet she had brought the week before with her fresh assortment of lilies and roses.

"Have some, Georgie," said Mrs. T. George rose from his chair and grabbed a handful of fries, sat back down and watched Carole who, satisfied now with her flower arrangement, knelt on the carpet by the coffee table and begin to massage her mother's feet. She signaled her intentions to her brother with a glance he refused to acknowledge.

"It looks like we have a kidney donor for George," she announced.

"You're always so brave," said her mother, licking her fingers. "George, you're lucky to have a sister like this," turning to George while she pointed at Carole. "She always looked out for you. Even when you were little."

"No, it's not me," said Carole. "It's Amanda."

Her mother paused with her mouth full. It took a moment to swallow, careful not to choke, before she could talk. "Amanda? That's a surprise. I thought you were going to do it. Did you change your mind? Was it Ray?"

"No, Mom," said Carole. "Nothing like that. I'm a bad match." She continued her massage, kneading the balls of her mother's feet, pressing firmly on her instep, putting her arms and shoulders deep into each stroke.

"A bad match," said her mother, absorbing the idea as she continued to chew. "Oh, well."

"Oh, well?"

"I'm sorry." Mrs. T dipped another fry in her puddle of ketchup and continued. "I know you had your mind set on doing this for Georgie."

"Yes, but don't you think it's a little strange?" said Carole. "Amanda and me being sisters and all?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

“So do I. We thought maybe you could tell us something. Like why we would have different blood groups.”

Their mother paused a moment while she swallowed again and cleared her throat, pointing to her root beer on the side table. “Who?” she asked, reaching with both hands for the large plastic cup George handed her.

“Me and George.”

Mrs. T shrugged, took a long sip through the straw in her drink and waved her hand. “That’s for the doctors to figure out. How would I know?”

“It’s not that hard,” said Carole. “You get one blood type from your mother, and the other from your father.”

“I have no idea what that means,” said Mrs. T, jerking her foot out of Carole’s grasp. “And I don’t want to hear about it. Why are you bothering me with these things? Don’t the doctors know?”

“The doctors can’t quite seem to explain it.”

“That’s their job, not mine. What are they getting paid for?” She finished the last of her snack and dropped the styrofoam container back in its bag. “I told you I don’t understand these things,” she repeated, wiping her fingers on a paper napkin, “and I don’t want to hear about it. I’m not well. You know how upset I get when I have to think about George’s transplant. George will be fine if he just takes his insulin. Georgie,” she said, turning to her son, “you should see Dr. Gastine about your prescriptions.” Then addressing them both, “It’s late and I’m worn out. Thank you for the flowers dear, they’re lovely. Now good-night. I need my rest.” She lay back on the couch and closed her eyes.

As George walked her out the front door, Carole said, “She knows what I’m talking about.” George said nothing. He also knew what she was talking about, but it didn’t matter to him. A kidney was a kidney. He hadn’t asked anyone for it, but he wasn’t going to refuse one that came his way.

IX.

Not one to be sidelined by a mere blood type, Carole was quick to recover from the news of her incompatibility. She hovered over George's pre-op preparations like a real estate agent closing a deal—making appointments, relaying messages, processing bills, shuttling between the doctors and George, Amanda and her mother, the hospital and home. Once she accepted the finality of it, the rejection of her donor status seemed only to fuel her need to insure that everything went well. Her main concern, she confided to anyone who would listen, was Amanda's mental fitness. And perhaps she did wish—though it's unfair to speculate on Carole's motives rather than approve her actions—that if Amanda did not outright change her mind, she would at least fail her psychological evaluation. But Amanda did not, and Amanda did not seem worried by any of it. When questioned she was well-informed, and when scheduled she was prompt. The fact that she did it all in good spirits and without drama only disturbed her older sister the more. Carole made sure that Amanda knew the risks, every possible complication, in vivid detail, and even enlisted Ray to help her stress them as he had stressed them so often to her. Ray was only too glad to help, in good spirits she could barely tolerate. Their mother would not weigh in on the subject. Mrs. T made clear that any talk of George's transplant upset her, and forbade them to speak of it in her presence. For his part, George was swept along with the preparations without much ado. He was not curious and he was not afraid. He smoked, and went to his dialysis sessions, and build a series of Soviet WW II aircraft models on his mother's dining room table. The blood group question that so bothered Carole was of no importance to him, nor to Amanda.

X.

There were vertical bars spaced eight inches apart, and a thin yellow curtain hanging beyond the bars. There was dull florescent light. There were tubes and wires strewn over him and electronic devices pinging somewhere overhead. Coming to, George felt like an appliance that had been plugged back in. His mouth was dry. His

throat was raw as if it had been filed by a rasp, and it burned like the strep throats of his childhood. He felt cold, felt the light touch of a sheet that was loosely draped over him to mid-chest. His eyes closed by their own sheer weight and he felt as if he were sinking down a long shaft, not unpleasantly, until a new sensation began to assert itself. First a vague soreness, then an ache, then a pain deep in his flank that told him why he was there. As if summoned, a nurse appeared mouthing words he didn't understand, questions perhaps, and injected something from a small syringe into the tubing that ran to his arm. He felt the pain ease as he faded out, surrendering himself to whatever force had overtaken him. Emerging from nothingness again—after a minute or an hour, days even, who could say—he was awakened by a hand gently shaking his shoulder. "So far so good." He heard someone talking, a dream-voice far away. Then, above the bars of the side rails, standing in his scrubs and green paper hat with a surgical mask hanging from his neck, the hazy face of the transplant surgeon slowly formed. "Your new kidney seems to be working fine," he said. Amanda's kidney, George corrected silently, and faded out once more.

When he transferred out of recovery, Carole and Ray were at his bedside waiting for him. The room was stuffed with flowers and balloons, strung with banners of encouragement hung over get-well cards and a large basket of fruit. "How's Amanda?" he asked.

"Amanda's fine," said Carole. "Healthy as a horse, what did you expect. How are you?"

"I feel like a new man."

"You do? Already?"

"Sure. I feel like a new man who's been run over by a truck."

"Well, the doctor says you're doing well."

"Easy for him to say. If anything happens to me, don't tell Mom."

"Like what?"

"Like if I die or something."

"Of course not. Mum's the word."

XI.

After getting the results of the blood tests, Carole's shock did not last long. She wanted answers and of course she would get them. She went to the library at the nearest medical school, spoke at length with her gynecologist and, for good measure, consulted a hematologist at her own expense. The answer was always the same, not that she wished to believe it. So finally, like a petitioner to Delphi, she brought the lab results in question to a medical school in Manhattan renowned for its research, where a much-published genetic counselor did her best to construct a three generation pedigree of Carole's maternal and paternal lines. But as to Carole's question, there was no ambiguity in this priestess's pronouncement. She and George could not have the same father. No probabilities, no equivocation, no need for further tests. As shockingly clear as modern medicine can be. Which meant Carole did not really know the kind of woman her mother was, did not know the provenance of her sisters and brothers, did not and could not really know herself—a daisy chain of not knowing. It gave her migraines and a desperate energy. Carole realized that only she, of all her siblings or half-sibs, had any clear recollection of the man who was supposed to be their father. But everything was now open to question, and getting answers from her mother, she knew, was futile. She had no choice. She had to track down him down—this man she had known as her father, Mr. Ted T, the fabled alcoholic of family lore who by some accounts had simply abandoned his family, and by others had been banished by his wife for the sake of the children. Ray warned her it was a bad idea. Nothing there, he said, but worms she'd never get back in the can.

It didn't take Carole long to find the Ted T she was looking for. He was not hiding or even far away, living peaceably enough in the Pennsylvania countryside just outside Harrisburg. She decided to pay a visit by herself, and told no one she was going. A scouting trip was how she viewed it, and George's involvement at this stage would only complicate matters. If things went well she would let him follow-up later if he wished, though George seemed strangely indifferent to the question of his paternity, an apathy she blamed on his illness. The trip was a four-hour drive through tiresome New Jersey

traffic and a slight drizzle at the Pennsylvania border. The house was a small grey ranch. She arrived in mid-afternoon, double-checking the house numbers as she cruised down the street and back for fear of pulling into the wrong driveway. The front yard was well-maintained she noted with some relief, sporting neat flower beds and a trim lawn. She had phoned the week before to arrange the visit, not wanting to surprise him. As she was poised to ring the bell an elderly looking man appeared at the door. Again she feared she had the wrong house. It took a moment to recognize him as the same person she had known in childhood, aged a full generation as if he were a grandparent of the girl she had been when he disappeared from her life. He was tall and thin, almost emaciated, with an angular face, and seemed quite ill at ease.

"Hi, Dad?" she inquired. "It's me, Carole. Don't worry, I won't bite." Apprehensive but able to muster her usual bravado, she sprang forward and gave him and awkward hug, feeling the tension in his narrow shoulders as he pulled away.

"As long as you're here, come on in," said Mr. T. Something in his voice told her that maybe she was wrong. He was not nervous, he was embarrassed. She followed him to the living room. It was also neat, modestly furnished with ersatz antiques, lime-green carpeting, bookshelves over the fireplace loaded with a collection of porcelain dolls and painted tea cups. A tired-looking woman appeared from the kitchen and stood at the edge of the hallway.

"This is my wife Barbara," he said, almost as if apologizing.

"Glad to meet you, Carole," said Barbara as she stepped forward and shook her hand. She took Carole's jacket and hung it in the closet, offering coffee or a soft drink that was politely declined. "Then I'll let you two talk. I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on," she said, and retreated to the kitchen.

Mr. T motioned for Carole to sit down. She chose the sofa, sitting pertly on its edge while he settled into a comfortable armchair across from her. They were finally face-to-face, and despite the fact she had rehearsed this meeting a dozen times, she didn't know quite where to begin. Perhaps Ray was right, this was a waste of time. In this space of silence, feeling him eye her warily, she began to sense the extent of her intrusion. She was no longer sure what she was looking for. In the end, what difference would it make?

“Well, here I am,” he said, breaking the ice with the defiant tone of a man about to be interrogated. “What do you want?”

“I’m not sure,” said Carole, unsettled by his abruptness and the impatience, almost rudeness, he didn’t bother to disguise. “I thought I knew, but maybe it’s not that important. Maybe just to see you.”

“You wanted to know about me. You said you wanted to know what happened between me and your mother. Okay, here you are so I’ll tell you. I owe you that much, I suppose. I’m not proud of what happened.”

“I can understand that,” said Carole, lowering her eyes in a gesture meant to spare his feelings. “With the drinking and all. Why Mom made you leave.”

Her father snorted and almost choked. “Why she made me leave? Isn’t that a nice little fairytale. Lying always came natural to her. Hell, I never drank more than the next man. And she didn’t throw me out, I left. But you didn’t just decide to drop by for old time’s sake. Something must have happened. I bet you found something out,” he said almost gleefully, thrusting a finger at her.

“Yes,” said Carole, steadying herself as best she could in the face of his indignation, “I did.” She paused a moment to gather herself before plunging into the real reason for her visit, the reason she had insisted on putting herself through this unpleasantness, the reason she had been denied the privilege of sacrificing her kidney. “Quite a surprise. From the tests for George’s kidney transplant. I found out you’re not his father.” She braced herself for his reaction but he merely shrugged.

“That’s not news. I figured that out a long time ago.”

“Or Amanda’s.”

“That doesn’t surprise me either.” He looked away in disgust.

“It sure surprised me,” said Carole, amazed at his indifference. “Mom never let on they were anyone’s but yours. I came here because I want to know what really happened.”

“What does your mother say really happened?”

“I just told you. She couldn’t take your drinking.”

“Okay, since you came all this way I’ll tell you.” Her father leaned toward her like a man about to confess, though his tone was still harsh. “Nothing strange,” he said.

“Adultery, plain and simple. A wife cheating on her husband. Happens every day. Maybe I could’ve stomached a little affair, I don’t know. But not knowing all those years. How could I be so dumb? The disgrace was bad enough, but raising some gypsy’s kids? At least they said he looked like a gypsy. I don’t know what he was, Cuban or something. Some spic. That was too much. I could have killed that son of a bitch. Good thing for him I couldn’t find him. Good thing for me too, or I’d be in prison right now.” He clapped his hands on the sofa and sat back with a sneer, awaiting her reaction.

And what difference does it make, wondered Carole again, realizing that this shriveled old man, this scornful and bitter man, sputtering out his bile in front of her, must indeed be her father as she had assumed all her life, realizing the sheer willfulness of her inquest, ashamed in that instant of her own spite that had sparked it and of the man it had led her to. She had nothing left to say.

“So now you know,” said her father. “Satisfied? Your mother is a slut and your brothers are bastards.” Her look of revulsion prodded him further. “I wish I could say I cared about you, but you remind me too much of her. And those twins can go to hell for all I care. All those medical bills. I couldn’t believe it, my hard-earned pay going for some spic’s bastards. What kind of country is this?”

Carole looked one last time at the twisted face of this man she wished she had never found, wished she had left alone, a face still oddly cherished despite its vile outrage, and took her leave with a curt thank-you and a hurried good-bye to him and his tired-looking wife. As she pulled onto the interstate a light rain began to fall. The sound of the windshield wipers was hypnotic and comforting, far preferable to the blaring of the radio. On her way across New Jersey she vowed to keep this visit to herself. She vowed that George would never know. She vowed she would never raise the subject with her mother and, as far as she was concerned, the subject was closed.

XII.

Mrs. T assured George she would pray for his new kidney, though her anxiety was too great to visit him in the hospital. The whole ordeal worried her to death. So much so that one morning when she coughed a clot of blood she knew George's ordeal had gotten the best of her. When George was on the verge of discharge she let it be known that even George's recuperation was too stressful for her, so he went to Carole's house. In fact, Carole insisted on it and Ray was only too happy to oblige. His mother would be glad to take him back, she said, when there were no dressings or stitches to deal with, when it was clear there would be no infections or bleeding or fevers or vomiting or pain of any kind. Her concerns were well-founded. George was so tired and weak he could hardly get out of bed. The soreness of the muscles in his side, yanked and stretched to their limit, made him fear to move. But after a few days, with Carole's prodding, he was shuffling around the house without much help, enough so that one morning he made his way to the back patio for a smoke. Dressed in flip-flops, boxers, and one of Ray's old cotton robes that covered his bulky surgical dressing, he settled into a deck chair eager for his first cigarette in weeks. It was late morning in mid-July, already muggy and hot, smelling of the thyme and hibiscus Carole kept well-watered in their planters. He had a question for his sister, who was knitting across from him in the shade of a large patio umbrella. George lay back for a moment to contemplate the dome of the sky, hazy and humid above him, before lighting up, feeling beads of sweat already pooling on his belly.

"You would have done it, wouldn't you," said George.

Carole knew what he was asking, and was not surprised by the question. In fact she was glad he asked, and replied while she continued to stitch as if picking up the thread of an old conversation. "Of course I would have."

"Why?" he asked. "It's not like we're close."

"That's not the point," said Carole. "It's what families do."

"Not all families."

"Well, this one anyway."

"I wouldn't have done it for you."

"Don't be so sure."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Carole chose not to comment further. The reason she was not a transplant match was no longer a mystery to her, but the rejection still rankled in a most personal way. She resumed the meditation of her knitting, her hands moving in a steady waltz-like rhythm, her skill apparent in the steady rise and fall of the needles, while George resumed his listless contemplation of the sky.

"There are things about Mom we don't understand," said George, blowing a fat smoke ring that hung like a mirage in the heavy air. He poked his finger through it and watched it collapse.

"Where did that idea come from?" asked Carole, her eyes fixed on the yarn.

"The things she says. Like about Dad. She keeps saying she kicked him out, but I remember it different. And how come he never came to see us?"

"She says she wouldn't let him."

"I know. That's bullshit."

"Maybe. So what's your point?" Carole looked up while her hands, autonomous, continued moving at their smooth pace.

"My point," said George, "is I don't know what to believe. Sometimes I think we don't even have the same fathers." He put another cigarette to his lips and let it dangle there, unlit.

Carole finally put down her needles to direct her full attention to George's last point, twisting uncomfortably in her chair to face him. "What gave you that idea?"

George waved his hand in the air as if the notion was of little consequence. "Something Nikki once said, about me being different. Frank too, for that matter. From an artist's point of view, anyway. She was talking about our faces, but it was more than that. This transplant business got me thinking."

Carole fidgeted with her skein, remembering her vow on her return from Pennsylvania.

"It explains a lot. Why I always felt different from you and Donna and even Amanda. It was easy to say it was the diabetes and let it go at that. But no, that was just a smoke screen. A very convenient one. There was something else going on. Now Frank—that's another story. But Frank could tell, too. He knew there was something wrong with our family. Why do you think he moved so far away?"

“I don’t know,” said Carole. “For his work. To get away from you. What difference does it make now?”

“What difference? All the difference in the world. How can you accept what happened if you don’t know what happened?”

Carole considered that for a moment. No rebuttal came to mind, and she nodded her agreement as she resumed her knitting. She was rethinking her vow, resigning herself to what now seemed like a moral necessity to break it and let George know the truth, at least the fragment of the truth she thought she found in her visit to Ted. But not yet. The time was not right.

“So what’s with all those tests? Did you ever figure out what the deal was?”

Carole wasn’t sure what to say.

“Carole? Did you?”

She didn’t answer, bending more intently to her task. Her knitting and her silence began to irritate him. He sat up slowly in his chair, wincing as he pulled on the armrests to ease the tension on his wound, planning to confront her with his question again until he saw how hard she was trying to control herself.

“Nikki was right,” she said, without looking up. George didn’t press her further. He sat on the edge of the lounge chair until she had a moment to compose herself. He took a deep breath to brace himself as well. “You guessed it. Congratulations, George. We have different fathers,” she continued. “That’s what the tests showed. So…,” she stopped to let George fill in the blank.

George threw his cigarette down and stared at the ground. A line of small black ants were marching across the bricks. Some of them carried bits of leaves twice their size. His eyes followed their trail to a small mound of earth where they disappeared. Their industry always fascinated him.

“So I found him,” she continued. “And now I wish I hadn’t. What a bastard. I wish he weren’t my father either.”

“You found him? You found who?” George had lost the thread of the conversation. He was curious about the ants, what their lives were like in their underground colony, and about the life of their queen. Then he felt the ache in his flank well up and eased himself back on the chair.

“My father, Ted T. In Pennsylvania.”

George shifted until he found a more comfortable position. His reaction to Carole’s news was muted, as much from his pain killers as his own indifference. “And what did he say?” he asked.

“He said he’s not your father.”

George coughed and a sharp pain shot up his side. He was about to cough again but held his breath and contained it. When the pain eased he lay back and looked up at the sky. It was still hazy and blue. In its depth there were no longer differences between him and his siblings from the so-called artistic point of view. He felt his blood pulse from his heart to his temples, to his belly and his fingertips, to his wound, and began to laugh.

“Have you told Frank?”

“No.”

“Good,” said George. He laughed louder. Side splitting laughter, busting a gut laughter. He would have liked to let it all out, but it was too painful. He had to stifle it before he could go on. “Don’t. We might as well have different fathers.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“But we have to talk to Mom,” said George, sitting up again, out of breath, holding his side.

“Why? What good will that do?”

“I have the right to know. From her.”

“Of course you do. But you’ll never get it from her.”

“I’m going to try. You with me?”

“No, not really.” Carol picked up her needles and resumed knitting. “I wish you wouldn’t smoke out here.”

XIII.

There’s one more thing that could be said with biological certainty. George and Carole had the same mitochondria. Besides those curious organelles, however, it was

hard to find much they had in common. Some bits of mitochondrial DNA from their respective fathers' flagellates may have slipped under the radar and survived the mother egg's cytoplasm, inhospitable as it was. That could make the difference, who knows? More research, etc. But even were it so, the long-lived maternal line was primary though George's energy felt nothing like Carole's and Carole's nothing like her mother's. We're talking more than ATP and oxidative stress here obviously, though as we can see George's parts were more prone to apoptotic rust, and maybe Carole did have greater reserves of ATP at her disposal. As well as managing her household and a full-time job, George's recovery and her mother's finances, her in-laws' health care and the annual neighborhood Fourth of July picnic, she chaired the PTO at her kids' elementary school and was Troop Leader for her daughter's Girl Scouts. After dinner she vacuumed and ironed clothes, and usually ended her evenings with a gin and tonic while she crocheted scarves for Christmas gifts in front of the nightly news long after her husband had gone to bed. Six hours of sleep was plenty for her. Ray was smart enough to stay out of her way, though they'd sometimes bang heads when Carole announced she was taking on something new. After fifteen years of marriage he still enjoyed her companionship and liked to have some personal attention from her now and then. In company he was always quick to say how much he admired his wife. But he had started to come home from work a little later, to go to bed a little earlier, to sleep a bit longer on weekends, and have a few more beers with his golf buddies after eighteen holes on the public course. Carole might have noticed if she wasn't so busy.

"Can I get you a refill?" said Ray, drink in hand, sitting on his backyard deck with George. George had just been cleared by the transplant surgeon and was about to move to his mother's house for one more week of recuperation before returning, at long last, to his island.

"No, I'm good," said George.

"Good, better, best. Hey, we're celebrating here." Ray spoke with the hyper-articulation of a man who would otherwise slur his words.

"Sure, why not?" On this occasion George was easily persuaded. He did, in fact, feel quite good and, settling back comfortably in his lounge chair, was quite fine with

the idea of feeling better. He clasped his hands behind his head and gazed up at the leaves shading him in the neatly groomed backyard, and the clouds above them catching the last of the sun in the evening sky, at the long white smudge of a vapor trail high overhead illuminated like a bright strip of snow. He always liked to look at the sky. And so the transplant had worked. He was off dialysis. His sugars were holding steady now. Amanda had bounced back just fine and was going about her business. So what if Nikki went to their high school reunion. So what if Frank was skulking around. Then he heard voices in the kitchen. Carole was home. The voices became loud and their tone sharp though he couldn't make out the words, two voices talking over each other in an argument that became more heated with each response. A door flew open, there was a rush of footsteps and his sister appeared on the deck.

"What on God's earth are you trying to do?" she said.

George turned his head and the house spun. "Doing what?" he asked, steadying himself, trying to suppress the wave of dizziness and nausea that followed.

"Are you trying to screw up? Are you deliberately trying to sabotage everything I've done for you?" Carole's face was flushed with outrage. Ray followed closely behind her, a bit off balance, trying to get a word in.

"It's not his fault," he said. "I was twisting his arm."

"Then it's both of you. Why do I bother? Get your stuff George, we're going to Mom's. I leave you two alone for an afternoon and this is what I get?"

George fell back in his chair, closed his eyes and stopped listening. In his mind he could still picture the leading edge of the vapor trail high above, and the darkened sky beyond turning to cobalt blue. He could hear his pulse beating in his ears like the surf pounding on the shore by his house on the island. When it was clear that George was not about to move or speak, Carole said, "Ray, go get George's stuff." Ray had no resistance to offer. He disappeared into the house as ordered as she called after him, "You and I will talk later." The pulsation in George's ears gradually subsided. He realized he wasn't feeling that well after all. Maybe he had drunk too much, but Carole's outrage was misplaced. Whatever the ill effects of alcohol, it did not threaten his transplant. This bullshit doesn't matter he thought, as he eventually rose from the deck chair and met Ray coming down the stairs while Carole waited for them in her car

with the engine running. Ray put George's luggage in the trunk. They shook hands in a silent goodbye, careful to suppress any display of comradeship or hint of conspiracy that might further enrage Carole. George fell into the passenger's seat and the house in front of him spun once again. Carole backed down the driveway, whipping the car around so fast when they reached the street that he wanted to puke. "Put your seat belt on," said Carole. She didn't wait long before she said it again.

XIV.

Back at his office after hospital rounds, Gastine was too harried to greet the staff with a fraction of his usual courtesy, rushing past the receptionist and nurse to have a brief review of his patient list. The first patient of the day had already been waiting long past her appointment time. Glancing down the column of names, he did a double take and paused. It was not George T but his mother, Mrs. T, scheduled in the eleven o'clock slot. He hadn't seen her in three years, and assumed she had found another physician. He also assumed she was coming to talk about George until he saw the reason for her visit. Coughing blood. He sighed and reviewed the possibilities, most of them bad, a differential that began with the triviality of nosebleeds and worked its way to a terminal diagnosis, with plenty of options in between. Coughing blood. At least the crimson-stained handkerchiefs of consumption were long gone but still, not a good symptom. So how was he to react to what he witnessed day in and day out? If you added it up, how many reactions was that a week, or a year? Into which compartment of his brain was it filed when he witnessed the daily routine of fear and pain on the face of a hospital patient, or the sadness, worry, and never-ending litany of complaints from patients in his office? And where did it go at home, seated at the family dinner table or when dropping off to sleep at night? We could ask, but chances are he wouldn't tell us even if he knew. Maybe he didn't think about it at all, and maybe he didn't need to. He was still part scientist, after all. He had the comfort of measurement. But there's no lab value for pain—not yet anyway. All the Likert scales and cartoon faces in the world will never tell the story, and pain and suffering are not the same we're told. What was

Gastine thinking the day he put down George's musty old chart, with pages of progress notes slipping out of the folder and the paper moldering away? Disappointment but also relief, perhaps, that he would not have to step into that vast world on the other side of the stethoscope. He didn't even realize he'd thrown out his last tape player years ago, and had nothing to play George's tapes on even if he found them. That's how long it had been since the tapes arrived. There must have been some reason he didn't listen to them right away. And maybe there was nothing on the tapes to play. Maybe they were the blank originals, returned as a courtesy. There was no way to know. The only thing left was the dry inventory of the written record, his Linear B.

"They're gone," he told his wife. "God knows where."

"Really, what difference does it make?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Gastine. "Maybe none. But I'd like to hear them so I can know it doesn't make any difference."

"Let me assure you, it doesn't," she said. "Whatever happened to him, happened whether you know it or not. And knowing will make no difference to him or to you."

"You're probably right," said Gastine. "I'm just not sure."

He opened his laptop and glanced at the time. He was already running twenty minutes late. He took another minute to glance at Mrs T's record as he walked to the exam room and his first testy patient.

Bad Blood

What horrible decisions the gods can make![5]

I.

It's hard to say when the bad blood between the brothers began. We could look to birth order, but the medical record is not helpful there. It's still unclear who was Twin A and Twin B, a situation not uncommon and not nearly as strange as the firstborn on Cape Cod who became younger than his twin—coming into the world just moments before daylight savings time ended, followed by his brother a half hour later after the clocks were set back. Nor those cases where the birth experience is radically different, one pushed out the birth canal and the other pulled from a surgical wound. In the case of the T's, ultrasound identified a Twin A lined up first to exit the old-fashioned way, but it's unclear who was the first to emerge in what became their operative birth. Although it was clear by their size difference who had the best of the placenta.

But birth is hardly the beginning. We can only speculate what might have happened around the moment of conception. If there were questions about 'winding the clock' so to speak, that affected the flow of 'animal spirits'. More on that later. In the immediate aftermath of that event, we'd put our money on mirror-image twins cleaving post-fertilization day five more or less. In which case we could say only their genes were identical, cloned homunculi already going their separate ways in separate packages while tethered to the same source that nourished them somewhat unequally. Although other scenarios are equally conceivable, e.g. early cleaving of the ball of cells that briefly held them together. On the evidence however, an unequal placental flow would seem to be a likely culprit, since something similar persisted after birth. And what, you might ask, made them unequal? And to whose advantage, if any? A role of the dice that became the experiment? Wait. Some say it can all be explained by going

back far enough and examining each variable in sufficient detail, i.e. using big data for a simulation—a virtual conception, gestation, and birth so to speak (even without the information from Gastine's lost tapes)—just as others might say those early circumstances made no difference at all, and there were no dice to roll. Of course it's quite possible it all started with George's diabetes, and that singular event altered the reality of everything that went before and after it. Be that as it may, it's surely only a matter of time before medical science answers these questions and more.

II.

There was once a time when Gastine's hospital had a well-appointed dining room for the exclusive use of the medical staff. There was once a time when doctors from the hospital and medical offices nearby looked forward to meeting there. They—mostly men and mostly white—talked sports or investments or wives over their free lunch[3], happy to leave the burdens of patient care for a few moments of friendly banter. Occasionally they even discussed their patients—to request a consultation, or describe an interesting case, or merely indulge in medical gossip. Even in the days before HIPAA, discretion was assumed but more observed in the breach. One day a certain obstetrician, one Mario Bertolucci, a skilled and erudite clinician dedicated to his solo practice who was nonetheless viewed as an outlier in his department, a bit of a cowboy in fact, appeared at noontime with dark bags drooping under his eyes and dark stubble on his chin, dressed in the rumpled blue scrubs of a physician who had slept in the call room. He drifted into the dining room and slid into a seat across from Gastine. Gastine, sitting erect, punctilious by contrast in his blue blazer and lost in his own thoughts, nodded politely. An odd couple, their paths seldom crossed anywhere else either socially or professionally. They traded pleasantries, after which Bertolucci launched into a rambling account of his vaginal delivery of a pair of twins the night

[3] *Lunches were provided to the medical staff free of charge until new hospital counsel raised concerns that the practice violated Federal anti-kickback statutes.

before, his eyes lit with the playful expression of an alert mind in a body that was chronically fatigued.

"After the first baby came out, the mother's contractions stopped," he said in a gravelly voice with the lingering trace of a Bolognese accent. "No one was in distress, so I had the mother rest on the delivery table with the cord clamped between her legs." He then told how he waited patiently, seated on a stool at the mother's feet in his scrubs and mask, chatting late into the night with the mother and the frustrated maternity-care nurse who planned to report him to the chairman of the OB department first thing in the morning, waiting for nature to takes its course. When long after midnight the mother's contractions started up again Bertolucci delivered Twin B without complications. "The beautiful thing is," he concluded, "I can bill the insurance company for two deliveries."

Gastine listened thoughtfully from the other side of the lunch table, wondering not about Bertolucci's risk of billing fraud, but the implications of twins with different birthdays—the one day a year Twin A would claim to be a year older than his or her sibling. It brought to mind a patient of his with diabetes whose identical twin was diabetes-free, a fact he then related to his colleagues.

"They're not, by any chance, mirror image twins?" asked Bertolucci, a lifelong student of embryology and other forms of medical arcana.

"That I wouldn't know," said Gastine. "But from what I do know they're different in other ways as well."

The words of the internist and obstetrician had traveled down the table to the ear of a psychiatrist newly appointed to the medical staff, a Dr. Lujan, who was frequenting the lunchroom in hopes of promoting her fledgling practice.

"That's all very interesting," interjected Lujan, and to be fair she was eager to join the conversation as much from professional interest as self-promotion. "But have you ever met your patient's twin?"

Gastine admitted he hadn't. He realized all his knowledge of Frank was second hand. Lujan introduced herself and continued, "It almost sounds like a syndrome of subjective doubles. There's a reverse type where the double seems an imposter." Then

turning to Bertolucci she added, “There’s also a mirrored-self misidentification where the subject sees his mirror image as someone else.”

“These are very real doubles,” said Gastine, suspicious of what he felt was psychiatry’s tendency to lapse into the jargon of pseudo-science, whether invoking reaction formation or neurotransmitters. “Clones in fact, if I’m not mistaken.”

“The clonal pluralization of self, then,” said the psychiatrist. “It can happen with the mind as well.”

“Yes, a very disordered mind,” said Bertolucci.

“No more disordered than the body,” said Lujan, an assertion that was hard to dispute, especially by those at the table so familiar with its natural shocks. Gastine was yet to have the idea that George should make his tapes, but no doubt Lujan’s assertion piqued his curiosity. Lujan left her business card and made sure her colleagues knew she was available for consultations.

After the hospital lawyers pointed out the risk of violating anti-kickback statutes, the doctor’s dining room, in use for half a century, was converted to a billing office, and a decade later to a conference room for the mushrooming information technology staff. There was some grumbling at first from the usual suspects, but the lawyers and the hospital administration had their way. It hardly mattered. Few doctors ate lunch in the hospital anymore, and when they did they ate alone, or in twos and threes, rushing back to their workplaces to turn out more relative value units. They eat in the employee cafeteria now, or take a tray to their office. Some of them bring lunch from home, and most are hospital employees anyway. For a time the cafeteria had a table set aside for doctors, but that practice too was abandoned without much protest, and what protest there was came from an oral surgeon and a dentist.

III.

Four incredible teens talk about their lives with type 1 diabetes:

- *Madison details her experience with finding out she has T1D.*

- *Zack started his teenage years hiding his diabetes from his friends and lying about his management to his parents.*
- *MacKenzie begins her journey to find balance between the need for her personal privacy and her parents' desire to be informed.*
- *Brett and his parents share their strategies for making living with type 1 diabetes a team effort.*

George shuffled into the classroom and took a seat in the back row, crossed his arms and examined the eight other “learners” seated in front of him, T1D teens of various shapes and sizes from surrounding towns. Some had barely started puberty, others were on the verge of adulthood, every one of them a stranger to him. What they had in common was their disease. George’s pediatrician, tired of complaints from the school nurse, had referred him to a hospital on the South Shore for ‘self-management education’. George reluctantly agreed, hoping to get his mother off his back and please his girlfriend and now, looking around the room, seeing a group of prim girls and clean-cut boys chatting earnestly, he was having second thoughts. The chatter stopped when the course facilitators stood up to introduce themselves, two women with sage smiles, a nurse and a nutritionist, both well into middle age, who began with a detailed listing of their credentials. After they finished lavishing praise on one another, with liberal use of the word ‘incredible’, they asked the teens to introduce themselves.

*“*George T,” said George, the last to give his name, slouched in a chair in the back row.

“George,” said the nurse, picking up on his attitude, “why don’t you start. What would you say is the hardest thing about caring for your diabetes?”

“Going to diabetes education class,” said George, garnering a few snorts from his classmates.

“I see you have some feelings about being here,” she said, still smiling. “Why don’t you tell us about that.” She waited, showing the class she was comfortable with the long silence that followed.

“I don’t have any feelings about being here,” said George. “I’m just here.”

“Then as long as you are, let’s make the best of it,” said the nurse. “We’re not going to lecture you. The goal of these classes is to empower you to take charge of your own care. We want you to have the information you need to make the right choices. And probably what’s most important, to learn from each other.” The nurse pointed around the room at his fellow learners.

“I’m already in charge of my own care,” said George.

A slim, dark-haired girl in the front row turned around, looking at him over the thick frames of her glasses. “What’s with your attitude? Can’t you see she’s just trying to help us? Chill out.”

George chilled, and didn’t say a word the rest of the session. When it ended the nurse managed to catch him before he slipped out the door, and asked, “Not too painful, was it?”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” said George, “I know all this stuff.”

“I’m sure you do,” she answered. “But there are still things we can learn from each other. Sometimes it helps to share our stories.”

“And sometimes it doesn’t,” said George. All through class he was thinking of food and Nikki and marijuana. He was intent on meeting up with his friends and getting high as soon as he got out of there. But he tried one more session. The class discussed setting personal goals, checking their sugars, eating right, injections before meals, but he had nothing more to say. When asked how it went, he told his mother and Nikki that everyone in the class was very nice. He did not say he hated kids who made a show of their disease. In his book it was unseemly.

IV.

The smell of pot roast filled the kitchen, the living room, seeped into the wallpaper and went out the windows. Mrs T. did not stint on garlic. The family were all at dinner—the twins, Amanda, Donna, and their mother—under the yellowish glow of a fluorescent light, on the formica top of their kitchen table, when George announced he was dropping out of school. His mother nodded and passed the bread, concerned that

Amanda was not eating enough and the carrots were overdone. Frank was not impressed. He'd heard it all before.

"Fuck you, George."

"No, fuck *you* Frank."

The twins' faces mirrored their temper, the same shade of red, the same glower, the same sideways head jerk when they were getting pissed off. But with hair and clothes cut differently, their styles had already diverged even if their features had not. Not yet.

"Stop it," said Mrs. T. "Don't say that word in my house."

"He's always dropping out," said Frank. "It's just bullshit."

"That word, too." said their mother. There was a moment of silence, of forks scraping plastic plates.

"Fuck you, Frank."

"No, fuck *you* George."

"I said stop it," yelled their mother, brandishing a soup spoon. The twins paid no attention, glaring at each other to see who would flinch first or punch, enraged not by high school or insults or their mother's impotence, but merely the scornful look on the other's face.

George was beyond explanations. He would not bother to tell them how his sugar had gone low in class again—that was the kind of news they had all heard before. He did not bother to relate how he raised his hand to ask a question, certain the teacher had written something on the blackboard that didn't make sense. He knew there was no point. There was no point in telling how his upraised arm became weak and unsteady as the teacher ignored him or when finally called on, his face flushed, he stammered "What is the…," as he stared blankly at the board. "What is the…," he repeated, feeling the room spin and unable to move his tongue. He couldn't make his family seated at the dinner table hear the giggles from the back row that punctured the class's silence as, his clammy face beaded with sweat, he failed to formulate his question yet monopolized the attention of the room while he continued to stammer. Then running out of patience, or maybe thinking he was being mocked, the teacher continued his lecture as Nikki rushed from the back row to George's side, retrieved the

candy bar from his pants pocket and shoved it in his mouth while he was still conscious enough to chew. How the teacher, clueless, kept lecturing while the class's attention remained fixed on the commotion around him. How Nikki recruited the student in the desk next to him to help her pull him to his feet, and they steered him toward the nurse's office past the gantlet of gaping classmates. "Is he okay?" asked the teacher as they reached the door. "No thanks to you," said Nikki, who couldn't stand the teacher or the class. The teacher turned back to the blackboard where he left off. That was the last straw for George. He'd had his fill of ridicule and pity. He'd had his fill of frightening people with his illness.

"We'll talk about this later," said Mrs. T.

"No, Mom. This time's for real," says George. "I'm done."

"Yeah, right. Here we go again," said Frank, shaking his head. "You're such a phony."

"And you're such a fake. Be real for once."

The dirty plates sat in front of them, carrot slices in grease, peas from a can. Amanda was thinking hard. She wanted to say something to end the argument and rid herself of the uneasy feeling in her gut, the knot she felt whenever the twins went at it. She wanted to tell George she thought dropping out of school was okay, but she didn't want to face Frank's hostility and she wasn't sure where her mother stood on the issue. She didn't know why it was okay to drop out, only that people should leave George alone. So she kept quiet, eyeing first George, then Frank, then her mother, then back to George, gauging their anger. "Stop arguing, you guys," she said, deciding that agreement with her mother was the safest course.

"What do *you* know," said Frank.

"Stay out of this," George warned.

"Stop it, both of you," screamed Mrs. T.

"That's it. I'm out of here." Amanda threw her napkin on the table and bolted to her room.

"Get back here and clear the table," her mother called after her.

"Fuck you, Frank."

"No, fuck *you* George."

Donna kept eating. She did not say a word. She enjoyed her mother's cooking. She was not going to let her brothers' squabble spoil her meal. Donna was not going to be bothered by George's problems, or clear the table if she could help it. She didn't know if she was really part of this family. Carole couldn't help. She was away at college.

V.

As a teen, George was always being told what he had to do and what he couldn't, nothing so different from other teens except that everyone impressed on him that the consequences of failure were more grim. And like most people of any age, with any condition, being told he couldn't do something only made him want to do it more. So it was not surprising that one day he found himself standing outside a dive shop in a strip mall just off the Southern State and Sunrise Highway. It was sandwiched between a nail salon and a deli in a one-story flat-roofed building the shape of a long cardboard box, set back from a strip of grass and a strip of sidewalk that bordered the curb and the fumes of a busy four-lane highway. A display of diving gear hung in the window to the right of the front door, and to the left hung a red poster with the acronym PADI printed in large white letters. George paused and looked at the red awning over the entrance. He was not thrilled with what he was about to do. It would not go well if his brother, or anyone, found out. He entered casually and poked around the store a few minutes to firm up his resolve before speaking to the young woman who greeted him from behind the sales counter.

"I'm interested in scuba lessons," said George, forcing the words out before he lost his nerve.

"Sure thing," said the saleswoman. "What level are you looking for?"

"Beginner, I guess," said George.

"That's our Open Water course," she informed him, handing over a brochure with dates and prices. "Do you have your own equipment?"

"Not yet," said George. "I thought I'd rent."

“No problem. When would you like to start?”

George looked over the brochure. “As soon as possible.”

“Great,” she said, handing him a sheaf of forms to fill out. “I’m Kim, your instructor,” offering him her hand. She looked athletic enough.

“I’m Frank,” said George, “Frank T.” He shook her hand and proceeded to fill out the forms at the counter, handing her Frank’s driver’s license for ID. When Kim made a copy for her records and clipped it to his file, George took a deep breath and fabricated his medical information. He was all set for his first lesson the following week.

George was now Frank as far as Kim and scuba lessons were concerned. At first it was troubling. When he heard his new name called he looked around for his brother. He had to stay alert not to slip up, but as the class progressed he got used to it. By the end it was almost liberating. For four hours each Saturday he had an ordinary life. No one looked at him with suspicion or concern. He took to the water as if he belonged there. Why would he stop? When he finished Open Water he signed up for an advanced class that travelled to the Pennsylvania countryside for a series of weekend adventure dives. The place was called Houndstooth Springs, a manmade lake and privately owned scuba course, the abandoned quarry of a bankrupt cement company repurposed for recreation. It was deep and calm, bordered by grassy banks hosting flocks of ducks and Canada geese, with a noisy water park at one end marring its peacefulness. Despite the camaraderie of the diving group, on the second day George was tense as he donned his gear. The class’s first two dives had been trouble-free, but somehow he felt a night dive would be different. There had been occasional deaths at Houndstooth. The lake’s owners had never been found liable—all carelessness on the divers’ part it seemed. The class had all signed a stack of waivers. George, or ‘Frank’, had been careful to hide his syringes, and had taken his evening dose of insulin in a bathroom stall. As the class boarded their dive boat at sundown, their instructor sensed an air of apprehension and the need to reassure her charges.

“A lot of people prefer diving at night,” she said. “It’s so peaceful. You see things down there you’ll never see during the day.”

“It’s the same lake but it looks like a different world,” added their co-instructor, Kim’s husband, a man with bleached-blond surfer hair and a Queens accent who was always quick to follow Kim’s lead.

When they arrived at their dive spot George counted half a dozen boats, their lights bobbing in a slight breeze, dotting the dark surface of the water like fireflies. On the far side of the lake stood the silhouette of the water park whose last faint sounds were fading into the night. The sky was clear and moonless. Kim was right about the peace. The Milky Way reflected in the still water of the quarry like a river of candlelight. The divers made a final check of their gear and back-rolled off the boat one at a time, making soft plashes like otters in a pond. Frank felt buoyant but uneasy in the underwater silence, watching his flashlight illuminate the blackness, adjusting his weight as he slanted downward toward their objective. He proceeded cautiously, afraid he might lose sight of the instructors. The other divers seemed small and distant. A small-mouthed bass caught in his light beam gave him a puzzled look and flitted away. He saw rocks below and the markings of the sandstone bottom of the lake, and then their target landmark rising in the gloom, a submerged airplane sunk as a diving attraction, an old B-24 rusted and glaucous as a wreck off the coast of Libya. First its telltale snout, the ‘greenhouse’, then its bent and broken propellers, its stout body with its twin tail section still intact, all covered with filaments of blue algae that waved like fingers in the slight current, giving it the blurred and insubstantial contours of an unfocused photograph. The dive leaders paused to gather the class and give them a moment to examine what remained of the bomber’s logo, a pair of bathing-beauty legs still visible under the cockpit window. Satisfied all their charges were accounted for, the dive leaders waved them on with Kim in the lead and her husband sweeping behind. The divers followed her over the top gun turret to the other side of the plane where the fuselage was ripped open. As he glided in the midst of the others toward the large hole gaping in the shadows of their torches, Frank’s tension eased and gave way to a flush of elation. He was suddenly at home here, comfortable in this school of comrades, welcomed by his aquatic surroundings. His arms felt like fins guiding him through the water, holding him balanced and steady. His legs worked as one, propelling him forward in long, easy strokes. His elation was short-lived. As he shined his light into the

bomb bay of the wrecked and rusting hulk he halted, stung by the sudden smell of acrid smoke and the taste of ash though the water was clear and his mask well-sealed. Then came bursts of light and puffs of glittery dust from a quarry bottom that seemed to have dropped miles below him, and streaks of light flashing at him from above, and a vibration like the deep throb of turbines. George froze. The trailing instructor tapped his arm and motioned him forward. George forced himself to move, bewildered by this apparition. He caught up with his classmates in the bowels of the plane as quickly as he could. Once there he heard men's voices calling to each other, frantic cries, cursing, and the crackling of static as the lights and sounds around him went out. He was no longer in a sunken airplane, no longer in the water of an artificial lake. He was in an ambulance on his way to a hospital in Harrisburg with an oxygen mask strapped to his face and an IV pumping glucose and saline into his arm.

"You went crazy down there," said Kim's husband as they wheeled George to his hospital bed, exhausted from yet another round of tests. "Thrashing around in that plane like a wild man. I was right next to you. It's lucky no one else got hurt."

"If you say so," said George. "I don't remember."

"Then you went limp and started sinking. When we got you to the surface you were blue as ice. Sure scared the shit out of us. You're okay though, right?"

"I guess so," said George.

As Frank, George had signed all the requisite dive waivers, but his instructors were not sure which name to address him by let alone the legal implications of his forgery. And so Frank T was hospitalized with hypoglycemia and seizures, and George T was discharged with his diabetes.

VI.

The brothers' final rupture was nothing special. It didn't come over a girl, or dropping out of school, or a diving fiasco, or even the favor of their anxious mother. It came more like a spark to fumes, from a small provocation. It came in a Greek diner with its display case of cream-filled deserts, a jukebox connection in every booth,

glossy menus with color photographs of the fare, and a counter by the front door where the cashier kept a watchful eye on the customers. It came from the commonplace of money.

"So you can't pay me back, is that what you're saying?" said Frank. The brothers were seated across from each other in a booth by the windows. Frank was angry and made no effort to hide it. George was non-plussed.

"No. I said I can't do it right now," said George. They halted their discussion while a yellow-aproned waitress set two tumblers of water in front of them and squished away in her rubber-soled shoes.

"That wasn't the agreement," said Frank, lowering his voice.

"I don't have the money," said George. He held up the menu between them, blocking the sight of his brother's face.

"So when will you have it?" said Frank.

"I don't know."

"Why not? Aren't you working with the carnival?"

"I have more bills," said George, lowering the menu and mirroring Frank's glare. "Medical bills."

"More?" Frank blurted out, louder than he'd intended. "For God's sake, why can't you take care of yourself? Is that so hard?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Because if you can't even take care of yourself, how the hell are you going to pay me back?"

"How I take care of myself is my own business. Don't worry, you'll get your money."

They sat across from each other holding their tongues while the waitress brought their identical orders: cheeseburger, fries, soggy coleslaw. They stayed silent and started to eat. Looking out the window as he held his burger, Frank saw their reflections superimposed on the cars in the parking lot and the traffic passing down the road. Mirrored next to his, as if their faces were floating in the glass, he appreciated the gauntness of George's face for the first time. "Fuck the money," he said. "Do me a

favor and stay on that god-forsaken island the rest of your life. I have more important things to worry about."

"Frank, I said you'll get your money."

Lowering his voice again, turning from the reflections in the window to face his brother who, across the table, was squirting ketchup on his fries, Frank said, "Face it George, you're one big fuck-up. You didn't finish school, you can't hold a job, your health is a mess, you spend more money on cigarettes than on food. So forget the money. I'm done."

"So be done," said George, without looking up, as if he had been waiting the whole time to make this one remark. "You have no clue. You never did."

"About what, your life?"

"About anything."

"All I know is you have your life and I have mine. I didn't make things this way. So just deal with it."

"Right. And just what the fuck do you think I'm doing? What do you think I've been doing all my life?"

"What do I think? It's not what I think, it's what I know. You just screw around. You blame me for not having your disease. You wonder why people abandon you when you're the one pushing them away."

"I don't have to push. They're happy to leave all by themselves."

"You're damn right."

"I'm damn right."

Heads turned from the table across the aisle and that was enough for Frank. He tossed some bills on the counter and slid out of the booth. George did not protest, did not try to stop him, did not utter a word, sipping his diet Coke as he watched Frank's exit as if watching a TV show. He waved a silent good-bye through the window as his brother walked away in the lights of the entranceway. He finished his meal and lingered at the booth to ponder his finances, then paid the bill with Frank's money. On his way out he eyed the desserts in the display case, tempted, but kept on going to the parking lot where he could finally light a cigarette. Nikki had her engagement ring, and now he considered his debt to his brother paid in full.

Driving away from the diner, Frank knew it wasn't just his feelings towards George that were at play. He had never felt a strong tie to family. Growing up he was mostly left to his own affairs, which he managed quite well. Having no need of his sisters they tended to ignore him. And there was the constant drama swirling around George that absorbed so much of everyone's time and attention. As soon as he could, he fled his double and had no regrets on that score. Whatever survivor's guilt he felt had been cancelled out by his family's focus on the special child. All that was simple enough. But even if the family playing field had been level, and its affection and worry equally shared, he did not have the courage to watch the premature image of his own eventual deterioration play out before his eyes, or enough sympathy to hear reports of it from nine hundred miles away. It was not his fault, he assured himself. After years of evasion and uncertainty, of shrugging his shoulders and waving his hands to deflect George's questions—whether those questions were disingenuous on George's part or merely naive was never clear, as was his twin's motivation in asking them—about the fairness of chance or design in his fate, he eventually found his answer not in religion or philosophy, but in the disputes of physics. God does not play dice. God is the die. That satisfied him. He felt no need to dig deeper.

Meet the Parents

…you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c…[6]

I.

Bernice T, née Hebert, of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, met her husband-to-be, Ted T, of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, at a USO dance in Providence. Bernice was an attentive hostess who tried her best to be nice to everyone, but didn't care much for the local boys. Ted seemed so worldly, so clever with his fast talk, and was such a better dancer than any of her other partners. For his part Ted thought Bernice rather plain-looking, though he was attracted to her full figure and clear complexion. His idea of his own looks was greatly inflated, which gave him a certain confidence with women. Over cake and coffee at the refreshment stand he told her how she would love Roseland and the Palladium, and how he'd like to show her around New York someday and take her to a place in Brooklyn that had the best cheesecake in the world. If he made it through the war, that is. What was a girl to think? When he said that part about the war it struck Bernice how fleeting life's chances were, and how silly the USO rules were that forbade dating the servicemen she hosted at the dances. She made a quick bet on Ted, figuring that losing her virginity to him would help the war effort in some small way so damn the rules. A month later they spent a weekend honeymoon in Newport, most of it bouncing on the creaky bed in their hotel room before Ted shipped out. But as Ted, a corporal in the Army Air Corps, was assigned to a B-17 maintenance crew at an airfield in the east of England, the risk of his not returning was rather lower than he made out. The closest he came to death was being beaten senseless by two Royal Marines outside a London pub after he pissed on their shoes when drunk on a weekend pass. When he returned to the States, intact more or less, it was clear that he and Bernice shared the same

religion, and a similar desire for sex and family and a house of their own, but not much else, which didn't bother either of them or really matter as long as Ted had a decent job and Bernice had healthy babies. Ted found a good job as a machinist in Long Island's booming aviation industry. Soon they could afford a little house in one of the new developments springing up just past the Suffolk County line, and a used Chevy for Ted's commute. Bernice kept up her end of the bargain, giving birth to a healthy eight-pound four-ounce baby girl they named Carole after a Hollywood film star who died in a plane crash flying home from a war bond rally.

Claire Hebert was Bernice's younger sister. She was a bit prettier than Bernice, a better student, but odd and awkward in a way that kept her from making friends. As a young child it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what that oddness was—a tendency to twirl around in circles, a habit of walking off in crowds—but when she started adolescence it took the form of strange ideas. She held long insistent monologues telling people how Pawtucket was haunted by the ghosts of witches and Indians, and how other planets were inhabited by creatures much like ourselves. When she finished high school her parents thought a change of venue would do her and them a world of good, and that she could be useful to her older sister now that Bernice had a new baby. Ted wasn't happy at the prospect of two more mouths to feed. Bernice assured him Claire had aced her stenography classes, and would find a job and maybe even a husband before long. And indeed, Claire soon found work in a local lawyer's office. But the little squiggles she jotted down with such speed and precision on her notepad expressed her own disjointed thoughts more than her boss's dictation. She didn't last a month. She then retreated to the bedroom she shared with baby Carole, reading science fiction magazines and writing long letters to their editors which she read over the dinner table to an increasingly worried sister and brother-in-law. When Bernice became pregnant with Donna, Claire started twirling in the backyard. With her skirt billowing like a dervish's gown, making slow graceful swirls of great dignity, she relayed to the T's neighbors voice transmissions she received from interplanetary spacecraft. When she twirled in her underwear one night under the light of the street lamp in front of their house, Ted reached his limit. He had Bernice coax her into the Chevy and

dumped her at the nearest hospital. She was checked for syphilis and a few common medical conditions, committed to the asylum at Central Islip, then transferred to Pilgrim State Hospital where she insisted on twirling with less dignity naked on her bed as she prepared for interplanetary travel. Bernice felt she could have used help with another baby on the way, twirling or not, but Ted was relieved to finally have her out of the house.

"She wasn't helping anyway," said Ted. "And the neighbors were complaining. Weren't you afraid she'd do something to the kid?"

"Claire? She wouldn't hurt a fly. It's all her imagination. Sometimes she gets carried away."

"Like to Mars, maybe." Ted turned the page of his newspaper and folded it neatly in half. "So is this one a boy?"

"We'll see," said Bernice, though she doubted it somehow. "We'll take what we get." She was feeling exhausted, and had yet to see Roseland or the Palladium or have that cheesecake in Brooklyn.

II.

The night Ted T was born, flames from the Standard Oil refinery burning on Newtown Creek illuminated the low cloud cover over Greenpoint, creating an eerie orange glow that carried from Brooklyn and Queens to Manhattan, the Bronx, and beyond. Ted's mother, holding her new baby in her arms after giving birth in the bedroom of her apartment on Java Street, felt her eyes begin to sting and tear, making her wonder if there was a cat nearby, but there were no cats in the apartment that night or any other night. Instinctively rubbing her eyes, she felt a grittiness that only made the stinging worse. She heard the baby sneeze and saw his eyes turn watery red, obscuring the faint blue of his sclerae. Then she noticed black smoke coming through the open bedroom window. She called her husband to come close it, but by the time he got there the room was filled with thick oily dust. Bad as it was, it was merely a portent. Thirty years later, watching the evening news on TV in a Long Island hospital

waiting room while twin baby boys George and Frank were delivered in the relative safety of a dust-free operating room, Ted T's anesthetized wife breathed pure oxygen from a tank. The lead story that night was an explosion in Greenpoint that blew manhole covers three stories high when a mysterious substance in the sewers exploded, a substance that turned out to be gasoline from the refinery fire thirty years before. The news distracted him from his worries over more mouths to feed, and led him to reminisce about the block he lived on as a child. And rather than the smell of petroleum fumes which often wafted through the neighborhood, he recalled the smell of fresh bread from a bakery on the corner and the rolls he bought there for a penny, a memory cut short when his wife's obstetrician burst into the room in scrubs, pumped his hand, and announced Ted was the father of two healthy baby boys. Ted broke out two cigars for the occasion and smoked them to their nubs, giving him a pounding headache that lasted all the next day and made it hard for him to be pleasant to his mother-in-law, though she was doing her best to care for his two older girls while their mother recovered from her Caesarean.

Driving home from the hospital with his wife, mother-in-law, the twins and his two daughters packed in their Chevy two-door, Ted reflected on what he had seen on the news the week before, while Bernice smoked her first cigarette in a week as she sat beside him with the twins in her lap.

"Twenty-nine manhole covers, can you believe that?" he said, glancing in the rearview mirror at his mother-in-law. "They must have thought the Russians dropped the bomb."

"Forget the Russians, what about your parents?" she asked.

"They're fine. Their windows shattered, that's all. My dad said he saw blue flames shooting out the manholes. I'd like to seen that."

"Thank God we don't live in the city," said Bernice, rolling down the window to exhale a lungful of smoke away from the babies. She had long lost interest in New York, in seeing Radio City or Little Italy or Carnegie Hall, and now felt little more than apathy and fatigue and a pulling sensation from the stitches in her womb. As they drove through the winding lanes of their development she stared at the small patches of front lawn where young trees were staked to the ground for support, their leaves

already tinged with the red of early fall, and began to cry so quietly only her mother could tell. As soon as they were out of the car Bernice's mother put her to bed, bottle-fed the twins and had dinner ready in no time.

"You got your hands full with these two," she told Ted. "There aren't any twins in our family."

"Or mine" said Ted. "My luck."

"Bernice is going to need a lot of help. I can stay for a few weeks, but after that you better pitch in."

"Sure, sure," said Ted. "Don't worry. We'll be fine."

Carole and Donna couldn't wait to see their new baby brothers, and after dinner each propped one twin in their laps with a bottle to see if they would take more formula. The babies grunted and squirmed, and formula ran down their chins and off their bibs and soaked the front of their pajamas. Everyone laughed and the girls seemed happy.

III.

"You wouldn't believe how the town has changed," Mrs. T complained to her sister Claire, noting that if it wasn't for the Woolworth's on Main Street you'd think you were in a foreign country. It was not her own town she was referring to, but close enough—the one next to Pilgrim State on the other side of the expressway—and it was not just her imagination. Migrants from the South were settling-out after each potato harvest. Migrants from the tropics, displaced from the slums of the outer boroughs, had moved there to find jobs. Her husband was disgusted. Those people would work for peanuts, he said. But Cubans of various complexions, neither farmworkers nor slum dwellers, had been around for some time even before the war, and like Hernan Rivera soon after it, preceding by a decade the wave of Cubanos who washed ashore escaping the revolution. This Hernan was a gentle soul, resigned to his fate, a shy, quiet man whose green eyes and straight dark hair seemed anomalous in the temperate North. He came from a small town near the sea not far from Santiago, the

youngest of a family of eight, orphaned at a young age and raised by a widowed aunt. When the aunt died, a Santero in the neighborhood told him his green eyes were the source of his family's bad luck. Anguish was added to his grief, and Hernan resolved to leave Cuba before causing any more harm. After his ship docked in Manhattan he fled the city as fast as he could, drawn to open spaces and the smell of the ocean. He soon made his way to the center of Long Island, to a town with a hint of his old home in the salt air that blew in from the south. Work was not hard to find, and he was amazed at how well it paid. In no time he had a job at Pilgrim State Hospital as a groundskeeper with a crew of Puerto Ricans when the sprawling psychiatric facility, its own city in the middle of the island's farmland, was at its postwar peak. The enormity of the place surpassed even Hernan's wild expectations of the scale on which people in this new country lived, and the mass insanity that must naturally result. After he had proven steady and reliable and his English fluent enough, he moved on to better pay in the maintenance department. In a few years, through common sense and discretion, he worked his way up to supervisor. Because he was a gentle soul he got along well with patients, and harboring his own set of demons he didn't judge them too harshly. His helpfulness made him a favorite with the nurses and doctors. Soon he could afford a nice wardrobe and the mortgage payments on a small bungalow. That's when he met Bernice T in Building 11. His friends agreed that Bernice was no beauty and a woman who worried too much, but he found her sexy in a plump jiggly kind of way. She lived in a town nearby and made frequent visits to her inmate sister. Bernice did most of the talking when she came. Her sister Claire had become very quiet since her shock treatments.

"She don't say much," said Bernice to Hernan the day they met. He'd come to Claire's ward to check his crew's work on a radiator that was causing trouble. "She used to be a chatter box. Sometimes you couldn't shut her up." Claire sat on the edge of her bed with her hands clasped in her lap, gazing at the floor while Hernan tinkered with the radiator across the room.

"Claire, we got to get you dancing," said Hernan, satisfied the radiator was fixed. "Let's go to Club Babalu." He escorted the sisters to the ward's day room where he removed his tool belt and hung it on a coat hook. Then taking Claire's hand, he led

her to the middle of the room and started a silent cha-cha-cha. Claire stood with her feet stuck to the floor while he bobbed around, the shorter of the two, snapping his fingers. When it became clear that her sister was not going to move, Bernice cut in and shuffled around the floor with Hernan while the three other patients in the room shouted encouragement and clapped a ragged clave.

"That's how you do it, Claire," said Bernice. "Now you try it." But Claire's feet stayed glued to the floor. A nurse came running to see what all the commotion was about. Alarmed at the prospect of a small dance party riling up the day room, she ordered them to stop. Hernan complied, and turned to her with a formal bow. Then with the utmost sincerity, in his most formal English, he asked her to dance. She thought he was mocking her and threatened to report him for disturbing patients and socializing with visitors during work hours. As everyone cleared the room, Claire marched up to the nurse snapping her fingers, snapped them all afternoon and through dinner, snapping them with a sharp, steady beat until she was finally fitted with thick cotton mitts and tied to her bed. That's when Bernice started calling Hernan 'Ricky Ricardo'.

It was obvious that Pilgrim State was immense, but Hernan had no idea it was the largest psychiatric facility on the planet, the largest hospital complex anywhere in the world. He assumed, in a country that had the Empire State Building and the Grand Canyon and the hydrogen bomb, its scale was the norm. The place was conceived, it seemed, as a monument to insanity in all its forms—those whose minds were sick and those who treated the sickness. A farm colony spread over a thousand acres of potato fields bought when land was cheap, it had its own police force, fire department, post office, courts, power plant, cemetery, and railroad station for the crowds arriving daily from the city. After the war its simple formula of work and daily structure made way for modern treatments like frontal lobotomy and electro-convulsive therapy, which were liberally applied. It was Claire's howling that earned her the shocks. Her brother-in-law's occasional visits would trigger fits that kept her wrapped in a straight jacket for days until she collapsed from exhaustion, though her sister's visits sometimes had a calming effect. She had been committed there involuntarily for five years when Hernan

started work on the maintenance crew. She was still the pretty sister though, even with her hair wrapped in a rag and her dress a shapeless sack.

"Why do you have to visit her so much?" said Ted T, glancing at his wife over the sports section of his neatly folded newspaper. "She just sits there like a vegetable." Bernice was putting the finishing touches on her makeup. "And why do you have to dress up like that?" he added. "You'd think you're going to the Copacabana or something. For god's sake, it's a nut house."

"I want them to know Claire comes from good people," said Bernice. "She's not just riffraff from the gutter."

"Okay, suit yourself," said Ted, returning to the box scores. "Don't expect me to go with you just because it's my day off. That place gives me the creeps."

"It's just a hospital."

"I got better things to do."

"If you say so," said Bernice, greatly relieved she did not have to invent an excuse to go by herself.

Bernice arrived in time to take her sister to lunch at the commissary, a small privilege Claire had earned with her docility. Claire examined her older sister curiously as they ate, and seemed on the verge of speech several times, but in the end said nothing. After a brief stroll about the grounds, Bernice returned Claire to her ward and hurried off to meet Hernan at his new bungalow. "You look so nice," he said as he greeted her at the door. She put a finger to his lips and told him to speak to her in Spanish while they shed their clothes for a playful afternoon romp in the sack.

IV.

Claire sat in the day room of Building 11, gazing out the window. Her gray smock hung down to her ankles and beneath it her blackened feet were bare. Outside In the courtyard women in identical gray smocks sat hunched on the lawn, or hunched in wicker wheelchairs, or paced ceaselessly around the base of the building. It was as if

the buildings, the inhabitants, the grounds, the sky were all the same gray. In a folding chair beside her Bernice sat talking softly, telling Claire she needed to eat more to gain strength. Claire turned a blank face to her older sister and spoke for the first time in weeks. “You’re screwing Hernan, aren’t you.”

It was Bernice’s turn to be speechless, but only for a moment. She couldn’t have heard her sister correctly. “If you get your strength up, maybe you can come home soon.” She smiled and patted her sister’s leg.

Claire turned back to the window. “I said you’re screwing Hernan, that’s all.”

This time Bernice heard her right. “Bernice, watch your tongue,” she said, still calm and smiling. “That’s nonsense. Your mind is playing tricks on you.”

Claire’s face contorted from her usual look of apathy to a clownish mask of anguish. “No,” she moaned, holding her ears and rocking back and forth. “Nooo,” she howled, dragging out the vowel in one long breath like the rise and fall of a police siren, creating an ear-splitting screech that filled the room. The other inmates jumped from their chairs and started clucking nervously. Two nurses came running with a straight jacket and soon had Claire trussed like a turkey. “She’s screwing the maintenance man,” she yelled as they led her away. “She’s screwing Hernan,” she screamed, unable to point to her sister through the heavy fabric. “And he’s screwing *me*,” she added, spitting and thrashing her head. “Hernan screws me every night. He comes to my bed and screws me, right after he screws my sister.”

After another round of shock treatments Claire was calmer, but held fast to her conviction that Hernan was screwing both her and her sister. Bernice was so outraged she stopped visiting. Soon other patients joined Claire with claims that Hernan was having sex with them. They said he came to their ward at night and went down the row of beds, screwing them one after another from lights-out till dawn. Some said he made himself invisible and did the most fantastic things to their bodies, things only a Cuban would know how to do. Others said he promised to marry them and take them away to his harem in Santiago where they’d live like royalty and make love on the beach day and night. Twenty-three patients said they had borne his children. They said he had lovers on the outside he drove so crazy with passion that they committed themselves

to the hospital and asked to be lobotomized. All the commotion only drove Bernice to new heights of desire and she could not leave Hernan alone.

Of course there was an investigation. It was inconclusive, as you would expect—one man's sober word against a ward of female lunatics—but the damage was done. Hernan was restricted to men's buildings and closely watched. Word travelled fast and his reputation preceded him. "Hey Ricky, how many Lucys you got today?" There was uproarious laughter everywhere he went, from both inmates and staff. When a reporter from a New York tabloid began poking around, asking about the 'Don Juan of the Dormitories', the superintendent had no choice but to let Hernan go. Regretfully, he said. Bernice begged Hernan to take her with him, but he told her their love affair had burned too brightly and was fated to end, like all great loves. Besides, a mother's place was with her children. Recalling the words of the Santero from his old home town, Hernan accepted his fate (how could he change his eyes?) and removed himself from Long Island as gently as he came, but now with a tidy profit from the sale of his bungalow. Before long he found work in a TB sanitarium in New Jersey that eventually became a hospital for chest diseases, and with the slow passage of time forgot the smell of the sea. He married a lively Mexican woman who worked in the laundry and they had three children. They almost divorced when she became convinced he was having sex with patients. But this time, despite his green eyes, there was no scandal, and no investigation, and no divorce, and he stayed on the job until he retired with a decent pension.

Ted T was curious when he realized his wife had stopped her visits to the insane asylum.

"I'm too tired," she said. "Those visits wear me out."

"I'll go with you if you want," he said, in an expansive mood that day.

"No, I can't take it. Claire went off the deep end. She doesn't even recognize me anymore."

"Suit yourself," said Ted. Bernice went off to the bathroom and heaved her breakfast. A week later, still heaving, she told him not to worry. She was not sick, just pregnant. "Maybe it's a boy," she said. "This time feels different."

On To Bridgeport

Whither he went I may not follow him. His eyes
Were strange to-day. They always were,
After their fashion, kindred of the sea.[7]

I.

Evening slipped across Mrs T's hospital room. Outside it was full dark. The light from her headboard shone pale on the bed and fell faintly to the floor. On a table by the window sat a vase of African daisies, their petals red and white like the rays of colored suns in a child's watercolor. Leaves framed the petals as the petals framed their eye. The image was just itself, shape and color, set by the window of the woman, Mrs. T, propped in her hospital bed looking at the stems in the turbid water that gave them the appearance of life. From the water came a faint putrid scent, almost sweet.

"Mom?" George hesitated at the doorway. He thought she might be asleep, staring straight ahead with her eyes half open. "Mom," he said again. This time she turned toward him with no smile of recognition.

"George?" she said, though she knew it was him.

He entered the room and pulled a chair to her bedside. She lay a cool hand, still surprisingly plump, against his cheek. "How are you, Mom?" She turned her head so she was facing straight ahead again as if something on the other side of the room had caught her attention. Where she was facing made no difference, her expression stayed the same.

"Nice of you to come, Georgie," she said, and he winced at her appreciation, perhaps because he knew she meant it.

"Can I get you something?" he asked.

"No, I just need a little rest," said his mother. "Did you take your insulin?"

"Yes, Mom," he said.

“Frank is coming,” said Mrs. T.

“I know. I heard,” said George.

“I wish you two got along,” she said.

“Too late for that.”

“I wish you would. You’re both so alike.”

“Then we don’t need to see each other.”

There was a tap on the door—Dr. Gastine in a grey herringbone jacket, his tie still neatly knotted at this late hour, a coiled stethoscope protruding from the side pocket, discreetly announcing his entrance. He came round to the bedside with his hands clasped before him as if walking in a church procession, and gave them a curt bow. “Good evening, Mrs. T. Good evening, George,” he said.

“You’re here late, doc. Is something wrong?” asked Mrs T.

“No, just wrapping up my evening rounds,” said Gastine. “Thought I’d drop by to see if you need anything.” She had begun chemotherapy for her lung cancer that morning.

“How about a decent meal,” said Mrs. T, sitting up. “The food here’s terrible. How are you supposed to get better eating this stuff?” Gastine only nodded, waiting for her to move on to other complaints. She winced. “And I’m still having pain.”

“Where?” he asked, standing attentive and alert as he observed the rise and fall of her chest and the pallor of her skin.

“Everywhere. I can’t hardly move. I feel worse than when I came in.”

“We’ll do something about the pain,” said her doctor, nodding again.

“She can’t go home like this,” said George.

“We can get you to a nursing home,” said Gastine.

“No nursing home,” said Mrs. T, shaking her head with surprising vigor. “I’ll stay here till I feel better.”

“Okay, we’ll see how it goes.” Dr. Gastine stood by silently for a moment, his arms still clasped, attempting a smile. George too said nothing as Gastine clapped him on the back and slipped quietly from the room.

“He’s a nice man,” said Mrs. T.

“See about what?” said George. He took a tissue from the box on his mother’s bedside table and blew a string of black phlegm from his nose. “Sorry, Mom. My sinuses are bothering me.” He dropped the tissue in the waste basket and wiped is hands on his jeans.

“You shouldn’t be here with a cold. I could catch something.”

“It’s not a cold. I don’t know what it is.“

“Well, wash your hands. Maybe you should see Gastine about it. You don’t look so good.”

“It’s my sinuses. Allergies probably,” said George, though he knew it was more than that. They lapsed into a moment of silence broken by the tap of footsteps marching down the hallway, growing louder until Carole appeared at the door. She was carrying a bouquet of flowers and a large paper bag of fried chicken.

“Here, Mom.” She dropped the bag on the bedside table and set the flowers by the window. Mrs. T opened it. The smell triggered a wave of nausea and she called for the emesis basin.

II.

As Gastine drove home from evening rounds and his visit with Mrs. T, a beam of light reflecting in his rearview mirror gave him a start. For a moment he imagined it was the police about to pull him over, and he patted his back pocket to reassure himself his wallet was there with a copy of his medical license. It was just a car changing lanes. He wondered why he was so jumpy, or more jumpy than usual driving at night when a police car might be following him, a response learned early in life and one that likely served him well. Certainly not because he had qualms over a patient dying of lung cancer. Health warnings had been on cigarette packs for twenty years. Mrs. T’s case was sad, but nothing out of the order of things. Then there was George. Gastine checked the speedometer to assure himself he was not over the speed limit and looked in the rearview mirror again to be sure there was no squad car lurking there. All was in order, except his recollection of George at his mother’s bedside. He didn’t know

if he was more disturbed by George's presence or his reaction to it. When he noted the prosthesis on his leg, Gastine's first thought was not concern for the loss of his patient's limb, least of all pity, but rather how justified he had been years ago in refusing to certify George's commercial driver's license. George was irate, mumbling profanities and threatening a law suit as he stormed out of the office. Not that it made any difference. It was a matter of public safety, of course. In the role of certifier, Gastine reminded himself, the doctor's responsibility was to the interests of the public, not to those of an applicant who, whatever their relationship and however desperately they might need a job, did not qualify. And Gastine had a personal interest in public safety as well, not wanting a truck driver with an attack of low blood sugar plowing into his kids' school bus. So he had no qualms about that issue, which did not explain his discomfort. In all their other medical encounters he did his best to look out for George's interests as George's agent, but what had he really done for him? Had he helped him in any perceptible way? Improved his life? Made him healthier? George looked so pathetic in his mother's hospital room that evening that Gastine almost felt repulsed, and some dimly sensed threat caused him to place the blame on George. But what Gastine really felt, barely recognized beneath his ego-sparing ruminations, was the weight of his professional failure, the admission he lacked the power or the skill to prevent that amputation.

Gastine turned into his driveway. The trip home, despite his uneasiness, had been perfectly uneventful after another routine day of work. He was tired. Before entering the garage he looked back at the deserted street. A streetlight shed its cone of light on the corner a half block away. As the car idled, waiting for the garage door to open, he had the strange sense that despite his failure, or maybe because of it, he and George were linked as more than doctor and patient. That in some way, despite their contrasts, he and George shared a common burden. There was nothing disturbing about that. It merely made for a curious mental note to examine the issue later, if ever. When he did return to it, sooner than expected, early the next day in fact, Gastine made the obvious connection. His grandmother too had lost a leg. His grandmother, a woman who had her own ideas about cooking and food that no doctor was going to change, and who never smoked a cigarette in her life. His grandmother, who preferred

her own herbs to insulin, the insulin she was given and prescribed every time she went in the hospital. Each time she was discharged home Gastine's grandfather had to give it to her, when she'd let him, because she wouldn't touch a needle. As a boy Gastine had seen her shuffle around the house in her slippers with sores and bandages on her swollen legs, and when she was walking outside he had to wait with her every block or two while she stopped until the pain in her legs went away. She was never the same woman after she lost that leg. Stopped going to church, stopped having family over. She spent the last year of her life in a wheelchair. He wrote about her in his application to medical school. He told how his grandfather taught him to give the injections, too. He said the failure of his grandmother's doctor was that he didn't know how to motivate people, or didn't care to. He said that he wanted to be a doctor who changed people's lives—a sincere but common trope that hardly distinguished him from other applicants. So now, twenty years later, what was George's family thinking about his medical care? That his doctor wasn't any good? That he didn't know how to motivate people, or didn't care to? And unlike Gastine's grandmother, he had let George lose his leg in what was supposed to be the prime of life, not that their diseases were the same. George's disease didn't start in mid-life, nor was he overweight. Once George started kindergarten it didn't take him long to learn he was different from other kids. He could witness in his own twin brother a life with more possibilities than his own, a life without the stigma that had been imposed on him not by any 'behaviors' or 'life-style' but by the luck of the draw. Gastine's grandmother of course had experienced much more than the stigma of a disease, or maybe it too was a disease, a social plague. Denying he was different had done George in. Gastine's grandmother never had that luxury, nor had Gastine for that matter. But whatever the truth of this jumbled and muddled comparison, they had both lost a leg, a loss which could have been prevented. Gastine had his part in that, and there was more than enough blame to go around.

Gastine had come to hate this medical condition, this slow-motion drama of loss. A body part here, an organ there, with blindness, impotence, and dialysis at the end of the road. He hated the injustice of it. What he did not know was that George was feeling better since his amputation. The scene he had witnessed in the hospital room was pathetic, but its pathos was not due to the ravages of chronic disease, or the

suffering of terminal illness, or the failure of doctor or patient. And, as he sat down to a quiet supper with his wife, he realized there was nothing strange in that, and nothing curious either.

"How was your day, dear?" she asked.

"Pretty much the usual," he said.

"I'm on call for the OR tonight."

"That's right. I hope it's quiet."

"Don't say that. You'll jinx me."

"Okay, I hope the place goes crazy."

"Don't say that either."

"Don't worry, I won't."

They finished dinner and settled in front of the television together. Before long her pager went off for the first time that night. Gastine went to bed as soon as she was out the door. He set the alarm for 6:00, but couldn't sleep. He kept anticipating the sound of his wife's car in the driveway.

III.

A knot of doctors in lab coats—some pristine white and neatly pressed, others wrinkled, smudged, and dingy—was gathered at George's bedside, notes-in-hand, talking kidney-speak. "You fucking bastards! I knew you screwed up," George screamed. He lunged at Dr. Sterne, the Chief of Service, with a roundhouse right that narrowly missed its mark, carrying George's fist in a broad arc that crashed it against an IV pole instead of its intended target, which was Sterne's jaw. Its momentum flung him hard onto the linoleum floor. Dr. Sterne had just disclosed the complications of George's angiogram, the "intimal tear" that damaged his transplanted kidney, and now the Chief jerked back, knocking George's breakfast tray off the bedside table and bumping his nephrology fellow against the window behind him. After George fell to the floor, flailing about in the striped pajamas he insisted on wearing in place of a hospital gown, pajamas that looked like prison garb with the empty leg pinned over the stump

of his amputation, the doctors rushed to help him off the floor but quickly fell back as he came up thrashing on the bed.

"I'm no goddam fucking guinea pig! Does anyone in this hospital know what the fuck they're doing?"

A nurse ran into the room when she heard the commotion. "Call security," Sterne instructed her calmly, firmly. Before running out she pulled the curtain between George and his half-delirious roommate who was grunting loudly over the commotion on the other side of the room.

"And call my lawyer!" George screamed after her.

"We think it's from the dye, George," said Sterne, keeping his distance and composure against the far wall of the room. "Give it some time. It should improve. In the meantime we can dialyze you."

"I won't go back on no fucking machine," George screamed, pulling out his IV. "I don't care. I don't fucking *care* anymore." He threw the tubing against the wall. A trickle of blood flowed down his arm, crossed the palm of his hand and dripped onto the floor where it coagulated to a sticky paste. He glared out the large plate-glass window of his hospital room with the impulse to crash through it headfirst onto the roof of the surrounding buildings, but the only result he could imagine was a futile bounce-back that would land him once again on the floor of his room with serious head trauma in addition to everything else.

Dr. Sterne and his fellow, after whispering to each other about the need for a stat psych consult, positioned themselves between George and the door. The nurse returned from her phone call and stood behind them. When security arrived George waved them away. He was sitting on the edge of his bed still looking out the window with his arms held tight across his chest, rocking silently, his tears flowing unrestrained. Unrestrained for the first time since he could remember. Unrestrained with a cheerless sense of relief. "What can I do?" he sobbed. "What do you fucking want me to do?" They all backed away and conferred in the hallway. His grunting roommate was transferred to a room down the hall and a security guard stationed outside George's door. George assured the psychiatrist he was not suicidal, just outraged, but a companion was assigned to sit with him for the next twenty-four hours just the same.

Despite his surrender to the kidney team, two days later George was rushed breathless down six floors to hemodialysis when fluid overload tipped him into his cardiac ischemia and congestive heart failure. After several more bouts of pulmonary edema he was finally stabilized, transitioned to peritoneal dialysis, and sent home 'feeling well', as Sterne's discharge summary noted. He was given a list of psychiatrists and psychotherapists from which to select for follow-up care, which he threw out, and his kidneys actually did improve a bit with time.

IV.

Dear George,

Maybe I'm the last person you expected to hear from, but please don't throw this letter away yet. Read on, I have some news. Word gets around fast and I wanted to tell you myself, even if it upsets you. So here it is. I'm going to have a baby. That's right. Don't ask me how or why. I'm in Bridgeport now fixing up my apartment. I'm really thrilled, you know, and scared, and tired, but this baby is making me happy and I haven't even seen him except on the ultrasound.

I heard you had some problems with your kidney. Just more shit, I suppose. You've had enough for all of us. All those doctors and hospitals, it's too much. And there's nothing for you on that island anymore. You need to get out of there, Georgie. You need to throw yourself at something. So here's why I'm writing. I want you to come live with me in Bridgeport. That is, if you don't hate me and wouldn't mind having a baby around. Does that sound weird? You know I'm a little weird sometimes, that's why you married me. That's why I married you. But it's really not. There's enough room for you here and the rent's not bad. And don't worry, his father's not in the picture. It would be just the three of us. Tell me it's not such a crazy idea. I miss you, Georgie. I think I need you, too. Don't ask me why. You always knew that, even if I didn't. And I hope you still need me a little.

Think about it. If you don't want to, I understand. Or call me if you want to talk. I'd be glad to talk about it. I know it must be a shock coming out of the blue like this. I wouldn't blame you if you don't want anything to do with me. But think about it. I'm afraid I'm not making any sense. Pregnancy does funny things to your brain. No, that's no excuse. This has nothing to do with hormones. I want you to be happy. I think we could be happy.

Sorry about your Mom. I know it's hard on you.

Love,
xxx
Nikki

V.

"I learned a lot from George," said Gastine, striding down the hospital corridor with a medical student in tow as he made his morning rounds. On most days Dr. Gastine ambled through the hallways with his head hung in heavy thought, but today he injected a new energy into each step meant to show his enthusiasm for the practice of medicine and for teaching. "Things I'd never seen before or since. He was a textbook of medicine." They were on their way to the nurse's station after examining a woman with a foot infection, the diabetic complication that had triggered Gastine's recollection. "Like mucormycosis." The student, a serious young woman from the state medical school, nodded knowingly, though she was a little vague on this particular '-osis'. "Something you're more likely to see on an exam than in practice," Gastine clarified, smiling at her uncertainty. "But it was classic, like all his complications." Arriving at the nurse's station they logged onto the computer to write their notes. The student waited patiently for Gastine to hunt and peck. "He presented with sinus pain and a nasal discharge," Gastine continued, peering through the reading glasses perched on the end of his nose at the computer screen in front of him, bringing up the latest lab results of the woman with the foot infection. "Nothing strange about that of

course, especially in a smoker like George. But this discharge was black, like those charcoal slurries they use in the ER. Ugly stuff to be coming out your nose." Gastine made a face as if recoiling from a bad odor. He pushed his chair back from the counter, swiveling to face the student and an older nurse who had paused to listen. "So we called in ENT. They did an ethmoidectomy and the biopsy showed mucor. What's interesting is that it's a saprophyte. You know, something that decomposes leaves and wood." The women nodded, still listening politely as he rambled on. "Between his transplant drugs and his diabetes, George was about as immunocompromised as you can get and still be walking around. This fungus thinks it's just recycling dead stuff when there's no immune system to chase it away. It couldn't tell the difference between George and a tree stump. In other words…" The older nurse was finally out of patience.

"Excuse me, doctor. I need an order for a laxative."

Gastine paused and nodded his approval. He continued less expansively to his audience of one as the nurse hurried back to her chart on the other side of the station. "In other words, it was just doing its job. So George earned himself a few weeks of amphotericin." Gastine returned for a moment to the computer screen and the laboratory values he had pulled up, still recalling George's ordeal. "That was no picnic, believe me, but we didn't have anything else back then. There really wasn't any choice—let the fungus go to his brain or risk his transplant. It was touch and go. The amphoterrible didn't help his kidney any, but he made it. Beat the odds—again. And know what I remember most about that whole hospital stay? He'd take his IV pole down to the lobby and smoke." Gastine, seeing the student fidget with her stethoscope, looked at his watch and realized he was late for office hours. He felt foolish he'd been so carried away. They hurried to finish their notes and enter the last of their orders. "One of these days I'll tell you about his transplant," he said. The student lingered at the nurses station for a moment to add "mucormycosis" to her list of study topics. Her medical school courses had already covered the science of transplants, in great detail.

VI.

George and Carole entered gently. Their mother's hospital room was filled with the scent of Carole's get-well-soon bouquet, sitting on the window sill for the past two days. It had been a week since Gastine told them how poor their mother's prognosis really was. Though Carole preferred the oncologist's vaguer prediction, in the space of twenty-four hours it seemed her mother's breathing had become more labored and her cheeks, if it were possible, more sunken. George saw his last opportunity to learn something about his father slipping away, and Carole could not persuade him there was nothing to be gained by hounding their mother with questions she would never answer. That it would be cruel in fact. If she had failed to get any information from their mother, what could he accomplish? And why now, since George never seemed to care that much. She did not know about Nikki's letter. They drew the flimsy curtain around their mother's bed for the sham privacy it provided and pulled a chair to either side of her. She was sitting upright, picking at her sheet as if it were infested with lice. They each gave her a kiss on the cheek and sat silent at the bedside while she continued to pick without seeming to know her children were there.

"Mom, I have to ask you something," said George.

She turned to him with a dull expression. She was heavily sedated.

"There's something I need to say. Please don't get upset. I have to say this." He paused, aware of the roommate rustling in the bed across the curtain, and lowered his voice. "I know," he began, still listening for sound from the other side of the room, "I know that…I know that Ted T is not my father," he whispered. That was it. He had said it. He shut his eyes so hard he felt his head spin, wondering what he had just done, feeling as if he were sitting in a room full of moving mirrors. His mother tried to raise her hand, a protest perhaps, a gesture to silence him, but she only managed to look away. "But I don't care," he said as he opened his eyes and the swirling slowed. "It doesn't matter why," he continued, trying to coax a response from her as gently as he could.

“My God, Georgie,” his mother whispered back. Her voice was hoarse and thick with phlegm. The trace of a smile curled the edges of her lips. “What a crazy idea.” It seemed as if she tried to laugh, and burst into a coughing fit.

“I said it doesn’t matter,” George repeated when her coughing subsided to a wheeze. “Not anymore. I just want to know. I just want to know who he is, that’s all.”

“Your father? You know your father.” Mrs. T made a vain attempt to clear her throat and pointed to a glass of water half-full on the bedside table. Carole held the straw for her while she took a sip. “Carole, what’s wrong with George? Why is he doing this to me?”

“He just wants to know, Mom. I told him not to ask, but he won’t listen to me.”

“But this is crazy.”

“Not so crazy, Ma,” said Carole. “But I told him it was a bad idea.”

“Did you care about him?” asked George.

“What?” Mrs. T’s eyes opened wide as if she were suddenly alert.

“Did you care about him?” The question had leaped out on its own before George even knew what he was asking. He was mortified when he realized what he said.

His mother’s breathing turned shallower. “You father?” she stuttered, “Of course… I can’t…why all this…?” She leaned forward and began picking at her sheet again. Her skin had turned grey. She raised her hands to her chest. “Call the nurse,” she said, dropping back on her pillow. George raced out of the room.

“You’ll be okay, Ma. Georgie went for help.” Carole stroked her mother’s head while her mother labored to breathe. A nurse ran in, followed by the commotion of more nurses, a respiratory therapist, a young doctor shouting orders. An oxygen mask was immediately applied, medications were rushed through her IV line. Mrs. T was transferred to the critical care unit and promptly intubated. “I’m here, Ma,” said Carole after her mother was attached to the ventilator and settled in bed with her tubes and monitors. “Don’t give up. You can beat this thing.” The ventilator beeped. “We’re not giving up.”

VII.

“Strange how she managed it,” said Gastine, referring to Mrs. T, more the person than the patient, though her medical care was all too fresh in his mind. She had died in the intensive care unit the evening before, coded by residents and interns who pounded on her chest for twenty minutes, cracking three ribs, shocking the cords of her expired heart again and again, running through the last of their drug protocols before they finally shed their gloves and walked away from the cancer-ridden corpse on which they had no choice but to perform their grim, violent ritual. The futility of it had drained them and him, the whole worthless enactment of human folly in which he was complicit. “Couldn’t stand colored folks. Complained about them straight to my face—welfare queens, drug dealers, gangs, all the same old bullshit. Maybe I should have fired her.” He had been brooding all night in his half-sleep, processing the tortured experience, wondering what he could have done that he didn’t, what he had done that he shouldn’t. He put it all on himself like any compulsive doctor, like all egotists. It took him a few days to get over these things. The physician and the surgeon, an odd couple, were sitting together in the doctor’s lounge—Gastine thin and professorial in his blazer and bow tie, Powell bulky and powerful like an aging athlete in his scrubs. Gastine looked around the room one more time to be sure they were alone and kept an eye fixed on the door.

Powell chuckled in his baritone. “Then maybe you should have fired half your patients.”

“Only half? When did you get so generous?” said Gastine, his voice rising, almost playful for a change. “You know, sometimes…” He didn’t bother to finish the sentence. “Anyway, she stayed with me till the end. Or maybe you should say I stayed with her. She never questioned it and neither did I, but I didn’t really understand it.”

“Of course you do,” said Powell. “You’re a doctor, that’s all. She didn’t see you as Black. Not so hard to understand. You weren’t like those other people. Those Negroes.”

“I know, but me not colored? Really? I’m so black I’m blue.”

“No need to get yourself worked up,” said Powell. “You know what I mean. It’s a funny trick.” Powell’s skin was much lighter than Gastine’s, his full features more African.

“Same thing with the rest of the family,” Gastine added, “maybe not as bad. After his mother, I think George was the worst. Didn’t stop him from coming back to see me though, when he was scared enough.”

“Of course not. Any port in a storm. And was he really that bad? I thought you liked him in a funny kind of way.”

“Maybe, but he was still a racist. The ordinary, run of the mill kind we have around here.”

“Like what did he do?”

“Nothing obvious. Just the way he seemed to disbelieve everything I said. I doubt it was anything conscious. Just bred in, or picked up by osmosis from all the bigotry around him. He didn’t have the power to do much harm with it. To most folks he was damaged goods. You know, defective. Maybe that’s why I felt sorry for him. He knew his medical problems made people uncomfortable, especially after the amputation. And his mother was even spooked by his injections. So I suppose he felt a connection with people society didn’t care much about, though I doubt he was aware of it. Then there’s his brother, his twin. I wouldn’t know about him. I never saw him that much.”

“His twin? Why would his twin be any different?”

“I don’t know. He was different, though. Didn’t have diabetes, for one thing. And he made a point of getting away from the rest of the family. I think one of his sisters was different, too. But who am I to say what white people think?”

“Right about that,” said Powell.

They heard the door open. “Anyway,” said Gastine, lowering his voice, “she wanted everything done. So did her daughter. It was full code all the way.”

Powell grunted and shook his head. “Stop beating yourself up. It’s not your fault. None of it.” The door opened again. The lounge was filling up. The two men smiled at their colleagues and started bantering about the Mets.

VIII.

Driftwood, plastic jugs, beer bottles, scraps of lobster traps, sand fleas on fish bones, the smell of sea-rot, shards of nacre. Fecund waste of an empty beach. This place I vowed to leave, George thought, and leave again. The place I thought I'd never leave. Back on his island now, with the knowledge his father was not a drunk, his father was not even his father. All of it his mother's invention—the drinking and the desertion, the fatherhood. All the things on which his mother cast blame all those years. All taken with her to the grave. And which was worse, her infidelity or her duplicity? That was a distinction he tried not to parse. But funny how simple it was in the end, and the strange way he came to know it. On this island again, recalling the flotsam of his life, revived by his sister's organ and Nikki's solicitation. On his island for the last time, rescued by the birth of another man's child, his brother's child, that was about to become his own. Say farewell to your island, George. I don't know if it served you well these many years, I only know you've been recalled.

IX.

George pressed the boombox's record button and cleared his throat. He had moved into Nikki's new apartment in Bridgeport. He sat surrounded by bare white walls in a room barely furnished except for cushions on the floor and a TV tray piled with old magazines. The baby was asleep. It seemed as if all sound had left the room, like the hush before a performance. He glanced down to make sure the tape was rolling. "I'm not sure where to start," he stated for the record, pursing his lips tight as if waiting for the machine to reply. He watched the cassette's two small sprockets spin at different speeds as if one were more anxious to begin than the other, and then he spoke. "Testing, testing…" His voice was flat and barely audible. He snapped the recording off and punched the play button. The sound of his voice made him wince. He tried again,

his speech a bit louder now but still halting and slow, talking about summers at the beach and fishing with his cousins on the shores of the Sound. The next day he recorded while the baby was down for his nap. “I’m just going to say whatever’s in my head. So don’t be surprised if I jump around.” This time the words flowed a bit more smoothly. The events of his life emerged with less effort, though mostly disconnected —leaving home to travel with the carnival, his first home with Nikki, his amputation— and although he could picture each experience clearly enough they were hard to describe. The voice on the playback still sounded foreign but was not as startling. He went at it the next day in a longer session, rambling on until the tape caught the baby’s distant cries waking from its nap. He kept at it for a week. By then the words were pouring out in a stream that was almost manic, jumping from episode to episode the way a child will recount their day. He filled one cassette, then another. He played them for Nikki, who nodded her approval, and the baby, who babbled his, and when he had finished listening to them one last time, mailed them off to Gastine. As he returned from the post office, George realized he hadn’t made copies for himself. He wanted to kick himself for his oversight, then said fuck it, and soon forgot about them as the memories faded as surely as his kidney transplant.

X.

The three of the—George, Nikki, and the baby—met Frank at the ferry from Port Jefferson and took him to their Bridgeport apartment. Everyone was wet from a drizzle that lasted all night and well into the day. The brothers stood side by side in the hallway, not saying a word as Nikki handed the baby to Frank and fished for the door key. Frank had put on weight, a lot in fact, and was on his way to a paunchy middle age. He stood straighter than George if not actually taller, George leaning on his quad cane and Frank holding the baby on the firm bulge of his gut. Frank turned toward his brother, reflecting George’s eyes and nose and ponytail and the echoes of his voice like the astral projection of another self. They stood as if gazing into the distortions of a funhouse mirror not quite eye to eye, not quite expressionless but withholding

expression, the baby between them, still not uttering a word until Nikki called them inside.

"Go ahead, Frank. It's all right," said George. The brothers had not shaken hands, as if the other's sight and scent were greeting enough. Why bother to touch when the other is a reflection? But it was George's idea to invite Frank after Nikki disclosed that Frank was the father, a confession partly to unburden herself, although she and George were divorced at the time of her little fling. She knew it was really none of his business and her guilt was minimal. It was more to let George know the baby was family by blood. George said it made no difference. Nikki wasn't so sure. She had her misgivings about getting the brothers together, not that she cared what Frank thought of her. She feared some mischief, and given all the years of bad blood who could blame her? George had finally prevailed when he swore his motives were benign.

"He has the right to see his son," said George. "He deserves the chance, anyway. If he doesn't want to, that's on him." It seemed a reasonable argument, which is what made it so suspicious.

George motioned his brother to pass ahead into the apartment. "Make yourself comfortable, Frank," said Nikki. She took the baby back and went to the bedroom to dry him off. The brothers remained standing in the living room, neither one willing to be the first to start a conversation. Nikki returned from the baby's room a moment later. "All dry," she said, handing the baby over to Frank again, whisking away a tear she was trying to hold back. "Back to Uncle Frank, Georgie." Frank cradled the baby in his arms, gazing intently into the dark eyes that were absorbing his features like a tiny monk in meditation. Uncle Frank. It seemed to fit him.

"Hi, little guy," said Frank, rocking him gently. "Hi, little Georgie." The baby spit up and smiled as if it were a little joke between them. Nikki gave Frank a moment longer, then took the baby back and wiped his chin when he began to fuss, checked his diaper and took him to the bedroom to change it.

Frank stayed for lunch. Nikki made a cake for the occasion as if it were a celebration of some kind. After finishing, the brothers continued at the kitchen table, Frank with a beer and George with his Diet Coke, dabbling in small talk like two strangers brought together by a mutual acquaintance, or perhaps two acquaintances

trying to avoid anything like intimacy. Nikki was in the bedroom settling the baby for a nap. “George,” said Frank as he looked beyond his gaunt double, out the window to the narrow slice of sky that appeared like a keyhole between the apartment buildings across the street, thinking past their small talk for a moment now to his son in the other room and recalling his thoughts on the flight from Chicago. “I don’t know you. I guess I never did. Funny don’t you think, considering?” Reclining in the window seat then, reflecting on his mother’s burden, George’s struggles, the anger and resentment he had clung to like a life jacket, the school reunion and the baby, all the pointless drama of their undistinguished family in their undistinguished lives, as if looking down on them from the altitude at which he flew, all of it barely distinguishable in the swarm of the multitudes who labored alongside them, let alone all the souls who had come and gone. Recalling this, he continued as if talking to himself, “I hate to admit this, you asshole—and don’t let it go to your head—but maybe you’re my better self.”

“For once I agree with you,” said George. “Even assholes are better than you.”

“Okay, maybe I deserved that,” said Frank. “But I’m serious.”

“Bullshit,” said George, waving away Frank’s assertion. “We’re just different people.”

Frank was not surprised George rejected his compliment. He knew it appeared self-serving. “Different, sure. But still identical,” he said, asserting the connection he had tried so hard to sever.

George sighed. “Frank, forget all this genetic crap. It’s not us, it’s just stuff passing through us. It’s not even ours, you know. It’s nobody’s.”

“And what does that mean?”

“You’re the scientist. You tell me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Me neither.”

It’s the phenotype, was all George was trying to say. He meant that at the end of the day, that’s all we have. He was grateful to Nikki, and though it was still painful to admit, grateful to Frank for this chance to see it unfold, this end product of nature and nurture, for whatever time he had remaining, in his namesake. He was sure Frank would understand that even if he, George, couldn’t name it. Frank did not stay long, for

there was nothing more to say. He kissed the baby good-bye while it napped, and kissed Nikki while she smiled and her eyes welled up. At the front door the brothers shook hands, then embraced in a long silent hug.

"Take care, brother," said Frank. "Don't be a stranger."

"Don't worry," said George. "We're not."

It was the last time the twins saw each other, though they exchanged Christmas cards that year. George died soon after, slipping quietly away as Amanda's brave but battered kidney finally failed. Nikki kept in touch with Uncle Frank and Aunt Laura, sending George, Jr. off to spend summers with his cousins in Illinois, and Uncle Frank visited whenever he came east, which was less and less often.

XI.

George turned off the cassette player. Gastine's second tape had run through its spool. No longer distracted by his dictation, he heard the baby rustling awake from a nap in the other room and went to check on him. His namesake, squirming prone in the crib, looked up at him with a grin that showed the tiny nubs of teeth on his lower gum. George smiled back, feeling a contentment in the act that seemed to flow from his body whether reflex or not. Their gaze stayed fixed on each other's eyes as George picked the baby up, both still smiling as if engaged in some hilarious play, and they continued smiling as George set George, Jr. on the changing table and felt his fat, soggy diaper. Disposing of it in the nearby bin, George cleaned the pink crotch and buttocks with a fresh baby wipe while holding the baby up by his chubby legs, slid a fresh diaper under him, clasped it snug but not too tight in one well-practiced motion, then snapped a clean body suit around it while the baby babbled away, drooling from his neck to his chest. George carried him to the living room perched in his arm at eye level, their cheeks touching, feeling the comfort of each other's warmth, and sat down with him cross-legged on the carpet. The baby creeped to the cassette player where George had left it near the sofa and slapped at the keys, squealing, delighted, popping open the cassette cover and drooling on the tape, much to George's amusement.

George pulled the deck away from the baby's grasp before he hurt himself, and removed the tape he had just completed. Was there anything more worth saying? Should he get a third tape? He glanced at George Jr, then back at the cassette, then at the baby one more time, shook his head laughing and dropped the tape in the kitchen trash. With one eye on the baby wriggling on the rug, George found Gastine's first cassette tape on the kitchen counter and dropped it in the trash as well. When Nikki returned from work that evening he told her he sent them off. The next morning, dumping out a filter paper full of coffee grounds, she saw them poking out of the garbage and retrieved them.

XII.

Or maybe George stared at the tape recorder. Does it matter, he wondered, one way or the other? He left it untouched. The next day it was the same, staring at the tape recorder like a useless artifact from a distant time. "Why am I doing this?" he said aloud, addressing the lifeless machine and startling George, Jr.. "For me or some stupid doctor? What the fuck does he care?" He slid the blank tapes in an envelope and sent them back to Gastine. He didn't bother to add a note, assuming their silence would speak for themselves. It was time to feed the baby. He took Nikki's breast milk from the refrigerator, pumped early that morning, and warmed it under tap water from the kitchen sink. His past felt like a jumbled dream, someone else's movie, remembered in fragments that faded in the waking work of the day. Witness to what? Hardly worth the trouble. He put a drop of breast milk on his finger and tested it on his tongue. It was warm, buttery and sweet.

Either way, Gastine will never know.

Reunion

There will be other songs to sing
Another fall, another spring[8]

I.

Granted the tiny power plants fueling George's cells were strictly matriarchal in nature, spinning through a cycle of chemical reactions that became for countless generations of medical students, our own Leo Gastine included, the cliché *par excellence* for pointless memorization, what are we to make of the provenance of the NRY section repeats on his Y chromosome? Can there really be such a 'functional wasteland', a sterile 30 Mb handed down for millennia from father to son for the sole purpose of taking up space? That's a lot of base-pairs doing nothing which, we have to say, is very suspicious. We deserve better answers. In George's case this so-called gene-poor zone could have produced the differences between him and the rest of his family, while his sisters X's were simply lyonized. What would Frank say about the claim an X is inactivated 'at random'? And how inactive are they really? You'd suspect some genes would sneak through and cause mischief, another reason perhaps why siblings can be at cross-purposes and women can be… different? Of course not. That would be irresponsible speculation, the worst kind of genetic determinism, even outright sexism. Meanwhile back at the Y, where did the twins' stack of 'inert' nucleic acid come from, anyway?

II.

Carole was determined to have a T family reunion on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her mother's death. She sensed the apathy of her siblings, so she knew it was up to her to make it happen. And so, naturally, she did. She chose the venue, sent the invitations, organized the travel, found vacation rentals, selected menus, planned games and, well in advance of the event, sent DNA test kits as Christmas gifts to all her relations. She planned the reunion for June, when grandchildren's schools were out for the summer, on George's little island, a perfect getaway for grown-ups who wanted nothing more than a place to relax while their kids played on the beach. Ray and Carole's family was all there of course, kids and grandkids. With some reluctance, at Laura's insistence, Frank arrived from Chicagoland with Laura and their children and grandchildren. Donna, twice divorced, came by herself, her aged and wealthy husband too frail to travel from Scottsdale, Arizona. Nikki came with George, Jr., George Jr.'s wife, and their new baby daughter. Ted T's wife Barbara, widowed and still living outside Harrisburg, was invited at the last minute after a heated family debate. To everyone's relief she declined, citing her 'health problems'. Amanda was the other no-show, understandably enough, living in Australia for the past twenty years with her partner Sara, a maternity-care nurse—unless you count Hernan. With prodding from Carole, Frank and Amanda eventually swabbed their cheeks and sent in their samples. Donna would have none of it. Nikki and George, Jr. had done their own tests the year before, but were curious to see if Carole's kits, from a different lab, gave the same results. Which they didn't, making everyone understandably skeptical of the whole business. The labs are conducting more research on this issue. But both tests were quite clear, with a margin of error of 0.05 percent, that everyone was related to at least one of the royal families of Europe. By this time the paternity issue, or non-paternity if you will, confirmed by the tests, was old hat. The highlight of the event was a video collage of T family memorabilia. Carole collected home movies, old photos, scrap books, polaroids, newspaper clippings, diplomas, award certificates, anything she and her siblings could dig up. Nicki remembered George's tapes from twenty-five years ago. She contacted Gastine, who told her they'd disappeared. He didn't mention he'd never listened to them.

III.

Nikki's excitement at the prospect of hearing George's voice again, and of the joy of sharing it with George, Jr. and his family, was equalled only by her disappointment when she heard the tapes were lost. Partly as redress, partly for no particular reason, after the reunion Nikki made a recording of her own, burned it on CD, and sent it to Dr. Gastine. When it arrived Gastine was curious, and puzzled, and, he'd have to admit, annoyed. He'd made his peace with George T years before. Dead or alive, he was reluctant to be involved with George again. But this time he didn't put the recording away for future listening. Perhaps it was to make up for his past carelessness, perhaps he was intrigued. In any event it was easier. There was no need to hunt down an old tape player. Gastine pecked away on his laptop until he finished his charting for the day, then slipped the CD in the computer. Then listened.

…Hi, Dr. Gastine. This is Nikki T again, George's wife. You remember me? I'm the one who asked you about George's tapes. I know this is coming out of the blue. Like why is she doing this? So let me explain. I wanted to do something special for the reunion. The T family reunion that is, not my old high school reunion. I already did something special for that. I'll get to it later. George's sister organized everything so well I felt left out. That's Carole. Carole's amazing. Even when I didn't like her I had to admit she was amazing. She had all the old family pictures and home movies digitalized, and planned a big show for them. Then I remembered George's tapes. That's why I got in touch with you. I shouldn't have got my hopes up. No big deal, though. It's been such a long time. No one could expect you to hold onto them all these years. Why would you? George wouldn't have cared. But why did you ask him to do it in the first place? Was there some medical reason? He must have been quite a case. George suspected you were writing him up for a medical journal. Nothing wrong with that I guess, but he liked his privacy. He could be very suspicious you know, even a little paranoid sometimes. For good reason, probably. Thinking about George's tapes gave me the idea to make

my own. Make one while you can, I thought. I forget more than I remember from those days. So here goes...

...Let me start with Carole and Frank and the reunion. You remember Frank, George's twin? They held it on our little island, George's island, because George loved that place even though we weren't happy there. Not at the end anyway, and that feeling lasts the longest. We loved each other, but we weren't happy. Does that make any sense? Of course it does. Carole had us all do DNA testing to get this ancestry business straightened out. Why I don't know, I couldn't care less, but it was a big deal to her. If she could've dug George up from his grave she would have tested him too. No kidding. It must have something to do with why she couldn't give George her kidney way back when. It turns out Carole and Amanda have the same dad. You remember Amanda, she's the one who turned out to be compatible. She's so nice, I wish she had come. There should be more people like her. Anyway, their dad would be Ted, Ted T. He died ten years ago, maybe twelve. It was his liver—cirrhosis or something. The tests showed Frank has a different father. Carole figured that out years ago, so no surprise there. So George does too of course, if they're really identical twins. Hey, who knows? Maybe we should've dug him up just to be sure. We don't know their father's name or anything. Probably something Spanish from what Ted told Carole the last time she saw him, and from the DNA tests too. Mrs. T never told a thing. God bless her, took it all to the grave. Donna didn't sent in her sample. Too busy, she said. Donna is George's other sister. Frank is one-eighth Jewish by the way, and has DNA from West Africa, too. Glad his mother wasn't around to find that out. It would have killed her. Haha! No surprises on my end—half Lebanese, half Italian. I didn't need a cheek swab for that. Two different labs said the same thing, but all you had to do was ask my parents. With George, Jr. it wasn't so simple. The labs gave two different results. One said he had eight percent Sephardic DNA, the other said he didn't, but had some Native American genes. Go figure that one. Makes you wonder about the whole thing. Like me being two percent Sami—I don't think so. George Jr's wife is from Ecuador, so I have no idea what that makes my grandkids. They can test themselves when they're old enough, if they'll even care about all this ancestry crap. Donna did get herself tested for the breast cancer gene, though. Paid for it herself when the insurance company wouldn't cover it.

She's negative, so good for her. But that doesn't mean other family members can't have it, right? And there's an alcohol gene and a diabetes gene somewhere. I thought this might interest you as a doctor. But let me get back to George...

IV.

...George and Frank. Did I get the right one? I thought they were about the same except George needed me more. Like that was the difference. It meant something at the time. I was seventeen years old, what did I know? And George seemed like more fun. That was when he liked to travel with the carnival. But that carnival stuff gets old and I didn't like his friends. You have to settle down sooner or later. I give him credit, he was good about it. He didn't mind working as a security guard even though the pay was lousy and the night shift messed up his sleep, which messed up his sugars when it was hard enough to control them in the first place. I could tell his sugars were high when he'd be peeing and thirsty all the time and drinking tons of soda. Sometimes he was so tired he could hardly drag himself out of bed but he never let on. And sex, what a problem that turned into. Don't get me wrong, we had a good run. There wasn't much else to do on that island, so we made the most of it. George was great in bed. He was very patient, and could he last. So when he couldn't get it up anymore he got real depressed. I told him to see a doctor and find out if they could do anything about it. He never did, of course. Poor George, he didn't live to see Viagra. Poor me, for that matter. Some parts of him were still in good shape but others were so worn out, like his eyes. Maybe that's why he tripped going down a stoop one night and broke his leg. That was it for the security job. The accident happened at work so he qualified for disability which was like getting a prize for screwing up, which was fine with me. He still wouldn't go to a doctor for his diabetes, though. He hated doctors. Didn't trust them. That's what finally did it for me—up and down, up and down, with his lousy teeth and that gross foot infection. He was stubborn, poor idiot. Which is all right when you have to stick to something but not so good when it's doing you in. Then he tried to make it look like there was something wrong with me for wanting him to stop messing up.

Something wrong with me and I actually started believing it. Whoa! How crazy is that? Not like he ever abused me or anything. He'd get mad and yell and scream about how he couldn't stand having to worry about his f'ing sugar all his life and what the 'f' would I know about it and who was I to tell him what to do but he didn't hit me or anything. I was never scared. He was like a little kid having a tantrum. It was more pathetic than scary. I probably could have punched him out if I wanted to. So I had to leave for my own sanity. And too bad, 'cause we had some good times. George had a kind heart. But he was bitter, you know, he just wanted to be normal. Then at the end he just wanted to be left alone and not bother anybody. I liked that little island too, but it was way too small for the two of us after we split up. I still cared about him. It would've been easier to watch him fall apart if I didn't. I told him that. God I hated to, but I moved back to my parent's house and had to hear their bullshit about marrying someone who didn't even finish high school. That's where I found out about the high school reunion. I hadn't even thought about his brother...

Gastine stopped the tape. He'd had enough. This was not what he wanted to hear. It made him mad. Why was this woman wasting his time? He was late for evening rounds.

V.

Two weeks after Nikki's tape arrived Gastine took a moment to consider his reaction. Why was he so put off? It contained a kernel of something interesting, things about George he'd missed, though he had no idea what he was actually looking for. He resolved to put up with what bothered him in order to see where all this was leading, to see if in fact there was any point to it. When he found a free moment on his lunch break he closed himself in his office to listen further, leaning back in his desk chair as if waiting for a dental check-up, gazing out the window at an empty parking lot. Nikki's voice, still youthful, hoarse, raspy even, leapt into the room as if she had never stopped talking.

…The reunion. I had no idea what was coming. How could I? I'd never been to one, and it wasn't what I thought it would be. I just went for the hell of it. It's not like I was looking for anything. I was living at my parent's place after George and I broke up. There's not much to do there. And high school wasn't a big deal to me like it was to some people. I couldn't wait for it to be over. You could say I hated it. I just wanted to be on my own and get out of Long Island. So I only went because I was around there anyway and I was bored. But the reunion was a hoot. Everyone was talking about their divorces, and AA, and meeting their soul mate in rehab and things like that. All that graduation bullshit about having your whole life ahead of you and making a difference in the world? Like twenty years later and people were really beat up. It made me think I wasn't doing so bad. But God, seeing Frank! That was so weird. It was like seeing my husband ten years younger. I'd forgotten about Frankie. When I turned around and saw him next to me I almost freaked. I thought I'd seen a ghost, except when I spilled my drink his pants got wet so I knew he must be flesh and blood. It was like some time machine transported George to the middle of the ballroom. I was so embarrassed. But that broke the ice, so to speak. Frank went to the bar to get me another drink, which gave me a chance to get myself together before we started talking. The more we talked the more we realized we had a lot to say to each other. The trouble was I forgot who I was talking to half the time. I kept saying things I wanted to say to George. We sat together at dinner and kept going. It was so confusing, you know, because not only is Frank not George, Frank is not like George at all even though if you close your eyes his voice is the same and if you touch his hair it feels the same. I tried to be careful not to get carried away with the fantasy, but it got harder as the night went on. Finally I really didn't care anymore. I just let it go. Just let it all go, for one night. All in this crazy reunion scene where everyone is starting to look like their parents and wearing name tags and reminiscing about high school as if it actually meant something. But so what, everyone was having a good time. All innocent enough I suppose, for most of the people there. Do you know what slow dances do when you haven't been held close in a long time and you're attracted to someone you like, someone very familiar, and you're half smashed and there's a hotel room right there waiting for you? I'll tell you. They make you forget about a lot of things. I still wonder about that night. I have no regrets,

mind you. That night I wanted it to happen. Not that I ever would have planned it that way. Somehow it was supposed to happen—for everyone's sake, not just for me and George. It happened for a lot of people. For Frank too, even if he didn't know it then.

So yes, I got pregnant and had the baby. Somehow it all made sense, all part of the non-plan. I moved across the Sound to Bridgeport and asked George to move in with me. That was a little crazy too. It was after Amanda's kidney got screwed up from that dye test and he finally recovered enough to get off dialysis. You remember that, right? He said he was never going back on it and never did. I asked him to move in with me because the baby was for him. That's the way I looked at it. He was really the father. Okay, it was through Frank, but as far as biology and DNA and what-not are concerned he might as well be the father, right? I told Frank to accept that. And George was good with it too. Good with naming it George, Jr., good with being a father for the time he had left. He changed a lot of diapers and for a while got around well enough to look after the apartment and do the cooking while I worked. Of course George needed his care, too. He didn't go out much with his bad eyes and his amputation and all. He hated people looking at him like he was less of a person just because some cells in his pancreas stopped working and his sugars messed up his circulation. That's how he put it. At the end, just after George, Jr. was out of diapers, I was taking care of both of them. It was hard but it didn't last long. George didn't want to go to the hospital and he didn't want to be a burden. Carole came to help, which was a blessing. I'd never had much to do with her before that. It was strange at first. We never really liked each other, but it worked out. We just did what we had to do. So at the end he just faded away, like going into a deep sleep. And that's the end of the story. But what I'd give to hear George's voice on those tapes. If you ever find them, let me know. If you even listened to this one. If you did, you know a little more about him. I figured you must have wanted to for some reason. And I know he was a tough patient. He never listened to doctors. He hated doctors, you know, but he thought you were okay. He told me you listened and you always told him straight, even if you didn't know the answer. I figure you did the best you could. So thank you. I guess that's all.

Gastine stopped the CD and slumped down in thought. Why had she done this? He listened to the silence of his office. And why did he even care? There was nothing

particularly interesting about George's disease. Gastine had seen his share of patients self-destruct from any number of vices. Nothing new there. George hadn't played his cards well, but so what? He was dealt a bad hand, yes, he and countless others. So maybe there was something more personal. Maybe Dr. Gastine had 'boundary issues', as the psychologists like to say. And what might that be—the struggles of this young white man to a young Black doctor—compassion confused with curiosity? Or maybe there was no special reason, and no boundaries were crossed. Just a young physician curious about the experience of his patients, a doctor concerned about the outcome of his and his colleagues' actions, the consequences of their medical paradigm, in what was a rather sad case.

George

Pray my Dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?[9]

Hello, doctor. I'm not sure what you want, so I'm just going to say what's in my head. Don't be surprised if I jump around. I could start anywhere, so I'll start with my mother. Kind of makes sense, doesn't it? I know there are smart mothers and kind mothers. Mine wasn't, but not as dumb or selfish as I thought. That's easy to see now. You know her—the nervous type, and kind of fat. She loved to cook. I see her in the kitchen, going from the stove to the sink and back, rummaging through the refrigerator, talking the whole time with her back turned to us and still talking after we'd left the room and stopped listening. And she loved to eat. She had this sweet tooth she tried to hide because of me. What a joke. She hid candy bars in the cupboards and ate them when I wasn't around. We all knew they were there. I got my share, so what was the point? See the mess you inherited? And I can see her filling my syringes, always afraid she'd get it wrong, squinting with one eye closed as she held up the vial. Her fingers shook when she pushed the needle through the rubber top and pulled back the plunger. She kept open bottles of insulin in the refrigerator no matter how many times the nurse or the doctor said she didn't need to. I never told her the injections hurt more when the insulin was cold, because it didn't hurt that much. My mother is the right place to start. She was the fixture. She was like the house or the furniture except with habits we used to think were funny. But now she's gone and the house is gone, the furniture is gone and you don't get them back. Too late for that, but never too late to wonder. She used to lie on the living room couch when we got home from school. What was she thinking all that time?…

…Our tract house seemed plenty big to us. It was brand new when we moved in, just like the rest of the houses in our development. It had winding streets that doubled back on themselves in crazy loops and even confused people who'd lived there for years if they were drunk or stoned or didn't pay attention. Three bedrooms. One for me and Frank, one for Carole and Donna, and Amanda slept in mother's room after my father moved out. It had formica cabinets in the kitchen and linoleum floors my mother waxed once a month, with a finished room in the basement next to my father's workshop. I called him my father then, so I'll call him my father now. My father finished the basement by himself. Electrical, plumbing, paneled walls, carpeting, everything. He was handy and he was organized. Everything in its place. If we moved a tool an inch we'd get whacked on the head. I used to watch him at his work bench. He didn't like me helping—didn't have the patience to teach me or show me what to do—so I would just watch him work until he chased me away. He was a jerk, basically. He had that sarcastic way of talking that people from the city have. I don't think it was some kind of act, just the way he was brought up and what seemed like normal speech to him. It was easy to think he was in a bad mood even when he wasn't, though he usually was. There were lots of people like that in our town, people from Brooklyn and the Bronx. Not my mother, though. Her feelings were more delicate…

…Let me describe an island scene for you. Rocks, water, and sun. That's about it. Seashores are stripped down. Nikki is sitting next to me. We're on a tree trunk facing the ocean. Our fingers touch. The wood is smooth and hard and gray. Saltwater must have soaked away its bark when it floated to the island. Trunks this big don't grow here. For it to be so far up the beach some storm must have tossed it ashore, a nor'easter or a hurricane. There are huge tree trunks scattered all along the beach like bones from some prehistoric plant world. They're perfect benches for looking out to sea, like monuments to anyone with a penknife who wants to carve their name or leave messages for future worlds. Who knows where those trees came from. Canada or the Carolinas. Bringing plants and animals to restock the island I suppose. Invasive new species, like tourists. Behind us are the clay cliffs the island is known for, studded with rocks. They look like loaves of raisin bread. On the top edge are shrubs. Their roots

dangle in the air where the silt washed away. Very precarious. They hang on as long as they can. Fast forward and they're gone, the cliffs are washed away. Nikki's gone too. The sea, the sky, the rocks are exactly the same. I'm sitting on the same trunk without her, watching waves slap the sand. Someday another storm will lift this trunk back to the ocean and wash it to another beach. I try to think where that might be. A tropical island maybe, Ireland or Portugal. Maybe someone, an old man in a Panama hat, will find it and wonder where it came from. He'll cut it up and sculpt it into little pelicans and seals for souvenirs. Or maybe it won't wash away for thousands of years, when there are no men. I felt stranded on that island, but I always went back. Was it me, or was it something else? I don't know doc, maybe you can figure it out. It's just a little pile of dirt in the ocean, full of vacationers three months a year and dead the other nine. If it wasn't for my kidneys I'd still be there. If it wasn't for my sister Carole, even though her own plan fell through. You know the story. In the end that place taught me all I needed to know. I left when it was time to leave. It was time to leave when I knew it didn't matter where I lived, or where I didn't live. In other words, where I died. Sometimes it felt like I was exiled there, and sometimes like I was abandoned. Hard to tell the difference, but who cares? It doesn't matter. Time exiles everyone…

…Nikki didn't like to cook. When we first moved to the island we'd have sandwiches for dinner, sometimes a bowl of cereal. Who cared, we were on our own. Then we bought a hibachi and I'd barbecue burgers and hot dogs in the backyard. But once in a while she'd invite friends over and make a big deal of it, on Sunday afternoons when the weather got cold and the days were short. She'd make a pork roast or leg of lamb with roasted potatoes and turnips, something to soak up the sauce, and we'd have red wine like it was an old family tradition, an after-church gathering in some little New England town though she never went to church that I knew of. It must have been a thing from her childhood or something she wished had been in her childhood. I never could tell which because her childhood was so mixed up with stories from books and magazines and movies it was hard to know what was true. Those Sundays. The way she took charge of the kitchen. It always amazed me. She'd tie back her hair and strap on an apron like she was suiting up for a big game. I can see her wipe

her hands on her jeans as she stopped in the middle of a thought while I'm peeling potatoes at the sink and say, "I hope this doesn't mess up your blood sugar." Because it was an early dinner and the timing of my insulin would be off. That was always the problem. She cared more about my blood sugar than I did. She cleaned up the kitchen afterwards, telling me to relax and enjoy the evening till our friends left stuffed with her roast and bread pudding and it would already be twilight and I'd be feeling light-headed and sleepy from the wine. Then the rest of the week it would be hot dogs or corn flakes for dinner and dirty dishes piled in the sink and she would slip back in her moods. That's why I started cooking, to help her with her moods. Not that I had a clue how to cook other than my memory of the way my mother did it, and my mother's meals were the only things I could think of. But half the time Nikki just pushed them away and had a bowl of Special K. "I can't believe she fed you this stuff," she'd say. "It's not healthy." I tried, but I was never much good helping her when she was down…

…Amanda, my little sister. I owe her so much, or do I? I never asked her for anything. She just tossed me her kidney like it was an extra pair of shoes. Generous Amanda, clueless Amanda maybe. She visited us one summer on the Island. She just broke up with a high school boyfriend and needed to get away from home because she felt Mom liked him more than her and tried to make her feel guilty, like it was all her fault. Amanda was the only one in my family that Nikki and I could stand. I'm sure they felt the same way about us. Nikki took her on after-dinner walks along the beach and they had long talks at the kitchen table, whispering, conversations that would stop as soon as I came in. I was working nights as a security guard. One morning when I got home—I liked those early hours when the island was so quiet you wouldn't know it was full of vacationers—I saw Amanda sitting by a pond down the road. I parked the truck in our driveway and walked back to see what was going on. Her eyes were red like she'd been crying. "What are you doing up?" I asked. "Couldn't sleep," she said. She tried to smile, looking at the water. "It's so pretty here," she said. The pond is small and choked with lily pads and has some sunfish and bass. The sun was just coming up. I remember the light was turquoise on the water, and the leaves had dew on them. I said, "You don't look so good. You okay?" Her mouth smiled, but her eyes didn't. She said, "I'm fine." I

said, "You don't look fine." She said, "I don't want to talk about it." I said, "If it's about boyfriends, it's not worth it." And she said, "Oh god, that's not it." She squeezed her eyes shut like something hurt. "I don't want to talk about it," she said again, not hurt now but bitter as if I was some meddling parent, and she shut me out just as sure as if I was. I could almost hear it, like a door slamming. I saw she was mad and trying to hold it in like a kid accused of something they didn't do. My shot at sympathy was pretty lame. I don't know how to do sympathy that good. She kept whatever it was to herself. She was staring at the pond as if I wasn't there and I had to get home so I left. I know I was the clueless one. I'd missed the point, and she couldn't talk to me about it. After she left, Nikki set me straight. Amanda wouldn't have much more to do with boys. I know what I owe her, I just wish I knew her better. The world would be better off with more Amandas around. My opinion, for what it's worth. I wish she hadn't moved so far away, about as far way as she could get. Can't blame her though…

…We lived in a house at the end of a dirt road on the west side of the island. I said house but it was more like a shack, four little rooms, one bath and a small deck, wood-paneled walls that made it smell like a musty cabin at summer camp. Maybe we were looking for something simple, but it was the only place we could afford and that was still a stretch. The so-called road was a dirt track barely wide enough for one car, full of rocks and ruts that banged up your suspension. Sometimes I worried the propane truck wouldn't make it for deliveries, especially when it snowed. The good thing was not many tourists wandered out there. We were near the shore, behind a wooded rise to the cliffs. You couldn't see the ocean but you could hear it pounding. There were fields with stone walls that ran up the hill behind us, stones that must have weighed a ton cleared from the old potato fields, stones that must have been dragged by horses and oxen and teams of men back when neighbors had to work together to make a living. With the sharp rise on one side and a long slope on the other we couldn't see the sun going down over the water. But the sky was big, and dusk lit it up with colors you don't see from the mainland in this part of the country…

…Me and Frank. I remember a day my uncle took us with our cousins to his favorite fishing spot near Orient Point. It was a rocky beach on the Sound, filled with smooth stones speckled like ostrich eggs. The waves were so small, just lapping the shore, you could wade into the water up to your hips and cast your line. We saw the New London ferry passing in front of us. Off to the right was the silhouette of Plum Island in the haze. Nikki once said the reason I got diabetes and Frank didn't was I got infected by some biological weapon from the Plum Island lab. A virus that was carried over by the wind and hit me by chance. Such bullshit. You hear those stories all the time. If it was true, wouldn't everyone in Orient Point have diabetes by now, not to mention people passing through on the ferry? Then again, it could have been a freak accident that was contained right away, more like Three Mile Island than Chernobyl. But still, why me and not Frank? A stupid thought, of course. A weapon that takes thirty years to kill someone? Unless you're playing the long game, but that's crazy. Who the hell knows? At the beach that day our cousins just screwed around like they usually did so Frank and I went off by ourselves to try our luck. We still dressed pretty much the same back then, and people used to get us mixed up all the time, even our parents. Especially when they were mad. It was funny. "Goddammit it Frank, George, whoever the hell you are!" How many times did we hear that? We shared the blame whenever one of us did something wrong. Our parents didn't care which one they punished, which was usually both of us. And of course we'd each try to take advantage, blaming the other whenever we thought we could get away with something. But by the time of that fishing trip we were getting tired of it. "George," said Frank, and I could tell he had something on his mind more serious than fishing when he said my name a second time. "George, I've been thinking. We should stop trying to be like each other." I had no idea what he meant. I didn't know I was trying to be like him, or he like me. We just were. I remember I stooped down to look at a jellyfish that washed up on the beach. It was perfectly round, about the size of a pancake. I could see clear through it. I said, "Who's trying?" Frank shrugged and we kept walking to a spot where a line of boulders went into the water, some low enough and flat enough to stand on. The water was smooth as glass and you could see the slimy rocks on the bottom covered with seaweed. I said, "What about here?" He said, "Go ahead if you want. I don't feel like it." He sat down on

a piece of driftwood and picked up a stick and flipped over a horseshoe crab lying on the pebbles. I asked him, "What's wrong, don't you want to fish?" He said, "We don't have to do everything together, you know." I said, "I know. So why are you saying this?" He said, "Because I've been thinking, that's all. It just gets us into trouble." I didn't know what he was talking about and told him so. "Like with Dad," he said. "He always thinks we're up to something. He's always mad at us." I guess I was used to Dad being mad. It seemed to me that Dad being mad all the time was even more reason to stick together. Besides, people were always going to lump us together no matter what we did. "Dad's always mad at something," I said. Then he said, "At least Mom sticks up for you." Then I got it, the thing he was carrying around with him and wanted to get rid of. He said it like it was my fault. That was the moment I realized we were even less alike than I imagined. It made me so mad I picked up a stone and threw it at him. I just wanted to kick up some sand at his feet but my aim was bad and it hit him in the leg and he yelled and dropped the stick and threw a rock back at me, but by that time I was down the beach far enough to dodge out of the way. "Go to hell, Frank," I yelled at him. "You're crazy," said Frank. I can picture the moment clear as day—Frank on a rocky beach with the sun on the water behind him, and the outline of the Connecticut shore in the background. The bright sun and the flat boulders and the clear jellyfish, trying to run after me but limping on the leg that was hit by the rock I threw and slipping on the piled stones until he finally gave up and went back to get his fishing gear…

…Do you remember when I asked you about my father's drinking? You said you didn't know he was much of a drinker but I think you must have had some idea since it would be hard to miss and you're not that dumb. I think you were worried I had it in my genes, but of course the funny thing is he wasn't my father and drinking was never my problem. Smoking, now that's another story. I always liked the smell of tobacco smoke. When I was a kid I liked the way my mother lit up her cigarettes. She did it with such a graceful gesture there was something beautiful about it. She focused all her attention right on the tip where the flame met the tobacco, as if for a few seconds nothing else in the world mattered. And then she inhaled slow and deep and blew out a stream of smoke so satisfied, or maybe it was relieved. I wanted to do it too. I think I was twelve

when I started. I remember the day. My mother was out shopping. When I got home from school I found an open pack of Salems lying on the kitchen table. I took one out when none of my sisters were around and went to a little park down the block and smoked it behind some bushes where I thought no one could see me. Everyone knows quitting is hard, but people forget how hard it is to start. You have to really work to get that awful-tasting smoke down your throat and in your chest and then get through the coughing and the headaches and the dizziness. The menthol in her cigarettes made it easier. It burned and soothed at the same time. Kids know it's easier to start with menthol cigarettes. I would steal a pack from her carton and hide it in the park and smoke with my friends on our way home from school. One of them said only Black people smoked menthols, but he smoked them anyway. I don't smoke anymore. I didn't try to quit, I just lost the taste for it. You would probably congratulate me, but I know it's too late to do any good. I miss it, though. I loved to smoke. It was the only pleasure I had when sex was gone. Of course my mother found out I was stealing her cigarettes and yelled and cried and said she was worried it would stunt my growth. She never told my dad though…

…You probably want to know something about my medical problems. A case study, isn't that what you call it? What I went through, what it was like. Or maybe you don't. So what, I'll tell you anyway. I'll tell you about the transplant service you sent me to. A little feedback. You know the guy in charge, Dr. Sterne? Sterne wasn't a bad guy. I know I shouldn't have taken that swing at him. He couldn't help being such a technical fuck all the time. But yes, he was pretty much a jerk. He was short and bald, a lot like me that way but with a big, bushy mustache. A stupid mustache, really. Like a cross between Albert Einstein and Yosemite Sam. His shoes were scuffed like he was always bumping into things, and he had no sense of humor at all. I'm sure he was smart but it seemed it was all a numbers game to him. He always had those junior doctors trailing behind him, kissing his butt, talking about milligrams of this and percent of that, doing calculations at the bedside and getting all excited about it. They'd have their little discussions and then he'd tell me a bunch of numbers I didn't understand and the only way I could try to figure out what was going on was by seeing if he was smiling or

looked dead serious. Later I figured that numbers were the only way he knew how to talk to people, or maybe the only way he thought he could help them. He did seem pleased when the numbers got better and he seemed to want his patients to be as pleased as he was. More like a kidney engineer than a doctor. That's all fine I suppose, you want them to know their stuff, but when someone tells you they just messed up the only kidney you have, the one your little sister gave you, it's not about numbers anymore. Telling you the news as if it was done by no one in particular, a committee maybe, and done not actually to you but to something that belonged to you, like your car say, it gets real personal. So I took a swing at him. A big one. And it was not just him, it was a swing at all the doctors who never had anything good to say to me. A swing they all deserved, maybe you too. A swing I'd been holding back for a long time. I really meant to lay him out. I put everything I had into it and if I'd connected I would've broke his jaw and laid him out cold. He never saw it coming. Lucky for him I was off balance and slipped just enough so I couldn't reach him and I fell off the bed when his face wasn't there to stop my fist. So there I was, flat on the floor with my stump and blood running down my arm, my kidney all fucked up, and I couldn't even punch someone out. How pathetic can you get? When I hit the floor that was rock bottom. I couldn't help it, the tears just poured out. I cried not because I was sad or even still mad at Sterne. I cried because I was ashamed of being so pathetic. I had to force myself to stop, because sobbing in front of all those strangers who took me for a lunatic was even more pathetic. After that I was persona non grata with the kidney team. One good thing about it was no one felt sorry for me anymore. The shrink only wanted to know if I was going to hurt someone or kill myself and ordered a bunch of pills I spat out when the nurse left the room. But it was all okay after that because I didn't care. Fuck it. They could do what they wanted, fine with me. The transplant doctors didn't want to have much to do with me anyway. They shipped me back to you as soon as they could, with a plastic tube sticking out my belly and a list of phone numbers for shrinks. I wasn't such an interesting case anymore. So, whatever. Carole said I should've sued them. I thought about it. What would you have done? I have to find out if Nikki can still sue when I'm dead, for George Junior's sake. As for me, I don't give a shit. I didn't want to see you or any other doctors but I had to do my home dialysis and

see if Amanda's kidney was getting better so I could get the fucking tube out, and there was my new heart problem to deal with. I was right, you couldn't do much for me but you said I should make these tapes. I'm not sure why. I'm not sure what you're going to make of them. I'm not sure what good they did me. I'm not sure I'm going to send them to you…

…I thought a lot about kidneys, more than most people anyway. One thing you can say about them, they're quiet suckers. Stop a minute and listen. Can you hear them? No way. You wouldn't even know you had them unless someone told you. You can feel your heart beating, and your breath going in and out, and twitches in your gut sometimes, but kidneys are stealth. You have no freaking idea they're doing all that stuff. Filtering, pumping, keeping your blood balanced. Very precise, supposedly. People say you have to flush them out all the time, but that's just marketing bullshit to sell bottled water, right? You would know. And they're just as silent when they start to go. No warning. Little by little the things in your blood get out of whack and you don't even know it's happening. No pain, no bleeding, no fever, no rash. Nothing. You don't feel anything until they're almost dead. Then a kidney transplant puts another person's silence inside you. You can feel it. I feel my sister's silence inside me. Strange, I know. Her reins, the Bible says. My sister is there, balancing my blood for me. Just like her—no fuss. Nice kid, don't you think? On the other hand there's so much noise around a transplant, so much f'ing drama. What a circus, which I guess is easy to understand. It's like some blood sacrifice except they don't do it on top of a pyramid. And it really is a medical miracle, I'll give you credit for that. But a moral victory? Not so sure. The jury's out on that one. There's so much support and sympathy when you get a transplant, at first anyway, you feel like a rock star. But try having a foot infection that won't heal. That's quiet too. No pain, just pus oozing out your wound. No surprise there. I once got second degree burns on the soles of my feet from walking barefoot on hot sand and didn't feel a thing. I was off my feet for two weeks while Nikki dressed the blisters. Foot infections are things you ignore, and so does everyone else till the stuff oozing out turns green and smells like caca. Then your friends clear out fast. Nikki cleaned and dressed that wound, too. I wouldn't go to the hospital. I think that's what did it for her. She could

put up with swings in my blood sugar, my eyes going bad, and even do without the sex, but she couldn't put up with the stench of that foot. It was too much, and I couldn't blame her. Finally the infection spread higher and they amputated. That cured it. As the surgeons say—no foot, no foot infection. Nicki and I got back together. It all worked out, see? Eventually. As for the transplant, everyone else took care of that. Carole drove the whole show and I just went along for the ride. If I was the star, she was the director and producer. I'll get back to her. Not sure what she got out of it. I have to hand it to her though, she made a tough decision. She had lots of other responsibilities, and she would have done it. Amanda was a free spirit. But Carole never got over the incompatibility thing. There was something about the word 'incompatible' that got to her. What was that all about? She and Amanda don't have much to do with each other now. It's easy enough since Amanda lives in Australia. There's the whole twisted trail, the big rabbit hole this incompatibility thing went down. But the strange thing is how I felt after the transplant. Sure, I had more energy and slept better, that was to be expected. What I mean is, I felt like I was more myself. I don't really know how to explain it any better than that. Someone else's kidney made me feel like I was finally myself for the first time in my life. Go figure. That's why I went batshit when Sterne fucked it up. It's a nice feeling. Most people probably take it for granted…

…Let's get one thing straight. I don't like fishing that much. When I was a kid it was fun because I was good at it and people were surprised that a kid could be so good. But I never tried to be, it just happened. I never liked to see a hook sticking out a fish's mouth, or blood dripping down their cheek, or their eye staring at me like they can't believe what's happening. They have personalities you know. You can tell by their expressions. They can be sad or mad. Some are funny and some smile at you. Don't we start out as fish with gills and fins, swimming around the womb? You would know better than me. So why would I want to hook them and drag them out of their home, which is just one big womb? Why would I want to feel them yanking on the line for dear life, which only sets the hook deeper? Or flipping around scared out of their wits as you haul them in? The Old Man and the Sea, what horse shit. Man against Nature. Why not Man with Nature? I never even liked the taste of fish. What I liked was spending the day on

the beach. I liked going out with my nephews. I liked getting up before dawn, making sure our gear was just right, packing lunch, feeling the wind and the sun, watching the kids get excited when they felt a hit or disappointed when a fish slipped away. We usually caught and released. Sometimes we'd bring a fat bluefish home for Ray to grill. The ones we let go had gashes through their mouths that I worried wouldn't heal, like I had to worry about infections all my life when I got a cut. My father dragged me and Frank to fishing contests all over Long Island. Frank hated it. People made fun of him when I'd land a big one and he wouldn't get a nibble all day. Sometimes he'd pretend to be me just to confuse people. I don't know why I had such a knack for catching fish and he didn't. Maybe it was the same diabetes virus I got from Plum Island. There are lots of good fishermen in Orient Point, so maybe they got it too. Ha! The best thing about it is finding a spot where the sky and land and water all come together, a place stripped down to basics. The shore, the beach. The plants and animals there are basic, too. That's what I liked. Fishing was just an excuse. Some people like mountains and mountains are beautiful, but mountains keep things apart while the sea draws you in. There's always something going on there. Even when it's calm there's tension below the surface you can't see. Especially because you can't see it…

…One day while I was waiting for my transplant I bumped into a high school friend at the supermarket. We were in King Kullen, coming down opposite ends of the cereal isle when our carts almost smacked into each other. I was so weak I used the grocery cart for a walker. He swerved away. Hey Jimmy, I called. I knew it was him—Jimmy hadn't changed a bit. He could've been wearing the same jeans, the same tee shirt, the same sneakers, the same baseball cap as the last time I saw him, like he was stuck in a 70's time warp. I don't know if I was happy to see him or not. Maybe I was. He looked around surprised to hear his name and didn't recognize me. I said, "Fucking-A Jimmy, it's me, George, George T," pointing at my face. It took a moment for the lightbulb to go off, then he said, "George! Damn, how the hell are you? I didn't know you were around." He tried to give me some kind of homie handshake, like we were brothers from the hood or something, and thumped me on the back. It was awkward. It was obvious how I was. I looked like shit. "What you up to these days?" he said. I said,

"Buying groceries. How 'bout you?" And he said, "Me too. Getting Froot Loops for the kids." We stood there looking at each other without much to say. I said, "So you have kids?" He said, "Yeah, two. They're a handful, let me tell you." There was another long pause while we nodded like bobble heads. It had been twenty years. He finally thought of something to say. "I ran into Frank. At the reunion. I thought he was you. Haha! I never could tell you two apart. Too bad you couldn't make it." I said, "I wasn't feeling good." Which was true. Still I never planned to go to the reunion, though I'd half felt like showing up just to make people uncomfortable. I asked, "Was Nikki there?" He said, "Sure—Nikki, and Frank. They looked great." Something about the way he said that didn't feel right. So I said, "You know we're divorced, right?" Jimmy never had a problem putting his foot in his mouth. This time he caught himself, a bit late though. "Yeah," he said, "I found out at the reunion." He squirmed a little and changed the subject. "Nikki said you had some health problems." "Yeah," I said. "A few. I'm on dialysis." He gave me a blank look. "You know, the kidney machine," I said. "Right," said Jimmy, "the kidney machine. That must be tough." He started to inch his cart away like dialysis might be contagious or something. For all he knew I could pass my kidney problem to his kids. I said, "Not so bad. It's the diet that's tough. Low protein. No steaks for dinner, bro. I'm still alive anyway." Jim said, "You bet," and backed up until he found the shelf with his Froot Loops and dropped two boxes in his cart. Then he looked down the aisle at me leaning on my cart and said, "Great to see you, George. We should get together. Right now I gotta run. Say hi to your mom for me." He gave a quick wave and disappeared around the corner. I never saw him again. Not that I wanted to.

I ran into one other person from high school when I was home that time. An old history teacher. I almost liked his class. History seemed to mean something to him, like he wasn't doing it just so he could coach the football team. He was the only teacher who told me not to drop out. I was at the bank one Saturday morning and there he was, moonlighting as a teller. I didn't know it was so tough supporting a family on a teacher's salary. It was a little awkward bumping into him like that, but I was glad to see him. He had aged of course. His face had lines that weren't there when he was telling me about Dred Scott and all that other bullshit. His hair was gray now, but I knew who he was the second I stepped up to his window to cash my disability check. He had no idea who I

was, not that I expected him to. I had changed a lot more than him. "Mr. Wykoff," I said, "I was in your American History class twenty years ago." He glanced at the name on the check, then back at me. "George T?" he said, kind of dubious. "Wait a minute. Yes, I remember. I used to wonder what happened to you. You've changed a bit." He looked at the check and back at me again and his surprise changed to something else. Like I was doing something wrong. It could have been my imagination—sometimes I exaggerate these things—but I got the feeling it had to do with my check. So I said, as an explanation, "I'm waiting on a kidney transplant." "Sorry to hear that," he said. He counted out my cash without looking up and motioned for the next customer. Who knows what happened to him the last twenty years. Look what happened to me…

…Nikki came to see me in the hospital after my transplant operation. Nikki—you know, my wife and ex-wife. No Jimmy, no teachers, nobody from the carnival came though I doubt there were any around and I wouldn't want to see them anyway. No Roz or anyone from the island either, but you couldn't expect them to make the trip. Some family made it, but not my mother. She wasn't feeling well, her nerves of course. And granted, it was over an hour's drive to the transplant center and traffic makes her nervous, too. Anyway, Nikki snuck in the room just as they were discharging me. There was an older nurse handing me a bunch of papers to sign, and a young nurse handing me pills like they couldn't get me out of there fast enough. Carole was packing my suitcase and Amanda was just watching everything from a corner. A crowded little scene when Nikki slipped in behind them with a bunch of flowers and made her way to the my bed. Carole got upset when she saw her and couldn't help blurting out, "What are you doing here?" They never did like each other. I don't know why, just never did. Maybe Carole thought Nikki should have made me finish school, or taken better care of me. Maybe it was just habit by then. Pretty stupid don't you think, at that point? "Sorry," said Nikki. "Bad timing. I should've come sooner. George, these are for you." She dropped the bouquet on the bedside table and kissed me on the forehead. I was sitting on the edge of the bed with my hospital gown hanging over my thighs—you know, those flimsy things they make you wear. "Hey Nikki," I said, and lifted my bare leg out straight. "Look, no more foot infection," showing her the bandaged stump where my

left foot used to be. She bent closer to get a better look and touched the gauze wrap with the tips of her fingers, real gentle like she was afraid it might hurt. Then she stroked my leg around the stump, like she was fascinated by it, as if for a moment it took us back to our own place and there was no one else in the room. Then she snapped out of it. "I don't know if that's funny or not," she said, more to the other people in the room staring at her. "Anyway, I better run. You have a busy morning." The nurses, Carole, Amanda all stepped back to make way and she was gone. It all happened so fast I wondered if I imagined it. Then I saw the flowers on the bedside table and her signature on the card that went with it. Yes, it was Nikki. She was there. I kept her bouquet in my lap when they wheeled me to the front entrance and into the backseat of Carole's car for the ride to her house. I wanted to annoy Carole with it. I kept the flowers next to my bed until they were dry. Carole threw them away one morning when I was out for a smoke…

…The more I got to know Carole the sorrier I was for Ray. He wasn't such a bad guy. And I understand why he didn't want Carole to give me her kidney. Nothing personal. I'd feel the same way if I was in his shoes, now that I have a kid. You can't understand that if you haven't been there, and once you're there you can't explain it to anyone who hasn't. The last time I saw him was the day I left Carole's house after the transplant. Carole probably wanted to keep us away from each other. I can see her point, too. She needed a rest. After she dropped me at my mother's place she stopped checking on me. I know I wasn't very grateful, and now I see how easy she made it for me. Maybe too easy, that was the problem. It was easy to take her for granted. Ray was the one person who didn't, but from what I could tell she never noticed. My mother was on pins and needles the whole time I stayed with her and kept calling Carole for advice. I ate a lot to make Mom happy even though I didn't have an appetite. When I wasn't eating I slept. I think we both couldn't wait for me to leave. Medical problems make her uneasy. People make me uneasy. I was tired of everyone caring for me or worrying about me. I just wanted to get back to my little island and sit on the beach by myself. No family, no doctors, no so-called friends. Why should anyone care more about me than I care about myself? Carole should have been caring about Ray, not me. I didn't

give a shit. Now Ray was a big guy to begin with, and he put on a lot of weight after the army. Maybe that helps explain what happened. But he was always a nut about safety, with everything. Like his guns. Kept them locked up and separate from the ammunition, all by the book. Some were at home, some at the office. He never had them out around the kids. Safety was a big part of his work, too. Had to be in the roofing business. If any of his men cut corners they were gone. Worker's comp gets real expensive and he didn't want their blood on his hands. He should've stopped going up on roofs, though. His crews knew what they were doing. They told him so, that he should manage the business and leave the roofs to them. He could've peeked at their work from a ladder now and then to make sure the jobs were done right, he didn't have to go up there and poke around. Carole told him the same thing. It was the one time he told her to stay out of his business. He liked it up there. He hated sitting around the office. He was up there on the roof of some new McMansion one day when it was wet and windy. Too wet and too windy, and he was too heavy. So he slipped. He was agile but once you go over, that's it. Landed on his head. Was he drinking or doing drugs? Ray? Hard to imagine. Death isn't the worst thing that can happen when you break your neck. I have no idea what it's like to be paralyzed, but I know what it's like to be sick and not feel pain. I don't think he suffered much from the fall. He had good life insurance. It wasn't all bad. He didn't linger. I didn't go to the funeral though—crowds make me uncomfortable. So with all my infections and operations and complications, Ray's the one who went first. Tell me doctor, what's that about? How can you deal with this shit every day?…

…I have to say a little about Roz, Nikki's best friend. Sad, funny Roz, much too smart for the two of us. Roz had a PhD in something—anthropology or maybe it was French literature, I don't know. She came to the island after her fiancé left her for a guy the week before their wedding. Not the first woman that's happened to and not the last. So instead of going to London with him, she came to the island. She and Nikki waited tables together at the Seaview Hotel. The Seaview was a big, rundown Victorian dump that looked like it could go up in flames any minute. Back in its heyday Warren Harding stayed there once with two cabinet secretaries and some senators. They played poker on the veranda, drinking whiskey and smoking cigars. So they say. Roz never seemed

put out by stupid complaints from the guests or drunks groping her whenever their wives weren't around, things that got Nikki so worked up they fired her. Nikki has a mouth. Good old Nikki. Roz just took it in stride, straight-faced or with a little smile, never saying a word. God knows what she was thinking. She wouldn't screw the manager, either. Just did her job, didn't make a fuss when she got the lousy shifts. The bosses all knew she was smarter than they were and it really burned them, especially as she never made a point of it. It was just obvious in the way she talked and did her job. Why I wanted to tell you about her was because of her photos. She had a great eye. Roz took all the pictures we have of me and Nikki on the island. To pay her back Nikki sketched her a few times and had her sit for a portrait in our living room. I would hang out watching them like I was waiting for two women at the beauty parlor. They were long sessions. One day after she'd been posing for an hour, maybe longer, Roz said, "I'm not comfortable like this. I like to be on the other side of the camera." "I know, said Nikki. But today we're going to uncover some of your secrets for a change. Don't move." "I don't have any secrets," said Roz. She was sitting perfectly straight. She had great posture, like it was drilled into her in some finishing school. "Of course you do," I said. "Seriously," said Roz, "I'm an open book. I can't help it if people don't know how to read it." "A picture is worth a thousand books," said Nikki. "Anyway, the portrait is yours. You can do what you want with it." "Maybe burn it," said Roz, "but first I want to take a picture of it. With you." She came off her stool, got her camera from the bag she carried everywhere and went behind Nikki at her easel. Roz told her to look like she was painting. She snapped a bunch of quick photos and went back to her pose on the stool. Nikki was never happy with the portrait. She kept revising it until Roz refused to sit for it anymore. I have no idea what happened to it, or to Roz. She went off to South America and we never heard from her again. But Nikki kept one of the photos Roz took of her painting the portrait. It's in the living room…

…All this stuff about my father. Why did Carole want to tell me, anyway? What difference did it make? Only that she couldn't give me a kidney and Amanda could? It made a difference to her, fine, I get it. She got her answer. I got her answer too, one I didn't asked for. I got it when I was sitting on her deck after my surgery, so doped up

with pain killers it didn't even register till the next day. Ted's not my father? Right, whatever. I was more interested in the ants under my chair. The ants were happening now, the ants were more interesting. But once I got it I couldn't let go. Funny how you hang on to familiar things. I have no fond memories of Ted. Ted was a bully. He terrified me, that was my main memory. Just the sound of his voice booming from the next room made me want to hide under my bed. I tried to understand why he was so hard on me. Then again, it's not like he was much nicer to Frank or the girls. He was hard on everyone but that didn't matter when he was yelling at me. It usually had something to do with money. He couldn't be bothered helping with my needles or my testing. I don't think he ever took me to the doctor. As far as he was concerned there was no such thing as diabetes. He was just this dark presence in the living room with his newspaper, or down the basement with his tools. Why was it so hard to give up the idea that he was my father when he never acted like one? When he was always such an asshole? I should have been happy about it, but it made a big hole in my life. Even if most of it was bad, it was solid stuff. Now there was nothing. Carole didn't get that. She still had her dad, such as he was. She had her answer and that's all she wanted. Her mystery was solved and mine had just opened up. Not just questions about who I was and who this new father might be, but about this mother I didn't know anymore. Questions about how it happened. Question about the girls, and Frank. Familiarity went out the window. I even started wondering if Frank and I had different fathers. It can happen you know. It seemed to make sense. But of course it didn't. We were identical, mirror images anyway, not fraternal. It didn't get that weird. There was nothing that disturbing to imagine about my mother. We were in this thing Carole dredged up, me and Frank, whatever it was, together for a change. All because she was denied her grand gesture or selfless sacrifice or whatever grandiose crapola it was she wanted. So who was this man she brought unasked into my life, unasked by both him and me? Somehow I knew he was out there, had hoped many times was out there. I was fine with the possibility, just not the fact. But truth is I'd been freed of a burden. It was scary but liberating. I was now a person with new possibilities. The reality, of course, was at that point—the end point—it didn't matter. I was on my way out and others were on their way in. There wasn't even any point in being terrified. Frank would say it all lined up like the reels of a

slot machine. Carole was just one reel in the line. What are the odds? Who pulls the handle, Frank?…

…Claire, a name Mom whispered. We had no idea that person was living ten miles away across the LIE. We only knew that something happened to her that no one liked to talk about. One Saturday morning Mom said we're going to visit your aunt, like it was some normal family outing. She made us all dress up like we were going to church and off we went. I couldn't have been more than five or six. Carole and Donna sat in the front seat of the Chevy with Mom. I was in the back with Frank and Amanda. Dad didn't go and probably wasn't asked. It was April, cold and wet. The only good thing you can say about April is it isn't winter. There were spots of color in the front yards in our development but the trees were still bare. I had no interest in seeing this strange relative. I started kicking Frank's feet. First little taps like my feet were swaying with the car, and then a big kick in the ankle. Frank could see it coming. He punched me in the ribs and Mom yelled at him to stop. Carole kept looking back at us so she could tell Mom what we were doing. Every time she looked away I kicked Frank again and he punched me back. It didn't hurt. It passed the time in what seemed like a ride forever, but it was no more than twenty minutes till we pulled up to a gate with sentries standing guard like storm troopers. Then we were in this huge park with buildings and grounds that had all the color drained out of them, some troll's version of the Magic Kingdom. It got real quiet in the car. I stopped kicking Frank. We stared out the windows, scared in that fascinated way you get watching horror movies. This is a hospital, said Mom, for people with nervous problems. Your aunt lives here. Aunt Claire had so many shock treatments she lost her memory. We found out later that's why they asked Mom to come see her, to see if she could revive some part of it. After all, shock treatments weren't supposed to do that. Mom hadn't seen her in years. First she paid a few visits on her own, and when she realized Claire was calm and had nothing to say I think she decided it was safe to bring us along. Don't expect her to talk, said Mom as we walked from the parking lot. There was a lot of open space on the grounds. A few small trees, wide lawns, empty sidewalks. Frank and I just wanted to run around in the

mud. Mom said, your Aunt Claire was always a very quiet person. The girls huddled closer to Mom. Don't worry, Mom said, it's safe here. Just don't speak to anyone.

The building we went in smelled like bleach and alcohol but it wasn't a clean smell, more like it was covering something up. The vestibule was quiet, hushed the way libraries are forced to be quiet. Mom gave our names to a woman at a desk and we went up an elevator to a room with big grimy windows. It had some old chairs and a sofa, and a table with magazines on it that had pages ripped out. A woman was waiting for us in a wheelchair with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. A nurse had just finished brushing her hair, which was long and wavy. It was Aunt Claire. She was tiny, like a shrunken doll, propped up in a wheelchair that looked huge like it was built for someone else. Her lips moved and I thought she was about to say something when she saw us, but she didn't. Her lips kept moving though, puckering up and making faces, and I realized she wasn't about to talk and she wasn't making faces, her lips were just twitching. It didn't seem to bother her, if she even noticed. "Hi Claire sweetheart," said Mom. She gave Aunt Claire a peck on the cheek, then stepped back and gestured toward us. "These are your nieces and nephews. They want to meet you." She was talking in this high sweet voice the way you talk to a baby or a pet. Mom introduced us from oldest on down, without mentioning Frank and me were twins. Maybe that was too obvious. Claire looked at the two of us with this strange smile and nodded and then her eyes went dark like a light switched off. I couldn't help looking at her lips twitch. It was interesting. I couldn't understand why they did that. It was like there were little bugs running around under her skin. Other patients had come in the room and I could tell Carole and Donna were getting nervous. Then Aunt Claire seemed to wake up. She wheeled herself closer to Frank. She looked up at his face and reached out to touch it. "Herman," she said, or something like that. It was hard to tell. Her mouth was dry and she was still smacking her lips. "I'm Frank," said Frank, jerking his head back before she could reach him, like she had the plague or something. He was about to say more and so was she, but Mom grabbed his arm and yanked him away. We were back in the car in no time. That was it, the one and only time I saw Aunt Claire. I think Mom took us to meet her because she knew Claire was sick and didn't have much time left. Anyway, Claire died a few months later. She looked so small and wasted that day it was hard to

believe she was Mom's younger sister. Mom took Carole and Donna to the funeral. She said Frank, Amanda and I didn't have to go, which was a big relief. We stayed home and watched TV. Ted left us alone. Pilgrim State is a strange memory, almost like it never happened. I didn't know hospitals like that existed. I didn't know patients like that existed. I thought diabetes was bad…

…I've had diabetes since I was four, but I've been a twin all my life. So let me get back to this twin business. Not that I want to. Not that I ever wanted to be a twin. Do you know what it's like? Of course not. So try this on. Imagine you're living with a hologram of yourself. Go ahead, picture a hologram of yourself standing next to you. What does that feel like? It smiles and it's your smile. It talks and that's your voice. Now imagine this hologram being with you day and night. You do everything together. You eat together, play together, go to school together. It's kind of cute, you know, to other people. And you have a companion. But slowly, for some mysterious reason that you don't understand, the hologram becomes more human than you are. You can tell by the way people treat you. One day you realize, holy shit, now you're the fucking hologram. You're the one who's just an image. So you try to take back whatever it was the hologram took away from you, because someone has to be the hologram and you don't want it to be you. That was me and Frank. Sometimes I imagined I had other twins, someone who was more like me. No joke, I did. I'd see someone on the street and for a second I'd think they were me. I suppose you love your twin as much as you love yourself…

…My Mom had a nice singing voice. That's not strange. A lot of fat people have nice voices. It got raspy when she was older and that bothered her so much she finally stopped because she liked a pure sweet sound, but when I was little she liked to sing around the house all the time. Her favorite singer was Nat King Cole. I think his were the only records she ever bought. I remember hearing There Will Never Be Another You when I was a kid. She didn't like Chet Baker's version. It wasn't Baker's voice so much as the fact that he was a dope addict, and she didn't like the way Sinatra did it. I think she liked how Cole said the words even more than the way he sang the melodies. It

was so smooth, so proper, she could close her eyes and imagine he was white. Ted said Nat King Cole was just a trained monkey. He didn't like Black singers, or Black music. He told us white men invented jazz, and Negroes copied it. Mom would only play her songs when Ted wasn't around. Mom said Ted used to be crazy about Big Bands, but I can't remember him ever listening to music. The only thing he listened to was ball games when he was at his work bench down the basement. Nikki knew all the lyrics to Another You because it was one of her mom's favorite songs too, though her mother like Sinatra. It was one of those little things that brought us together when we met in high school. After we were married, Nikki would sing it around the house when she was vacuuming. I may dream a million dreams but how can they come true, if there will never, ever, be another you? Belting it out over the roar of the vacuum cleaner. It always reminded me of my mother. Nikki has a nice voice too, sweet just like Mom's, but she's too shy to sing in front of people. Before Ted moved out he smashed all Mom's records. A lot of them were old 78's. You remember those heavy black things, so brittle they shattered into little pieces. She cut her fingers when she picked them up off the carpet in the living room. I don't think she ever got new ones. She stopped listening to music after that. I think it stirred up too much in her. She liked silence around the house. Only at the end, Carole got her a cassette deck and some earphones so she could listen in bed. I had her try some newer stuff, but she always went back to the old songs…

…Today I'm thinking about the little pond near our house, the one where I ran into Amanda that morning on my way back from work. There was an old rowboat on the near bank flipped over with its hull facing the sky, all dented, waiting for someone to right it and put it in the water. No one ever did because the pond was too choked with lily pads. It just sat there beached, falling apart. It had been there so long no one even knew who it belonged to. The edges of the pond were full of thickets, scrubby trees and blackberry bushes that hid the water and made it hard to fish. There were blackberries everywhere. They didn't ripen till August, but Nikki would try to eat them in July when they turned from green to red, like raspberries. They looked good but they were still gritty and sour. You have to be patient. One summer I made her wait till they

were so soft they were falling off their stems, maybe too ripe. We went out to pick them before the birds got them all. We ate more than we put in our buckets and they turned our fingers purple. There's something special about picking fruit straight off the vine, the idea that nature can put something so sweet and juicy right in your hand, ready to eat. When my legs got tired I sat down in a shady spot for a moment to smoke. Around us was a field of yellow flowers, full of bees and dragonflies. Before I could light up Nikki pulled the cigarette out of my mouth and threw it in the water. "What was that about?" I said. It wasn't like her. I thought I must have done something wrong, or maybe she was taking a sudden stand on my health. All it did was annoy me, just when I was enjoying the day. "Nothing," she said. By the way she looked at me I could tell it was something else. The afternoon was warm with the nice kind of heat that makes you want to stretch out your body on the ground and soak up the warmth and close your eyes and daydream like you did when you were a kid. Not the sweaty heat of July. There was something light and soothing about it. Nikki's lips were purple like her fingers. She took a handful of berries from her bucket and plucked one with her teeth and held them up for me to taste. "Try this," she said. She dropped a berry in my mouth and I bit it. The juice was sweet and tart. I went for another and Nikki rubbed the whole handful against my nose, against my lips and chin, laughing while the juice ran down my neck, and then she pressed her mouth against mine, laughing, licking the juice and the crushed berries with her purple tongue and laughing while she pushed me down on the ground, unbuttoning my shirt, licking my neck and chest until I was laughing too. She lay on top of me and our hips moved together like we were slow dancing. She took off her halter top and I slipped off her shorts and panties. We paused for her to sit up and undo my jeans. She looked down, straddling me as I kicked them off. "You're very sexy when you're juicy," she said. We were hidden down a slope behind a thick line of bushes, and the grass was long and soft and thick like an old shag rug. We forgot about the ticks and mosquitoes. She pressed her body against me, both of us were naked now, grinding slow circles with our arms wrapped around each other. I loved the feel of her skin and the way her breasts pressed against my chest. But not much was happening. She caressed me with her sticky fingers, gentle and firm, and when there was still nothing she slid down and caressed me with her purple lips. She was patient and

persistent. I caressed her too as best I could. I closed my eyes and tried to use my imagination to help her. Still nothing. Not the slightest bulge. So I did what I could to satisfy her, using the parts of my anatomy that still worked, but it wasn't what she was looking for. That's when I knew. I knew where this new reality came from but I still felt like it was my fault and she knew too and felt like it was hers. No win. We lay there on the grass together for a long time without moving. She was on top of me with her face buried against my neck. We could still feel each other's warmth, and the warmth of the sun, and the warmth of the earth, but it wasn't much consolation. I knew we weren't ever going back. I knew I hated this. "Are you okay?" I asked. She didn't say anything, but I could feel her head nod against my shoulder. By now the gnats had found us, swarming around our eyes and whining in our ears. We tried to shoo them away but it was no use. We stood up and stretched and brushed off the dirt and brushed away the gnats and put on our clothes and picked a few more berries and then went home. We didn't say a word to each other till the next day.

After that fiasco, our morning bike rides helped. Helped keep us together for a while, anyway. It was our own special time. We had a couple of old three-speed bikes with heavy tires. I fixed them up so they ran pretty good. We liked to ride early before the rest of the island woke up. We'd pass a few walkers downtown, and see the ferry moored in its slip. The beaches were empty, washed smooth and clean overnight. The deer would be out, and the horizon would be orange and pink, and some days there were dewdrops on the spider webs that hung over the stone walls along the road. Nikki would always stop and look at them. "They're like strings of pearls," she'd say when daylight caught them, or, "They're like African bead-work," when they were in the shade. And when they were swaying, they looked like carnival lights. She was always astounded as if she'd just discovered them. And they were just like that, not some figment of her artist's imagination. The simplest mind could see they really were like strings of pearls, lines of little tapestries with shiny beads that caught the light and mirrored back colors from the sunrise. Everything around us was quiet, with a breeze blowing in from the ocean. Or there would be fog shrouding the shore and mist over the ponds, and a fawn would peek out like from another world and disappear again like its mother yanked it back. Sometimes there was wind that made you feel like you were

peddling in place. Each year it got harder to keep up with her. I had to slow down or my legs would ache. First my calves, then both legs all the way up to my butt like a vice was squeezing them. Going uphill I'd have to stop and sit on the side of the road and rub them until the pain went away. One morning in October—I remember it was just after the first frost—we started up a long hill and I called out to Nikki that my legs hurt. She couldn't hear me up ahead with the wind in her face so I said it again as loud as I could, "My legs hurt. I have to stop." "Just push through it," she said, and kept up her pace. "No way," I said. "I can't." "Sure you can," she said. "Just keep moving." Without looking back she waved to me to keep going and I watched her get smaller and smaller as she pedaled up the hill steady as ever. I tried to do what she told me, push through it, and my legs froze. They didn't even hurt anymore, just went dead. I couldn't push the pedals. I tried harder but my legs wouldn't move. I stopped and put one foot down on the ground to rest. My leg wouldn't hold and I fell over on my shoulder and cracked my head, like it happened in slow motion but it was only a split second. When I crawled off the road Nicki was already around the next curve. By the time she realized something happened and rode back I could move my legs again but my hair was caked with blood. There's a big scar on my scalp where I should've got stitches. I wouldn't bicycle after that. Nikki said biking was good for my circulation and good for my blood sugar and it was good to get out of the house and I should get a helmet and try again. We argued about it. When I fell off the stoop at work and broke my leg that was the end of that argument. Nikki kept riding, though. She was a strong cyclist. She said it cleared her mind, and I could tell that her moods were always better when she got back from a ride. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but she's a natural athlete. She has a dancer's legs. Other guys were always looking them. Let them…

…That damn foot. Always that damn foot. How it got that way I don't fucking know. I didn't bang it or cut it. I never stepped on a nail. A cat didn't scratched it. No dog, human, or snake ever bit it. Nikki said it must have been my boots, but as far as I could tell my boots always fit good. I know that much about foot care. It must have been something to do with the island. My foot never gave me problems before I got there. I could never get my sugars right after it started acting up. I can't tell you how

many antibiotics I went through, week after week, taking those pills three, four times a day. I cleaned it, scrubbed it, soaked it in Epsom salts. I poured peroxide on it till it was raw. I massaged the shit out of it. It just wouldn't heal, like it was cursed. It would get better for a while, the skin would close, then a little pinhole opened up and it would start to drain all over again. The trouble was it didn't hurt. When people looked at it they couldn't believe that. That's why it would have been easy to ignore except for a messy little trickle, the oozing that made me keep it bandaged all the time. After a while it smelled real bad. It was constant. After Nikki left I didn't bother to clean it as often or change the bandage every day. Why? Because it didn't make any difference. It just kept oozing, just kept trickling, no matter what I did. People avoided me more, and I avoided them, but I managed okay by myself. Not great but okay, until the big storm. That seemed to trigger something. The next day it was swollen more than usual and now I could feel it, like something was squeezing it. The day after that it puffed up like a melon and the skin turned red to the top of my ankle with streaks going up my leg. Now there was pain. Deep, burning pain like I'd never felt before. It was very fucked up. So I went to Roz's house. I knew she was leaving for Peru soon but was probably still there since the ferries had only just started running again. I figured she might have some pain killers. She was home thank god, already drinking with people from her work and a couple of local guys who ran sport fishing boats sidelined by the storm. Her power was still out, and the weather had cleared a bit but not as much as you'd want or expect after a big storm passes. They'd been drinking steady and doing god knows what else since mid-morning, their eyes all bloodshot and half-closed. Roz had been very formal to me since Nikki left, stuck-up even, keeping her distance as you might expect. I'm know I'm not a sympathetic character. Pathetic maybe and kind of pitiful sometimes, but not very sympathetic. I know Roz encouraged Nikki to leave me, like she was mad at men, all men, but still, who could blame her? She didn't know I didn't give a shit whether she encouraged it or not. She didn't let me close enough to tell her. So I knew I was putting a damper on their little party. "George, what brings you to town?" she said. We stood on her porch for a minute while she swayed in the doorway, hoping I was on my way somewhere else. "Who's it?" called some drunk from the house. There was a round of laughter and I smelled a cloud of marijuana and incense floating out. "I have a

question for you," I said. Roz finally stepped aside and motioned me in. The place was a mess. Candles everywhere, dripping mounds of wax on the tables. There were empty liquor bottles on the kitchen counter and dirty coffee mugs in the sink and crumbs and scraps of food on the floor that must have been piling up since the hurricane landed. "Have a drink George," said one of the partiers, pouring some red wine in a Mason jar. Alcohol was the last thing I wanted. Just the thought of it made me want to throw up. I passed on his offer and lead Roz back to the kitchen where I made my plea. "Really, George?" she said. She smiled and gave me a boozy wink. "Percocet? Let's have a look." I pulled up my pants and set my leg on a chair. The swollen foot was wrapped in gauze with an old sock over the toes, stuck in an old slipper I slitted open so my foot would fit. The redness was halfway up my calf. Roz looked at it and her smile disappeared. "Shit George," she said, "that looks bad." "Yeah," I said. "It hurts, like I told you." She said, "I have some codeine around here somewhere. Don't go away." She disappeared in the bathroom and I could hear her rummaging around the medicine cabinet. When she came back she had a small bottle with half a dozen Tylenol #3's. "That's all I could find," she said. "Take them. But you need to see a doctor." "I'll be OK, I said, I just need something for the pain." I took two tabs and sat down in the living room. I was just going to rest for a minute, but I fell asleep the second I laid my head back. I woke up when I felt something pulling on my foot. It was Roz, bent over me with her camera slung around her neck. She had undone the dressing and was examining my foot. The skin was weeping yellow stuff that looked like Mountain Dew, swollen so tight you'd think it was about to split. Her party guests were staring at it over her shoulder. She should have taken a picture of their expressions. A damper on their little party sure enough. "I'm driving you to the doctor's office," she said. "You could lose that foot." Roz could be a little too dramatic sometimes, but I had a feeling now she wasn't. She changed the position of my leg to catch more light. "Don't move," she said. She snapped a few close-ups, then wrapped it up again as gently as she could while my foggy brain registered pain and considered how to respond. I was feeling a little better with the codeine. "Maybe I will have some of that wine," I said. I reached for a bottle, but Roz snatched it away in time. Her wasted party guests did their best to hold me up, and Roz managed to bundle me into her old Volkswagen. I didn't help much,

but wasn't in any shape to protest either. It was a just a short drive to the clinic. The waiting room was full of islanders who'd managed to mess themselves up one way or another trying to get through the last few days without electricity. You could hear the clinic generator humming through the wall. Two hours later the doctor took one look at my leg and excused himself to make a phone call. When he came back he said, "I'm sending you to the hospital. Right now." And that was it, off I went. They transported me on the next ferry. That's when you know you should go to the hospital, when you're too sick to care. I went straight to a bed on the medical floor. The first few days they x-rayed and scanned me. They started a bunch of antibiotics and pumped me with fluids and insulin. My sugars wouldn't go down and my toes started turning black. They consulted wound care and a bunch of specialists—infectious disease, surgeons, an endocrinologist, you name it—and in the end just lopped off my leg below the knee. End of problem. Then I went to rehab. They gave me crutches and after a week or so fitted me with a temporary prosthesis. I learned how to walk on it. I felt a lot better, especially when I could start smoking again. People like to ask me about phantom pain. That's always their first question. Something about phantom pain fascinates people. Sorry to disappoint them, but I don't have any. My foot was always numb. No pain, that was the problem. I got my permanent prosthesis six months later, when the swelling in the stump went down. Man, you should see the medical bills. But then again, you wouldn't be surprised. I declared bankruptcy and got a job off the books. I could finally see myself getting off that little island and doing something else with my life, as if I was meant to do something. I didn't see my kidney failure coming, or dialysis, or the transplant and all the bullshit that came with it…

…Hello again, doc. Almost done. I'm on the beach today watching the waves. They're not very big, just long straight lines with a nice little curl. I brought my fishing gear and my tape deck. I don't feel like fishing so I'll talk to you instead. The weather is fine. The sky is a perfect color. The water is a perfect color. There's no haze on the horizon, it's just my bad eyes that make it look that way. There's no shortage of time here, so no need to save any time. There's nothing to stop me from lying back with my hands behind my head, closing my eyes, digging my toes —the ones I have left—in the

sand, thinking about the parts of me that aren't my own. My kidney, my leg. I think my mind too is not my own in a different kind of way, not like some secondhand organ or a custom replacement part. It's not my own because it's just a reflection of the weather. The way I think and the way I feel is just weather. Being mad or worried or happy is just weather. When your mind is cloudy or your mind is clear it's just weather. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe it's just the feel of the air today. That's why people like to look at the ocean, or a lake or a river. Any body of water. Watch the water, it's always changing. Feel the air, same thing. That's why people will go outside to watch a hurricane come ashore. That's why when the weather's bad, who feels like doing much? There must be ions in the atmosphere, force fields or something that synchronize our brain waves. We don't react to the weather, we're part of it. I think Frank would agree with that. Maybe that's why I like the ocean so much. I like being part of it. The ocean is just weather with fish. Drugs are just fake weather. Though now it doesn't seem like it, I'll get off this island soon enough. I'll go someplace else where the weather will pass through me and keep going the way it always has before we had a word for it. That's all the news I have for now, doctor…

…There's more I could say, but what's the point? I've rambled on long enough. Let me end with my meeting with Frank. It happened a week ago, so I can tell it while it's still fresh in my mind. It was my idea. Nikki wasn't happy about it. I told her he had the right—no, he had the obligation—to see his son. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe I had the obligation to see Frank. It was hard to pry him away from his little suburban split level. I suppose it's nice and comfortable out there in the Midwest. Anyway, he came over to Bridgeport on the ferry from Port Jefferson after a visit with Carole. They had some business about Mom's estate. He and Carole are co-executors. From what I gather they aren't seeing eye to eye, something about George, Jr. If you ask me, it's all a mess. Everything's held up in probate. With three kids and Ray gone I'm sure Carole is fighting for all she can get. She already got the furniture and Mom's jewelry. The house is the problem. I've stayed out of it and Amanda doesn't want to be bothered. I don't know about Donna. From what I hear she's pretty well-off as is. That leaves the two of them to fight it out. The lawyers will end up with most of the money

anyway. So fuck it. But that's not why Frank came to Bridgeport, that's just why he came over on the ferry from Port Jeff. It's not me so much as money that got him to come back east. My take on it, anyway. I know I'm jaded. He didn't come to see Nikki, either. He came to see the baby, the baby he told Nikki not to have. What kind of reunion this would be was anyone's guess.

The three of us waited for him on the dock. Everything was wet. It rained all night and there was heavy fog over the city. You couldn't see I-95 right smack behind us let alone the Long Island shore twenty miles away. You couldn't even see the ferry till it came out of the mist like a ghost ship about to ram the dock. I got a sick feeling when I saw it, and wondered why on earth I'd invited him. Maybe Nikki was right. After all these years what was the point? It seemed like the cars took forever to drive off the boat. Then came the line of foot passengers. At first I thought he wasn't even there. I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed. When I finally recognized him I knew why. Why I invited him. Hey George, he said. Walking toward me was this bald, chubby, middle-aged guy. So this was my doppelgänger, this little putz with his stringy pony tail? This caricature of my twin brother? It was a relief to know I didn't look like him, even beaten down as I was. I'm sure he felt the same way looking at me. I was holding the baby. "Hey Frank," I said. We nodded at each other and didn't bother to shake hands. Nikki hugged him and burst into tears. At first she tried to hide them but what did it matter? "I won't stay long," he said. Frank and I didn't have much to say. I think we both stood there glad we weren't the other, glad we weren't looking in a mirror anymore. But I felt the distance between us close a bit when I handed him the baby. Here's your Uncle Frank, Georgie, said Nikki. And when the baby smiled and spit up on him it closed a bit more. Uncle Frank. Somehow it fit him. It was more like the reality of our situation anyway. We all sensed it. We were all okay with it. Uncle Frank, he liked that. There was no need to say anything more. Frank tried to though, I don't know why, after we went back to the apartment for lunch. We were in the kitchen eating the chocolate cake Nikki made special for him. She was the only one keeping the conversation going. When she went to the bedroom to change the baby's diaper, Frank drummed his fingers on the table for a minute before mumbling some polite crap about me being his better self or his better half or something. I chalked it up to guilt over his

little fling with Nikki and the lies he was telling his wife. It was like he was trying to apologize. For a moment I almost felt sorry for him. We're just different, that's all, I said. No big deal. But I was thinking of George, Jr. and thinking of Nikki and thinking of our mother and Ted and our father, whoever he was, and our sisters and thinking we're not all that different. I didn't say that, though. I said something about forgetting all this twin crap, all this genetic crap. I have no idea what I meant. Maybe you can tell me. I'm just trying to get along here, at the end…

Epilogue

If there's a moral to this story, and there is, it's simply this: if you have diabetes don't smoke. Admittedly that's more a health message than a moral, but these days what's the difference? And better yet, twin or singleton, may we all live lives of euglycemia with the parts God gave us. Or not. For all we know, there may well be another you.

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Notes

1. H. Warren and M. Gordon, “There Will Never Be Another You”
2. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*
3. H. Warren and M. Gordon, “There Will Never Be Another You”
4. University Hospital Kidney Transplantation Services brochure
5. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*
6. L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*
7. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*
8. H. Warren and M. Gordon, “There Will Never Be Another You”
9. L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Appendix: Glossary of Medical Terms

Stenosis—a narrowing, usually referring to an artery
Nephropathy—kidney disease or dysfunction
Autonomic neuropathy—damage or dysfunction of the nerves that regulate involuntary physiologic processes
Retinopathy—disease affecting the light-sensing layer of the eye
Creatinine—a product of protein metabolism used to measure kidney function
Mucormycosis—a fungal infection
Amphotericin—an anti-fungal medication
Klebsiella—a bacterium
Lacunar infarcts—small areas of dead brain tissue from lack of blood flow
Angiogram—a dye study of arteries
Catapres—a blood pressure medicine
Captopril—a blood pressure medicine
Nifedipine—a blood pressure medicine
Prednisone—an anti-inflammatory and immune system suppressing medication
Imuran—an immune system suppressing medication
Basalgel—an antacid also used to treat high levels of phosphate in the blood, usually from kidney disease
Transderm-Nitro—a medication used to treat angina
Bruit—sound made by turbulent flow in an artery
BUN—blood urea nitrogen, used as a measure of kidney function
HCT—hematocrit, the ration of the volume of red blood cells to total blood volume, used as a measure of anemia
White count—white blood cell count
Platelets—blood cells involved in clotting
Angioplasty—procedure to open blocked arteries
Intimal tear—tear of the inner lining of an artery
Anuric—not producing urine
Oligouric—producing small less than normal amounts of urine
Fractional excretion of sodium—a calculation to help determine the cause of low urine output
Zoloft—an antidepressant medication
Haldol—a major tranquilizer and antipsychotic medication
Hemodialysis—the filtering of blood through an artificial kidney machine
Ischemia—lack of blood flow
Vasodilators—medications that increase blood flow through arteries
Femoral—relating to the femoral artery or vein, located in the groin
Peritoneal—relating to the lining of the abdominal cavity
Euglycemia—normal blood sugar levels
HLA—human leucocyte antigen, used to assess compatibility for organ transplants
Ethmoidectomy—surgical removal of one of the nasal sinuses