FRANKLIN SQUARE

by

STEVEN WILLIAMS

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Written under the direction of

Tayari Jones

And approved by

Rigoberto González

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Franklin Square
We moved to Long Island in June of 1997, just before my ninth birthday. My parents had been wanting to leave Ozone Park, Queens for years, my mom notifying my grandmother every time she heard of another mugging, another corner store getting held up. My mom had gone back to work at the bank as soon as I started preschool. My dad was a plumber and worked ten-, twelve-hour shifts, and then there was his weekend job at his friend’s pizzeria in City Line. But they’d need my grandmother’s help if they were going to buy on Long Island. She only budged when my mom started complaining about my school, P.S. 64. That was when I was in third grade. “There are forty kids in Katherine’s class. *Forty.*” She shook her head. “A bright girl like her.”

My grandmother closed her small, close-set eyes, and nodded. “Call a realtor.”

Our first morning in the new house, I woke up while it was still dark outside, the orange glow of the streetlamp out front filtering through the blinds. I went to my window and looked out. I could see our whole block. Lawns were a rarity back in Ozone Park—unless you counted the strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street where people walked their dogs—but here, every house had one. Two homes had their sprinklers going already. Because we lived at the bottom of the hill, the houses across the street were higher than ours, and the ones behind those higher still, giving the impression of a cresting wave. As the sun came up, the sky turning a clear blue, everything—the street, the parked cars, the shingled roofs—sparkled. The world looked brand new.

When I went downstairs, my mom was coming out of her bedroom and putting earrings on. “Morning, Kat,” she said, and kissed me, then rushed off to the kitchen, where she poured me some Cheerios and explained that it was just like in the old house: my grandmother was downstairs if I needed anything, and my sandwich was in the fridge.
Playing outside was allowed, she said, but I had to tell Grandma first, and I had to stay on the block. She’d be home by three, she said, kissing me goodbye. Then she grabbed her pocketbook off the table and was gone. My dad had left for work hours ago.

After I was done eating, I migrated to the living room, and spent the rest of the morning watching cartoons. We had cable now, and I indulged in three or four straight hours of Nickelodeon: *Rugrats* and *Doug* and *Hey, Arnold!*, all shows I’d heard about but had never seen. When a commercial came on, I’d start skipping around the living room, up the hallway and into the kitchen, then back. There was just so much room compared to the old house. But mostly, I was just killing time until the afternoon, when surely every kid on the block would be in their front yards. Our block in Ozone Park had been mostly old people—all friends of my grandmother’s—and a few families with babies. But when my parents brought me to visit the new house, I’d seen kids everywhere, playing soccer on their lawns or shooting baskets on a hoop they’d set up in the street. One girl who looked my age was riding her pink Huffy up and down the block, weaving around the parked cars. It was a dead end, I realized then. The street wouldn’t be off limits. Now, I peered through the blinds every few minutes, checking for activity. Nothing yet.

When it was almost noon, I went into the kitchen. I was taking the cream cheese and jelly my mother had made me out of the refrigerator when I heard footsteps coming up the basement steps. I turned and saw Grandma in the doorway, holding a few cans of tomatoes and wearing a blouse with a floral pattern, her crucifix necklace tucked under its collar.

“Hey, there’s my dolly,” she said when she saw me. I set my plate down on the table and went over and hugged her, wrapping my arms around her waist. She put her
hands on my head and started running her fingers through my hair. “Oh, with that straight hair. You’re going to have to beat the boys back with a stick, I’ll tell you that right now.” She bent down and kissed me.

    I felt myself blushing. “Grandma.”

    She pointed at the plate. “What’s that you’re eating?”

    “Cream cheese and jelly,” I said, peeling back the plastic wrap.

    She half-smiled, unimpressed. “How about Grandma makes you some chicken parmigiana, huh? How’s that? Come on, we’ll eat together.”

    My grandmother got out a pan and a few cans of tomatoes. But we didn’t seem to have any chicken. “Get dressed,” she said. “We’re going to the store. That one your mother took me to yesterday.”

    From the kitchen window, I heard a bike bell, and bouncing basketball.

    I looked at the clock. We wouldn’t be gone long, I figured. When we got back, I’d still have the whole afternoon to play. To find some friends.

The King Kullen was five or six blocks away. We walked, my grandmother pushing her shopping cart. I’d once asked her why she never learned to drive, but she just tapped the side of her head with her finger and said, “Nerves.”

    We were in and out of the store, buying the chicken and also loading up on canned tomatoes, as usual. When we exited to the parking lot, the sun seemed to have gotten stronger since we were last outside. I started walking, but after a few paces, I realized my grandmother wasn’t next to me.
When I turned, I saw her still standing by the exit, gripping the handle of her cart. Behind her glasses, her eyes were darting all over the place.

“Where is this?” she said. “Are we in City Line?”

“City Line?” I said.

“That’s right. In East New York.”

“Grandma, that was by the old house. We live here now.”

She looked at me, her expression blank.

“We live here,” I repeated, “in Franklin Square.”

She nodded. She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Right.” She looked around some more. “But, honey? Do you know how to get home?” She looked nervous.

I had no problems getting us home. I’d walked all over with my grandmother when we lived in Queens, especially during the summer, and I’d developed a good sense of direction. As we approached our house, she handed me the key, and let me unlock the front door for us. I helped her bring the bags into the house, and watched as she folded up her cart and dragged it up our front steps.

In the kitchen, she emptied the bags, setting the canned tomatoes on the table.

“You know I was only kidding with you, right?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t think Grandma knows how to get home? I wanted to make sure you knew the way. It’s important you get to know the new neighborhood.”

I didn’t say anything.
“But you don’t tell your mother and father.” She wagged her finger. “They may not understand, think I’m getting old and forgetful, and then I’d be embarrassed.” She frowned. “You don’t want Grandma to be embarrassed, do you?”

When I stayed silent, she reached for my stomach and tickled me. I giggled a little.

“Come on,” she said. “How about that lunch, huh? You must be starving.”

As soon as I was done eating, I told my grandmother I was going to play and ran out front. Next door, a brother and sister were playing Wiffle ball on their lawn. The boy, who looked older, must’ve thought he was a real pitcher, winding up and everything while his sister chopped at the ball with the yellow bat.

I stood at the edge of their lawn. They both looked at me.

“I’m Katherine,” I said.

“Do you want to play?” the girl called across the lawn. She looked a year or two younger than me. She wore a huge pink bow in her hair, and a t-shirt that nearly reached her knees.

I nodded.

“We’re going to play hide and seek now,” said the brother. He was tall, with a long, skinny neck, his salad bowl hair so blonde it looked almost reflective. He rolled the plastic ball down their driveway. His sister walked towards us.

“Tina’ll hide first,” he said. “Then you.”
I looked back at the house. I couldn’t go off and hide. I wanted to keep an eye on the front door in case my grandmother decided to go out again. What if she forgot how to get home and she was all by herself?

“I can’t,” I said.

“Why not?” said the boy.

“Because.” I tried to think of something. “I’m too scared.”

“Too scared?” He laughed. “You’re scared of playing hide and seek?”

I felt my throat constrict. “We could play Wiffle ball instead. Or basketball.” I pointed at the hoop that sat on their curb, leaning into the street. “I can go get my ball.”

He shook his head. “We have to go inside now,” he said, and grabbed his sister’s wrist, leading her towards their house.

It rained the next day. The day after that, every kid on the block seemed to be in the pool next door, splashing and screaming all day. I spent most of my day inside, except later that afternoon, when I slipped out to ride my bike up and down the block for a little while, never taking my eye off the front door.

While we ate that night, my poor dad looked like he barely had the strength to lift his fork. His jobs were mostly in Manhattan and the Bronx in those days. It hadn’t been so bad driving from Queens, but now, he had to leave the house by five every morning.

“Talk to the union, Mike,” my mother said to him. “To be driving, what, an hour, hour and a half each way, five or six days a week? It’s ridiculous.”

My father laughed and shook his head. He was freshly showered in his white t-shirt, his wet hair combed back. I could smell the Bengay on him, even with the chicken
francese steaming at the center of the table. “You think they give a shit about anybody’s commute?”

“Well it couldn’t hurt to ask, is all I’m saying. See if they can get you some jobs on the Island.”

“At least you get to see people during the day,” my grandmother said. “Other adults. Have a few conversations.” She looked sad. Her eyes darted between my mom and my dad, who said nothing. I knew that if I kept looking at her I’d start to cry.

My father was grinning. “How about coming to work with me tomorrow, Ma? I’ll bet I could get my mother-in-law into the union. You know how to use a wrench?”

My parents laughed, but my grandmother just put down her fork. She laced her fingers and looked across the table at me. “Your father thinks he’s a comedian.”

“Take it easy, Ma. He’s just joking with you,” my mother said. “Chicken came great.” She put a forkful in her mouth. “And besides, we’ll have company for Sunday dinner. I spoke to Jimmy earlier.”

“Gloria too?” I asked. She was my favorite cousin. My mom nodded.

My grandmother looked surprised. “Oh, Jimmy, huh?” She shook her head. “Now that we live ten minutes away he can find the time to visit his mother. God forbid he should drive into Queens. They can’t wait to move down south, him and Janet.”

My mom’s eyes narrowed. “Ma, what are you talking about?” She looked at my dad, then back at my grandmother. “They came and visited last month, for your birthday. We had them for Easter, too.”

“Yeah.” My grandmother nodded. “Yeah, I know. We’ll see if he keeps that up.”
“Well, he said they wanted to come see the house, spend time with all of us. You especially, that’s what he said. You’ll get to see your granddaughter Gloria, too.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what to tell you, Ma.”

“Sure you don’t.” My grandmother poked at her string beans. “Nobody knows anything.”

I spent the next two afternoons in the kitchen with my grandmother. She’d cooked a lot in the old house too, would sometimes help my mom by putting up a pot of sauce or making meatballs, but now, it was all she seemed to do. I’d sit at the table drawing pictures of horses with my colored pencils, and while cutlets fried or the lasagna baked, my grandmother would sit across from me and leaf through the newspaper. Sometimes, when she was making sauce, I’d get up and stir for her, dragging the wooden spoon through the bubbling sauce, scraping the bottom of the pot.

“Look at this. I’ve got a little helper.” She’d smile at me, and I’d smile back at her.

We went out again, too, to the same supermarket, and while she didn’t outright ask me if I knew the way home, I could sense her trepidation when we left the store, a vulnerability in her eyes that was becoming more and more familiar. To me, at least. My parents didn’t seem to have any idea that something was off. To avoid arousing suspicion, I’d make sure I was outside when my mom got home from work. I figured that strategy would work for the rest of the summer. Did I have a long-term plan for keeping my grandmother’s sudden forgetfulness under wraps? I did not.
That Sunday, Uncle Jimmy, Aunt Janet, and Gloria, my cousin, got to our house at a quarter to five, close to an hour later than we were expecting them. When my mom saw their old Toyota pulling up, she started for the front door, waving for us all to follow her, to go out and greet them.

We said our hellos on the sidewalk, a flurry of hugs and handshakes and kisses on the cheek. Gloria, eighteen years old and lithe in her tight black tank top, now had dark, dark auburn hair—it was naturally light brown and frizzy like her mom’s—and I was instantly jealous. My grandmother seemed happy to see her—“My first grandchild!”—but her warmth evaporated when Aunt Janet hugged her. My memory insists Uncle Jimmy was the size of a bear, which actually might not be far from the truth. He was over six feet tall with dark, curly hair, which he wore combed back, and a stomach that bulged so it was almost impossible for me to hug him.

“How do you like the new house, Kat?” he said to me, and everyone seemed to go silent and look at me. Crowds, even of people I knew well, made me nervous. I nodded.

Next he turned his attention to my grandmother. “Look at my ma,” he said, putting a hand on each of her shoulders. “Looks like she’s still in her forties, this one.”

“It’s true.” Aunt Janet’s smile looked forced. She handed the bakery box she was holding to my mother.

“Sorry for our tardiness,” Uncle Jimmy said to my parents. “Hit traffic coming back from a job out east. Speaking of which”—he prodded the yellow dead patch at the corner of our lawn with his sneaker—“what kind of sprinkler system you got here?”

My dad shook his head. “None yet. We just have the one that connects to the hose.” He flapped his hand back and forth, mimicking the motion of the sprinkler.
“Well, whenever you’re ready to upgrade, just give me a call. I’ll talk to the boss, get you a good price. Otherwise, you might have to rip this whole thing up.” He laughed a little. “You could lay down some stone. Guinea grass, they call that.”

“Dad.” Gloria folded her arms.

“What?”

“That word.”

“She’s right, Jim,” said Aunt Janet. “It’s a slur against Italians.”

“No,” corrected Gloria, “it’s a slur against Guineans, and all of Africa. Saying ‘Guinea’ as an insult implies that dark skin is an undesirable or shameful trait.”

Uncle Jimmy shrugged. “Who insulted anybody?”

Gloria rolled her eyes.

“Anyway,” said my dad, and started towards the house. We all followed him.

Inside, my parents gave everyone the tour. In the living room, my Aunt Janet pointed to the blank walls. “Tri-County has some nice paintings,” she said to my mom. “You’d be surprised. Not expensive, either. Paintings give a room some life.”

My grandmother looked at me and rolled her eyes. I tried not to laugh.

My mom smiled tightly. “Good to know, Jan.”

Next was the kitchen, a quick peak at my parents’ room, and then finally, we all went up to my room. I’d fallen in love with it the first time my parents took me to look at the house—it was twice as big as my old room, and my dad said he’d paint it any color I wanted. In the corner was a rocking chair. My mom gestured towards it. “She likes to sit there and read at night.” She looked at me and winked.
Gloria was smiling at me, too. “Cool room, kiddo.”

When it was time to eat, we gathered in the dining room, my father, Uncle Jimmy, and I taking our seats. My grandmother, too, had been encouraged to sit, relax, while my mom, my aunt, and Gloria made the plates and brought them over to the table. It was ravioli and meatballs. “Mom made a ton, if anyone wants seconds,” said my mother, gesturing towards the stove. At the head of the table, my father cut the Italian bread.

Uncle Jimmy cut his ravioli with his fork and took a bite. “Mmm. This sauce, huh? My mother, the culinary genius. That’s why I’m like this.” He patted his belly.

“It really is delicious, Grandma,” said Gloria.


“I’ll tell you, it’s some setup you’ve got here. Nice size. A kitchen and a dining room. Can you beat that? They must’ve extended the house at some point.”

“We’re very happy so far.” My mom swallowed. “And look how close the school is.” She pointed out the window, from which the school was visible above the houses. She smiled at me. “Katherine’s very excited about going to Washington Street in September. They have a gymnasium, small classes, art and music, all of it.”

I smiled. I’d visited the school with my mother earlier that month and had been amazed at the huge library and brightly-painted rooms.

“Kat.” Uncle Jimmy wiped his plate with a piece of bread. “You know your cousin’s going to be going to Boston University in a few months? She got a scholarship.”

Gloria was blushing. I didn’t know anything about Boston University, but I decided I’d go there too when I got older.
Aunt Janet shook her head. “Where do our kids get these brains?”

“Anyway,” said Uncle Jimmy. “Like I was saying about the house: you bought at the right time. This area’s blowing up. Everyone’s coming over from Queens and Brooklyn. I spoke to a real estate agent recently, she said over the next year or two, prices are going to go up.” He was looking mainly at my grandmother. “But after that, they’ll plateau, maybe even drop.”

My mother looked at Uncle Jimmy and shook her head. She mouthed the word “Don’t.”

“Meanwhile,” Uncle Jimmy continued, “it’s getting very expensive to live in New York. Marone. We have to work like dogs. Right, Mike?” He wacked my dad on the forearm. “Anyway, me and Jan have been looking at houses in Florida.”

This was not news. He and Aunt Janet had been talking about Florida long enough with no action that nobody took them seriously anymore.

“But before we sell,” he continued, “we were thinking of sprucing up. It’d be a good investment. The agent said a nice kitchen can fetch a lot of money, so we were thinking new countertops, maybe redo the floor.” He coughed into his fist. “Maybe extend the house in the back. So, Ma. I wanted to ask you a favor. Just twenty-five or so—”

“Who do you think I am, Rockefeller?” My grandmother looked disgusted.

“It’d be a loan,” said Jimmy. He held up his palms. “We’d pay you back, with interest, if you want.”

“And then what?” She gestured towards Gloria with her thumb. “You’re all in Florida forever? When’s the next time my granddaughter will see me, at my funeral?”
To hear that word in connection with Grandma shocked me.

“Easy, Ma, easy,” said my mom.

“Hey.” Gloria’s breath was soft on my ear. “Do you want to go up to your room with me? Show me some of your books?” When I kept staring at Grandma, Gloria got up and tapped me on the shoulder. “Come on,” she urged me, squeezing past my chair.

“What are they talking about?” I asked Gloria when we were up in my room. I’d sat down in my rocking chair. “Does Uncle Jimmy want money?”

She was sitting on the floor, her long legs folded underneath her like a pretzel.

“It’s just boring adult stuff. Trust me.” She gave a warm smile.

“Are you really moving to Florida this time?”

Gloria shrugged. “I doubt it.”

“But you’re going to Boston.”

“I am. But we’ll still see you guys on holidays. Boston’s not that far.” She looked around the room. “So, do you like it here? Making lots of new friends?”

I shrugged. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean?”

I almost shrugged again, but I knew she’d press me, so instead, I said, “Why do you want to go to Boston?”

“I just think it’ll be fun. You know, to be on my own.” She pushed her hair behind her ear. “You’ll understand when you’re a little older.”

“Do you think we can go downstairs now?”

“Nah. It’s better up here.”
“But I want to see if everything’s ok.”

“You’re sweet. But you don’t have to worry about that stuff. It’s just something the adults need to work out. It’s not your problem.”

She looked like an adult to me, and seemed so mature, but I also thought I could trust her. “Um,” I said. “Sometimes Grandma—”

“Glor!” It was my Uncle Jimmy’s voice, calling up the steps. “Come say goodbye!”

“What?” she called back.

“We’re going!” He sounded angry.

Gloria held out her hand and I took it, and we went downstairs together.

Uncle Jimmy was at the bottom of the steps. Aunt Janet was next to him, her arms folded. “Come on,” Uncle Jimmy said. “Your grandmother asked us to go.”

“Gloria too?” I said.

“Sorry, sweetie,” said Aunt Janet.

“What happened?” said Gloria.

“She told us to leave, so we’re leaving,” said Uncle Jimmy. “We were just talking and she stormed out of the room, must’ve gone downstairs. Come on, go say goodbye to her.”

Gloria stomped down the rest of the steps, then went through the kitchen. I went into the living room, where my parents were sitting on the couch, their elbows on their knees. Before I said anything, my mom looked at me and said, “Everything will be fine, honey.”

Gloria’s voice carried from the kitchen. “She’s not down there.”
“What do you mean?” said Uncle Jimmy.

“I mean she’s not down there.”

My mom shook her head and sat back in the couch. “Figures. She must’ve taken a walk. Slipped out the front door,” she said to my dad. She looked at me. “Go ahead, go say goodbye to everyone.”

After Uncle Jimmy, Aunt Janet, and Gloria left, I went up to my room and stared outside. The sprinklers went off. A few of our neighbors dragged their garbage pails to the curb when the sun started to go behind the houses, the sound of plastic scratching concrete reaching all the way to my window. When I went downstairs, my mom was slipping her flip flops on. When she saw me, she pointed towards the kitchen. “There’s some cookies in there that Aunt Janet brought.”

“Are you going to look for Grandma?”

She smiled softly. “I’m sure she’s only a block or two away, honey.”

My dad reached for his shoes.

“Stay in,” my mom said to him, “take it easy. You have work tomorrow.”

My dad looked up at the ceiling. “Don’t remind me.”

“Can I come with you?” I said.

My mom looked surprised. “Sure, yeah. I guess.”

In the car, we drove towards the supermarket. When that turned up nothing, we drove the opposite way down Washington Street, until we were in front of my school. The street lights had come on.
I spotted my grandmother a block later. She was on the sidewalk on the left side of the street, walking in the direction opposite the house. I pointed her out to my mom, who pulled the car to the opposite side of the road. My grandmother looked scared at first, but her face slackened when she saw it was us.

“Jesus Christ, Ma, where we you?”

“Oh, always with the hysterics.” My grandmother got into the back seat with me.

“I can’t even go out for a little exercise. I was just heading home.”

That night, after my dad went to bed, I went into the living room. My mom had the news on, the volume at a whisper while she talked on the phone. She was wearing her long white nightgown, a can of Diet Pepsi in her hand.

“Yeah, just a few blocks away, Jimmy. No big deal. Gone”

She was silent.

“Didn’t I tell you not to bring it up, to wait until she’d gotten settled here.” She sipped from the can. “Right, yeah, exactly. That’s what I told Mike. I don’t know the neighborhood yet either. I get turned around just going to work sometimes, the way all these roads curve and change names. Besides, it’s the first time she’s gotten lost like this.”

She stopped when she saw me staring at her. She told Uncle Jimmy she had to go.

“Mommy?” I could feel that I was going to cry.

But that conversation isn’t what I remember most vividly about those first days in Franklin Square.
After we found my grandmother and she got in the car, I started to cry immediately.

“Great, now you’ve upset her,” my mother said.

“Hey, hey, what’s the matter?” Grandma slid over so that she was right next to me. She never liked wearing a seat belt. She put her arm around my shoulder, kissed my head. “Everything’s fine sweetheart.”

When that didn’t work, my mom pointed out the window. “There’s the school, honey. You’re going to love it there.”

My grandmother looked at me. She was smiling wide, her eyes sparkling. “That’s right.” She nodded. “That’s why we’re here.”
Aunt Julia
This was July, 1994. My parents were getting divorced, and my mother had been living a couple towns over in Mineola for the last five or six months. She had a boyfriend, too: Gary, who had dark, curly hair and was tall, like Dad, but younger looking. I’d met him for the first time just last week, which was also the first time I’d seen where my mother was living—an apartment with framed posters of Van Halen and KISS all over the walls. Gary had come out for ice cream with us. I wondered how long my mother had known Gary, if maybe she—I squashed the thought. My parents had explained divorce’s significance to me, its finality, but that didn’t stop me from scanning every word they said for signs, for hope.

One night my father came into my room and told me that my grandfather and Aunt Julia would be coming to stay with us for a week. After he told me they were coming he did the thing where he made me laugh just by pretending he was going to tickle me. “Should be good for all of us, aye, kiddo?” He seemed happier than he had in a while. Sometimes, when I got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, I would peer into the living room and see him sitting on the sofa in his underwear with a baseball game on. Once or twice I’d seen him crying, the TV flashing blue on his face, on his hairy chest. He kissed my forehead and left my room. I didn’t know my grandfather and Aunt Julia very well—they lived somewhere in Connecticut, four hours or so from Long Island, and we only saw them every other Christmas and at the occasional party—but I was glad at the news we would be having visitors. Without my mother around, the house felt big and still, like the museums we went to on class trips, like I might get lost in it if I wasn’t careful.
The morning they arrived, I stood at the end of the hallway and watched Dad and Louise, my older sister, greet them. My grandfather came in first, shaking Dad’s hand and then kissing Louise on the cheek. He was tall, like my father, with a friendly face and smooth white hair he wore combed to the side. Aunt Julia shuffled him behind him, carrying two duffle bags. She had on a yellow tank top and jean shorts. When she got inside she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head.

“Elsa,” said Dad, looking over his shoulder at me. “Come say hi, honey.”

As I started walking towards my grandfather he turned and saw me. “Little Elsa!” he said, which made me giggle a little. “You know, I still picture you like this?” he said, flattening his hand and holding it by his waist. He leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

Aunt Julia hugged my father—“Big bro!”—and then turned to Louise. “My little niece!” Aunt Julia squealed. Then she saw me. “Look at how big you’re getting,” she said, and kissed me on the cheek. She was ten years younger than Dad, and looked almost young enough to be Louise’s sister. Like Dad and Louise, she had platinum blonde hair—she wore hers in a bob—but her figure, long and slender, reminded me of Mom’s.

While we stood in the living room, luggage around our feet, Dad filled us in on Aunt Julia and my grandfather, and vice versa. My grandfather had just turned seventy-four. Aunt Julia was finishing up her doctorate at Yale—she was an anthropologist. Louise had just finished eleventh grade. I had just finished sixth, and having graduated from elementary school, would be in the same school as Louise next year. We had both gotten straight A’s. Dad looked tense, but excited. Even Louise, who had pretty much
stopped leaving her room except for meals and showers, stood tall and straight, a soldier at attention, smiling wide with her eyes fixed on Aunt Julia.

Dad asked the two of us to take their stuff and help them get settled. We obliged.

My mother explained her decision to move out to me and Louise like this: It was not about us—this was emphasized—and it wasn’t even about Dad, not really. She just needed some time on her own; she hadn’t had time to focus on herself in a long, long time. It was a Sunday morning, and we were at the kitchen table, in the same places we sat for dinner. She wouldn’t be far away, she said. We would see her every other weekend, even sometimes during the week. Dad tapped the table with his thumb while his eyes roamed the room. Mom reminded us how much she loved us, kissed us both, and that was that. I looked at Louise, who looked back at me, her eyes big, and shrugged. It would be the closest we would come to talking about what was going on.

Sundays in January meant football in my house, and that Sunday was no exception. Mom and Dad even put on their Giants jerseys. I ended up watching the game with them, even though I’d never really liked football. Mom and Dad were their usual animated selves beginning to end, getting excited and frustrated at the same moments, behavior that seemed to me to be in tension with the news we had just gotten. It was a close game, and I remember really hoping the Giants would win, but they didn’t.

Louise spent most of the day in her room, coming out for dinner and slipping right back in as soon as she was done eating. When I visited her room that night—a ritual we shared at the time—I found her sitting on her bed with her legs crossed, flipping through
channels. She gave me a big smile when she saw me. “What’s up, El?” She patted the spot on the comforter next to her. I went over and sat with her.

“Have you seen the new Dave Matthews Band video yet?” she asked me.

I shook my head.

“Oh my God, you have to,” she said. She put on MTV. They were showing a Pearl Jam video. “Just wait. They show it on here all the time.” She patted my thigh.

We watched a few videos and I dozed off, which I almost always did when Louise and I tried to watch something at night. Normally she’d rub my shoulder until I woke up, and if I gave her a hard time about getting up, she’d start tickling my feet. But that night I woke up on my own, slumped over with my head on her pillow. When I opened my eyes, the lights were off, and the glow of the TV was filling the room. Then I saw Louise, still sitting up, staring straight at the TV with tears in her eyes, her fist in front of her mouth.

She startled when she saw me. “Was just about to wake you up,” she said, rubbing her eyes. She sniffled. “Time for bed, sleepy head.”

The next night when I knocked on her door she said she’d decided to go to bed early. The same thing happened the next few nights.

I wondered if I had done something to make her angry with me.

The first night my grandfather and Aunt Julia were there, Dad made two roasted chickens, baked potatoes, string beans, and a salad whose ingredients all came from the garden. Since my mother moved out he’d been cooking big elaborate meals every night, especially on days when he didn’t have work. He was taking this entire week off from the phone company, where he was a lineman and I knew the kind of dinners we could expect:
chicken francese, beef stew, salmon filet, rib roast. When school was still going on, he packed our lunches, too. They were usually leftovers from the night before. He only gave us simple stuff like peanut butter and jelly or baloney sandwiches if we specifically asked for it.

“I listened to something on the radio the other day,” he said, taking the chickens on their plates off the counter and placing them on the table one at a time. “They asked one hundred world famous chefs what their favorite thing to cook at home is, and almost all of them said roasted chicken.”

“These look delicious,” said Aunt Julia.

“A few of them said that part of it is it makes the house smell so great.” Dad had closed all the windows and turned on the AC, and the aroma had been filling the house for the last couple hours. I could even smell it down the hall in my room. There had been something nice about it, combined with the sound of Dad, my grandfather, and Aunt Julia chatting in the kitchen, something comforting. Dad made my plate for me; everybody else reached for their own pieces of chicken. The potatoes and string beans were passed around.

“Mmm—perfect,” said my grandfather. He was eating a breast with both hands. “Maybe you could teach your sister a thing or two before we leave?” When I caught his eye he winked at me.

“You don’t cook, Jules?” Dad asked her.

“Not like this. I mean, not like how Mommy used to.” It surprised me to hear an adult use that word. For a split second I thought she was talking about my own mother.

“Grandma was a good cook?” Louise asked.
“My God, the best. Terrific baker, too,” Aunt Julia said. My grandfather confirmed, nodding silently while pulling apart a thigh.

“Remember her cheesecake?” said Dad.

“Yeah, of course,” she said. She was staring off now. I could tell she was thinking hard about something. “She always wanted to teach me about stuff like that.”

I wanted to ask her what my grandmother was like. She’d died a couple years ago, and I had only vague memories of her from holidays here and there. I could barely call her face to mind. Who had known her better? I started to wonder there at the table. Dad, having known her for ten years longer, or Aunt Julia, since she’d lived near her her whole life? Then I realized that Aunt Julia hadn’t had much time with my grandmother at all. I looked at her across the table and felt sorry for her. She seemed more childlike to me now, her skin smoother, her eyes less certain.

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“Elsa,” said Dad. “You tell your aunt and your grandfather about the basketball team?”

I swallowed a mouthful of drumstick. “Yeah,” I said. “I was on the travel team.”

“And she’s going to play for the junior high next year,” said Dad.

“Good for you,” said my grandfather. “It’s important to be strong.” He made his hands into fists and held them in front of his chest.

“Aunt Julia was some athlete, too, growing up,” said Dad.

“You played basketball?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “I played soccer in high school and college. Now I play tennis. I’m in a league with some friends from school.”
“She runs, too,” said my grandfather. “She ran a marathon last year. Over twenty-six miles.”

“Holy crap,” said Louise.

“You girls ever play tennis?” Aunt Julia asked us.

“Never,” said Louise. I shook my head.

“How would you like to play with me tomorrow? I brought a couple extra rackets.”

Louise thanked Aunt Julia but said that sports weren’t really her thing, which was an understatement—the one or two times she’d tried to play basketball with me, she was out of breath in about five seconds. I told Aunt Julia, sure, sounded good.

We made plans to play the next morning.

At first, both Louise and I saw Mom every Sunday. Sometimes she would take us to the diner for dinner; other times she would pick us up after dinner and we’d go to Baskin Robbins. I looked forward to these outings, where the three of us were nothing but smiles and laughs and warmth, from the time Mom picked us up to the time she dropped us off.

“How would you girls like to go to Applebee’s tonight?” “Sounds good to me, Mom!”

But then one Sunday night Louise made plans to go to the mall with her friends.

“She can’t just leave,” Louise said to my father while she put on her coat, “and then expect me to clear my schedule whenever she decides she wants to see me.”

So that night it was just me and my mother, sharing a banana split at Friendly’s.

“How’s your sister?” she asked me. “Did she seem mad?” When I looked in her eyes, I instantly felt guilty for not defending her to Louise earlier. I tried to think of something to
say. Before I could come up with anything, Mom said, “You know, I hope you girls both know that,” she started, but then stopped and took a deep breath. “I hope you both know that this was not an easy—” She stopped again. She was about to cry—I could hear it in her voice. She was biting her lower lip.

“I got a 97 on my math test,” I said.

For a second she seemed confused, but then she looked happy again. “My little scholar,” she said.

I started to bring good news to every Sunday outing. Grades, detailed explanations of things we were learning in school. Eventually, I started bringing my actual tests, marked and handed back with stickers of stars and smiley faces and words like terrific and excellent in big bubble letters. If I hadn’t gotten any tests back that week, I’d bring one from earlier in the year. Louise only came with us every other Sunday now—the other weeks she would see Mom one day after school—and when she wasn’t there, that was when I made sure to lay it on thick. Mom seemed to delight in all of it. Sometimes, I would think about asking her if I could see her more often, but then I would remember what she had said about needing time to herself and decide that probably wasn’t a good idea. Before the night was over, she would ask me what I wanted to do next week, and when she dropped me off, I always made sure to let her know how much I had enjoyed my pizza, or my ice cream, or my hamburger, and most of all, her company.

“So you want to serve overhand,” Aunt Julia said. It was late morning, the sun high and strong, and we were at the tennis courts by Louise’s school—my school, too, starting next year. Aunt Julia had on sunglasses and a Yale baseball cap. She took a ball out of
her skirt pocket and demonstrated, tossing the ball into the air and then hitting it lightly over the net. She took out another ball and handed it to me.

I liked the racket Aunt Julia had given me to use—it was hot pink, with a yellow Nike swoosh on the strings. The frame had a gloss to it—I could tell the racket was new. The first time I tried to serve the ball, it hit the top of the net, but the next time I got it over.

“There you go,” Aunt Julia said. She handed me another ball, and I hit that one over, too. She gave me another, and another. I backed up a little with each hit, until I was at the baseline. I hit two more. It was getting easier, and I was hitting the balls harder.

“This is really your first time playing?”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling.

She smiled back me. “Guess you’re a natural, then,” she said. She took off her baseball cap. “Here,” she said, putting it on my head. “Keep the sun out of your eyes.” It was a little big, but I didn’t mind. “Let’s volley a little,” she said, and jogged over to the other side of the net.

We hit the ball back and forth, taking turns serving. She was going easy, but I could tell by the way she moved, the way she handled the racket, that she was really good. “Good hit!” she would call out to me every so often. I started to think that maybe I would ask her to play basketball with me another day this week, or maybe she could show me how to play soccer, or take me running.

“Take a break?” said Aunt Julia. She walked around collecting the ball on her side of the court. I started to pick up mine, too. While I did that, Aunt Julia went to her car, just on the other side of the chain-link fence, and came back with two bottles of Gatorade,
a red and a blue. She waved me over to her. “Sorry, they’re a little warm from the car,” she said. “Pick.” She held up the two bottles. I pointed to the blue, and she handed it to me.

I sat on the ground, leaning against the fence, and started to drink the warm Gatorade. She sat next to me cross-legged, close enough that I could smell her sunscreen. “So, how are you?” she asked me. She took her sunglasses off and clipped them to the front of her tank top.

“I’m OK,” I said. “How are you?”

She laughed a little. “I’m good, thank you.” She took a sip of her Gatorade. “But I mean, like, how are you doing?”

I stared at the ground in front of me and tried to think of something to say. My eyes started to wander, and landed on the pink racket. I picked it up. “I like this racket,” I said.

“Yeah?” said Aunt Julia. “Have it. It’s yours.”

I looked at her. “Really?”

“Sure,” she said.

I felt the smile come over my face gradually. I examined my new possession. “Thanks,” I said. When I looked at Aunt Julia, she was beaming right back at me.

It became a routine: each morning, I would get up at around 8, and find Aunt Julia at the dining room table, surrounded by textbooks that had a thousand yellow Post-its sticking out of them and looked like they weighed more than I did. She would be writing in a notebook, and sometimes, she would have her headphones on, but when she saw me,
she’d take them off, letting them rest on her neck. Then she would make me my favorite breakfast—oatmeal, with ground up cinnamon—which I would eat while she drank a protein shake. The rest of the house would be asleep still, but we would exaggerate how quiet we needed to be, tiptoeing everywhere, opening and closing cabinets as slowly as possible. Finally, we would tiptoe across the living room, Aunt Julia with her finger in front of her lips, her eyes open wide as could be, and I would try not to burst out laughing. Then she would drive us to the courts and we would play for an hour or two. We repeated this every day for the rest of their stay except for the one or two days it rained.

Afternoons, while Aunt Julia and Louise went shopping or to get their nails done and Dad and my grandfather worked on dinner, usually while watching the Red Sox on the kitchen TV. I would call my mother on the phone in my parents’ room. How was I enjoying my visitors? What else was new with her big girl? I told her about tennis with Aunt Julia, about my new racket, the aroma from the kitchen growing stronger as the phone call went on. “See you soon, El,” was how she ended every conversation. By the time I got off the phone, dinner would be ready, the dining room full of chatter. We all seemed to fall easily into the routine, and the week passed quietly and quickly.

On their last night with us, my grandfather insisted on taking us all out to dinner. Steak, maybe? he suggested, and we were all on board. So my father drove the five of us to the Outback in Long Beach. The adults shared a bottle of red wine, and once Louise and I got our Cokes, my grandfather proposed a toast to his hosts, and to the great week we’d shared. We ordered. We ate. We left stuffed.
On the way home I sat in the middle, with Aunt Julia and Louise on either side of me and Dad and my grandfather up front. We cruised along the highway, the cars on the other side zipping past us in blurs. The sun was starting to go down, and Dad had the AC going. With the windows closed, I thought I could smell the wine on the adults. Aunt Julia was explaining to Louise what cultural anthropology was, and Louise had a thousand questions. Dad and my grandfather were talking about someone the Patriots had gotten in a trade. I was starting to doze, and only half fighting it.

I was awoken by Aunt Julia’s breath in my ear. “I had a really fun week with you, honey,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

She smiled at me, and looked out the window.

“You’re going to come again soon, right?” I asked her.

“Well, honey, we live very far away, you know.”

I thought. “Maybe Daddy could drive me to you sometime.”

She smiled weakly. “Maybe, honey. But, you know, you can always call me on the phone. And I think we’ll see you guys for Christmas this year.”

I felt my stomach drop out. “Christmas?” I said. My throat was getting tight. Aunt Julia winked at me. “Not even half a year away.”

She was looking out the window again. I was starting to cry, but the car had gotten darker, and nobody seemed to notice. I stared at Aunt Julia. In the dim light, her cheekbones were pronounced. And those long, thin arms. Tomorrow was Sunday; my mother was picking me up at 5, and we were going to Roy Rogers. I wondered if Gary
would come again, if I would have to go to his apartment after. Sensing my gaze, Aunt Julia turned to me.

“I hate you,” I said.

She looked back at me, confused. “What?”

“At least my mommy’s still alive,” I said. “You’ll never get to see yours again.” I didn’t know where it came from—I seemed to say it almost involuntarily—but I knew as soon as I saw Aunt Julia’s stunned face that I had said something serious, something damaging.

She turned away from me and sat straight up, her back pressed to the seat, and covered her mouth with both hands. Her eyes were squeezed shut, but I saw a tear leak out of the corner and wriggle down her cheek, stopping when it hit her fingers. The car slowed to a stop. My father, my grandfather, and Louise all turned to me, looking just as shocked as Aunt Julia had. They seemed to be waiting for something. I couldn’t get a word out.
A New Generation
Grandma and Grandpa started trying to get pregnant immediately after they married. I don’t know this for a fact, but I do know how important having children was to Grandpa. “He thought that was why they went to war,” Grandma would say. They’d started seeing each other in August of 1943, a week or two after Grandpa was sent home. He’d been shot in the shoulder during the Allies’ invasion of Sicily, the resulting surgery leaving his right arm three inches shorter than his left. His brother had been killed in the same battle.

“He said he fought to make the world safe for the next generation, and the one after that. If you weren’t going to have kids, what was the point? That’s how he saw it.”

Grandma lived with us while I was growing up. She’d moved in with my parents after Grandpa died of sudden cardiac arrest three years before I was born. I’d visit her in the basement at night so we could watch TV and eat ice cream together, and she’d point to the pictures of Grandpa on the wall: cradling his swaddled first grandchild, my cousin Gloria, his hair still black as ink; posed in front of the house with Grandma, Uncle Jimmy, and Mom the day of Mom’s communion, all four of them unsmiling in their Sunday best. In his Army portrait, his uniform is huge on him, the fabric of his pants puffing out above his boots, the front of his helmet sliding down his forehead.

Grandma’s favorite was their wedding photo. They were standing in front of the church, the train of Grandma’s dress fanned out in front of them and rippling down the steps, Grandpa’s dark, wavy hair pushed back, his nose smaller than it is in the pictures where he’s older. The first time Grandma pointed to that picture and told me I had his eyes, I cried, because I thought it meant I looked like a boy. But when I looked at the photo
again, I saw what she meant. Like mine, they were big and dark brown, and permanently wet-looking.

“Grandpa would’ve gone crazy for you, with your books and your straight A’s. You two should’ve known each other,” Grandma would say, and press her lips to the top of my head. “Your mother’s got those eyes, too. We’re lucky he got to pass them down, let me tell you, with what we went through.”

II

Grandma and Grandpa married in June of 1944. Grandma was twenty, Grandpa twenty-three. The day after the wedding, he helped her move her things into his mother’s house, a two-story brownstone made of brick the pale yellow of sand. It had been Great-Grandma’s idea that they stay there for the time being, to save money, and Grandma and Grandpa knew it was the wisest thing to accept her offer. It’d be tight, sharing his bedroom, the same one he’d grown up in, but they’d make it work.

They gave Great-Grandma thirty-five dollars a month in rent, and Grandma offered to handle the cooking, too, but Great-Grandma wouldn’t allow it. “You can clean, if you’d like to help,” she told her new daughter-in-law, but would still scrub the floors and dust the furniture herself once she was done with her sewing work for the day. Grandpa wished his mother would learn to relax—she was fifty-two, after all—but it seemed to make her happy to have a house full of people to cook for again, to take care of. Over the last two years, she’d lost her husband and her son, her first-born.

Grandpa’s sister, Great-Aunt Angie, lived there too. She worked mornings at the bakery around the corner, and Great-Grandma hoped Angie would meet a nice man there
one day, but Angie was more interested in finishing secretarial school and finding an
office job. In the evenings, Angie practiced her typing on her Remington. The sharp
clicks bounced off the wood floors late into the night, and it made it difficult for Grandpa
to sleep—the sound reminded him of gun shots. Still, he was proud of Angie’s work
ethic. When he got back from the war, he was surprised to find he’d come to feel paternal
towards his sister, who was two years older than him. Maybe it was that for the first time,
he was the only man in the house. Or maybe it had to do with the feeling he had that he’d
spent the last two years aging at a few times the rate of everyone who hadn’t fought. One
night that summer, he went into the kitchen for a glass of milk before bed and found
Angie at the table with the typewriter, futzing with the piece that was supposed to guide
the paper. He’d buy her a new one for Christmas, he decided.

Grandma worked then as a teacher’s aide, writing up worksheets and helping
first-graders with their letters, guiding their hands as they traced cat, and dog, and baby
on their lined paper. She loved her kids, loved everything about that job except that it
stopped every summer, leaving her to pick up the odd cleaning job once or twice a week.
She spent the other days that summer resurrecting the garden in Great-Grandma’s
backyard, yanking up the weeds and the withered cucumber vines that had been there
since Great-Grandpa, and planting tomatoes, eggplant, basilico, and zucchini.

“My mother was a great baker, but nobody could make a pot of sauce like my
mother-in-law,” Grandma used to tell me. “Whatever she had lying around the house,
she’d make something delicious out of it.” I picture Grandma coming in from the garden
each afternoon, a comma of dirt on her cheek, the tomatoes piled up in her arms. She’d
dump it all out on the clear-plastic-covered table, and Great-Grandma would appraise the yield, slipping her apron over her head, and start planning that night’s meal.

Grandpa worked in the leather factory in City Line, a job he’d gotten weeks after coming home, making mostly shoes and belt. Because it was a union job, he punched out at four o’clock every day. Once or twice a week, he took the bus home with Roberto, who worked in an adjacent factory and lived around the corner from Grandpa. They’d get off at the same stop and make plans for a card game that weekend before saying goodbye. Hey, he said to Grandpa one day that July before they parted ways, I’ve been meaning to ask you, does Domenica got a sister, maybe a friend who ain’t married? Grandpa said he’d mention it to Grandma and get back to him.

Once Grandpa reached the block, he’d be stopped by the short, skin-and-bones ten-year-old boy down the block for whom he’d become something of a hero. The boy’s name was Giuseppe, but his parents, who’d gotten off the boat weeks before he was born, insisted he be called Joseph outside the house, even on the block. Grandpa would hear his squeal—“Al!”—and turn to see him running down the block, a crumpled paper bag in his hand, back from an errand for his mother. Had Grandpa listened to the Dodgers game? he’d ask. Had he seen the picture of Dixie’s homerun in the paper? “Sure, of course I saw,” Grandpa’d say, and promise to take Joseph to the park one weekend and teach him how to hit homeruns like Dixie Walker. If there was time before dinner, Grandpa would stop in to say a word to Joseph’s parents. It was his way of keeping his Italian and Sicilian fresh.

Dinner was macaroni most nights, with meatballs on Sundays, and chicken parmigiana maybe once every other week. After they’d all cleaned their plates and
snacked on the slightly stale pignolis and sfiogliatelle Angie brought home from the bakery, Grandpa and Grandma retired to their bedroom. They slept on Grandpa’s old twin mattress, a tight squeeze, you’d think, even for people who loved each other, even for newlyweds, but judging by the way Grandpa looks at Grandma, not the camera, in most photos, and by the way Grandma would absolutely wail when my mom and I took her to visit Grandpa’s grave in Pinelawn, I imagine they were just fine with that arrangement.

They liked to spend the last minutes before sleep lying on their backs, listing names.

“How about Marco?” said Grandpa.

“I like James.”

Grandpa thought. “It’s a nice name. Powerful-sounding.”

“What about if we have a girl?”

Grandpa smirked, propped himself up on his elbow to look at Grandma. “Then we can name her after her beautiful mother.”

“Listen to him flirt.” Grandma smiled. “I don’t know. It seems conceited, naming your child after yourself, don’t you think? Maybe something more American-sounding? The girls in my class last year had some nice names. How about Margaret, or Deborah?”

“Those are nice.” Grandpa blinked a few times. He was tearing up. “Yeah, Deborah especially. Whatever you like.” He kissed her good night.

Grandma would fall asleep first most nights, leaving Grandpa to gaze up at the ceiling, his eyes growing used to the dark as his thoughts wandered. It had turned out to be a good decision, living with his mother for now. Sure, he would’ve liked to give his
wife a proper home, but this was just for the short-term; they were planning for the future, and that was all that mattered. His job paid well enough that come September, they’d be able to save every dollar Grandma brought home from the school, and if they kept living frugally, he figured that when they had their first child—within a year, tops—Grandma would be able to quit her job without much of a problem; he’d keep saving steadily and they’d have their own house in no time. If he needed to, he could always work nights or Saturdays at one of the pizzerias that now seemed to occupy every other storefront. War had been terrible, and Grandpa missed his brother Lenny, knew he would for the rest of his life, but still, he woke up most days feeling lucky: lucky that he’d made it home from the war, lucky to have a steady job, lucky to have Grandma for a wife.

Their life together seemed to spread before them, inviting.

III

They didn’t realize that pregnancy was something you had to try for. You had to take certain measures if you wanted not to get pregnant, they knew that. They were surprised when a month went by with no success. Grandpa wasn’t worried—“It ain’t complicated. Any day now, you’ll see.”—but Grandma thought it was worth bringing up to her doctor, who was a specialist in women’s health. It was late July now, and she’d be seeing him soon anyway—she always went in for a check-up before the school year started. Grandpa asked her to make her appointment for the late afternoon so that he could go with her.

After Dr. Paskowski was done examining Grandma, Grandpa told him that they’d been trying to get pregnant without success. Grandma fidgeted on the examination table in her papery gown, her legs dangling.
Dr. Paskowski pulled off his rubber gloves. He took a pack of Chesterfields out of his white coat and lit one. “And you say it’s only been a month?”

Grandma and Grandpa nodded.

Dr. Paskowski scratched his bald head. “Look here,” he said, pointing with his cigarette at the calendar on the examination room wall. He explained to Grandma about cycles, helped her find her “window of peak fertility,” circling certain days, marking others with dots. It all seemed like another language to Grandpa, and it made him anxious at first—who knew it was all so complicated? But then he began to follow along, and he calmed down. How could they go wrong with all this information? He watched Grandma nod along. When Dr. Paskowski was done, he unpinned the calendar from the wall and gave it to Grandma and Grandpa to take home. “Give it time, ok?” he told them.

That night, they went to Palermo’s on Linden Boulevard with Roberto and Mary, Grandma’s pretty blonde friend from the school. It was something they hardly ever did, dine out—part of their plan to save as much money as possible in service of the future—but they figured it’d be ok this once, as a favor to Roberto and Mary, whom they were introducing. Grandpa would try and pick up some more overtime at the factory that week.

The service was slow that night. The waiter claimed that they were short-handed, but as far as Grandpa could tell, there were plenty of waiters—they just all seemed disproportionately focused on taking care of the eight men at the big round table in the corner, all of whom wore suits, their hair slicked back. The staff brought them platter after platter, bottle after bottle while the men took turns slipping folded bills into the waiters’ shirt pockets. When the wine finally came, Grandpa poured each of them a glass, giving Roberto a little extra. Roberto was clearly nervous, dabbing his forehead with his
handkerchief and talking too much about how he’d come to work at the soap factory while Mary smiled politely. When he was done, Mary turned to Grandma and told her that Shiela, her ten-month-old niece, had taken her first steps earlier that week.

“Isn’t that something,” said Roberto, smiling. “That’s young, ain’t it? I’m an uncle myself, got a niece and a nephew.” He seemed to relax.

Mary smiled. “Is that right?”

“You bet. I love kids. Here, I’ll show you.” He shifted to pull his wallet from his back pocket. He opened it and took out two small photos. “Every time I see the little one, Margherita, she wants a piggyback ride from her Uncle Robbie.”

“Adorable, with those curls,” said Mary, taking one of the pictures from Roberto.

“You know,” said Grandma, “Al and I are looking forward to starting our own family soon.”

Roberto raised his eyebrows. “Well, congratulations, you two!”

“Oh, I’m not pregnant yet,” said Grandma. “But soon.”

“You better believe it.” Grandpa turned to Roberto and Mary. “We went to the doctor, and he told us everything we need to know.” He flattened his hand and sliced it through the air. “Shouldn’t take us no more than a month or two.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” said Grandma.

Three months later, Grandma still wasn’t pregnant. They tried to remember what Dr. Paskowski said, that it sometimes took time. But then two more months passed. It was Christmas now. Grandpa bought Angie a new Remington. He took his mother to dinner at Palermo’s as her present. He bought Grandma a bracelet at Bloomingdale’s, even though they’d agreed not to exchange gifts. It was sterling silver, dotted with
emeralds, her birthstone. It had been a splurge, but it made her happy, Grandpa reasoned, and it made him happy to see her pleased. Their moods needed lifting these days.

After the holidays, they made another appointment with Dr. Paskowski. Keep trying, he said, and lit a Chesterfield for himself. He offered one to Grandma and Grandpa; they both declined. “Seven months is long, but it can take up to a year, in some cases.” He leaned on the counter behind him. He coughed, smoke curling from the cigarette at his side.

“A year?” Grandpa said.

“Aren’t there some tests you could do?” she said. “To see if there’s a… a problem?”

“We prefer to wait for that kind of thing,” the doctor said. “It’s quite costly to—”

“Do whatever you need to do,” said Grandpa, rolling up the sleeves of his oil-stained work shirt. “What, you don’t think I can pay?”

Dr. Paskowski stood up straight. “I-i-it involves some blood work.” He turned to Grandma. “You’ll need to change into a gown.” He started to leave the room, signaling for Grandpa to follow him.

The next few weeks dragged while they waited for the results. Grandpa worked harder and longer than he ever had, ignoring the radiating ache of his wounded shoulder. Grandma, meanwhile, had to reckon with Great-Grandma’s playful inquiries about finally giving her a grandchild. “In time,” was all Grandma would say. “In time.” Roberto asked Grandpa a few times if he and Grandma would like to go out with him and Mary but they just didn’t have the head for it. They stopped rattling off names at bedtime. They were both anxious to get to sleep, where time seemed to pass the quickest.
When Dr. Paskowski phoned with the results, Grandpa answered. He knew as soon as the doctor said hello that he had bad news. Grandma had an underactive thyroid, it turns out. Hers was a mild case, overall, but it was unlikely that Grandma would ever be able to conceive. “There’s some very interesting research being done involving the thyroid. Who knows what the field of medicine could produce over the next few years?” he offered as consolation. Grandpa handed the phone to Grandma.

Grandpa told Great-Grandma, back from visiting her friend down the street, that his stomach was bothering him and he was going to bed without dinner. Grandma was going to turn in with him. They closed their bedroom door behind them and sobbed, collapsing on the bed, Grandma resting her head on Grandpa’s chest. After two hours, Grandpa took a few shots of sambuca while Grandma prayed to Saint Jude—“the patron saint of hopeless cases,” she explained to Grandpa—crossing herself again and again.

The following Monday, Grandpa stood in the February cold waiting for his bus. He felt a bony hand on his shoulder, and saw Roberto, who put his arm around him. He had good news, he told Grandpa. He and Mary were getting married. The wedding was next month. Grandpa congratulated him, and smiled. It was nice to hear some good news.

“Don’t tell anybody,” Roberto said, lifting a finger to his lips, “but Mary’s pregnant.” He grinned. “We’ve been trying to get yous to come out with us, but all of a sudden you’re too busy for your friends.” He winked.

Grandpa shook his friend’s hand, said he was glad for him, but inwardly, he cringed, both for himself and in awareness of the fact that over at the school, Mary was giving Grandma the same news.
IV

They kept trying, of course. Dr. Paskowski didn’t, after all, say it would be *impossible* for her to conceive. So Grandma continued marking the calendar on their bedroom wall like Dr. Paskowski showed her. There was still Saint Jude. There were still miracles.

Meanwhile, Grandpa was doting on his sister even more than before. He offered to walk her to the bakery on Saturday mornings, to meet her there when she was ready to go home. She responded with confused acceptance. As the weather warmed, he began taking Joseph to the park on Sundays, teaching him how to use his glove to shield his eyes from the sun, how to put his shoulders into his swing. But while he was walking him home one day, Joseph looked up at Grandpa and said, “Hey, Al?” This was on the third consecutive Sunday. “My father said he wants to take me to the park next weekend.”

Grandma began spending more time at her mother’s house, stopping in on her way home from work. She told her mother and father what Dr. Paskowski had said, even though they hadn’t told Great-Grandma. It was easier, Grandma figured, to share something like that with someone you didn’t have to see every day. Her mother made her some stuffed shells, Grandma’s favorite. “But there’s still a chance, right? You’re eating enough over there, I hope?” her father asked in Italian, sipping wine from a juice glass.

Grandma was late that May, but waited six weeks before she said anything to Grandpa, not wanting to get his hopes up. They called up Dr. Paskowski’s office as soon as she told him, took the first appointment he had. More blood work. More waiting. Another phone call. This time: “We’ll have to wait until sixteen weeks or so for the blood work to be definitive, but you’ll be showing by then anyway.” She could hear the smile in his voice. Grandpa wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off the ground and
spinning, the telephone cord coiling around them. They took turns touching their palms to Grandma’s belly. Grandpa swore he could feel a bump.

They told everybody right away. Great-Grandma. Grandma’s parents. Angie. Roberto and Mary. Grandpa especially spread the word, telling Joseph’s parents and every other neighbor he could find, even his co-workers and bosses at the factory, even the men he made small talk with on the bus sometimes, whose names he didn’t even know. The only co-worker Grandma told was Mary—it was summer break—but Mary told Alice, the teacher they worked for, who visited Grandma and presented her with a book: *Expectant Motherhood*, it was called, a slim, olive green volume. It had been awfully helpful to her, Alice said. Grandma flipped through it later that day, and though she found hardly anything of use—pregnancy corsets?—she was happy to have this book, to feel as though the author’s words were directed towards her. It was July now, ten weeks; was just starting to believe it. She put her hand on her stomach; she was starting to show. She was pregnant. She was an expectant mother. This book was for her.

They went to Dr. Paskowski at twelve weeks. He ran more blood work on Grandma, just standard procedure, he said. It really surprised him, Grandma’s getting pregnant, he commented, but you never knew with these things.

Dr. Paskowski phoned a two weeks later, asked them to come in later that day.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“We’ll talk when you get here.”

Grandma’s thyroid condition, it turned out, seemed to have made for an “unfavorable uterine environment.” She’d miscarried. Dr. Paskowski advised them against trying again. With a condition like Grandma’s, there was a good chance it would
happen again. Grandma wrapped her arms around her belly. Grandpa began sobbing. He hobbled over to Grandma and hugged her. They squeezed each other as tight as they could, because what else could they do?

A week later, the war was over. Japan surrendered. America celebrated. Grandpa felt a flash of satisfaction, on behalf of his brother, mostly. But then a thought seized him: how many little babies had those bombs killed? Was it possible that any of their parents were unfortunate enough to survive to mourn them?

V

It was five more years before Grandma got pregnant with my Uncle Jimmy. Three years after that was my mom. Grandma’s thyroid problem turned out to be treatable by a medicine that came out in 1949. Grandma used to say that they never gave up hope, that they always believed. “Your grandfather? Give up? Are you kidding? That man survived war.” She’d shake her head. “We always knew things would work out.”

They were religious people—Grandma and her crucifixes everywhere, Grandpa and the Saint Jude medal that swings from his neck in the picture where he poses with Mom on his shoulders at the beach on Coney Island—and that helped, I’m sure. What must it be like to have that kind of faith? I wonder. Maybe during those five years, they kept playing their name game. Maybe they even went further with it, allowing themselves to imagine what their kids would look like, which personality traits they’d take from Grandpa, which from Grandma. You might imagine them growing less optimistic over those five years—why should things start going right now?—but I picture them gaining
hope, as if they were certain that with each passing day, they inched closer to a fate as parents, as grandparents.
The woman came into Tumello’s, the Bayside, Queens deli where Angelo had been working since he was in high school, on a Sunday in January. Mr. Tumello, a fiery, seventy-something-year-old Italian man, had been bugging Angelo again about going for butcher training. He’d be able to pay him three more dollars an hour if he got licensed, and they could start talking about moving Angelo up to management. Angelo had been meaning to get started with butcher training for a while, but the training facility was all the way over in Astoria, and it was a whole process to call and register for the classes. Besides, Angelo’s pay was already up to fourteen dollars an hour, which, at forty-five or fifty hours a week, came out to a pretty decent pay check. He would go for the training soon, he assured Mr. Tumello, real soon.

The woman had dark, curly hair, and rectangular glasses that to Angelo said: smart, accomplished. The glasses had steamed up when she entered the warm, crowded shop, and she took them off while she looked up at the menu board. She pulled a tissue out of her coat pocket and wiped her lenses. Her eyes were small and darting, with a touch of nervousness to them. She looked a couple years older than Angelo. She put her glasses back on and asked Angelo for half a pound each of mozzarella and capicola.

Angelo slid open the deli case. “Good choices. Both came in fresh today.” He grabbed the cold block of mozzarella. “What are you making?”

“Chicken breast. You stuff them with the capicola and then melt the mozzarella on top, like chicken parmesan. A guilty pleasure.” Her glasses were starting to steam up again.

“You know, there’s a muffler shop across the street if you want to buy some defrosters.”
She laughed. “Not bad.” She took off her glasses and wiped them again.

“Seriously, is it that cold out there?”

She rolled her eyes. “It is frigid.”

“Well, you’re in here now. We’ll keep you warm.”

She smiled warmly. “I do appreciate that.” She undid the belt of her pea coat and started to open the buttons.

Angelo shut the case. He turned his back to her and began slicing her order. The shop buzzed with the other counter workers calling out numbers, suburban moms giving their orders and chatting amongst themselves. He would like to talk with the woman some more, maybe ask her out, he thought. When was the last time he had asked someone out? It had to have been at least two years. He had been popular with girls as a teenager. It was true, he had gained a paunch these last few years, and at twenty-five, his hair was already thinning badly; he had to cover his head while he handled food, and was grateful for the excuse to wear his Giants cap. Still, he had his height—six foot three—and his big shoulders, and he felt these gave him some kind of sex appeal. These days, though, he hardly ever met women outside the shop. He took a quick look around while he continued to slice. There were four other guys working the counter, and then there were all the customers; asking her out in here was out of the question. Running out of the shop after her didn’t seem like such a great idea either. He would just have to let it go, he decided.

Angelo handed her the cold cuts. “Enjoy. That chicken sounds delicious.” He watched as she paid and left.
A few minutes later, the 12:00-8:00 guys started to come in, and Angelo took off his apron, put on his coat and gloves, and took a walk to the coffee shop down the block. While he was paying for his coffee, he noticed the woman from Tumello’s at one of the tables. She was reading a book, holding it with one hand, and sitting with her legs crossed. There was a cup and a plate with crumbs on it in front of her. It was a small place, with only a handful of rickety little tables, and she was the only one there besides a teenager with a laptop and ear buds. Could he talk to her now, maybe? No, he thought. The chance had passed. Whatever spark there had been in their exchange was gone now.

He sat his coffee down on the counter where they kept the milk and sugar and took off the cup’s lid. He poured in a splash of half-and-half. He would spend his lunch break drinking his coffee on the bench in front of the shop, just to get some air. If he got too cold he could make himself a sandwich and sit on a milk crate in the back room. He looked at her while he stirred his coffee. Whatever she was reading, she looked engrossed.

She looked up. They made eye contact, and she smiled. “Hey, you.”

“Hi,” he said. He tossed the red plastic stirrer in the garbage, picked up his coffee, and started for the door. His hand was already on the door’s push bar when he heard her say something.

He took a few steps towards her table. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I said, ‘Would you like to sit with me?’”
Her name was Gina. She taught earth science to high school kids, and lived in Sunnyside.

“Sunnyside?” said Angelo. “You came all the way to Bayside to pick up some capicola?”

“That and to meet my mom for lunch. My parents live in Bayside. I’m running a little early.”

“Oh, so you’re from here?”

“I am.”

He studied her face. She didn’t look familiar. “Did you go to Benjamin Cardozo?”

“I went to Catholic school, actually. Sacred Heart Academy. It’s a stuck-up preppy school in Nassau County.” She rolled her eyes.

He laughed, not too hard, he hoped.

“What about you?” Gina said. “Have you always lived here?”

Angelo nodded. “Always.”

After high school, Angelo had gone to Nassau Community College for a year. He had played on the football team, and towards the end of spring semester, his coach called him into his office and told him that he’d heard from a recruiter at SUNY Plattsburgh who was interested in Angelo. It wasn’t an offer, exactly, not yet, but it might turn into one next year, and who knew, maybe a few other schools would show some interest, too. He could play another season at Nassau, finish his associate’s degree, and then enter another school as a junior, his coach explained. The way Angelo was playing, a full scholarship to a division II or division III program was not out of the question when he finished up here.
But school was hard. He’d finished his first semester with a 2.4, and while he was doing a little better this semester, he still didn’t know what he wanted to major in, or what he wanted to do. Meanwhile, Mr. Tumello had been offering him more hours. They liked him there, at the deli. He hadn’t yet registered for next fall, and as he sat there in his coach’s office, considering his future, he knew he never would.


Gina tucked her hair behind her ear. She leaned forward, her elbows on the table. “So, about 200 million years before the dinosaurs all died, there was something called the Permian period.”

Angelo nodded while she spoke. “So, when the Permian period ended, about ninety percent of the earth’s life was wiped out, and it’s still a mystery as to what caused that, and the book tries to solve it. Could’ve been a meteorite, could’ve been a few massive volcanoes, could’ve been almost anything. The author’s a paleontologist, but he talks to geologists, geochemists, astronomers, everybody.” She looked at Angelo. She was smiling, but she looked a little confused. “You know, not a lot of people would just sit there and listen to me while I rambled on about this stuff.”

Angelo shrugged. “It’s interesting to me.” Angelo had liked science when he was in high school. He did pretty well in it; even at Nassau Community, he’d gotten a B+ in Scientific Inquiry 101. Science and math had always been his strong suits; it were English and history that gave him trouble. He hadn’t been able to write to save his life.
Angelo noticed the time. He had to head back to the shop. He told Gina it had been nice talking to her, and asked for her phone number, managing to resist cracking his knuckles the way he always did when he was nervous. She gave it to him.

“You’re a Giants fan, too?” Gina said, pointing at his cap.

Reflexively, Angelo touched his hand to his cap. He felt ridiculous for having left it on the whole time he’d been sitting there talking with her. He said he was sorry, and explained that he had to wear it while working with the food, and that he sometimes forgot he had it on. She waved away his apologies. He took the hat off, and watched her face for a reaction to his wispy hair. None came.

The family dog, Shadow, came trotting over to Angelo when he walked into the house. Shadow was a mixed breed, mostly Black Labrador, they thought. He was entirely black except for a little strip of white on his snout. Angelo crouched down and rubbed Shadow behind the ears and then let Shadow smell his hands. Shadow always went crazy for the smell of the meat when Angelo came home from work.

Angelo’s father was sitting on the couch with his feet up and a bowl of popcorn in his lap. He was bald, and short; Angelo had outgrown him by the time he was fourteen. He worked for the Department of Sanitation. He had been a trash collector for two decades until he hurt his back a couple years ago and had to take a position in the offices.

“If it isn’t Mr. Meat,” he said.

Angelo looked at the TV. A commercial was on. “Who’s playing today?”
“Patriots and Ravens. Your mother went out for groceries. She said to text her if there’s something you want her to pick up.” He shoved a fistful of popcorn into his mouth. He kept talking with his mouth full. “Busy at the deli today?”

“Pretty busy. Average Sunday."

“Average Sunday. Well, you know, you get a real job”—he stopped to swallow the popcorn—“you won’t have to work on a Sunday. You’ll be able to take it easy. Relax, like everybody else.” He only talked to Angelo like this when his mother wasn’t around.

Angelo stood staring at the TV, his coat still on. The fourth quarter was about to start, and the score was tied. He had never told his parents what his coach said about SUNY Plattsburgh, about his shot at a full scholarship there or maybe somewhere else. His mother begged him to take his time and give it more thought when he told them he wouldn’t be going back to Nassau Community in the fall. She was a second grade teacher. “You’re a bright boy, Ang,” she’d said. His father had looked satisfied, like he had just won a bet.

Angelo took his coat off and started to head to his room. “Hey,” his father said. “Come watch the game with me?” He looked at his father as he sat there, waiting for Angelo’s response. There was something so sad about him, even when he was being mean. His cheeks sagged like a bulldog’s.

“Sure. I’ll be right there.”

Later that week Angelo drove to Sunnyside to meet Gina for coffee. He had initiated plans, and was proud of himself for it. Sure, Gina had said, Thursday night was perfect.
The place she had chosen was called Sip This. It was a small, dimly lit café, crowded with other people on dates whose chatter all but covered up the soft jazz playing on the speaker system. After they ordered, Gina led Angelo towards the back of the shop, where instead of tables there were couches. Angelo plopped down on one of them and she sat next to him, her legs crossed, her fingers through the loop of her mug handle. She had ordered some kind of latte that came with a graham cracker sticking out of it.

Angelo sipped his coffee and looked around. “Nice place.”

“Cozy, isn’t it?”

She was wearing a pink cardigan, form fitting jeans, and brown leather boots that almost reached her knees. Angelo had chosen a red argyle sweater and khakis, after some deliberation. He doubted his parents had believed him when he told them he was going to meet Sean, an old high school buddy, for wings and beers at Connely’s.

“Thanks for coming all the way out here,” said Gina. “I know it’s a bit of a hike.”

“It’s no problem.” He sipped from his mug. It was good coffee. “I’ve never really spent much time in this part of Queens. It’s a nice neighborhood.”

“I like it.” She paused. She had this way of chewing on her bottom lip when she was thinking about something. “It might be getting a little too popular, though. Only a matter of time before the wealthy vampires start moving in and get all of our rents jacked up. You saw what they did to north Brooklyn.”

Angelo laughed. Wealthy vampires. Where did she come up with this stuff?

“So how has your week been?” she asked Angelo.

“You know. Your average week.”

“Uh-huh. Do you like working there?”
Angelo almost laughed before he realized she was being serious. Nobody had ever asked them that. “Yeah, I think I do.” He thought. “It’s just, on the one hand it’s just food, right? But people love food, food’s important to them. You buy our capicola and make yourself a delicious meal. A family gets together for Sunday dinner, they have our sausages. And I guess I’m a part of that experience, in a way. I like talking with the people in the shop, helping them get what they need. Plus, they want to make me a manager.” He hoped he didn’t sound ridiculous. He meant everything he’d said. Maybe he was working at Tumello’s in part because he had blown a few opportunities and taken the easy way out a few times, but maybe he’d found meaning in what he did, too. Maybe he’d call the training facility in Astoria tomorrow while he was on his lunch break and find out about getting that butcher’s license.

“That’s really sweet.” She winked. “Not to mention, it’s a great way to meet women.”

They shared a laugh. She had set her mug down on the coffee table in front of them and let her body go slack on the sofa. Her hand lay flat on the cushion between them, small, like a little star. Angelo reached for it, his own hand big and dry from the cold. She let his fingers wrap around hers.

“So, the Saturday after next I was thinking of going into the city.” She was rubbing his finger with her thumb. “They have an exhibit at the Museum of Natural History right now, all about natural disasters. Volcanoes, earthquakes, the kind of stuff that book I’m reading talks about. Would you want to go to it with me?”

As a full-timer, Angelo had every other Saturday off. He would be free that day. He hadn’t been to a museum since middle school, when they had gone on a field trip to
an art museum on Long Island. Still, he could imagine himself having a good time with Gina, looking at fossils, sitting in dark rooms and watching videos of volcanoes erupting on those big round screens. Maybe he could even take her out for dinner afterwards. He would look up places in the area as soon as he got home. “Absolutely. Sounds like a plan.”

Angelo pulled up the Museum of Natural History’s website on his phone when he got home. He sat on his bed in his boxer shorts, the glowing screen the only light in the room.

He had found the exhibit Gina must have been talking about, he thought. It was called Nature’s Fury: The Science of Natural Disasters. At the top of the page there was a YouTube video. He tapped the screen, and dramatic orchestral music started to play. The video showed old-looking clips of dams breaking, streets flooding, and palm trees being uprooted. A man’s voice with a British accent narrated. “There is no way we are going to avoid natural disasters on a dynamic earth, but there are certainly ways that we can learn to live with them, to mitigate the risks to society. But in order to do that, we must study the earth’s history of natural disasters. We cannot prepare for where our planet is going until we really grasp where it has been.” It made him feel like he was in school again. He could hear his father lumbering around the kitchen. He could hear Shadow’s nails clicking on the kitchen floor. His father had trouble sleeping and sometimes got up in the middle of the night and took a swig of vodka. The refrigerator opened and slammed shut, the jars of peppers and olives rattling.

Angelo had failed history his senior year and had to go to summer school. It was the first time he’d failed a class, though he suspected that this was in part because his
teachers always liked him. That year, though, his friends from the football team had introduced him to beer and house parties, and he started slacking off more than usual. The deal, the principal explained to him, was that he could walk at graduation but would not receive his diploma until he passed the summer class. “Summer school. In your senior year,” his father said when he found out. “Even I never had to go to summer school.” He shook his head. “You’re lucky you’re big and strong, kid. At least you’ve got that going for you.”

He was supposed to call Gina early next week to figure out the plan for Saturday, but maybe he wouldn’t. What did they really have in common, anyway? It didn’t make sense to date a girl who lived in Sunnyside. That was all the way on the other side of Queens, easily half an hour away. What did he really have to offer her, what about him could interest her in the long term? He would be doing them both a favor, he decided, if he deleted her number from his phone and pretended he had never met her.

He heard Shadow crying outside the bedroom door. He was an older dog, and couldn’t see so well at night. Angelo let him in. He was panting heavily; he didn’t seem tired. Angelo got him to sit in front of the bed so that they were facing each other, and started rubbing behind his ears. He stroked his back, where Shadow’s hair was matted, feeling the bumps of his spine. He leaned down and kissed the top of Shadow’s head.
Social Work
Christ, the traffic today was unbelievable. Debbie Crescimanno sat up in her seat and tried to see over the little green Honda in front of them on the Long Island Expressway. Maybe a lane was closed? An accident up ahead? Debbie lowered her window and stuck her head out. The humidity shocked her skin. She could see nothing but more brake lights, more Hondas and Subarus and Toyotas, their roofs glistening like foil as they inched forward.

“Would you close the window?” Mike said. “You’re letting the cold air out.”

“I told you we should leave early, didn’t I? It’s a beautiful Saturday in June. The whole island is probably on here heading out east.” She looked out the window. In the next lane, a bright yellow Hummer tailgated a beat-up Toyota. It made Debbie nervous.

Mike shook his head. “It’s a party. Your cousin’s not expecting everybody there at four on the dot.”

“You think traffic will be like this on the way home later?” Katherine asked from the back seat.

Debbie turned in her seat to look at her daughter. Katherine was wearing a white floral-patterned sundress with ruffles at the waist; she was so young.

“Why, someplace to be later?”

“I’m going by Adam’s if we get home early enough.” Katherine took off her bug-eye sunglasses. “Why, is that not ok with you?”

“I just thought you said he was sick, that’s all.”

“Yeah, exactly. And he’s my fiancé. You think he should be in his apartment by himself all day? He can barely get off the couch to cook himself a meal.”
God, did she love reminding Debbie that Adam was her fiancé, now. Debbie turned to Mike. “You see this? You see how quick she is with the attitude?”

“I’m quick to have an attitude? Me? Do you even hear yourself?”

“How about both of you just take it easy, huh?” Mike looked at Katherine in the rearview. “Come on, how about giving it a rest for today?”

“Try telling Mom that.”

“Oh, right,” said Debbie. “I forgot. It’s always my fault.”

The car went quiet. Traffic started to free up. After a few minutes of silence, Mike put on the classic rock station; Led Zeppelin was playing. Debbie tried to look at Katherine without being too obvious. There was a book open in her lap now. Always loved to learn, that girl. Last year, she’d graduated Queens College with a psychology degree, with honors. Where did she get these brains? And in a few months she’d be going for her MSW, and staying on part-time at the social services agency. By then, she’d be all moved in with Adam. They wanted to find a place in Astoria, near where Adam taught high school orchestra. Katherine loved Astoria. There was live music, she said. All different kinds of restaurants. Culture. Not like Nassau County. She wondered how often Katherine would come and visit, if she’d have any use for them once she moved out.

“Honey,” said Debbie. “I’m sorry for giving you an attitude just now. Really. I don’t want to fight today, ok?”

“Well then let’s not fight today.” Katherine cocked an eyebrow. “Ok?”

Debbie faced forward. The car was quiet again.

“Boy, I’m getting hungry,” said Mike.

“Maryann said they’re having it catered, so I’m sure there’ll be plenty to eat.”
“Oh. Fancy.”

“Come on, don’t make that face. Every summer they invite us out there for some party, we should go to at least some of them.”

Mike squeezed the steering wheel, the muscles in his plumber’s forearms flexing. He smirked. “Hey, remember Maryann and John’s wedding?”

“Do you have to bring this up every time?”

Mike looked in the rearview. “Kat, you should’ve seen this thing. They had some Frank Sinatra wannabe singing all night, the ice sculptures. I thought I died and went to ginzo heaven. Gaudiest fucking decorations you could imagine.”

“Yeah, well, it is Long Island,” Katherine said. “We want to have ours in Queens, probably Astoria. They have a lot of nice halls. Mom, look.” She tapped the screen of her iPhone a few times and then held it up to Debbie, the screen white while the page loaded.

Debbie faced front again. She sucked in her lips. She counted to ten.

“Sweetie?” Debbie said.

Katherine looked up. Out of the corner of her eye, Debbie saw Mike glance at her.

“You look very nice in that dress,” Debbie said.

Katherine put her phone on the seat beside her. “Thanks.” She opened her book.

The DiLorenzos’ block was already packed. Cars were parked bumper to bumper in front of every house, big, shiny SUVs and BMWs like boats cramming the driveways. A van marked “Caterers of Dix Hills” took up most of the room in front of Maryann and John’s. When they couldn’t find a spot, Debbie told Mike to pull into the driveway and park behind the minivan. They were hosting a party. They weren’t going anywhere.
Debbie got out of the car and walked around to the trunk, eyeing the house. It was a long ranch with Spanish-style roofs, like a lot of the houses on the block, but unlike the others, Maryann and John’s had a second floor; they added it after they bought the house years ago. It still amazed Debbie. Where did people get the money for things like that? What did that even cost, to add an entire floor? After removing the aluminum pan of brownies and handing them to Mike, she closed the trunk.

When they entered the yard, Debbie saw her cousin, standing under a huge blue tent that shaded most of the yard and talking to one of the caterers. She wore a blue sleeveless top. When Maryann spotted Debbie, she smiled, waving with her whole arm.

“Deb, hi! Big cousin!” She came running through the grass, spry in her form-fitting white capris. She embraced Debbie, tight. “So glad you could all make it.” Her blonde highlights complemented her tan. She’d had that beautiful olive complexion since they were kids.

“I’m so sorry we’re late.” Debbie tried to laugh. “You know, weekend traffic.”

Maryann waved her off. “It’s still early. The caterers haven’t served anything yet.” She greeted Mike with a kiss on the cheek. When she came to Katherine, she put a hand on each of her shoulders and looked her up and down. “Sweetie, you look wonderful, as always. I see all those pictures you put up on Facebook, you and that fiancé.” She paused. “Adam couldn’t make it today?”

“He’s sick, actually. The flu. It’s really bad. But he says thanks for the invite.”

Maryann frowned. “Well we’ll miss him.” She put her hand on her forehead. “Oh my God, what am I thinking? Let me see that ring!”
Debbie watched a sheepish smile grow on her daughter’s face. Katherine held her hand out and bit her lower lip while Maryann admired.

“Tell Adam he has good taste.” She clasped Katherine’s hands, widening her eyes. “You must be so excited! Congrats, kiddo.”

Katherine beamed. Debbie smiled tightly.

“So, brownies, right?” Maryann pointed at the aluminum pan in Mike’s arms.

Mike shook his head. “Like Deb said, we hit traffic. I got hungry.” He patted his belly and winked at Maryann. She slapped his chest playfully.

“Don’t listen to him. There’s a whole tray there,” said Debbie.

“No nuts, I hope?” Maryann took the pan from Mike.

“No at all. I checked all the labels like you said.” Debbie took a flat rectangular Tupperware out of her purse. “And here are the ones with the walnuts, the ones you said Joey really liked. The nuts didn’t come near the others. Made a whole separate batch.”

She handed her husband the Tupperware. “Mike’ll put them inside.”

Maryann smiled. “Perfect. Joey really loves those.” She began walking towards the tables and waved for them all to follow her. “Sorry to hassle you about the nut thing, Deb.” She turned to explain to Mike and Katherine. “It’s Joseph’s friend, Hardeep. There can’t be a trace in anything he eats, otherwise he vomits, gets diarrhea. It’s awful.”

As Debbie followed Maryann, she noticed her slim figure. Look at her in those capris! To be—what, almost fifty?—and so fit. The little body on her. Debbie really needed to sign up for some yoga classes, she decided.

Maryann led them all over to Debbie’s Aunt Angie and Uncle Freddy and then left to go talk to the caterers. Freddy was short with a rotund stomach, his thinning white
hair combed back. Liver spots marked his temples. He stood up and he and Mike shook hands. Then Mike excused himself. He was going to the bathroom, he said, holding up the Tupperware. He’d bring the brownies inside, too.

When Freddy gave Debbie a hug and a kiss, she smelled his Paco Robanne. Good for him, still taking care to look and smell his best.

“Angie,” he said to his wife, his voice raspy, “you remember our niece, Deborah? Your brother Al’s daughter?”

Angie was silent, her eyes narrow and distrustful behind big, square glasses. Her hair was short and curly with a golden hue, her lips thin and bright red. She wore a homemade-looking shirt that said “#1 GRANDMA” in big pink bubble letters.

Freddy tapped his head with his fingers. “Sometimes it’s a good day, sometimes no. And you see that shirt? Every day she wants to wear it. So I say, eh, if it makes her happy, salute, right?” He shrugged then looked at Katherine. “Just remember, la vecchiaia é terribile. So stay young.” He kissed Katherine on the cheek, and she smiled at him.

When Mike returned, Debbie excused them both to go say their hellos. They greeted Joey, and then stopped at Allie’s table and gave her her gift—fifty dollars to Bed Bath and Beyond; she’ll need stuff for her dorm, Katherine had suggested.

Back under the tent, John was sitting with five or six men Debbie didn’t know. As they approached the table, John made eye contact with Debbie and stood up, dressed for golf in a red polo and pressed khakis. He wore boat shoes, as did a lot of other men at the party, Debbie’d noticed—did Mike look ridiculous in his flip flops? What about Debbie’s sandals? What kind of shoes was Maryann wearing?
After greeting Debbie and Mike, John made introductions: the man in aviators smoking a cigar was from the body shop in Valley Stream; these other two were going to manage the new one he was opening here in Dix Hills.

“It’s great to see you both,” said John. “I was telling Maryann, I don’t remember the last time you two came by. You weren’t here for the party last summer, were you? When Joey graduated elementary?”

“No,” said Debbie. “We couldn’t make that. It was Katherine’s…” She struggled to remember the excuse she’d given.

“Always something with that kid of ours,” Mike jumped in.

“Trust me, I know what that’s like.” John shook his head. “Hey, speaking of which, I heard about Katherine. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, John,” said Mike. Debbie nodded and crossed her arms.

“You know, when it comes time to find a photographer, I’ve got a pal, took some pictures for the shops’ website, but he does weddings, engagement shoots, all that. Top notch work.” He lifted a green beer bottle from the table and drank. “He’s based in East Hampton, but he works the whole island.”

“That’s nice of you, John,” said Debbie. Engagement shoots. What an extravagance! Probably not the kind of thing Katherine would go for. But what did she know? Katherine didn’t seem interested at all in talking with Debbie about what she was planning, what she wanted.

She looked at Mike, who was staring off at the caterers’ tables. Debbie slapped him on the arm. “Mike, did you hear John?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m listening. The photographer.”
“Anyway,” said John, “I'll let you go make yourselves some plates. Enjoy.”

After they were done circulating, Debbie and Mike went back to Freddy and Angie’s table. Mike and Freddy left to make themselves and their wives plates.

“Just some salad for me, please!” Debbie called after Mike.

She looked across the table at her aunt. “A beautiful home your daughter has, huh?” She smiled.

Angie said nothing, but made intense eye contact with Debbie. The wind shifted, and Debbie caught a whiff of the food grilling over the charcoal. A few tables over, it looked like Allie was introducing Katherine to her friends. Debbie tried to remember the last time she saw her aunt.

“So how are you feeling these days, Aunt Ang? You look good.”

Angie snorted. “I know you. You’re Al’s daughter. No good, that father of yours. Not even when we were kids.”

“Yep, I’d say the old bread basket’s just about at capacity.” Mike patted his belly and looked at the other guests. He handed his used plate to one of the kids from the catering company, who dropped it into the garbage can he was wheeling from table to table.

Debbie’s uncle was laughing, dabbing his mouth with his napkin.

Debbie looked at Mike. “Get a drink with me, will you?”

They walked over to the beverage table by the deck. Debbie poured herself a glass of water from a pitcher that had lime- and orange slices floating around in it. Mike reached underneath the table and took a Samuel Adams from the cooler.
“Do you have to do stuff like that,” said Debbie, “rub your belly in front of everybody? That’s the second time you did that today.”

Mike put his fist in front of his mouth and tucked his chin into his chest. His cheeks puffed out, and he exhaled. “I held that one in at the table. You’re welcome.”

“And before. John’s talking to us and you’re busy staring at the food.” Debbie gawked, mouth agape.

“What, when he was talking about the photographer from the Hamptons? How the hell could we afford that, take out a second mortgage?” His eyes narrowed, and he smirked. “Have you had anything to drink yet? Maybe you could use some wine.”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Hey, I’m actually having a good time. It’s nice seeing your uncle, I always liked him. He wants me to go fishing with him some weekend.”

Debbie heard Katherine’s voice behind her.

“You sound groggy,” Katherine said. “Are you resting?”

She was walking through the grass towards the front of the house, her phone to her ear.


“Oh, would you stop? He’s sick, she’s probably checking on him.”

Debbie took the cold bottle from Mike’s hand and sipped. The sour taste of the beer surprised her, and she handed the bottle back to him.

“He’s a good kid,” Mike said. “He’s good to her, respectful to us, he’s got his life together. What else do you want?”
Katherine was slipping through the gate now. “Ok, love you too. Talk to you later.”

Debbie was suddenly short on breath; the back of her neck tingled. She inhaled deeply. “I’m going to go talk to her.”

Mike drank. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“What, I’m not allowed to see if my daughter’s having a good time?”

On the front lawn, Allie and her friends kicked a soccer ball around with bare feet. Two boys sat on the stoop, one wearing a backwards hat and a sleeveless shirt that showed off lean, muscled arms and the other in a Hawaiian shirt. A pretty blonde girl in a sunburnt orange skirt that brushed the ground sauntered over and squeezed herself between them.

Katherine was standing on the sidewalk, having what looked like a serious conversation with an older-looking girl. They stood under the shade of the tree, and Katherine’s sunglasses hung from the front of her dress. The other girl wore a long, striped dress and a straw hat with a dark band. She and Katherine nodded at each other while they spoke, each holding a glass of white wine.

Katherine made eye contact with Debbie. The other girl said something to Katherine, pointed toward the house and started up the path. Debbie approached her daughter.

“Who’s that?” Debbie asked.

“Her name’s Regina.” Katherine sipped her wine. “I was telling her how I’m going for my MSW and she said her boyfriend is volunteering as a social worker in the Philippines.”
“That sounds like a very nice thing,” said Debbie.

“Yeah. I thought maybe I’d look into doing the same thing next summer. I’ll have a year of grad school under my belt by then. I might even be able to get credits for it.”

“Oh, so you didn’t even start grad school yet, and already you’re leaving?”

Katherine exhaled. “It would be a part of grad school, Mom. For credit.”

“Oh, is that what Regina said?”

“Keep your voice down,” Katherine whispered, looking around them.

“Anyway,” said Debbie, “was that Adam you were on the phone with?”

“Yeah. He’s feeling better. If he’s up to it we may go to the IFC Center Wednesday for a screening.” She swirled her wine and sipped.

“What movie are you seeing?”

Katherine shook her head. “You wouldn’t have heard of it. It’s a French film.”

Debbie was silent.

“So,” said Katherine, “remind me why we hardly ever see this part of the family?”

Debbie shushed her daughter. “Keep quiet. It’s nothing.”

“Oh, I forgot. Everything’s a secret.”

Debbie shook her head. “No matter what I say. Amazing. Daddy and I will be in the back.”

In the backyard, Debbie sat down at the table again. Her cousin Carmine had joined them. He and Debbie exchanged kisses on the cheek. He was always a good-looking man, Carmine, his cheekbones high, his eyes big and green. A talker, too, marone. Was Mike still with the union? Debbie still selling loans at the bank? Maybe she could help him. He
was thinking of remodeling his basement and renting it out. He began passing his phone around the table showing everybody his floor plans.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “I drew up a little sketch of how I want it to look, and Stephanie showed me how to scan it onto the computer. This way, I e-mail the pictures right to the contractors and they give me an estimate. Simple. It’s about time I spruce up down there. Sandy did a number on that basement in twenty-twelve, let me tell you.”

“I’ll tell you what’s amazing,” Freddy said. “I saw a commercial for a car. A Ford. You start to get a little sleepy”—he mimed a dozing driver—“drift into the other lane, and beep, it wakes you up.” He shook his head. “The technology we’ve got. Never could’ve imagined it when I was young.”

Debbie smiled. She started to feel relaxed for the first time all day. Then she remembered Katherine. She wished she would come join them, tell the family about work, about grad school. And it might be easier to talk to her among a group. Maybe when it was time for dessert.

But half an hour later, when dessert was served, Debbie spotted Katherine sitting with that girl again, Gina, or whatever her name was. After a little while, Katherine got up and walked over to Joey and his friends, who were playing some kind of game that involved throwing bean bags. Katherine appeared to be refereeing, showing the boys where to stand. Middle-schoolers. That was the age group Katherine wanted to work with.

Debbie decided to go inside for a little while. Take a break from the party.

*
Jesus, this was some kitchen. Double oven, dark wood cabinets, stainless steel appliances. And those marble countertops. Everything sparkled.

Debbie looked out at the backyard through the window above the sink. It was dusk now, the sky above the trees that buffed the edge of the yard a dreamy swirl of purple and orange. Almost all the adults were seated, looking tired. Maryann and Allie stood on the deck, trying to connect an iPhone to some kind of speaker system. They were having trouble, it looked like, but they were laughing. It occurred to Debbie how ridiculous she must look, peering outside that way, and she backed away from the window.

The sliding glass door opened.

“Deb, how are you? Are you having a good time?” Maryann was holding two empty wine carafes. She slid the door closed with her elbow.

“Absolutely. Can I help you with anything? You’ve been rushing around non-stop all day.”

“I’m fine. Just came in to re-fill.” She put the glass carafes down on the counter and took two bottles out of the refrigerator.

“So, Georgetown University for Allie,” said Debbie. “These brilliant daughters of ours.”

“Yeah. You know, she’s already talking about doing study abroad in Rome, the little go-getter.” Maryann smiled. “I’ll miss her while she’s at school, but we’ll stay close. As she’s gotten older, we’re more like friends now. Do you know what I mean?”
“Katherine and I were always close. From when she was little. Every Sunday we’d go to church together, get our nails done afterwards. Even as she got older, we did things together. Talked.” Debbie felt like she could cry if she let herself.

“You were smart to build a good foundation when she was a kid. All the books say that’s the most important thing. I’m sure you two will always be close.”

“Yeah? These last few months, ever since—” Debbie stopped herself, but then looked at Maryann, who gave her a warm smile. “I just feel like I’m losing her.”

Maryann poured some red wine and placed the glass in front of Debbie. “What makes you say that?” She sat in the stool next to Debbie’s.

“And to be engaged? She’s barely twenty-three.”

“Kids have long engagements these days. Sometimes two, three years.”

“They’re not in a hurry.” Debbie drank. “They talk about looking at halls and all that, but they’re just getting ideas right now. But it’s not even that. I can feel her drifting from me. Why would she want to spend time with her mother when she can go see French films with Adam?”

“Oh, honey.” Maryann rubbed her shoulder. “Of course she wants to spend time with you. Maybe just—”

The sliding glass door opened and a boy came running through the kitchen, a blur in his red shirt. His sneakers squeaked on the wood floor as he sprinted down the hall.

Mike stepped through the open doorway.

“What happened?” said Maryann.

Katherine came into the kitchen from outside. “Is Hardeep ok?”
“The kid came over to the adults,” Mike said to Maryann. “His stomach was bothering him. I said maybe you’d have some Pepto, but he just took off.”

Maryann looked at him. “Where did you put those brownies before? They didn’t get put out with the other desserts, did they?”

“No way, I stuck them in the fridge. Covered them in some Saran wrap.”

Maryann pressed her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. “Oh, Mike, but even a little fleck…” She shook her head. “I’ve got to go check on that kid.” Maryann started down the hall.

Debbie looked at Mike. “Unbelievable.”

“I thought you’d want your Tupperware back. I figured the Saran wrap was good enough.”

Debbie could see Maryann standing at the end of the hall with her hands on her hips. Her voice carried to the kitchen. “Honey?” She knocked on the bathroom door. “What can I do to help you?” She put her ear to the door.

Debbie gestured towards the hallway with her hand. “You hear that?” she said to her husband. “I’ll bet my cousin’s real pleased with us.”

Katherine stood by the sliding glass door. She looked worried.

“Ok, sweetie,” Maryann called into the bathroom door. “Just as soon as you’re ready.” She came hurrying up the hall. When she was back in the kitchen, she picked her pocketbook up off the counter and started going through it. “Poor kid forgot his EpiPen.” She pulled out her keys. “I’ve got to drive him home so he can take his pills.”

“Oh, Maryann.” Debbie winced. “We parked behind you. We’re blocking you in.”

Maryann closed her eyes and leaned over, her hands on the counter.
“I’m sorry, Maryann. You know, I shouldn’t have even brought the brownies. This is all my fault. I just thought—”

“I could drive Hardeep,” said Katherine. “I’ll take my parents’ car.”

Debbie looked at her. “Oh, but honey, an adult should come with you.”

Katherine glared at her.

“Someone older, is all I mean,” Debbie corrected.

Maryann nodded. “I agree with your mom.” She turned to Debbie. “Deb, I’d feel better if you went with them.”

Debbie looked at Katherine. Her arms were crossed, lips pursed while her gaze roamed the ceiling. “Yeah, sure,” said Debbie. “If you think that’s what’s best.”

Maryann started scribbling on a pad. “He doesn’t live far. You’ll have no trouble.” When she was done writing, she tore out the page and handed it to Katherine. “I’ll go get the patient,” Maryann said, and started down the hall. “Hardeep? Honey?”

Debbie heard the toilet flush, the sound of the faucet being turned on.

“Well?” said Katherine. Her sunglasses were on. “Are you ready?”

Debbie rode up front with Katherine and read her Maryann’s directions. Hardeep sat in the back with a paper grocery bag on his lap. His forehead shone with sweat.

“How are you feeling back there, buddy?” Katherine asked.

Hardeep’s glasses slid down his nose. He looked over them. “How much longer?”

“Just five or ten minutes, kiddo,” said Katherine.

Hardeep’s eyes watered. He squeezed them shut and stuck his face in the bag. The vomit made a splattering sound. He coughed a few times.
“Here, honey,” said Debbie. She pulled a wrinkled tissue out of her pocketbook and handed it to him. The smell from the vomit was pungent.

Hardeep wiped his mouth. “Is Mrs. DiLorenzo mad at me?”

“Of course not, silly,” said Katherine. “She just wants you to feel all better.”

“Oh, this isn’t your fault, honey, it’s mine.” Debbie clasped her hands. “My cousin must be livid with me.” Katherine glanced at her before turning back to the road.

“Everybody knows I threw up,” Hardeep said.

It hadn’t occurred to Debbie that he’d be embarrassed. That was one of the hardest things about parenting a young child, she remembered, the way it was impossible to predict what would excite them, make the laugh, scare them.

Katherine was smiling. “You know, Hardeep, when I was a kid? About your age? I threw up in front of my whole class.”

Debbie remembered that day well. Katherine was nine. Her stomach had been bothering her since lunch but she didn’t ask to go to the nurse because they were studying ancient Egypt and she didn’t want to miss it. A little scholar, even then.

“That’s right.” Debbie smiled.

They pulled up to a light, and Katherine turned around. “I threw up all over my desk. It even got on some of my friends.” She contorted her face, and Hardeep giggled.

Debbie looked at Katherine, who was smiling. They made eye contact.

“I remember,” said Debbie, “Mrs. Collins telling me how you ran from the room with vomit all over you screaming ‘I’m sorry! I’m sorry!’ You came back from the bathroom with paper towels for the other kids. You wouldn’t stop apologizing.” Debbie smiled and shook her head. Was that really fourteen years ago?
Katherine grinned and rolled her eyes. Hardeep was hysterical, his laughs coming out in wheezes. The light changed and they started driving again.

“Anyway,” said Katherine, looking in the rearview, “those kids were still my friends. And I practically threw up right on them. It got on their books and everything. Gross, huh?” She put on her blinker and turned the wheel. “Seriously, bud. No one’s going to remember except you.”

Now, Hardeep was slouched in his seat, his head resting on the window, the grocery bag crumpled in his lap. He smiled. Katherine really did have a way with kids.

In five minutes, they were at Hardeep’s house. His father, a balding man with a thick mustache who wore a robe, said his son needed to be more careful. He’d be fine once he had his pills. He pulled Hardeep close to him and kissed the top of his head. He thanked Debbie and Katherine and said good night.

When they got back to the car, Katherine took out her phone. She was texting, it looked like. It was nice, the way the three of them had laughed. It seemed to soften something in Katherine. But Debbie couldn’t tell if the mood had lasted. She examined her daughter’s face. It was impossible to read her when she wore those damn sunglasses.

“Nice kid, right?” said Debbie.

Katherine put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway, looking over her shoulder. “He’s a sweetie.” She began driving down the street.

Debbie looked out the window. This was some neighborhood—how wide these properties were! The block was mostly still, the long ranches looking closed up for the night. She heard the thumping bass of dance music, a block party somewhere.
“So Adam just texted me,” said Katherine. “He’s feeling much better. He even managed to call some photographers, just to get ideas about prices.”

“I’m glad he’s feeling better. I just feel awful about that poor boy, with his stomach.”

Katherine looked confused. “Adam?”

“No, Hardeep. It was a stupid idea to bring those brownies.”

“But Maryann knew you were bringing them, right?”

“She knew, but that’s not the point. You think she’ll have us over again after this mess?”

Katherine rolled her eyes. “You don’t like coming here anyway.”

“Honey, it’s very complicated, the way I feel towards my cousin.”

Katherine exhaled. She crossed an intersection and slowed down, pulling towards the curb. She put the car in park and looked at Debbie. She took off her sunglasses.

“Complicated. Is that how you feel towards Adam, too?”

Debbie was surprised. “I-I… like I’ve said, I think he’s a nice young man. It’s just that you’re very—”

“Young? You’ve pointed that out to me several times, thank you. And I’ve told you: it’ll be two years, at least. So what’s your real problem?”

Always had an answer for everything, that girl. “I don’t know. What do you want me to say? I just…” Debbie shook her head. “I feel like you’re drifting from me. We’re not close anymore.” Shit, now she was crying. She took a wrinkled tissue out of her purse and wiped under her eyes. “You and Adam go to your concerts, your museums, and I don’t see where I fit into your life anymore.”
Katherine looked shocked. “Are you serious? How many times have I tried to talk to you about the wedding? And every time, you change the subject. If we’re drifting, maybe that’s why.”

“Are you kidding? I do not do that.”

“You just did it. I mentioned that Adam spoke to photographers and all you can talk about is the brownies and how everything’s your fault. And before, I mention going to the Philippines, and you just shoot the idea down.” She sniffled. “I mean, what’s your problem with me lately? We haven’t talked about the wedding once. You’re my mom.”

A truck passed going the opposite way, and its headlights lit up Katherine’s face for an instant. Her cheeks glistened.

“Honey, it’s not that I have a problem with you. Never, I just—” She didn’t know how to continue. “I feel inadequate.”

Katherine seemed to soften at this, her expression shifting to sympathy.

Debbie continued, “Especially here, around my cousin, who’s able to send her kids to fancy private schools, and to study abroad in Rome.”

Katherine looked confused. “Is that why you don’t like coming here?”

“You could say that.” She exhaled. She used to be really close with Maryann when they were kids, Debbie explained to Katherine. Like sisters. They’d go to the candy store, play hopscotch. Their families were always together for Sunday dinner, for holidays. But when Debbie’s grandmother got Alzheimer’s, Aunt Angie felt Debbie’s father didn’t do his part to help take care of her. He was working two, sometimes three jobs. Her father and Aunt Angie fought and fought. The whole family would be having dinner, and the two of them would start shouting at one another, and Debbie’s father
would grab their coats and tell them it was time to go. Soon, there were no more Sunday dinners. And Debbie stopped seeing Maryann so much.

“When I’d call Maryann’s house, my aunt would pick up and tell me she wasn’t home. Every time. You believe that? She didn’t want her daughter spending time with me, like there was something wrong with me. I was only eleven.” She wiped her eyes. “And now look. How often do I see my cousin, once every few years?”

Katherine was frowning. “That’s really sad, Mom”

“That’s what happens when you don’t address something. It builds over the years.” Debbie thought. “So you know what? I’m sorry. I know I’ve been a little… difficult. And maybe I treat you like a kid sometimes. I’ll try to be better, all right? Maybe we can talk about the wedding sometime, how’s that?”

“Yeah.” Katherine nodded. Was she tearing up? “Yeah, definitely.”

Katherine put the car in gear and started driving up the block. The streetlights had come on. They passed an elderly man walking a small dog. At the corner a group of teenaged boys were gathered on bicycles, sipping from fast food cups. Katherine turned left onto a main road, picking up speed. They’d made up, hadn’t they? Katherine had accepted her apology, it seemed. But somehow it didn’t feel like things had gone back to normal. Debbie looked at her daughter, who seemed remote, even more so than earlier in the day. Debbie knew she should feel proud: she’d raised an intelligent, capable young woman who was making her own decisions, pursuing the life she wanted. But instead, Debbie found herself feeling a mix of loss and—what was it? Jealousy? It was an ugly, ungenerous feeling, and she tried to quiet it as she looked at Maryann’s directions. She
was about to read them aloud when Katherine made a turn and Debbie realized that her daughter remembered the way back, and did not need Debbie to guide her.