Growing Boys

by

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# Table of Contents

The Airshow ................................................................. 1

A Bowl of Soup ............................................................ 14

Beowulf: A Memoir .......................................................... 30

King of the Dock ............................................................ 36

Little Necks ................................................................. 52

A Jaguar that Spits ....................................................... 67
The Airshow

It was weeks since it rained. The earth was hard and dry beneath Cal’s bare feet. He sat on the porch that his father had built by laying slabs of pine across cinderblocks found in the junkyard. The door to the trailer was open behind him. Snores echoed from within. He reached into the pocket of his torn jeans and pulled out the little tin airplane that his mother had given him years before. He held the toy up. The sun was still low in the morning sky, and the edges of the metal plane glinted where the paint was chipped. Cal turned it experimentally to see how the sun shone on different parts of its surface.

The eastern winds usually pushed the foul smell of the junkyard over the brush and into the trailer park, but today the air was fresh. Cal put the plane back in his pocket. He watched the plump white clouds pass gently above him, then turned his gaze in the direction of the wire fence at the edge of the trailer park and the dusty field on the other side. The grass was yellow and dying, but somehow pretty. The highway sprawled beyond, all the way to the local airfield. He closed his eyes and bit his lip, visualizing the scene of the airshow: the roaring stunt planes looping above the packed stands, the tall spools of cotton candy, the pleasant bite of a snow cone against his front teeth. He swallowed, and took a
deep breath. All of this would take place later that afternoon and he would not miss it, not after so many weeks of waiting.

Cal darted around to the rear of the trailer. A brown mutt lay in the dust. The animal lifted its head off the ground and Cal held out his hand, letting the dog nuzzle and lick his palm. Behind the mutt, a bicycle leaned against the side of the trailer, chained to the axle below. A year before, his father had found the bike in the junkyard, and his mother had sat on the porch with a Brillo Pad, scraping away the rust and grime from the bike’s fenders. That was before she had gone away. Now much of the rust had returned in the gear set and the pivot of the handlebars.

Cal bent over and dug through his sock, finding the little key that he kept on him at all times. He knelt on the dusty ground, reaching for the lock beneath the trailer. The bike was chained just below the window of his father’s bedroom. From inside came a grumble, a burp, then heavy, rhythmic snores, as if his father was some great hibernating creature. Otherwise the morning was mostly quiet. Most of the other trailers were abandoned. Those who still lived here had already gone, hunting for scrap metal in the junkyard, or washing car windows for tips at the gas station.

Cal pulled the chain from between the spokes of the bike’s front wheel, then suddenly stopped, noticing that the front tire was soft and flat. A shard of glass was lodged in the rubber. Yesterday, he’d taken the bike for a ride in the junkyard, wheeling over broken bottles. He sighed, pushed the bike back and
forth to test the wheel, then let it fall to the ground in a huff. A plume of dust shot upwards. He looked at the bike, narrowing his eyes on the flat front tire. His hands crept into his pockets, feeling for the toy airplane. In the other pocket, he felt the coins that he’d collected over the past few weeks, patrolling the trailer park with his gaze fixed to the ground. He had a total of two dollars and thirty-two cents; he hoped to buy a snow cone at the airshow. He gripped the money hard so that the coins hurt against his palm.

Cal returned the bike to its place against the trailer and threaded the chain through the spokes of the front wheel. Back on the front porch, he looked into the dreary trailer interior. Inside, he could taste his father’s salty sweat. Stale beer cans festered in the heat on the kitchen counter. Flies hovered about the carcass of the chicken they’d eaten last night. Cal moved past the table toward the room where his father slept. He saw an ashtray was packed with Marlboros, a reminder of the charred scent of his father’s breath. Last night he’d struck Cal hard across the face for forgetting to chain the mutt. Ever since his mother left, six months ago, Cal got hit more often.

Cal came to the door that led to the bedroom and watched his father’s massive belly rise and fall. Cal tried to swallow his rising anxiety, but his mouth was dry and his eyes burned. He took a half step forward, then suddenly stopped. He’d make Pa coffee first. Regardless of his father’s mood, he wouldn’t go anywhere without drinking a strong cup of coffee.
Cal pulled a chair from the table to the counter in the kitchenette, careful to keep it from scraping the floor. The chair wobbled as he climbed and reached for the cupboard to get the coffee. Next he found the percolator in the sink and filled it with water. He turned the knob on the stove until he heard a click, and struck a match, jumping back as fire burst from the burner. Hot blue flames clawed up the sides of the percolator. The sound of the water boiling was like the patter of raindrops. A coffee aroma filled the room. He poured the thick liquid into the mug that his father had kept from when he was a soldier in Vietnam. Cal, now ten years old, waited for the day when he could approach the recruiter who sometimes came through the trailer park. He considered this as he moved to the bedroom, careful not to spill.

Cal found a small space between beer cans and cigarette ash on the old bench that his father used as a bedside table, and he put the cup down there. His father’s face was soft and bloated, a contrast to Cal’s sharp features. They used to look more alike, but now his father had a scraggly beard and his hair was long. Cal kept his head shaved close, using his father’s razor. He didn’t care about the cuts he’d accumulated along his scalp. He liked the way he looked.

“Pa,” Cal said.

His father groaned and rolled over. Cal grabbed his shoulder and shook it gently.

“What is it, boy?”
“I made you coffee.”

Cal’s father opened his eyes. They were milky and confused, but he didn’t look angry, just distant.

“Coffee.” His father sat up and reached for the mug. “That’s a good boy.”

Cal watched hopefully. His father brought the cup to his lips. Immediately, Pa’s face relaxed and his eyes grew focused. For a moment, Cal saw the man he’d known before his mother had left them. He had the sudden urge to crawl into his father’s lap, but Cal didn’t move. He watched and waited. His father climbed to his feet and peered out the window. His briefs were browning along the crotch.

“Damn. Looks to be another day without rain.”

“It’ll come, Pa,” Cal said. He’d heard Pa say this before.

Cal’s father spit and reached for a cigarette. The tip turned bright orange like Cal imagined a jet engine might. He’d never seen a jet up-close before, only distant, high overhead. Pa had seen many in the war.

“Pa,” Cal said. “Today’s the airshow.”

“That so?”

“I was hoping… my bike, the tire…”

“You want a lift, huh?”

Cal nodded.
His father rubbed his nostrils. “That’s fine. I’ll take you right after you give me a hand in the junkyard. Just need to find some auto scrap for gas.” He took a long hard drag of his cigarette.

“Sure, Pa.” Gas was what his father called liquor. It would take less time to find scrap and get a ride than it would take to walk to the airfield, over ten miles away. There were old mufflers and exhaust pipes all over the junkyard. They’d load them up and bring them to Murray’s Auto for cash. Maybe they’d collect enough for a new bike tire too?

Cal’s father sat back on the edge of the bed. Suddenly, his eyes were weak and cloudy again. He scratched his chin and gagged, quickly reaching for the coffee. “Give me a minute to get right,” he said. “Feed the mutt. Then we’ll go.”

“Sure,” Cal said.

“Pass me the aspirin too, boy.” He pointed to the small bottle on the windowsill.

Cal climbed onto the bed to reach the aspirin. “Pa,” he said, holding out the bottle.

His father’s gaze veered towards him. He offered Cal a forced smile and pushed himself back upright. Cal watched him tilt his head back and shake pills into his mouth. He managed to swallow without liquid.

“The mutt,” he reminded Cal, his eyes watering from the swallow. “And is there any more coffee?” He grabbed his head and coughed.

“Yes sir.” Cal dashed back to the kitchen for more.
As his father lumbered to the kitchenette sink and washed his face, Cal opened a can of beans. Cal brought the can out to the mutt and set it down. The animal immediately tipped the can over and lapped at the spilled contents on the ground. Cal reached beneath the porch, pulling out the old tea tin that he’d found one day in the junkyard. He blew off the dust on top and opened the box. Inside, he kept his most important things. The Hot Wheels with the broken windshield and three plastic toy soldiers. The foreign coins from Cuba that a traveler had given him in exchange for a cup of water. A thimble, a half-eaten roll of lifesavers, and the photo of his mother.

He picked up the photo and studied it. His mother’s long blond hair curled down the sides of her face and her plump lips were soft and smooth. He remembered a burning hot night, when his mother came out and sat with him on the porch, holding a bag of frozen peas to her forehead to keep cool. Her eyes were moist and round. She looked at him and petted his head, saying, “I’m sorry baby boy.”

“I’m not a baby boy no more,” Cal had said. A week later she was gone, leaving nothing but a note, which his father refused to let him see and burned on the stovetop the night after. Cal had been so angry with his father, watching him burn the letter. She wouldn’t have left him without a good reason and he believed that the letter contained that reason.

“She found herself a better chance,” was all Pa had said.
Cal put the photo back in the tea tin and pulled out a flyer for the airshow. The flyer showed two pilots, each holding an aviator helmet. They looked straight ahead with sharp, serious faces. The pilot on the right had a thick mustache and deep green eyes. He seemed to know where he was going and how to get there.

Cal folded the flyer and put it into his pocket with his change. He put the top on the tea-tin and slid it back under the porch. “You almost ready, Pa?”

“Sure, sure,” his father said and came onto the porch.

Pa looked into the day. His forehead was beaded with sweat and long curlicue hairs stood up on his arms. He was smoking another cigarette. The sun was high and hot and Pa’s skin was very pale.

Cal watched him lumber in the direction of the old pickup parked between their trailer and the abandoned trailer next door. The pickup was missing a front bumper and the headlights were rusted. Cal climbed into the passenger seat as his father got in and stared blankly at the steering wheel.

Cal’s father wiped his forehead and turned the key in the ignition. The scent of exhaust came through the windows and into the cab.

“Let’s hurry, Pa.”

“Boy.” His father put his elbows on the wheel and looked down at his feet. He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes.

“Please, Pa!”

“My head. You’re killing my head. Just wait, and I’ll sleep it off.”

Cal gripped the fabric of the seat cushion.
“I’m sorry boy.” His father turned off the ignition and climbed out of the pickup, leaning himself on the door. Cal watched him cough and grumble, trying to dislodge something from the back of his throat. He looked at Cal, turned and walked slowly towards the trailer, where Cal knew he would get back in bed and sleep until he got thirsty enough to drink what was left of the emergency pint he kept beneath the sink.

Cal slammed his fist against the dash of the pickup. Tears welled up in his eyes. He ran his hand over the top of his scalp, feeling the nicks from the razor. He picked at one of the scabs. It hurt, but he kept at it. When he pulled his hand away there was a little blood on his fingertips. He put his fingers into his mouth. They tasted vinegary and harsh. Still, he held them there, his eyes falling to the ignition. His father had left the keys.

Cal slid over into the driver’s seat. His feet barely reached the pedals, but if he sat with his rear at the very end of the seat, he could push them down. He tested out the pedals a few times, then reached to turn the keys. The pickup rumbled with life. Cal wrenched it into reverse. As he backed up to the road, his father was suddenly out on the porch in his underwear. Cal froze, his foot on the brake, hoping for a moment that his father would get in and drive him to the airfield.

“What the hell you doing boy?” Pa came down off the porch.
Cal could see that his father couldn’t move very fast. He waited, suddenly thrilled to be teetering on the edge of danger. He gripped the wheel tighter, reminding himself that he could quickly press his foot on the gas to escape.

His father staggered towards him, looking worse than before. His skin was now yellow. Ten feet from the car, he stopped and grabbed his stomach.

Cal watched.

“Get out before I …” His father paused and took a long breath. “Boy, you better…” He coughed and fell onto his knees, vomiting bright bile. When he righted himself, a bit of vomit rolled down his chin. He looked at Cal with sharp, fierce eyes, reaching for a rock beside his knees and holding it tight in his grip. He squeezed the rock and held it above his forehead. His eyes were closed tightly. Suddenly Cal understood what he aimed to do.

“Dad!” Cal yelled.

His father’s eyes opened, and he started to sob. Cal’s heart pounded. His head hurt, but he was too scared to cry. Pa looked straight at Cal, dropped the rock, and quickly turned, disappearing into the trailer, closing the door behind him. Pa was going to put the rock into his own head.

Cal sat in the pickup, letting it sputter, then lifted his foot off the brake and put it gently on the gas. He’d driven a few times. Before his mother had left, Pa used to work the pedals and let Cal sit on his lap and steer, making circles in the junkyard. Once or twice, he’d even let Cal drive the car on his own, sitting close and guiding the steering wheel when needed. Cal had never driven the pickup
without his father beside him. He’d always imagined speed to be fun, to be free, in the way that it must feel to pilot a plane, or ride in a helicopter like they did in Vietnam, but he drove slowly, as if his father were there.

Why had Pa let him go? It was as if he’d given him permission to take the pickup, as if he’d always expected it of him. The airshow would start soon, but Cal didn’t hurry. He drove slowly through the trailer park in confusion. There was a heap of old cars stacked high to his left in the junkyard near piles of debris and machinery. He drove towards the dirt road that marked the exit of the trailer park, where he stopped. He looked back at the junkyard, then out in the direction of the highway, and finally at the steering wheel. He sat erect, motionless. The fabric of his shorts stretched tight against his skinny thighs. He could feel the coins and the tin airplane, each in their separate pockets. He looked up at the sky and saw thunderheads forming on the far horizon. Surely, the planes would not take off if a storm came in. They’ll reschedule the airshow, he thought, and turned the pickup around.

Cal parked the pickup and walked slowly towards the trailer door. He was ready for whatever punishment came his way. He knew he deserved it.

Inside the trailer, Pa sat at the kitchen table in his underwear. He held a cigarette over the ashtray and Cal took the seat across from him. His father did not speak. Smoke rose from the end of his cigarette. The chicken carcass and the beer cans lay between them. Cal wanted to tell Pa that he wouldn’t leave him, not today, and never without saying goodbye like mom, but he didn’t. He just reached
into his pocket and pulled out the tin airplane. He put it on the table and flicked the tail so it spun in a circle.

“I saw thunderheads,” Cal said. “Out on the horizon.”

“That so?”

“I bet the airshow was cancelled.”

His father nodded and looked to the floor. “It’ll be good. Pack down all the dust.”

“You think?” Cal said.

“Better bring in the mutt.”

Cal nodded. Pa got up and went back to bed.

Cal went out to get the little brown mutt. The dog sat on his hind legs, shaking, the way he always did when he sensed a storm coming.

Cal looked out to the horizon. The thunderheads were very distant and it was difficult to see if they were moving in this direction. Still, he unhooked the mutt from its chain, hoping that if they prepared for the rain, it would come.

“Come, pup,” Cal said, pulling the dog along by the collar.

Inside, the mutt ran to the bedroom and lay down on the floor beside his father.

“Boy,” Pa said quietly.

“I’m here,” Cal answered.

He went to the table and reached into his pocket, pulling out the flyer for the airshow. The two men in their pilot suits were stern faced, like the recruiter
who came to the trailer park. Cal carefully smoothed the creases in the flyer and patted it on the table beside the tin airplane. He looked around, then started with the chicken carcass. He threw it into a sack with all the empty beer cans and took the trash outside. He put the sack in the tin garbage can in the back of the pickup. The keys were still in the ignition. He opened the drivers’ side door and reached for them. He’d leave the keys on the table, where Pa would see them first thing.
A Bowl of Soup

Sitting alone in his living room, looking out the window at the light snow falling over the gray Hoboken cityscape, Frank wondered how his son Bobby was holding up. He’d sounded so very sick on the phone last night. After all his careful planning, they’d have to delay the ski vacation until he returned from his business trip to China a month from now. By then, it would be nearly mid-March and there was a chance the snow would be gone, melted by the coming of spring. Now, instead of driving north to the Vermont where he’d rented a small cabin near Stowe Mountain, Frank was stuck in his apartment, waiting for his ex-wife Carla to call when she returned from the doctor’s office. He hoped Bobby didn’t have anything serious.

It felt awful, just sitting around, waiting. He hadn’t been able to sleep well last night, and had spent the morning trying to read the paper, but couldn’t concentrate. Frank ran his hand through his thick black hair, his mind returning to the little, tired voice of Bobby whimpering into the phone when the boy called in tears after his mother told him the trip was cancelled. Frank had told him that everything would be okay, but the boy just coughed and continued to sob. It had
hurt to listen to, especially after the boy apologized for getting sick, and said it was his fault.

Frank imagined Bobby’s disappointment. The child had been so eager over the prior weeks, and had even drawn a picture of the two of them in skis at school. Surely there was something he could do to help him, perhaps a steaming bowl of chicken soup? That was Frank’s mother’s approach. She’d serve it to him in bed, then read to him until his hot eyes closed and he drifted into deep sleep. When he woke it seemed everything was better. It was enough, knowing he was loved and cared for. He very much wanted Bobby to feel the same way.

Carla’s house was twelve miles away, a small colonial in a suburban town with a good school system. Frank figured that by the time he arrived, Bobby and Carla would be home, but Carla’s car wasn’t there. He turned on the car radio and leaned back. Now and then, he threw a glance behind him, up the street, hoping to see Carla’s Camry round the corner. He changed the radio to the news, stopping with his hand on the volume knob. The battery light flickered on the dash.

“Damn,” Frank said.

He’d meant to get the car serviced weeks ago, but it was difficult to schedule quotidian tasks traveling as much as he did. The moment he returned from a business trip it was time to leave again, to get on a plane and fly overseas. He went many places. India, China, Argentina, working as a foreign business consultant. It sounded more glamorous than it was, he always told people. He
never really saw these countries, stuck in an office, his food brought to him by assistants. The most familiar place was the hotel bar.

Frank turned off the car worried the battery might die. Carla wouldn’t be long, and the residual heat should last. But twenty minutes passed and soon it was very cold. He called Carla. She didn’t answer, which was often the case. She tended to keep her phone on vibrate in her purse and often forgot it all together.

The wind picked up and the snow grew heavy. The doctors office was far away, out in Verona, a thirty minute drive each direction. There were other, local doctors, but Doctor Flyer was the best. He’d saved the boy from a scrotal hernia that nearly killed him as an infant. That happened back when they all lived in the old house on Elmhurst. There seemed no other possible doctor after that, even with the long drives. So Frank understood why Carla was late. He’d just miscalculated the time it would take for her to return.

But it was so damn cold in the car and now Frank also looked forward to the prospect of a hot bowl of chicken soup. That’s when he remembered that Carla kept the backdoor key under the welcome mat in case of emergencies. Why hadn’t he considered this before? He reached for the car door, then hesitated. Was it all right for him to enter the house without permission? He tried calling Carla again. There was no answer. He left a message this time, explaining that he was here, waiting, and very much wanted to see Bobby. In the meantime, it seemed best to go inside. He figured any animosity Carla might have would vanish when she returned and saw him standing in the kitchen, stirring a large pot of
homemade chicken soup with the best intentions. He could even move the television up to the boy’s room. Bobby could watch movies all day.

The snow bit Frank’s face as he walked up the driveway. The weather was less pleasant than he remembered when he first looked into the white world that morning. Part of him was glad they weren’t going skiing. If the day remained so punishing, it would be more fun to sit indoors over hot bowls of soup anyway.

He headed around the side of the house, and up the back steps to the door. He was careful to remove his snow-covered shoes on the welcome mat before entering. Carla was a stickler for a clean house. He didn’t want to frustrate her over such a simple matter, as was the case at the end of their marriage.

Back then, nearly any little thing could start an argument (hair that he’d neglected to wash out of the bathroom sink, too much wine at dinner), triggers that seemed typical and embarrassing in hindsight, and though he knew the divorce was ultimately his fault, that he should have never slept with his co-worker Deborah Miller in Buenos Aires, Frank was glad he’d eventually told Carla the truth. He became so marred by guilt that it was difficult to share a bed.

When he told her she’d cried, she’d hit him, then three day’s latter she said she’d known, that it was obvious, and that she was lonely too. There were makeup smears beneath her eyes. She looked suddenly older, her face pale and bloodless. Strands of blond hair stuck too her damp cheeks. Bobby slept in the next room. Frank was grateful he was so young, but sometimes wondered what it would mean if he hadn’t been asleep; if he was capable of understanding.
That happened three years ago. And though they’d ended things bitterly, they’d since managed to behave civilly, even enjoying the occasional family dinners to share time with Bobby. They didn’t want hostility to ruin their relationship with their son. Carla had seen enough news reports and read enough child psychology articles about the potential damages of a bitter divorce, and Frank kept thinking about his father, who drank himself into a heart attack, but not before giving Frank his fare share of licks.

Frank hated his dad as a boy and feared Bobby would do the same. Sometimes, while he was away in a hotel bed, he woke with the sudden fear that Carla was telling the boy bad things about him, that she thought he was a sour, careless man and that he didn’t love Bobby. He’d lurch for the phone to call to say he did love him, to explain why he was always away, before wiping his eyes and slowly placing the phone back on the hook, taking several deep breaths, his forehead dotted with sweat.

Surely he loves you, Frank now thought, as he located the cutting board, and started chopping carrots and celery. He dumped the ingredients into a pot with oil and garlic, listening to the sizzle, already tasting the fragrant aroma of the soup to come. Aside from the sizzle, it was very quiet in the kitchen. He turned the radio on the counter to NPR. He listened to a show about Duke Ellington, focusing on the host’s calm voice to take his mind away from the emptiness of the house. Making the soup felt productive and therapeutic. The repeated stirring
motion, the slight resistance that the shriveling vegetables gave the wooden spoon were predictable. Expected.

He added the chicken thighs, which needed to brown before he poured in the stock. He sat at the table, watching the worsening storm.

The snow was so thick it was difficult to see beyond Carla’s backyard. The fence that lined the property was hazy, and the neighboring houses stood barely visible through the thick white. It was nearly noon, about forty minutes since he’d arrived. Bobby’s appointment was at 10:30. Surely there was a backlog at the doctor’s office. Those places never functioned as quickly and efficiently as planned.

Frank turned the chicken browning in the pot. The chicken was off-white, and a bit raw on the sides. He very much wanted to move to the next step, pouring in the stock. It was frustrating to wait, but he’d mess up the whole process if he became impatient. He wanted the soup to be as delicious as possible.

He poured in the stock five minutes later and set the stove to low. The NPR program stopped suddenly. Then came a weather announcement; the storm was bad and getting worse, the highways were growing icy, and several accidents had occurred. When things started to get bad they turned quickly. Still, Carla was a safe driver. She drove slower than the speed limit. That was another thing they used to argue about.

The pot steamed at the sides. Frank lifted the top, even though it had hardly been enough time for all the flavors to meld. And then it occurred to him
that he might call the doctors office. If Carla was there, the receptionist could ask her to call him back.

He didn’t have Dr. Flyer’s number on hand, but found it posted to the wall in the small room off the main hallway where Carla kept the landline. He was also glad to see his number at the top of the contact list, Dad, written beside it. He noticed Carla’s cellphone dead on the small table next to the wall-mounted landline. It was frustrating she didn’t have it on hand, and yet relieving to know she wasn’t ignoring him.

He headed back to the kitchen, his phone pressed to his ear.

“Dr. Flyer’s office, Norma speaking,” a woman with a thick New Jersey accent spoke on the other end. It sounded like she chewed gum.

“Hello Norma, this is Frank Conrad. I was curious if my son, Bobby Conrad, well if he had his appointment already?”

“Oh yes,” Norma said. “Bobby Conrad, he was here.”

“Is he gone?”

“He left nearly a half hour ago.”

“And how was he? Did Dr. Flyer have anything to say?”

“I don’t know. I could ask the doctor call you later, but he’s busy right now.”

“No, no,” Frank said. “It’s fine. I don’t want to be a bother.”

He hung up. So Carla left only a half hour ago, which meant that if she drove cautiously, she would arrive very soon.
Frank stood over the pot of soup, tasting the saltiness rising from the bubbling contents. He fished out the chicken thighs and picked the bones clean. He chopped the meat finely. In a second pot, he boiled orzo pasta, which he’d pull out when al dente, fearful that they would overcook if he added them directly to the broth.

Afterwards, he started to clean. He scrubbed the cutting board, the knives, and even the leftover coffee mug and bowl with bits of cereal caked to the edges that Carla must’ve left in the sink that morning. He tried not to look at the clock on the wall, but couldn’t help a glance. Where were they? It was nearly fifteen minutes since he’d called the doctors office. What if something happened? What if they skidded off the road?

Frank didn’t want to think about it. He got back to work, wiping down the rest of the counter and even the top of the stove, which was slightly splattered in grease. He was so focused on cleaning, he nearly forgot to strain the orzo pasta. He grabbed the pot, darted across the room, and threw the contents into the colander. He ran cold water over the pasta to stop them from cooking. He tasted one, relieved it had not yet reached “gushy” which Bobby absolutely hated, even in soup. He tasted the broth. It was a little salty. He added half a cup of water to thin it out.

Soon there was no more work to do. The soup was done, the kitchen was clean. Frank sat idly at the kitchen table; his eyes explored the room. The sea-foam green walls, the white trim, the refrigerator decorated with photographs of
Bobby—one of him in a pumpkin costume on Halloween two years ago, one of him at his fifth birthday with cake smeared over his face.

Bobby was six years old now, funny and full of energy. The last weekend they’d spent together, Bobby ran around his apartment with a toy plane until they settled into the evening, drawing monsters from the how-to book Frank bought as a present in the Tokyo airport.

Bobby was supposed to stay with him every other weekend and Frank tried to schedule his business travel around those times, but with the China contract it was increasingly difficult. Carla had given him special permission for the ski trip.

Frank reached for the photos, but stopped when he saw one of Bobby, smiling broadly on the shoulders of Carla’s current boyfriend, Travis. Frank felt a pang of jealousy, wishing he were in the photo and that Bobby was excited to be with him. Still, he didn’t harbor particularly awful feelings towards Travis. Perhaps in the beginning he had, but it was tiring to hate someone involved in Bobby’s life. It was easier to forgive. Besides, Travis was sensitive to the situation. When Travis called to invite Frank to Thanksgiving last year, he’d mentioned that he cared deeply for Bobby, yet understood he wasn’t the father, and very much wanted him to come. Frank thanked him for the call, but said he had plans to go to his brother’s place in Larchmont instead.

Frank took a deep breath and drank water from the tap, still there was something unsettling, something unpleasant in the pit of his stomach that he
wanted to wash out. His eyes returned to the photograph again of Bobby and Travis. Maybe he knew where they were? He scrolled through his phone contacts, looking for the man’s number. He pressed the hard plastic against his ear, hoping to slow anxiety with pain.

The phone rang several times. He nearly hung up, convinced it would go to voicemail on the very next ring, when Travis answered.

“Frank, funny you should call.”

Frank’s voice closed up. He’d expected a different answer. Why was it funny?

“Do you know where Carla is?” Frank said.

“Sure. She’s here, with Bobby. They came by after the doctor’s. Carla was just saying she needed to call you. I guess your ears were burning.”

Frank wondered if their conversation was truly so innocent, but tried to put it out of his mind. He just wanted to speak to Bobby.

“He’s sleeping now,” Travis said. “He was very tired.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine. Doctor Flyer said it was nothing.”

Frank was about to tell Travis he was at Carla’s, when he realized that none of his messages had gotten through to her, as she didn’t have her cell phone. It might seem very strange to try and explain why he was here without context. He didn’t want to give them something to discuss when he hung up. The phone felt clammy against his ear.
“I was thinking about stopping by to see the boy,” Frank said.

“Sure, Frank,” Travis said. “He’s your kid.”

This was something Travis often emphasized to make Frank believe he wasn’t trying to take his place. Frank knew it was meant to be in good spirit, but he didn’t like it. It annoyed him how confidently he could say such things, knowing that he was able to participate in Bobby’s life without the awkward arrangement of pickup times.

He didn’t mention this, however. He didn’t want to give reason for Carla and Travis to hold a grudge, especially after all the labor to make the chicken soup.

Speaking of the soup, he’d have to figure out a way to get it there. And he couldn’t simply rush out the door to right then. Travis only lived a few blocks away, and Frank was theoretically supposed to be back in Hoboken, fifteen minutes away.

So he had to wait. But it wasn’t like he didn’t have anything to do. There were still dishes to clean. He had to make it seem like he was not here, like he’d never been here. He dug through the cabinets, found old plastic Chinese soup containers, which Carla would certainly not miss. He put the broth in two (there was a great deal of broth) and the orzo’s in another, before putting all of these things in the plastic bag he found beneath the sink.

He then set to scrubbing out the pot and drying it clean, before putting it away. He hesitated for a moment about the coffee mug and cereal bowl, before
putting them back in the sink, where he’d first found them. He made sure all the lights were out, locked the door, and returned the key under the back door mat.

He was in the car, turning the gas, when the whole thing sputtered, and fizzled out. He tried again to the same result. The engine was dead. The battery light flickered. When Carla and Bobby returned home, they’d know he’d been here, but it didn’t matter, he could just claim he’d parked here before walking over, or something of that vein.

Right now what was important was getting the soup to Bobby.

He was out of the car, walking through the snow, bag in hand. He didn’t have gloves and the cold turned his fingers raw. He looped the bag around his wrist and put his hand in his pocket. He walked with his head slumped downward to keep the snow from his eyes. He stepped on a bit of ice, and nearly fell to the ground. He took a deep breath, adjusted his scarf, and walked forth with even more determination, keeping his eyes pasted forward this time, even though the wind and snow hurt on his cheeks.

He was nearly there when he came to a corner surrounded by a puddle of gray, slushy snow. There was no way around it, except to jump. But he feared that he’d slip on the other side. He took an icy breath and stepped into the puddle. Cold water seeped into his shoes. He yearned to see Bobby’s little face, to be near to him, to hold him close and smell his milky little boy scent. He didn’t care if he was a coughing, sneezing little blob.
Travis lived in a large Victorian with a wide wrap around porch. The stairs were icy. Travis hadn’t salted them, as he should have. Frank gripped the banister hard, even though it too was iced and so cold that it burned his exposed palm. He kept the bag clenched in his other hand and took the stairs one at a time, careful to keep his balance. He knocked the door and looked through the window.

Bobby came running through the hall in his dinosaur pajamas. He didn’t look very sick, as he ran to him, laughing. Perhaps it had been a twenty-four hour bug?

“Daddy, Daddy!” the boy jumped up and down on the other side of the door, trying to open it.

Travis came down the hall, scooped Bobby up and undid the latch.

Bobby squealed with delight as he was hung upside down.

“Daddy, look I’m flying!” he said.

Frank stepped inside.

“Hello there Frank.” Travis put Bobby down.

Frank shook Travis’s hand, cordially, calmly.

“Frank?” Carla called from the kitchen down the hall. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Travis asked to take his coat, but Frank said he’d put it away himself once he got settled. Frank turned his attention to the boy.

“Well, you look much better, what did the doctor say?”

“He gave me a shot,” Bobby said.
“That must have been very scary.”

He saw Travis through his peripherals, standing with his arms crossed. He wished he would leave.

“I was brave,” the boy said, his little blue eyes veering to the bag.

Travis asked if he wanted any tea.

“No,” Frank said. “I made Bobby soup, and look….” He pulled the container of Orzo out of the bag and showed it to Bobby. “I even kept the pasta separate so it wouldn’t get gushy. What’s say we have some?”

Bobby shook his head, looking at the pasta with sudden disdain.

“I don’t like that shape,” he said.

“What shape? The pasta?”

Bobby nodded solemnly.

Travis placed a hand on his shoulder. Frank flinched, and pulled away.

“He’s been very picky about pasta shape recently,” Travis said.

It annoyed Frank that Travis knew this bit of information.

“Well, what if we cooked a different shape?” he said.

Bobby shook his adamantly. “No, I’m not hungry.”

“Please, Bobby, just have a little bit. It will make you feel better.”

“I already feel better.”

“We just had lunch Frank,” Travis said.

“I didn’t ask you.” Frank stood. He was suddenly aware of the cold wet sock from the puddle he’d stepped in before.
When he turned back to speak to his son, Bobby was running into the living room, yelling that he was going to go play with his Legos. Frank stood there, wanting to follow him, but didn’t move. Didn’t the boy know how much he’d gone through to bring him this soup? Didn’t he know how badly he wanted to care for him?

He felt heat in his eyes.

“Son,” he called. “Son, come back here.”

But the boy did not respond.

“Frank,” Travis reached for the bag.

Frank pulled the bag back quickly. It slipped from his grip, falling to the floor and splattered on the ground. The broth seeped into the carpet. Bits of chicken and vegetables steamed like vomit.

Carla appeared at the end of the hall and walked to them.

“What happened?” she said.

“Oh nothing,” Travis said. “Frank just had a little accident.”

An accident? Frank thought.

“Dear me,” Carla turned to get a towel from the kitchen.

“Sorry about the mess,” Travis called after her.

Frank clenched his fists. He wanted so much to flatten Travis, to see him down on the floor, his nose pressed onto the broth soaked rug. He’d never hated anyone so much, the way he looked at him with false sympathy, as if he were so damn pitiable. He was ready to leap at him, but then he imagined Bobby, sitting
in the other room, working on his Legos, running back to the hallway and seeing Travis knocked out on the floor. The boy loved Travis too. Would Bobby forgive him if he beat him and traveled to China? How would Travis and Carla explain it to the child?

Frank wanted to cry. He wanted to go into the living room and tell Bobby that he was his boy and that he loved him, but he didn’t move at all, fearing what might happen if he took one step. He took a deep breath, looked to Travis, and apologized for the soup.

“Ask Carla to call me later so we can arrange a time I can see him tomorrow,” Frank said. “I best go. I have something to take care of.”

Travis looked at him in confusion.

Frank turned for the door, his tears turning cold against his skin. He walked fast, didn’t stop until the corner. He looked back at the house, hoping someone would come after him, that Bobby would come after him, but there was no one there, save for a warm light flowing from the front window, piercing out into the gray. He took in a deep breath, and walked on, reaching for his phone in his pocket. He needed to call Triple A. He needed to get the car jumped if he was ever going to get back home.
Beowulf: A Memoir

Beowulf, you were a fish. You were a Japanese fighter fish that I bought on a date to impress a girl. The girl and I had just finished having coffee at the Starbucks in Union Square when I dragged her into the Petco across the street, because I thought that girls liked it when guys did things that were impulsive and weird. That’s when she noticed you, Beowulf. She said, how pretty, and without hesitation I bought you and named you, all for a laugh. At the time, I did things like that, Beowulf. Stupid things. And when I called the girl the next day to see if she wanted to hang out again, she said no, she was busy or something, though I don’t really remember what her exact excuse was.

So anyway, that’s how I ended up with you. I kept you in a plastic fish bowl on my dorm room desk, and you swam around while I did school work, or smoked a joint, or played guitar.

Now, here’s where it starts getting a little weird. See I was suddenly stuck with this fish that I bought to impress a girl, and seeing you there, just swimming around, and recalling the failed date, well it made me feel kind of stupid. And so that’s when I decided to find some better use for you, and I began to carry you in your little plastic fishbowl wherever I went in the dorm.
I took you to the study room. I took you to the dining hall. I took you to a party in 14B, where I put you beside an empty forty ounce, and you watched as I blew a line of smashed up vicodin pills that I stole from my mother’s medicine cabinet. I was sorry to expose you to such things, but I wasn’t happy at the time, Beowulf. It was my first semester of college, I was lonely, and when I would walk through the halls carrying your fishbowl, and girls would look at me and say things like, “cool fish” or “omg, isn’t that guy sooooo funny,” it would feel really really good.

I was pretty close with this one dude in 5B, Beowulf, you must remember? His room was a smoking room, and when my roommate was around and complaining about cigarettes and weed, I went down there to get away.

My friend’s name was Zahid, and the day after that party in 14B I took you down to his dorm room, and put you on his desk, and Zahid and I talked about all the girls that we weren’t getting.

“There’s this total babe living in 6D,” Zahid said.

“What’s her name?” I took a hit of a fat jaybird.

“I don’t know man, but she’s tops.”

Wait! Stop. I’m sorry Beowulf. I’m sorry because this is bad dialogue, and I don’t want to diminish your story. But please understand that it’s hard to remember the exact conversation, because it was years ago and I was high as a kite. Also, please understand that because this is a memoir I’m kind of sworn to oath not to exaggerate or stray from the truth too much. So let me just cut to the
chase. The real point of this scene is to explain how a week before I bought you, Zahid and I had started an elevator music band, in which we would bring our guitars into the elevator, and play some stupid songs until one of the RAs came to yell at us, all to get laughs. So anyway, it was on this Sunday that it was decided that you would join our band, Beowulf. We decided we needed a mascot, and you became it, and that night we brought our guitars into the elevator and began to play seated on the floor, and you were in your plastic fish bowl right beside me.

Why am I telling you all this? I want you to feel as though your life wasn’t completely purposeless, Beowulf, even though it might seem as if I was using you. But please understand how at the time I was blinded. See, Beowulf, humility was something that I was just learning about. I was doing my best to understand that while I might have seemed exceptional to my parents, or even unique and interesting in my suburb, at a private university in New York City I was kind of like everyone else, and maybe even more of a douche than most. I was ashamed of my sameness and lack of originality, so you became a prop, a decoy, and a way to make me seem special. Also, I thought that carrying a fish around would help me in the ladies department.

But this memoir isn’t about that. This memoir is about the shame I was talking about before. And we’re just about to get to the really shameful part. The sad part where I betrayed you after all you did for me, after all the fun we had together, and all the attention you got me from girls who would’ve otherwise not noticed me as I walked through the dorm halls.
It went like this Beowulf. Your water got dirty, and I didn’t feel like changing it. Please understand, I was on drugs and depressed at the time. I smoked weed everyday, and drank a forty of Colt 45 every night, and had just started doing this thing called Ketamine that made me feel really really good; made me feel really really unique, and really really special—you know what I mean Beowulf?

So anyway, I neglected you, but not just you. I stopped eating, lost weight, and my roommate started to hate me even more. He complained about how I left my clothes scattered all over the place, and that the room smelled like my musk, and that I needed to shower. I stopped carrying you around. I was ashamed that your dirty water was a reflection of myself.

Okay, Beowulf, I get it. I was a bum, but it wasn’t completely bad for you. You must remember how my roommate took pity on you? How he ended up cleaning your water one afternoon while I was out with Zahid in Washington Square Park, checking out girls as they tanned on one of those fluke October days, when the weather suddenly jumped to seventy degrees.

When I came back that afternoon, the clean water surprised me, and it was weird because by that point I was kind of hoping you’d die.

See, I’d had my fun with you. I was tired of being that-fish-guy, and wanted to be something else, some other type of guy that girls might like.

And so, when I saw your water, I got kind of angry. I know it makes no fucking sense, but that’s what happened. Honest!
Anyway, weeks went by. The temperature plummeted with the coming of winter and the days grew shorter. I got even more depressed and ashamed of my sameness, and so I took more drugs, and then came winter break. I packed a duffel bag, and brought you home with me Beowulf—back to my insular suburb!

During that winter, my mother noticed how skinny and all around terrible I looked. She said that it might be a good idea to send me out to visit my father, who was directing a popular television show in Los Angeles—we had money, Beowulf, another thing I was ashamed of, because if you think about it, I had it all, opportunity that most would die for—a scholarship to a great university, and parent’s who cared about me, things that made depression and addiction seem small.

I left you, Beowulf, in my mother’s care. My dad’s apartment in Los Angeles was spacious. He was working a lot, and so I spent my days by the pool, reading and doing things like not drinking, and not taking drugs, because I finally recognized that those were the things that were making me depressed.

Still, it was hard, Beowulf. I would wake up with throbbing headaches, and grew terribly, terribly sick. I willed myself through the pain, though, because I was completely ashamed to tell my parents exactly why I looked the way I did—it wouldn’t be until the subsequent summer that I was sent to a psychiatrist, and still then, I lied. And though I was away from the judgmental eye of my college dorm, I was suddenly without my masks, without my humor, without elevator music bands, without you, Beowulf, and all that was left was me and my shame.
Now for the part where I lost you. It happened like this: I got a call from my mother on the last day of my stay in Los Angeles, and she was in tears. She said, honey, I’m sorry, but I killed your fish.

For one reason or another, my mother had come to think that you were really important to me, and I didn’t stop to correct her, to tell her that really I was sick of you, and kind of wanted you dead.

And so when she told me that she had tried to change your water, and that she’d accidently used the hot water tap, and cooked you alive, I took advantage of her sentimentality, and began to cry too.

Please understand, Beowulf, I was sick at the time, and although I had neglected you for all of your short life, the second someone else neglected you, I held them accountable. I yelled at her, and reaffirmed her false perspective that you were somehow important to me.

I don’t know why I did it Beowulf! I don’t understand at all what possessed me at the time. But I do know that the joke wasn’t funny anymore. Really, it had never been funny, and that what I had really been doing by buying you, by carrying you around, by starting elevator music bands, was hiding.

I was a bloody coward, Beowulf. I was a coward even with my mother, the person who loved me unconditionally. And instead of telling her the truth, I saw you as a way to continue to hide myself, my selfish and cowardly self, and so I didn’t dare tell her that I didn’t give two shits that you were dead, but by pretending that I did, I got the attention that I craved.
King of the Dock

Early one balmy Saturday in June, Charles and his brother Norman drove up to their family’s country house in upstate New York to begin packing in preparation for the sale of the property. Charles hadn’t been to the house in a terribly long time, distracted by work and New York City. This was one of the reasons why his parents decided the house should be sold—they rarely used it anymore and the property seemed more trouble to maintain than it was worth. In the winter, they had to pay to plow the driveway to avoid fines. In the summer they hired a caretaker to mow the lawn.

Now that his parents were trying to find additional resources for retirement, selling made sense. This weekend, Charles and Norman planned to pack up the living room and kitchen. They’d decided it would be best to do the work in shifts so they didn’t exhaust themselves—they had two months to clear out the place. Charles figured the work wouldn’t take long, and wanted to rest for a moment after the four-hour drive. But when they parked on the dirt road that ran up to the house, Norman asked Charles if he was certain he did not feel well enough to get started right away.
Charles considered Norman’s question, surprised by his eagerness to work. On the drive up, Norman seemed calm and entranced by the road, and Charles figured that he too was quite exhausted by the early rise.

“Could we wait just an hour?” Charles said. “We have all weekend. It’s really not such a big job to do two rooms.”

Norman looked at Charles with serious eyes.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Go ahead and lay down. I’m just going to get started anyway.”

“But if you wait we can start together—”

“I don’t mind,” he said. “I just want to get it done so I can relax later.”

Charles nodded. Was Norman being honest? Charles considered just sucking it up and working through his hangover—he’d gone to the Crown Inn Pub last night until two in the morning and had barely slept—but as he got out of the car and carried his duffle up the shallow hill that lead to the house, his body was overtaken by a dizzy rush. He had to stop on the front porch and reach for the railing to stabilize himself.

Charles washed the clamminess from his face in the kitchen sink, took some Advil, and went up to his and Norman’s old shared bedroom. The bed didn’t have any sheets, but he didn’t care. He reclined and let his eyes pass over the walls—the old baseball posters, the framed drawings and paintings of monsters he’d made as a boy. Norman’s side had all the model airplanes; he’d had a fascination with flight and used to say he wanted to be a pilot. Charles liked
seeing these things. He hadn’t seen them in seven years. His eyes began to feel
heavy with nostalgia. His mind calmed.

Charles was on the verge of sleep when the noises started in the living
room directly below. They began as just the sound of his brother’s footsteps
moving back and forth, then escalated to the heavy thump of something being
stacked, and put away. Charles remembered how when he was young, he’d never
slept well when his parents sat in the living room listening to music, talking into
the night. Now, just about all of Norman’s activity was audible, his grunts as he
picked things up, the sound of something being pushed across the wood floor, the
screech of the packing tape dispenser. Even the intermittent moments of silence
annoyed Charles.

He tried to put the sounds out of his mind, tried to close his eyes and
submit to his hot daze, but then came the mechanical buzz of the drill. The noise
was piercing.

Charles sat upright at the edge of the bed. Would it be terrible to ask
Norman to move his work to the kitchen? The kitchen was beneath the bathroom
at the end of the upstairs hallway, and would surely result in less noise. The
request sounded petty and childish, but surely his brother would understand—
when they were young they sometimes made a game of what they could hear
come up from downstairs. And if he was to be any help in the future, he needed
rest now. It seemed better to be upfront.
The stairwell was on the other side of the second floor and led into the kitchen, which connected to the living room by a swinging door. Charles was heading for the door, when it suddenly opened, and Norman burst through and into the kitchen. He was shirtless with a bandana tied around his head. Beads of sweat formed on his neck.

“Feeling better?” he said, reaching for a glass in the cabinet. “Ready to help?”

“Norman,” Charles rubbed his temples. “I’m having trouble falling asleep. I can hear just about everything you’re doing.”

Norman filled the glass with water from the sink. Although the water was safe to drink, it had a sulfurous aroma, which Charles could taste in the air. His stomach tensed.

Norman looked at Charles quizzically. Did Norman believe he was being thoughtless, that he was using the hangover as an excuse to avoid work?

“Please understand,” Charles said. “I feel awful. If you perhaps wait a little while, or move to the kitchen, I’ll rest and help you after. I want to help. Really I—”

“Charles,” Norman said. “I told you I don’t mind doing it. And I’m already in such a groove. I hate to interrupt—”

“Yes,” Charles said. “I know how you’re very determined.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Norman said.
Charles saw Norman’s confused defensiveness. He considered his next words carefully. He wanted to act reasonably.

“I didn’t mean it derogatorily,” Charles said, calmly. I know you’re just trying to be productive. But can’t you wait a little? Or like I said, work in the kitchen.”

“Fine,” Norman said. “You get some sleep. I’ll need your help to figure out how to move the couches in the living room later.”

“Are we supposed to move them?”

Charles thought they were only going to pack up the belongings in boxes, and that a moving company would shrink-wrap the couches and handle the rest of the work once the home was prepared.

“I told Mom we’d take them down to Betty Humm’s house,” Norman said. “Mom’s got no space for them at home. She called me about it last night.”

“That so?” Charles said. “Well alright. I’m sure I’ll feel better by then.”

Charles went back upstairs, wondering if his brother was upset with him. It didn’t seem so, but he knew he would be if he were in Norman’s position.

Regardless, Charles told himself he would be completely useless in the present, as just the process of walking back upstairs began to make him feel weak. A shiver passed through him as he entered the bedroom. He fell forward onto the bed, then rolled over onto his back and lay staring at the ceiling. He momentarily expected his brother to go back to the living room and resume his work. But then he heard minor movements coming from the kitchen, and his eyes slowly closed.
Charles woke three hours later feeling much improved. When he went downstairs Norman wasn’t anywhere to be found. In the kitchen, there were a number of brown boxes labeled and stacked in one corner. Charles was surprised by the amount of headway his brother had made in such a short time. When he took a drink of water, his stomach rumbled. He hadn’t eaten all day and there was nothing in the refrigerator.

Charles found Norman sitting at the table on the front porch, the remains of sandwich in front of him. He recognized the Smith’s Deli wrapper, a good place in downtown Sorrel about a ten-minute drive away.

Norman put the last bite into his mouth. He chewed, the corners of his lips curling with satisfaction.

It annoyed Charles that Norman had not thought to wake him to say that he was going to Smith’s. He asked if he’d brought him something too.

“I didn’t think you would be eating,” Norman said. “You looked like you were going to throw up in the kitchen before, and so I thought—”

“It’s alright,” Charles took a seat beside him.

Charles looked over the property. Down the hill, and across the dirt road, there was a small man made pond that was the focal point of much of the brother’s summer fun when they were younger. The sun was high and strong. There was a thickness to the air.
Norman wiped the corners of his lips with his hand. Perhaps they should’ve stopped for groceries on the way? Charles hadn’t thought the weekend through, so much as just agreed to it when his mother called. He wished he hadn’t, but he wasn’t good at saying no to these things.

“Why don’t I take the car?” Charles said. “I’ll just go for something to eat.”

Norman nodded. “Well how hungry are you?” he said.

“Hungry enough,” Charles said.

“Do you think we could move the couches to Betty Humm’s first? I’d like to get that out of the way, and then we’ll get some food in you.”

Charles decidedly did not want to move the couches first. He knew how long that would take, that they would have to find a way to get them out of the narrow front door, which required clever angling and work. It would be a big pain to carry the heavy things down the hill to the car, and then there was the process of getting the couches into the back of that old Volvo station wagon, or worse, trying to tie them down to the top, which was always a risky venture, as they could slide off when the car went down the bumpy dirt road if they didn’t tie them down properly.

“I just don’t think I can do it without something to eat first,” Charles said.

“You know how I get when I’m hungry.”

“Sure,” Norman said. “Forget it. I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“It’s not that you’re being insensitive,” Charles said.
Charles tried to believe his words, but felt quite differently. Norman was clearly trying to guilt him into moving the couches. When they were young, he was always doing things like this. Little things like asking their father to go for a hike, knowing Charles wasn’t much of a hiker, so that when Charles said he wanted to do something different, he could say, “Fine, Charles. I know you don’t like to hike” with a snarky tone that Charles knew was meant to make him feel bad.

Charles decided then that he would not allow himself to feel guilty for his hangover, and that he would not allow himself to feel bad for wanting to get something to eat before moving the couches.

“Let me just get something quick downtown,” Charles said. “And when I get back, then we’ll move the couches. Okay?”

“Works for me,” Norman said.

Norman tossed Charles the car keys, then started down for the pond with a book in his hands. This seemed just like Norman too, walking away from an opportunity to talk things through. Charles gripped the car keys, feeling the rigid edges work their way into his palm. The subsequent bite of pain felt good. He released his hand, telling himself not to indulge his brother. They were adults; Charles was twenty-five, Norman was twenty-three. Surely they could move beyond the pettiness that defined their youth. Charles just needed to serve as an example.
Charles ate a good cheeseburger at the Mott Diner in downtown Sorrel. As he left the restaurant, he immediately regretted his food decision, as it sat in his stomach worse than he’d thought it would—he hadn’t had a Mott burger in years and forgot that it required a certain tolerance. Still, he was feeling reasonably okay compared to the morning. He figured he just needed the drive to digest.

When he returned to the house, the greasiness of the cheeseburger was still present in his gut and he did not want to move the couches. He spotted Norman laying on the floating dock in the center of the pond reading his paperback. The idea looked good to him. He recognized he had yet to do any work, but it seemed like Norman was done for the day and he figured he could pack up some things in the kitchen in the evening, or take up the more difficult tasks and give his brother a break tomorrow.

He changed into his suit and swam out to the dock. Norman closed the book and looked at him as he climbed on.

“You look like you’re finally all together,” Norman said. “Where did you go for lunch?”

“Mott Diner. I ate the soup,” Charles said, before his brother could ask, worried that it did not seem proper to eat a cheeseburger when he had been feeling so ill that morning.

“The soup?” Norman laughed. “On such a hot day?”

Charles laughed too, not sure what else to do. He wished he’d just told Norman about the cheeseburger, and wondered what Norman would have said to
that. He figured the result would’ve been some other mocking response, potentially worse. As he lay on the dock, the heat of the rays seemed suddenly more intense.

Charles wasn’t feeling physically sick anymore, it was clear that was just the consequence of a difficult night of sleep—he habitually needed eight hours—but he wasn’t feeling completely good either. The pleasantness he’d hoped to find on the dock felt marred by sharing it with his brother. The faint swampy scent of the pond and the way the water seemed to harden on the fine hairs of his arm as it dried made him uncomfortable. He told himself he should not think bitterly, that surely he was making a problem where there was none, but in reviewing Norman’s behavior throughout the afternoon it seemed increasingly clear that Norman was trying to get under his skin.

Charles, being the older of the two, believed this meant it was somehow his responsibility to be reasonable about the situation, as he was asked to do all of his life. He remembered how when he was younger, and Norman complained about wanting the last bit of pie after dinner one hot night, his mother and father looked to him to forgo his slice and suggested that they split it, and even hinted that he should give it to Norman entirely. And while Norman had not outwardly complained today, it seemed very clear to Charles that he was behaving bitterly, all because he felt maligned.

Charles sat up and looked at Norman thumbing through his book, as if unaffected by his presence at all. This too bothered Charles. How could Norman
pretend these things didn’t exist between them? But Charles caught himself before his temperature could rise. He took a deep breath, relaxed his muscles and resolved to deal with his brother maturely.

Charles and Norman had not been alone together for many years. They’d gone to college in different states, and even though they now both lived in New York City, they lived in different areas, several miles away from one another—Charles on the Upper-West Side, Norman in Red Hook where he rented a loft space, he was a freelance photographer and print maker.

“Are you okay?” Norman said, closing the book. “Feeling sick again? You don’t look well all of a sudden. It must be the heat.”

“I feel fine,” Charles was annoyed by his brother’s sympathy.

Norman stood and looked up to the house.

“Isn’t it sad that we’re selling it?” Norman said. “I remember some good times here. Do you remember how we used to play King of the Dock for hours? We’d play until our bones hurt, and then mom and dad would give us ice-pops on the porch.”

Charles nodded. He did remember. The game was simple; who could stay on the dock and defend it from the intruding brother by pushing them off when they tried to get on. Charles also remembered how Norman always wanted to play King of the Dock whenever he wanted to play with the diving rings. When he practiced his dives, Norman would sneak up behind him and push him into the water.
“I never liked it,” Charles said.

“What’s that?”

“King of the Dock, I much preferred other games.”

Norman smiled. “Really?”

“You were always so manipulative when we played,” Charles said.

“Well, we were kids.”

“You were very determined to win.”

“I remember having fun,” he said calmly, in a way that Charles knew was meant to aggravate him. Really, Norman’s behavior had been intentional all day. He’d always been so purposeful and the idea that Charles had to be responsible seemed even more unfair now than it had seemed during their childhood.

A sudden heat of rage came over Charles, and before Charles even realized what he was doing, he was on his feet, charging in Norman’s direction, aiming to push him off and into the water. But Norman turned and stepped out of the way with a laugh, as though he’d been expecting the act the whole time, and Charles hurtled over the edge of the dock.

The world turned brown as he hit the water. The briny liquid shot up his nose. When Charles came to the surface, Norman stood laughing with his arms crossed at the edge of the dock.

“Are we playing King of the Dock now?” Norman said. “Alright, I’m ready for it. Let’s play.”
Norman got low, looked at Charles with menacing eyes, and started to laugh.

Charles gritted his teeth and swam violently toward him. He tried to thrust himself up and onto the dock, but Norman was quick and put a hand on his face, squishing his nose and pushing him back into the water.

Charles grabbed the edge of the dock, but Norman held his foot over his fingertips, ready to stomp, and Charles retreated backwards. Charles then took a deep breath, and dove under the water, swimming beneath the dock to the other side, where he stayed under for a moment, before rocketing to the surface ready to make haste for the dock. But when he came up, Norman was waiting, standing right where he’d intended to attack.

“The same tricks won’t work anymore,” Norman said. “I know them all.”

“What tricks?”

“Diving under the dock.”

“Just let me on, Norman.”

“That won’t work either,” Norman grinned.

Charles breathed heavily, kicking harder to keep himself afloat. His brother stood with a stupid smile on his face, as if pleased with his cleverness. Charles hated him in that moment, he hated just about everything about him. He swallowed, then propelled himself forward as fast as he could, grabbing hold of Norman’s ankle. He squeezed, and pulled back hard, taking Norman’s foot out from under him and sending Norman falling backwards, his head slamming into
the wood with a thump. A sudden panic set in and Charles threw himself up beside his brother. He shivered with fear, leaning over Norman, the pond water dripping from his tired body and onto his brother’s face.

“Are you okay?” Charles said. “Norman?”

Norman sat up slowly and rubbed his head, looking at Charles stupidly. Then slowly, a smile crept across his face and he started to laugh.

“Charles,” he said. “You should’ve seen your face. You looked scared beyond all hell.”

“So you’re alright?” Charles said.

“Of course,” Norman said. “It’s just a little fall.”

Charles smiled in return, embarrassment surging through his tired muscles. Norman continued to chuckle, amused and yet forgiving of the attack. A gust of wind came and broke through the heat of the day, sending a chill through Charles’ bones.

Charles couldn’t believe how stupidly he’d behaved, but that wasn’t the worst of it, for in the moment he’d charged his brother, he’d intended to hurt him, he’d wanted him to fall, and thinking back to the way his ankle felt in his firm grip, part of him knew that he’d enjoyed the thrill of it.

Charles scooted to the edge of the dock, and let his feet dangle over the edge into the water, wishing he were alone. Norman came beside him, rubbing the back of his head. The two of them sat together in silence.
“You know,” Norman looked at him. “Why don’t we call it an afternoon with the work, maybe put something on the grill for dinner?”

“We’d have to take a trip downtown. Pal’s butcher, perhaps?”

Norman moved his legs through the pond. The water swirled around and caught the sunlight. “Sounds good. Make Dad’s special pork chops? Remember those? He used to cook them up on the porch all the time when we were kids while we’d sit and draw at the table. The smell of the meat seemed to blanket the air. I miss those times.”

Charles nodded in agreement. He did remember. He remembered warm nights, and the smell of the sizzling meat. He remembered how nice and calm everything could be, as they sat in respective silence, each of them working on their own drawing pads, the crickets chirping in the night, the country alive and fresh and so very pleasant.

“It’s still early,” Charles said. “We could take care of those couches on the way downtown? Get it done tonight.”


They sat in silence for a while. The sun was lowering over the distant pine covered hills, and the shadow of the house began to lengthen and extend on the grass.

“Know anything about the family who bought it?” Charles said.

Norman shook his head. “Not a thing.”
Charles nodded.

“Shame it has to be sold,” Norman said.

“It makes a great deal of sense,” Charles said. “We don’t use it…” he paused. “But still, if I’d known it was going to happen, I’d come up more often.”

Norman nodded in agreement and stood up. “So how about those chops?” he said, then dove into the water and swam in long perfect strokes.

Charles stood and was about to dive in after him, but stopped to watch a little bit longer. Halfway to the shore, his brother slowed and began to swim breaststroke. Charles shrugged, reared back, and dove out into the water. When he came up, he suddenly began swimming as fast as he could to see if he could sneak up on Norman and beat him to the car. His brother sped up too, and they didn’t stop until they made it to the shore.
Little Necks

They’d rented the house over past summers and viewed it as a special place. They liked the smell of the sea and watching the boats moving through the waters in the distant fog. They always came in October, when the tourists had gone away, and the barrier islands were nearly empty. They liked the sound of the waves at night, soothing, calming. She’d curl up against him, and whisper sweet things about the baby they were going to have, how she was going to grow big and round, and that when the child grew up they’d bring the child here, and maybe buy a vacation house of their own when they had enough money.

Of course, that was before the doctors cut the child out two months too soon, after his heart had simply stopped beating. His small wrinkled body was covered with dark silky hairs, ordinarily shed in the womb, and his small perfect fingernails looked like translucent little shells. The doctors wrapped him in a blue blanket and showed him to them. They couldn’t bear to kiss his little forehead without noticing how he smelled like something that was meant to be alive. They had only just begun to make a list of names.

That all happened in June, and Tom hadn’t expected to return to the house on Little Neck Bay that year. He spent the summer nursing Amy, who lay
bedridden for several weeks after the emergency surgery. He made her soup. He read to her, encouraged her to get out and go for brief walks in Central Park. When her friends or relatives called, he’d always answer for her. He explained she was getting better, they were both doing better, knowing that no matter the intentions behind the calls, all they would do was make her cry.

Then, one day, Amy woke early and started to go for long morning jogs. She returned to work, as a paralegal for Binder and Crowder. She seemed happier, healthier. She dyed her hair red, something she said she’d always been curious to do. She bought new china for the house, and they hosted a dinner party, inviting her closest friends. She even booked the house for the last week in October.

“Why break tradition?” she said.

They drove up on a cold day. The house, a little saltbox, looked different when they arrived, the cedar siding somehow grayer than in years past. But Amy didn’t seem to notice. She went in ahead as Tom stood for a moment in the cold, watching the gulls circling over the dunes ahead. He unloaded their duffels, carried them up the back porch and into the house.

In the kitchen, he put down the duffels and watched as Amy explored the open first floor of the house. She moved through the living room, touching nearly every trinket on the wall: The old fishing poles, the papier-maché crabs, the harpoon, the collage made of shells that didn’t look much like anything at all.
That night, Amy pulled Tom close and whispered into his ear. She was ready; she wanted him inside of her. But he couldn’t do it. He felt leaden and told her he was tired after the long car ride.

She nodded, and kissed his cheek, her lips feeling somehow firmer than their usual softness. She rolled over and reached for the light, then kissed him on the cheek again. He turned away from her, and she rubbed his back wordlessly, an offering to say she understood. But she couldn’t understand, he thought.

Tom couldn’t sleep; the wind was so heavy that it seemed to rattle the windows to the point where he feared they might break. But he did not get up, worried that he might disturb Amy’s rest. In the morning a heavy fog hung over the bay. The tide was further out than Tom ever remembered possible and still retreating. He stood by the bedroom window, contemplating the large flat of exposed sand that skirted the shoreline, recalling the clammers that raked the beaches the last time they were here. They’d moved slowly, methodically, digging through the surf. He touched the glass pane, calm and cool.

Amy roused, and came up behind him. She wrapped her cold hands around his upper body and kissed his neck.

“I’ll make coffee,” she said and headed for the door, each one of her steps pulsating through the hardwood, and made palpable beneath his bare feet.

Later he found Amy in the kitchen, standing by the gurgling coffee maker. She offered him a thin smile, her gaze falling to the old tin bucket in his hand, which he’d found in the upstairs closet.
He was dressed in shorts and a windbreaker. He couldn’t be in the house with her all day. He needed time, space and a moment to breathe.

She poured him a cup of coffee and asked him to sit. He swallowed, and shook his head. She handed him a mug of the steaming hot liquid.

“I’ll take it in the thermos,” Tom said and put the mug down on the table.

“Just sit for a moment,” she said. “I’ll make you eggs. When was the last time I made you eggs? And besides, what’s the rush?”

“The water,” he said. “Did you see it?”

“What about it?”

“It’s perfect for clams.”

He took the thermos and went out to the porch. The air was damp with the scent of the sea. He clammed in the bay and that evening he cooked his catch with garlic and butter, as Amy sat in the living room reading and sipping wine.

The clams opened up in the steaming broth, exposing their cooked, pale gray interiors. Amy commented on the smell, how delicious they were. It must feel good to produce a meal from something he’d gathered. It was very resourceful, she said, reaching for his hand as they ate, seated across from one another at the small kitchen table.

He took held her hand loosely, and then reached for the bottle of wine. He drank so much that his penis stayed limp in her hand when she came around to his side of the table and unzipped his fly.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “It happens.”
He nodded and brought the dishes to the sink.

The wind returned that night, crying and moaning. How could anything sound so alive and lifeless at the same time? Amy rolled towards him. She pulled his thick arm around her back, wordlessly asking to be held closer. Her belly pressed against him beneath the warm flannel sheets. He could feel the heat of her blood through her nightgown, and his breath seemed to harden in his chest.

Tom took off the covers after she’d fallen asleep, and sat on the edge of the bed, letting the coolness of the room calm his sweaty skin. His eyes veered to the window. The wind was still very strong. He wished it would stop, so he could hear the lull of the sea. In prior years, he’d loved to listen to its slow, gentle churn. He’d never slept better than in this house, he’d told Amy the last time they were here.

Tom went to the window and looked into the night. He waited for a while, listening to Amy’s hollow breath. When he returned to bed, Amy had rolled onto her back, and he spent the majority of the night exchanging glances between the ceiling and Amy’s rising and falling belly.

At dawn, he snuck out of the bedroom quietly, careful not to wake Amy. He didn’t want her to try to hold him up again, to try to be near to him. He couldn’t be close to her and regretted coming at all.

He made coffee quickly, gulped it down, leaving some in the pot for when she woke. He went onto the porch, and headed down the path that led to the
shore. He went past the dunes that separated the beach from the grass and the hill where the house sat. He looked back to the house. The roof was bowed, which helped deflect the northern winds. Amy appeared in the kitchen window and looked in his direction. The fog faded her image. She seemed so far away to Tom, operating in a different time and place. Did she want to try again? Did she really want to try again?

The house was situated right near the clam beds. The shoreline ran in a crescent shape, rimmed by short red and yellow hills, which curled inward in the distance, creating a barrier from the open sea, and a womb for the clams. In the center of the crescent was a single passage to the open sea. Tom walked on to the beach and could see the dark shapes of the fishing boats moving through the fog beyond the passage. Tom took off his shoes. The sand squished under each step.

The shore was spotted with little bubbling clam holes, the size of parted lips. Tom reached into the bucket for his spade. He pushed the tip into the sand beside one of the holes, the area around it turning a lighter shade of gray. He dug quickly. Water seeped into the hole from the sides, pooling in the bottom and slowing his progress.

The first clam was small. He let it rest on his palm. He liked the weight of it, and pushed the sand off its ribbed surface with his thumb, then put it into the bucket.
Tom let the hole fill with water. He stood, and walked to another hole several feet ahead. It felt good to move very slowly along the wet sand, looking for every little detail, every sign of life beneath the surface. He liked letting his exposed knees sink into the sand when he stopped to dig. He liked how the sand clung to the hairs on his legs, and slowly fell off in clumps as he walked to the next bubbling spot.

He reached into his pocket for his Swiss knife. He broke open one of the clams, exposing the beige blob of slime with a slight pink hue, covering dark inner organs. This is an entire animal, he thought, everything that makes it work and live.

He cut the flesh free of its rubbery ligament, and pushed it around the shell with the tip of the knife. He held the clam to his lips and slurped it from the shell, then washed the shell in the surf. The interior of the shell was silver and smooth, as if it were a valuable; he put it in his pocket.

Tom clammed until the tin bucket was full. The surf began to creep up, slowly covering the sand flats, protecting the little necks until the tide went out again. Tom walked near the surf on the way back to the house. The icy water washed over his feet from time to time. When it did, he stopped, and took several deep breaths, clenching his teeth to withstand the sting. He liked how the relief was immediate after the surf receded, and left his feet exposed to the warmer air.

He ate more raw clams seated on the wooden steps that led to the house’s porch, the empty shells stacked neatly beside him.
Amy came onto the porch, and stood by the railing, watching him and drinking a steaming cup of mulled cider, which she preferred to coffee in the afternoons. Her hair was tangled. She tried pushing it to the right side a few times, but it kept falling back into her eyes as the wind picked up and the gray sky steadily darkened without sight of the sun.

“Can I get you something to warm up?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I like the cold.”

Tom split open another little neck. He slurped it up, wiping the salty brine from his lips as the creature slid down to his belly.

She looked into the bucket.

“You’ll need to get these in ice water,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I know.”

“I’ll get you some,” she said.

She went inside, and came out not much later with a vase filled with ice water, and poured it over the clams.

Tom watched the rolling bay. He smoked a cigarette, taking long, heavy drags. The clam beds were fully covered by the tide now.

Amy came down the steps and put her hand on his right shoulders. His muscles tightened, feeling the weight. He hadn’t realized how sore his body was from all the digging until she touched him.

“You’re very tense,” she said. “Come inside?”

“I’m fine here,” he said.
“Tom,” she said. “We need to talk.”

He swallowed, unable to speak.

“Is this about the baby?” she said.

“Maybe it was something I did?” he said.

“No.” She rubbed his shoulder.

He pulled away, and stood up.

“Why won’t you touch me?” she whispered.

He opened his mouth, but didn’t know what to say. She looked at him, stood and went inside.

That night he slept on the couch. When he entered the kitchen early the next morning Amy was waiting. He was very tired and agreed to coffee.

Amy sat across from him and sipped slowly. She wore a hooded sweatshirt. There was a good morning chill in the house. Behind her, Tom could see the large pot on the stovetop, and on the windowsill there was a series of white porcelain bowls decorated with different sea creatures. Lobsters, mussels and crabs. The window exposed the gloomy sky. It seemed to stretch endlessly. One could get lost, he thought.

Tom licked a film of black coffee from his lips, chapped from spending consecutive days outside. He liked having chapped lips. He liked biting the dead skin off with his front teeth and feeling a tinge of pain.

Amy offered him another cup of coffee.
“No,” Tom stood. “I need to go.”

“I know,” she said.

He stood and dumped the last of his coffee in the sink. He turned to her, smiled meekly, and went for the door.

Amy stood suddenly and he paused.

“You know,” she said. “It was warm this September. That’s why there are so many Little Necks this year. The breeding went on late into October.”

“Really? How’d you learn that?” Tom said.

She shrugged. “Just thought you might want to know. I Googled it.”

She went to him, and took his hand.

“Also,” she said. “If you find a small one keep on looking in the area. Clams seem to nest in groups. The little ones are called seed clams.”

“That so?”

She nodded, and said he better get going before the tide changed.

Tom turned for the door. He stopped for a moment with his hand on the smooth knob and stepped into the cold.

A light mist set in as Tom walked. He pulled the hood of his windbreaker over his head, and drew the chords tight. The wind still broke through, and a shiver ran through him, but he didn’t mind, and set off along the beach, looking for clams.
There were other beach houses along the shore, but most were empty at this time of year. When he was done, he looked in the bucket and saw there was more than he and Amy could eat. He wondered what would happen if he clammed everyday. Could he get them all? It seemed impossible, but he knew things were finite, so perhaps he could. He laughed out loud, but the damp air devoured the sound the moment it left his lips.

That evening he and Amy drank bourbon and ate frozen pizza. They didn’t talk much, and Amy didn’t reach to touch him. When they were finished, Tom was about to clear the plates, when Amy told him to sit, and offered him another bourbon. He shook his head, but reached for the bottle anyway. He poured the stuff himself.

“You know,” Amy said, as she washed a plate. “I thought about it all day.”

“Thought about what?” Tom said.

She stopped scrubbing, and turned to face him.

“The baby,” she said. “I get it. I really do.”

She came to him, wiping her wet hands off on her jeans.

“You spent so long worrying for me, you never gave yourself the chance to grieve.” She kissed his cheek, and returned to washing the dishes.

Amy went to bed early and left him to the couch. Tom lay taking long deep breaths, his legs crossed. There was no wind and he heard the sea, faintly
rolling in the distance. Now that he could hear it, he wished the wind would come back. He paced the room. He was relieved Amy couldn’t see his restlessness. It felt good not to hide. He went to the window and looked out to the black sea. He walked around the house, listening to the hardwood creak beneath his bare feet.

He went out to the porch, and looked into the night. Thin, ghostly clouds veiled the moon. He smoked a cigarette, and watched the white crests of the waves in the distance. He went down the porch, and walked halfway along the path to the shore. Footprints lead down the path to the beach. He followed them to the surf, where they disappeared, washed by the tide. Who did they belong to? Were they his from before? It could just be anyone.

“Hello,” he called into the night.

He waited and listened, but the night was so very still.

Tom returned to the porch, and saw the tin bucket full of clams from the day. He split one open with his knife, revealing the raw, dead creature, sitting in a pool of its own brine. He realized there wasn’t any blood. Did they even bleed? He left the clam on the porch, wondering if one of the gulls or sandpipers would come and take it in the night.

In the morning, he was waiting for Amy at the kitchen table with coffee. She grinned, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. He noticed how her skin was paler than it seemed before, and he feared she hadn’t slept.
They sat sipping the cups in silence, not talking about what it was like to spend the night apart. After a while, Tom looked at his watch, knowing the tides would change soon.

“Would you like to come out today?” he said.

“Clams?” she said.

He nodded.

They walked down to the beach, hunched forward, eyes set firmly downward. The sand was very smooth. The tide seemed higher than before, and the clam holes were few and very small.

“Where do you think they are?” Amy said.

“Perhaps I caught them all?” Tom laughed, then looked quickly out to the water, and rubbed his hands together.

They walked on along the beach, up towards the taller dunes in the distance. They approached a log crusted in barnacles and weed. The log was hollow and inside there were empty shells, left by a muskrat or a raccoon, Tom guessed.

Amy looked at the log, her eyes webbed with thin blood vessels. She put her hands on her flat belly, and held them there. She pressed her tongue against her lower lip, and kneeled forward, allowing her pant legs to press into the sand.
She started to dig with her hands, pulling back large clumps of sand. She kept digging, and then looked at Tom. Her lips were pale. Dark circles skirted her eyes.

Tom recognized the look. He’d seen it before when they first learned there were no options. His lungs stiffened. His eyelids felt heavier. He knelt beside her with the tin bucket. He reached for the spade and started to dig too.

They dug, and the sun pierced through the overcast above them and fell onto their backs. Soon the hole was large enough to fit just about anything they’d want.

They stood, looking at the hole.

“We’ve got nothing to put inside,” Tom said.

Amy looked straight into Tom’s eyes and unzipped her hooded sweatshirt and placed it in the hole.

Tom scratched the stubble on his chin, then took off his shirt. They took off all their clothes and their shoes and put it all in the hole.

They stood only in their underwear. Tom saw Amy’s red scar, a gash from her navel to the pubis. Tom had never seen the scar in such plain site. She’d undressed in the dark for months after. He reached to touch it, ran his hands up her stomach to her chest.

She shivered in the cold, and he shivered too, but he didn’t mind the feeling.
They worked together to cover the hole with wet heavy sand, patting it down smooth. They pushed the log over the spot, went down to the water, and cleaned their hands in the ocean water. They stood barefoot, the surf splashing up over their feet. They flinched together at the bite of the cold water. They kissed and when they pulled apart they looked into each other’s dark eyes.

Amy’s lips were soft and plump. He reached for her and held her close. She cleaved onto him. The surf receded around them. The sand breathed.
A Jaguar that Spits

In the summer of 1997, my older brother Tom went to camp for eight
weeks and my father was in New Mexico doing a PR job for an oil company,
leaving me alone with my mother. It was nice to have such an empty house. In the
evenings my mother would read the paper in the living room and I would watch
television in the den without my brother nagging me to change the channel. I’d
just turned ten, and my mother gave me increased privacy and responsibility. She
no longer bugged me to get out of bed early, or limited how much television I
could watch. Sometimes she let me walk to the Campy’s Pop Shop downtown on
my own.

But things changed when my grandfather arrived in mid-July. He lived in
Buenos Aires and visited us in New Jersey every year to avoid the coldest part of
Argentina’s winter. My mother usually put him up in the guestroom in the attic,
but she’d started writing copy part-time in February, and had converted the
guestroom into an office.

So my grandfather stayed in my brother’s room, directly across the hall
from mine. At night, I heard his nasal snores. In the mornings, he spent too long
in the bathroom my brother and I shared, and when he finally came out and said,
“all yours joven,” the sink would be filled with little white hairs from his moustache and the room would smell of eucalyptus from that stuff he used to slick back his hair. He sang songs in Spanish, and never closed the bedroom door during the day, as he lounged reading heavy books about agriculture. Worst of all, he never left me alone when I wanted to watch television. He’d enter the den, put his arm around me and tell me a story about Argentina.

“I don’t care,” I often told him, trying to squiggle to the other side of the couch.

But he’d just grip my shoulder and hold me still. I knew my mother would scold me if I disrespected him, so I was forced to listen, to endure the sour smell of his breath whenever he leaned in too close. Sometimes, I’d distract myself by counting the liver spots on his forehead until he noticed my eyes wandering.

“What’s so interesting that you can’t listen?” he said on one occasion.

I shrugged and burned in embarrassment, then looked him in the eyes, as he told me about how he used to play Pato, a game played on horseback, a sort of combination of polo and basketball. “Perón made it the official game of Argentina in 1953,” he said, proudly. “And did you know your great grandfather, Ernesto, was buried in a tomb a mere five feet from Eva Perón? Right in the Cementerio de la Recoleta.”

“Who is Eva Perón?” I let slip.

“You don’t know Evita?” he said.
I didn’t know the name, but said that I did, because I knew that he was prepared to go on about her if I did not. But when I responded, he just started to laugh. I wasn’t a very good liar, I suppose. Thankfully, he spared me the criticism. Instead, he lifted his arm from around me, leaned back and played with the tip of his moustache.

“I know what’ll interest you,” he grinned.

He then told me about the Argentine rainforests near the border of Brazil in the province of Corrientes. His father had lead a hunting expedition there back in the 1930s to look for a particular kind of jaguar that spit into the water to lure fish to the surface to catch them. He told the story truthfully, he didn’t embellish things like he did with the other stories, but I knew he was lying and told him it was not possible for jaguars to spit.

“And besides,” I added. “Aren’t cats afraid of water?”

At the time, I wanted to be a zoologist. I watched a great deal of the National Geographic channel and Animal Planet, and had learned a good deal about animals.

But immediately after I spoke, my grandfather’s lips went thin, and he shook his head very slowly.

“Only a few jaguars do it,” he said. “They’re very rare.”

“Then why would your dad want to kill it if it was so rare?” I said.

He told me that hunting was very important at the time in Argentina.
I told him killing rare animals was a bad thing. “Besides, that sounds like an excuse.”

“Como?”

“To cover up something that doesn’t exist.”

“It does exist,” he said.

I didn’t want to argue about it anymore, and told him I needed to go to the bathroom. I ran out of the room, fearing he might launch into another story if I wasn’t quick.

There were plenty of other things I didn’t like about my grandfather too. For example, it seemed he wore the same clothes over and over again—a white linen suit and a large wide-brimmed hat. Also, he always sat in our backyard smoking cigars and drinking fernet with diet coke. When I complained about the smoke, my mother said he could do whatever he liked. He was retired and should indulge in life.

This didn’t seem right, because at school we learned about the potential damages of smoking, even second hand smoke.

“Do you want me to die?” I pretended to cough, holding my hands over my mouth. But my mother just looked at me seriously, and then started to laugh.

“You don’t need to stand so close to him if you don’t like it,” she said, as she patted my shoulder reassuringly.
Even though the smoke didn’t really hurt my lungs, I could smell it just about everywhere in the backyard. Sometimes I could even taste it in my mouth. But it wasn’t bad enough to prevent me from playing outside while he was there.

Aside from television, one of my favorite things to do was bird watch. I had a pair of binoculars that belonged to my father from when he was in the army years before. In the back corner of the yard, there was a small forest of bamboo near the cedar fence. The original bamboo plant was a gift from my uncle when my parents first moved into the house. It was creeping bamboo and grew like a weed. Every year it needed to be cut down, but my father always let a good amount of it grow because he knew I liked it.

It was from within the bamboo that I usually liked to bird watch with a juice box and peanut butter crackers. But as I sat with my binoculars that day, my grandfather stood just outside the limits of the bamboo, observing me.

“The jaguars you’re hunting are hiding, joven,” he said. “You aren’t calling to them the right way.”

“I’m not hunting jaguar. And you don’t call to them, anyway.”

“Of course you call them,” he said. “How else do you find them?”

I groaned. “And they don’t spit into water. That’s just not true. I’ve never seen anything about it on Animal Planet.”

“Joven, I don’t know what shows you’ve been watching, but you’re wrong.”
It was a hot day, and the sun came through the leaves in a way that hurt my eyes. I stepped out of the bamboo and walked up to my grandfather. I was beginning to think he actually believed the story about the jaguar. Or did he think I was that gullible?

“If it’s true, then why don’t more people know about them?”

“I told you, joven. They’re only in a particular part of the jungle.”

“So only this one kind of jaguar can spit?”

“That’s how it works.” He headed back to the chair on the patio and returned to his fernet and cigar.

I tried to resume what I was doing, pushing through the bamboo, trying to imagine that it stretched for miles. I wanted to feel alone, I wanted to feel like I was exploring the real wild, but I couldn’t make the image of my grandfather smoking in his chair on the patio disappear from my mind.

Eventually, I gave up and went to sit with him. My mother was grocery shopping at the time, and she wanted me to spend more time with him while he was here.

“What if we look it up on mom’s computer?” I said.

“Como?”

“About the jaguars that spit. I bet no one else has seen one either.”

“Just because no one else has seen one, doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

“What if we go look at the jaguar at the zoo?” I said.

“You want to go to the zoo?” he said.
It didn’t, necessarily. I had planned on watching a show on the National Geographic channel about the Australian Outback, but now that the topic was raised, I decided that going to the zoo might be fun. Maybe one of the zoologists could explain to my grandfather that jaguars didn’t spit?

“Let’s go,” I said. “Please grandpa.”

My grandfather put out his cigar in a flipped over seashell my mother had given him to use as an ashtray. “I don’t know, jovencito. I’m pretty tired.”

I crossed my arms and tried to hold in my frustration. My grandfather didn’t look particularly tired. I figured the real reason he didn’t want to go was because if we went to ask an expert, they’d agree with me. But after talking about it all day, I was starting to get irritated by his persistence. I wanted him to admit that he was wrong.

So I stayed outside with him, thinking about how to expose him. He picked up a book on the table, and read with deep concentration, but really I knew he was trying to avoid the topic of conversation.

Then I remembered my mammalian almanac book upstairs, with pictures of mammals from all over the world. I went to find it, and returned outside, skimming through the pages, looking at different pictures of jaguars. I brought it to my grandfather, but he just laughed.

“No, jovencito. You won’t find it in there.”

“Then where will I find it?”

“Argentina,” he said.
I groaned and went inside to watch television. There was still some time until the show about the Outback started, so I just flipped through the channels. I put my feet up on the coffee table in front of the couch, even though I was not supposed to. A few minutes later, I heard steps coming through the house, and pulled down my feet before my grandfather entered.

By then I didn’t want to talk anymore, I wanted to be alone, but didn’t say anything, because my mother would ground me if I were rude to him. My grandfather sat beside me, the sound of his breathing wet and heavy. I could smell the lingering scent of his cigar still on him. But at least he didn’t speak.

We watched a show about freshwater dolphins until my mother got home. She joined us and commented on how nice it was that we could all watch together.

“And what else did you do today?” she asked.

“Not much,” I said.

My show was going to start in a few minutes and I wanted them gone. But my grandfather just smiled. “Gabriel went on a bird watch,” he said.

“That so?” my mother said. “Find anything?”

“It was a lousy time,” I said.

“I was telling him about mi padre, too,” my grandfather said.

My mother smiled. “You know, Gabriel, he went on real safari.”

“I heard,” I said.

“Did you tell him about the jaguars, papi?”
“He doesn’t believe me,” he said.

“Well did you show him the picture?” my mother said.

I told them I didn’t want to see the picture, I was so frustrated that I stood up and started to walk away. Was my mother in on it too? My grandfather must’ve coaxed her into agreeing with him. I wouldn’t be surprised. As I thought about it I realized they probably planned it all to try to trick me into believing an Argentine kid’s story. I should’ve figured as much. Ever since my grandfather arrived, my mother tried to do things to make him more comfortable. We ate weird meals, empanadas, which I liked and morcillas, which I’d never had before, and were gross. They spoke to each other in Spanish, which bothered me, because I didn’t know enough to understand and sometimes I wondered if they were saying things about me. When I complained, my grandfather smiled and said that he’d love to teach me, and my mother got excited and said that we could all practice together. Now, there was this business with the jaguar. Why would they toy with me like this? It didn’t seem right, but half way to the door I stopped. Why should I leave? I was there first, and my show was almost on. And why didn’t my grandfather mention the picture before?

“You never brought it up,” he said when I asked.

This seemed all the more evidence that it was a sham. Perhaps I was being tested? Perhaps if I showed them I knew what was going on, they would finally stop?
So I decided that I had to at least see the picture and sat back down on the couch, and said, “So where is this picture?”

My mother ran to the other room and came back a few moments later carrying a large photo album, which she kept on the top shelf of the bookcase in the living room. It was blue with gold stitching. I’d looked through it once or twice before when I was bored, and hadn’t seen any jaguars. Most of the photos were old black and whites from a farm out in Argentina where my mother used to vacation before she moved to the United States. We all sat on the couch flipping through them. My mother sat in the middle. She stopped on a photo of her with a dark haired man with a hunch, and started to laugh.

“Uncle Andres,” she said.

“That’s the night Apollo 11 flew over the farm and men walked on the moon,” my grandfather said.

My mother’s eyes softened. She explained she was fifteen years old then and she’d ridden a horse out into the alfalfa fields with Andres, and they’d set up a radio and a picnic in the middle of the night to celebrate.

“Andres was a great lover of astronomy and science,” she said.

“Can you show me the jaguar already?” I said.

My mother looked at me sharply. “Impatience never got anyone anywhere.”

I rubbed my brow in frustration.
“Look,” I said. “I know there’s no jaguar. I know you two are up to something, and I don’t like it.”

“Up to something?” my grandfather said. “I told you, joven, I’m serious.”

He reached for the photo album, flipped through pages, and settled on a photograph of my great grandfather, Ernesto, standing by a river in the jungle with a giant rifle strapped across his chest. He wore an army cap and pants that seemed too tight for his thighs. He was tall with sharp features.

My mother said he looked a lot like me.

“No he doesn’t,” I said. “And where’s the jaguar?”

My grandfather put his finger on the photo and passed the album to me.

Sure enough, in the far background, a jaguar crouched by the river where it banked. I squinted. I couldn’t see it very well, the image was blurry and small, and I would’ve never noticed it without help. But the jaguar most certainly looked like it was waiting for something to come up from the water. I looked at my grandfather, who considered me with a raised brow, as if to say I told you so, but I just shook my head.

“This doesn’t prove anything,” I said.

“What do you mean, it’s right there.”

“Yes, but you can’t see if it’s spitting or not. It’s too small.”

My mother took the book and looked at it closer. “I always thought it looked like it was spitting.”

“It can’t be, mom. They don’t spit. Why are you guys lying to me?”
They both looked at me quite seriously and started to laugh. I stared at my grandfather hard, hoping he would stop, but he kept on laughing and it ticked me off.

“Stop,” I said. “It’s not funny.”

My grandfather nodded and wiped his eyes. “I’m sorry, joven,” he said. “You’ve just become quite the machito. You were different last summer, so quiet.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“I mean, you’ve got a little fight. Like my father.”

“I don’t want to be like your father.”

“Well,” my mother said. “That can’t be helped.”

After that, she stood and asked if either of us wanted some mate. We only drank mate when my grandfather was around, so I shook my head no.

“You sure, joven?” he said, as my mother left the room.

“It tastes like burnt grass,” I said.

He laughed, put the photo album on the chair beside me, then stood and headed the door. But before he stepped out, he stopped. He turned to me and smiled.

“I choose to believe it spits,” he said.

When he finally left the room, I reached for the remote. It was time for my television show. But as the introduction began, showing a slew of animals in
different natural environments, none of it seemed real, and my eyes kept veering
to the photo album on the couch beside me.

I turned off the television, reached for the photo album and opened it to
the page of my great grandfather in front of the jaguar. I squinted. Was it really
spitting? It could be, I thought. I wasn’t sure anymore. The longer I looked, the
more it seemed possible.

I looked out the window and saw my grandfather and mother sitting on the
patio. My grandfather smoked another cigar. My mother packed the mate gourd
with yerba. She looked at me through the window and gestured for me to come
out.

I sighed, went outside, and fell into the seat beside my grandfather, as my
mother poured the hot water from a kettle into the mate gourd. My mother was
about to sip the mate, when my grandfather reached to stop her. Smoke rolled
from the tip of his cigar.

“The little one drinks first,” he said.

“Do you want it, hijo?” my mother said.

I bit my lip, knowing how disgusting the stuff was, but nodded and
reached for the gourd anyway. I looked for a moment at the triangular patterns
carved into the side of the gourd then dipped in the silver bombilla and took a sip
of the warm, bitter drink. I grimaced, but swallowed and said that it tasted better
than the last time that I’d tried it. I held out the gourd to my mother, but she shook
her head.
“You’ve got to finish the whole thing before you pass,” she said.

“It’s true,” my grandfather said. “It’s just how it goes, joven.”

I nodded, and brought the bombilla back to my lips without complaint.

My grandfather patted me on the shoulder. “Mira qué macho!” he said.