THE PROFESSIONALS

by

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PART I:

ATTEMPT TO GIVE THEM ADVICE
The Professional

Yesterday I answered every question with “yes” or “no.” I arrived home to find my spouse and child sick, and I took them apart verbally like used cars. A friend called to indicate that a movie we saw may have been violent. “Not violent enough,” I countered. “On the contrary, this movie should have looked like someone pouring out a chrome bucket of rich red blood and pig’s guts.” It became apparent that I was out of breath. She thanked me.

That’s when I knew: I’m prepared to vote in lockstep with my aspirational economic interests. My ponytail twitches like an antennae. I’m like: A, B, C. I feel out of sorts but I’m in the correct order. I’m not supposed to be here and yet I fit perfectly.

Generations ago, before the word “computer” as it’s currently understood, on the banks of the river Elbe, a Czech village was crumbling. An ancestor of mine got down on her knees. She cried in the most beautiful place she knew because she had lost her eldest son. Fighting had senselessly taken him. I’ve forgotten all about that now, but please don’t blame me. My mother only knew the words, and I’ve tried to preserve them as a leaky montage in the shadow of my mind.

Now I’m afraid. I’m afraid officially. I’m afraid that if I were there, next to that woman, with a hand on her shoulder, hearing the rush of that river,
dear God don’t let it be true, but I would attempt to correct her posture. I would tell her how cold the water really is.
My Pastimes (a response to Henri Michaux’s “My Pastimes”)

I’ll chat with a stranger in a coffee shop because I’m naturally gregarious, but I’m almost always thinking. Give me a good punch in the nose, a good kick in the teeth. My face is a surface to which pressure should be applied. Friends obsess over politics, media, the web. Not me. I like to get beat up.

People discover my intentions only when it’s too late. They ask me the time on a busy street, and soon I’m crowding their space. I assume an impossible level of intimacy and attempt to give them advice. Then it’s all over.

Here’s one now.

Crack! That’s my rib. Clunk! That’s me on my back.

Now he picks me up to knock me down again. I’m on my back. I’m on my feet. I’m on my back. My feet.

I lean into a punch and now my teeth are out, all over the sidewalk like dice on a table. He stomps my teeth, he pounds my teeth, he grinds them deep into the concrete. I make a show to reach for them, and he stomps my hands with a foot. Ten stomps for ten fingers, and then a few more on the tops of my palms.

Now I’m crying—with pleasure!—and he rains down horrible abusive words. By the time I black out, he’s called me every name in the book.
Later, I revive.

What’s this? He’s folding me up! In my tenderized state, he gets me small and thin. I fit easily into the U.S. Post Office mailbox slot, and in the darkness my wounds ooze onto the legitimate messages. I do not sleep. Next morning, the mail carrier finds me, and boy does she give me a piece of her mind! But also, diligently, she brings me home, where my wife and kids are unamused to find that I’ve done it again.

And you can guess what happens next! Or maybe you can’t. Or maybe you, or they, are just like me.
A Path

I cannot stomach violence and war, and so when the war was announced I looked for a way to put myself into a safe coma for at least two years. I figured out quickly that this wasn’t something you could easily find out. Googling “safe coma” was like stepping across the boundary between sincerity and irony. Nothing I needed could be trusted. So I googled a path. I googled a path toward a precise plan. I tried to google like my exact thoughts. I had to invent a multi-stage process for placing myself into a safe coma. With a lot of research, and a fair amount of shopping, soon I had made an $18,000 investment I could feel pretty good about. I calculated I would stay safely suspended for four full years.

Was I risking death? Sure. And was there a violence implicit in slowing down my bodily functions to such low levels? Again, sure, but it was nothing compared to the violence of living in a society at war. I’m old enough to be a parent of a soldier, so heading toward a battlefield wasn’t my worry, but it was seeing my street, my office, my view outside my window turn into a stage for potential violence… I couldn’t live with it. But in a coma I could bravely—some may say—face the process. I felt like an adventurer, a secret one. Neighborhood girls and boys were signing up for or shirking signing up for war, and I was signing up for something myself. I could look them in the face. Secretly.
I took my pills, tubes, blankets, generators, etc., into my secret room. *Thank god for my secret room.* With a deep sense of calm, I began—

The next thing I knew I was coughing because I was covered in dust and my son said, “Dad, dad, wake up!”

What? I have a… I have a son? He was handsome, with brown hair and my uncle’s jaw. But he had not come from me. He wore a strange uniform. I smiled. My plan, at least in a certain sense, had worked.
I read someone online calling my dad a slumlord. The writer put my father’s last name in the headline, and that’s my last name, too. You can imagine my reaction. But then I thought: is my dad a slumlord?

I thought backwards, grasping to recover any memory of any time my dad had acted like one. Laughing and talking with hairy fingers. Scoffing with lawyers at fire codes. Constant angry phone calls: incoming ones during the day, outgoing ones late at night crudely performed in a harsh, barely disguised voice. Lawsuits on the kitchen table he read through on Sunday morning. Words like “wealth” and “maintenance” breaking up the chatter of slurs. Was that family vacation spent at the beach? Or were we watching him in court?

I couldn’t recall anything, so I stopped. But he could be. Memory isn’t infallible and pieces are sometimes missing. Maybe soon I’ll pick up some everyday object, like a crystal paperweight, and in the refracted light stumble upon myself seeing him vividly as a slumlord. Then I will realize…

Or maybe I will realize, at that last possible second, that in a memory, in the dusk-like corner of an unused room, there stands a mirror. I look into the mirror, and I see me. I’m startled. It’s been me all along. You see, I’m the slumlord. I’m the slumlord, and my reflection reveals the worst parts of me. I reach out to call my dad, but the phone? It’s already ringing.
Earl Cross

Earl Cross, trumpet player, told Valerie Wilmer, jazz journalist, amid the heyday of the avant-garde black jazz scene of New York City in the 1960s, “I would like to get everything down that small where that is all I do. When I become my instrument and my instrument becomes me, I'm not a person anymore. I would like to walk around the street looking like a trumpet if possible, because that is what I am.”

One day, it happened.

He started walking down the street, and suddenly he was a trumpet. He could tell he had become a trumpet because everyone was looking at him more strangely than usual. He was an avant-garde musician without institutional backing, so he was used to a certain amount of strange looks, but this was something special. Also, his perspective had sunk much lower than he expected. He turned and saw himself reflected in storefront glass: the brass tubing upright with the bell on the bottom, just rattling along the sidewalk.

At first, he felt joy. He let out every note he could think of. The notes came easily. They bellowed from deep within him, and he vibrated completely. He made sound ecstatically for he did not know how long, until the store owner peeked his head out the door and asked him to stop. He said that Earl’s sounds, though joyful, were more of a private reverie than those of a concert
for paying customers. (This is not to say that Earl’s music made him too much money at this point in time.) People were wary of walking too closely to the music and into the grocer to shop for food. “They’re going across the street!” Earl turned and looked. The store across the street was silent.

So he went home. It was hard to get into his apartment—it was a fifth-floor walk-up, and where had his keys gone?—so he tapped his mouthpiece on his landlord’s door. His landlord answered.

“Excuse me?”

Earl made a sound.

“What’s going on here?”

Earl played a wild melody.

“Oh,” his landlord said, “Sorry, Earl.” He used his spare set of keys to let Earl inside his door.

Still a trumpet, Earl sat on his old soft chair and recalled his past domestic life as a human. All of the pain. All of the hunger. He realized he would never need to eat again. This was great news since he was devoted wholeheartedly to his craft. He would save a lot of money on food. And time!

He let out noise.

Then he realized he would never have to sleep again. Trumpets didn’t sleep. He could stay up, contemplating and playing—no, no, being—music twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He reflected wistfully for a moment on his past human life: part of the beauty of the trumpet had been that he could pick it up at any time and make it make its sound. Now, the any time
had expanded exponentially. Trumpeting would happen all of the time from now on.

He let out more noise.

Dusk fell, and he continued to emit sound. It was fascinating to play this way. Extended technique became interior technique. Scales felt like clearing his throat, and a tune by Charles Tyler felt like a story about a friend.

Suddenly, he had a familiar urge. The urge began to separate him from himself. It caused him to fall silent. Something was missing, and it always would be, and he became very somber.

He would never be able to play the trumpet again. He contemplated the extent of this breach in his life. It may have been sentimental, but he began to weep. Luckily, and shockingly to Earl, he heard the most beautiful music.
The Sportscaster

Work was work. Home was home. Pat unwound in crippling traffic only by listening to the sportscaster, who wasn’t especially knowledgeable and never really had an opinion.

Pat liked that the sportscaster spoke calmly. He shared information with precision. He placed one fact behind another, hour after hour, during both drive times. For Pat, he made the scenery go by. He was reliable and deliberate, like a heavy wheel rolling through a rut.

When the sportscaster had begun working at this station, the callers had called in “hot,” railing against this or that athlete or coach. But the sportscaster, unlike the previous sportscaster, did not engage in these debates. He did not interrupt. Often, in these early days, the callers went on for many minutes, filling broadcast space with evolving rants. The callers agonized over gender, labor, and race. On one of the sportscaster’s first mornings, while Pat’s car idled on the highway, a caller told the sportscaster, “They’re paying him to play! That kid’s not going to remember being born, so why be at the hospital?! And another thing,” he foamed, “they’re not even married!” The caller continued his line of reasoning. Pat wished he could move, that he could drive to where the caller was. He would tell him about the excruciating pain of being unable to attend your child’s birth. Instead, he crawled to work. The caller
began to peter out, finally silenced only by the stamina of his own lungs. Then
the caller waited, as did Pat, for the sportscaster to speak.

The sportscaster paused for a beat too long. And then he said, “There
are seven players in the National Football League whose fathers were players
in the National Football League, too.” A momentary hiss. “Matthew Slater, a
six-time Pro Bowl selection in special teams. Taylor Mays…” Pat relaxed, and
he thought about his daughter.

After a few months of confusion during which, more than once, angry
voices hijacked the show for many hours, interrupted only by commercials,
callers began to appreciate the sportscaster. They began to mirror him. The
show became a series of hushed facts passing drowsily by one another, never
to touch, never to connect.

Over the years the commute worsened. Time spent at work and home
blurred. Traffic was the only constant. The sportscaster kept broadcasting, and
Pat kept listening, for hours and hours and hours. Sometimes he found himself
talking in that voice to his wife and daughter. They wondered what Pat wanted
to tell them.

One evening, under a darkening sky, the sportscaster and a caller traded
statistics on peak playoff hockey puck speeds, and Pat wondered what he was
trying to tell his family when he used the voice. Do I have any secrets? Pat
thought. He looked out the window at the cars going the other way. He heard
weeping. The caller, in the midst of the phrase “miles per hour,” had broken
down into sobbing. This had never happened on the sports channel, and Pat
leaned in. The sound of crying sounded new coming out of a phone amplified
by a radio station, tinny and expansive, like a satellite.

Contrary to his typical style, the sportscaster did not wait for the caller
finish. He did not raise his voice, so that his words mixed in with the sobs, and
he began, “One… two… three…”

At forty-two Pat pulled over. He couldn’t remember where he was
headed. He had completely unwound. The sportscaster continued his refrain.
Pat reached for his phone. He would call into the sportscaster’s show. The
sobbing continued. He had something to say.
The Fox

I’ve had it up to here with the coverage of the fox. When the fox wins the lottery, yes, he goes on TV and smiles and shakes the sweepstakes official’s hand. And yes, he’s kind and gracious to the bystanders gawking as he’s handed the prize. And sure, of course, it’s fun to watch the fox showing the morning news crew his new home, the one large enough for his parents to live there, too. And let’s not forget that the fox promises to donate part of the winnings to an under-served wilderness fund. But, please, let’s get one thing straight: he’s not smiling because of the money. He’s not even smiling because of what the money does. He’s smiling because he’s going to use the giant check as a bridge to reach the rabbit’s den.
The man stood in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom dressed in a police officer’s outfit he had bought online. The costume was completely dark-blue with a plastic silver badge he had clipped to a front pocket. Surveying his image, he smiled, because wearing the outfit was such a whimsical thing to do.

He had shined his black shoes which were not part of the costume, and the light from the bulbs on his ceiling fan glanced off them and caught his face. The light too strongly emphasized his scalloped mouth. He was reminded to be dour, focused.

He looked himself up and down in the mirror.

“Hey, you.”

It had no effect.

“You’ve been up to something, I know it.”

He bided his time, waiting and reading the suspect.

“There’s something going on around here, and I’m going to figure it out,” he said. He walked up to the mirror, bent at his knees, and pawed at it with both hands. He could feel the beginning of sweat on his fingers and palms, and the skin stuck slightly to the glassy surface. The mirror, he confirmed, was completely smooth. Its glass fit under the simple black wooden
framing like that of a mounted photograph in a museum. There was hardly a seam. The back was dark and papery, but there was no rupture, no break, nothing that could shed light on the suspect.

He backed away to study the mirror with more of his bedroom in his peripheral vision. He needed the context in the moment. The mirror shrank as he moved backward, and he hoped to see something new in the mirror and the suspect within this larger field of vision. Both were smaller.

The mirror now hovered between white walls and over beige carpet, and the officer willed himself into intense concentration. But before he had the opportunity to properly focus for a long enough period of time, he got something in his eye, a flake or a particle, and as a matter of protocol he closed both of his eyelids. He rubbed the offending eye with a fist. When he opened his eyes again, he saw himself dressed in the policeman’s uniform in the mirror, a tear running down his check. It left a wet path. He chuckled.

“What do you think?” he said with malice. “You think this is funny? You think there’s something funny about this?” He had learned that funny was a word that could roll off the tongue like a knife.

Immediately a second tear wetted the suspect’s cheek. Other tears followed, all following the same path as the tears that had come before. He saw that the eye had become neon red.

The man bristled at such clowning and he contorted his face into a hideous mask that he’d seen so many other men wear during the day. He denied the red eye. He was furious.
“I’m going to fuck you up if you don’t tell me what I need to know,” he said. He kicked the mirror but left only a small gray scuff in the lower right corner. He was done with the mirror. The mirror, and the suspect, could not help him. His joints became taut, and the man stalked throughout the house. He flipped cushions, dumped drawers, checked any and all pockets. He opened all canisters in the refrigerator and pantry and overturned the contents into the sink. When the sink was full, he began to empty the items directly onto the floor. He stomped on the mixture until it became a gray slop. He found nothing of interest or hidden value. He unscrewed the backs of electronic devices. There was nothing there except batteries and the wires one expects to find. He became so tired that he felt he would fall asleep in the middle of his work, but he was holding a sharp knife and slicing open the mattress. He hadn’t slept in days.

He returned to the mirror. “I’m warning you!” he yelled. He said each word as if he was saying funny.

The suspect looked to the officer as if he were filled to the brim with sickness. That would explain why he was so pale. The man had to keep searching. He had to find something.

He stepped through the house slowly and purposefully, feeling the floors intimately through his shod feet, his socked toes. He listened for creaks and other suspicious noises, such as low moans. He knocked against all of the walls, straining his ear for unusual sounds. The drywall felt cold and solid on his knuckles. He was disappointed. He had been disappointed since he had
started, naturally. What officer of the law isn’t disappointed at the beginning of an investigation? Disappointed until the arrest can be made? But still, he was disappointed.

At last, he arrived at the last place he had decided he would look. He took a break from his relentless suspicion to marvel at this framed picture on the hallway wall: a candid portrait of a college-aged girl with black hair eating a round fruit, either peach or apple, in black-and-white. Trees lined the terrace in which the upper-half of her body was situated. She smiled as her teeth met the fruit.

He flung her off the wall and banged on the space behind like a door. The emptiness made his stomach drop. He broke a hole in the wall with a hammer and enlarged the hole by flinging drywall to the sides with his fingers. He put his hands inside of the wall. Inside, the air felt humid, almost tropical, warm with the texture of decay, yet the surface of the wooden slats felt dry and cool. With little groping he found a very small box. He brought it out of the wall. It was a pack of cigarettes closed with heavy, gray tape. The box felt almost weightless. The man’s insides grinded with lordly judgment and he brought the box to the mirror. He saw the suspect and he waved it at him. His hand, and the box, glanced against the mirror’s surface.

“Look what I found,” he said. “Want to talk?”

The suspect just huffed and puffed. He was as worn out as the officer.

“I said, Talk!”

The man started crying. He wasn’t talking.
The officer could have pushed the interrogation further, but he knew from an expert intuition that he had better not press. He might be able to get the man to say something, anything, but his words would never match whatever the box contained. He had no choice but to open it. He cut through the tape in full view of the suspect, making great pains not to appear too theatrical. It would ruin the effect.

He didn’t have to reach inside to find the hair. The hair tumbled out. Just hair and hair and hair. Hair in all lengths, likely cut with scissors. How did he know that? Cut with scissors? He kept pulling out more hair. It was the same color as the suspect’s head, or at least very close to it. Would a police officer really be able to tell? What does a police officer know about hair?

Now the carpet was covered in hair. Some of the hair disappeared into the beigeness. The officer felt like he had already entered a dream, like he had already entered sleep. The suspect had just made his bed, but then he remembered the shredded mattress.

He kicked the mirror one more time. He must be arrested.
PART II:

BIOGRAPHIES
One

He loved Berlin. Of people he wrote:

How they belittle each other and are at pains to suspect and dishonor. How everything takes place merely for the sake of triumph.

Despite growing renown, he went to school to become a butler. He voluntarily entered a sanatorium and said, “I am not here to write, but to be mad.” There he spent the rest of his life. After his death, someone discovered a series of stories on narrow strips of paper in handwriting one millimeter tall. One story was about schnapps, another about rotten vegetables.
Two

She wrote a novella at the age of twelve. When she defied her stepmother, her father beat her and locked her in her room for six months. She escaped and wrote about the incident for the *Shanghai Evening Post*. She had a scholarship to study in London, but the Second Sino-Japanese War changed her plans. She became the most famous young writer in China. She announced in the preface to a reprinting of her short-story collection, “To be famous, I must hurry. If it comes too late, it will not bring me so much happiness… Hurry, hurry, or it will be too late, too late!” She married a prominent journalist who changed his identity and disappeared when the war ended. She ran a fashion design firm. She was called the Chinese Chekhov. In a novella about a man trying to balance his relationships with his wife and mistress, she wrote:

Two leaves skittered by in the wind like ragged shoes not worn by anyone, just walking along by themselves. So many people in the world—but they won’t be coming home with you.

She had to leave Shanghai. In Hong Kong she worked for the United States Information Service. She moved to America and became so reclusive that even her editor interacted with her only through fax. She moved from apartment to apartment trying to escape lice.
Three

He believed new knowledge required new forms. He kept his aspirations private. He sold the family textile factory and went to college at forty. The depression hit and he considered his decision a moral failing. He made his art despite himself. He wrote:

In the intoxication of falling, man was prone to believe himself propelled upward.

His first short story collection anticipated the rise of fascism. He saw chaos and decay all around him. In a prison, thinking his death not far off, he saw long, wavelike sentences mounting slowly to a peak and receding. He emigrated to America, where he argued for a “Dictatorship of Humanity” and couldn’t find much work. As the war ended he admitted a “deep revulsion” to literature, which he thought a paltry form. He applied for a grant to study mass psychology and died.
The daughter of a local mill-owner, she was educated by evangelists first. Afterward, she was educated by those opposed to evangelists. A neighbor tried to hypnotize her, but he could not get past her strong character. Though her formal education ended at sixteen, she gained privileged access to a great private library at Arbury Hall. She observed her neighbors, who practiced alternative arrangements for marriage. She heard arguments doubting the literal truth of the Bible. She translated Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*. She was romantically rebuffed by a prominent philosopher. At a radical literary magazine she often acted as the editor’s editor. She would rather read *Villette* for a third time than another novel for the first. She wrote a manifesto titled, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” She and a married man treated a research trip to Germany like a honeymoon and subsequently lived together. She took on a male name for her fiction. She suffered crippling self-doubt. When she admitted her authorship the popularity of her work did not suffer. She kept the male name. Thomas Hardy published anonymously and was accused of being her. She believed in the importance of mundane rural lives. She wrote the first recorded mentions of lawn tennis and “pop” classical music. After the death of her companion, she married a man
twenty years her junior. He jumped out of a window and survived. Her family restored contact. One of her last novels includes the lines:

Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was, that she must wait and think anew.

She was denied a plot in her country’s most exclusive cemetery because of her irregular life.
Five

Whenever his mother said it was raining outside, he told her the sun was shining. During law school he paid his valet to attend lectures for him. He rejected the legendary novel, and his friends told him that what he was writing was terrible. His debut novel included dozens of examples of figurative language involving the buttocks. He took a cruise liner named for an ancestor to South America and a week later Germany invaded Poland. He stayed in Argentina for the next twenty-two years. He later chronicled his time in the Buenos Aires underground gay scene as a small fraction of his public diaries, a sixteen-year project published in *Kultura*. In its collected form, the diaries begin:

Monday
Me.

Tuesday
Me.

Wednesday
Me.

Thursday
Me.
He was censored by the Nazis, the Stalinists, and the Communists. He never returned to Poland, and when he finally traveled to Europe, he felt like a bumpkin.
Six

Her middle name was Delores and she signed all of her letters FDR. She helped her grandmother cook large dinner parties for a nearby wealthy family. She heard Yiddish at the corner store. She graduated high school before her sixteenth birthday. She proofread parts of Ed Koch’s first book. She was often the only black woman at gatherings. She completed only one novel, which begins:

> When Frieda Schwartz heard from her Shmuel that he was (a) marrying a black girl, the blood souged and staggered in all her conduits as she pictured the chiaroscuro of the white-satin chuppa and the shvartze’s skin…

In an afterword she explained in great detail how the plot mirrored the myth of Theseus. The novel received confused reviews and disappeared. She wrote for *The Richard Pryor Show*. She coined and defined fake black slang for *Playboy*. She had difficulty completing another novel. She found the address of Djuna Barnes’s New York City apartment in the phone book and knocked on her door. The elderly writer appeared and said, “I don’t see people anymore.”
Seven

He was named after the patron saint of bakers. He spent his schooldays being bullied by the wealthy. He fell ill and the headmaster wrote home to tell his parents that he was in a “sort of coma.” He attempted suicide on a bridge. During a law apprenticeship he saw the vagaries of human nature, the human heart grappling with the Penal Code, and he rejected an offer to become the successor. He admired the Catholic Church and the crown. He spent half the day crisscrossing the city to buy the three beans he blended into his coffee: Bourbon, Martinique, and Mocha. He ate dozens of pears everyday. Two of his mistresses were the same age as his mother. He lived in terror of the debtor’s prison. He received a most charming letter signed only “The Foreigner” and fell in love with the sender. He wore a heavy Dominican robe during his long, frantic writing sessions in which he did not eat because he believed the imagination could be hampered by digestion. He planned to run for political office but he slipped and cracked his head on the street. He did not hesitate to include real people and places in his novels and nobody seemed to complain. He celebrated the completion of a manuscript by drinking four bottles of white wine. He tried to set up a secret society of journalists to guarantee himself favorable reviews. He added the nobiliary particle to his last name without any official recognition of the act. He almost did not marry because of objections
from the Tsar. Near the end of his life he was captivated by the idea of cutting down twenty-thousand acres of forest in the Ukraine and transporting it for sale in France. In the penultimate scene of one of his greatest novels, a strange priest appears in the woods and says to the protagonist:

I believe you to be inordinately ambitious.

The protagonist answers:

Yes, father, I am
Eight

His involvement with a Catholic sect called the Detachers convinced him to conscientiously object from World War Two. He spent a year and a half in prison, during which time he published his first story and discussed diagrams for a new kind of farming community with apprentices of Frank Lloyd Wright. He denounced “business sense.” He warned his fiancee that he would never work to earn a living. He wrote almost all of his fiction about Roman Catholic priests living in the Midwest during the mid-20th century. While saving a boy from drowning, he continued to smoke his pipe. He had an idea for a never-published novel about family life and working titles included: *Flesh*, *The Sack Race*, *NAB (North American Brands)*, and *Nobody Home*. He was always looking for a place to live with his wife and five children, and they moved unsuccessfully to Ireland four times. He could waste hours polishing his shoes. His first novel won the National Book Award but sold fewer copies than he had expected, and he said, “The great experiment with the great American (and British) reading public is over, so far as I’m concerned.” He wrote one other novel twenty years later, also given the working title of *The Sack Race*, which includes a priest thinking:
As for feeling thwarted and useless, he knew that feeling, but he also knew what it meant. It meant that he was in touch with reality, and that was something these days.
Nine

He never met his father, who poisoned himself to death with gas. He loved his grandfather, who seemed allergic to work, and his grandfather loved him. He left school one day by walking in the opposite direction. He spent his happiest years working in the cellar of a shop in the roughest neighborhood in Venice. He wanted to sing. Lung conditions plagued his life, and he spent much time, especially during his teenage years, in sanatoriums. He was often moments away from death. He met a woman of privilege thirty years his senior while out for a walk and they became companions for life. He turned to the written word, and his works seemed to extol the logical necessity of suicide. He relentlessly denigrated his home country, Austria, and the people in it. One short story, “Hotel Waldhaus,” reads in its entirety:

We had no luck with the weather and the guests at our table were repellent in every respect. They even spoiled Nietzsche for us. Even after they had had a fatal car accident and had been laid out in the church in Sils, we still hated them.

While accepting a national literary award, he was rushed by the Cultural Minister for using the word “state” repeatedly and critically. He signed in a guestbook that he was a “good boy.” His death was announced only after his
funeral in accordance with his wishes. He wrote into his will that his work should not be published in Austria for fifty years, but publishers ignored his request. His voice was considered too significant.
Ten

He was born in Belgium on the 13th but superstition dictated he be recorded as having been born on the 12th. He became a newspaper reporter at age fifteen. He attended lectures on police technique from the Sherlock Holmes of France. He wrote eighty typewritten pages a day and then vomited from the tension. He worked himself into a “state of grace” before he could enter “the novel mode.” A novel took less than two weeks to write. He had an affair with Josephine Baker and became her part-time secretary. His production slipped and he published only eleven novels that year. He wrote his first detective story while boating near the Dutch town of Delfzijl. Years later a statue was erected on the port to commemorate the event. He threw a huge gala, the Anthropometric Ball, to celebrate the literary debut of a new character, a fastidious French commissioner. At the age of 29 he said, “I’m already 29 and I’ve only published 277 books.” He rarely edited. His reputation suffered. In one novella, a radio repairman separates from his wife and child while escaping the Nazis by train. He begins an affair and makes love to a woman while surrounded by other refugees in the cattle car and says:

I am not ashamed to say that I was happy, with a happiness which bore the same relation to everyday happiness as the sound produced by passing a violin bow across the wrong side
of the bridge bears to the normal sound of a violin. It was sharp
and exquisite, and deliciously painful.

He lived in luxury. He had sex with his servants. He said he had sex with over
ten-thousand women. He told a panel of doctors he limited the contact to two
minutes and often did not remove his clothes. He signed papers confirming he
was Aryan to assure his films could be made by a Nazi studio. He was
misdiagnosed as having only months to live. His daughter shot herself in the
heart, devastated that she could not be the central woman in his life. One day
he had trouble working on a novel, and he retired from writing fiction. Soon he
dictated his memoirs, which covered twenty-one volumes. They were poorly
received by both the public and himself. He said, “At bottom, I have nothing to
say.”
Eleven

His mother, a powerful landowner, beat him mercilessly. After his schooling, he went to work for the Minister of the Interior. His first short story collection influenced the next tsar to free the serfs. When a steamboat caught fire, he panicked, shoved women and children aside, and offered a sailor ten-thousand roubles to save him. He praised Gogol in an obituary, and for that offense the current tsar sentenced him to one month in prison and two years under house arrest. During that time he wrote a short story about a poor man forced to drown his beloved dog. He spent much of the rest of his life in Baden-Baden and Paris. He was considered a master of the description of nature. A long, ambitious novel about youth and political change became an unexpected bestseller around the world when fifty-two young men and women in Russia were arrested on revolutionary conspiracy charges. The novel ends:

“Anonymous Russia!” he said at last.

He never married, though he had a lifelong affair with a Spanish opera singer. Dostoevsky parodied him, and Tolstoy challenged him to a duel. Both writers later apologized.
Twelve

When she arrived at the hospital to give birth to her third child, she gave her occupation as “writer,” but the clerk wrote “housewife.” She was a master of horror. She typed her correspondence and rough drafts using only lowercase letters. She classified herself as an amateur witch and claimed in interviews to have used black magic to break a publisher’s leg. She loved baseball. She wrote light comedy about her home life for national magazines. She received no awards, prizes, grants, or fellowships. She married a Jewish man whom her parents never accepted. Her grandfather was an architect, as was his father, as was his father, and she wrote the definitive haunted house novel, which includes the lines:

The menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armor of superstition and have no defense.

She claimed to have never had a supernatural experience.
At age twelve he pasted labels onto pots of bootblack in ten-hour shifts in a warehouse overrun with rats. The operation moved to a busy street, and crowds gathered at windows to watch him and the other children work. He attended a school with a sadistic headmaster. He was a gifted mimic. He went to the theater every day for three years. He learned shorthand and reported on the courts. He pioneered the serialized novel. Americans waited at ports to hear his latest plot developments. His wife’s younger sister died in his arms. He fashioned a character after her, and he found that he could not kill her in his fiction, as he had previously planned. In a novel about the legal battle over several conflicting wills, he wrote of the villain:

Mr. Vholes, quiet and unmoved, as a man of so much respectability ought to be, takes off his close black gloves as if he were skinning his hands, lifts off his tight hat as if he were scalping himself, and sits down at his desk.

He promoted a renewed enthusiasm for Christmas. He wrote a never-published novelization of the life of Jesus meant only to be read by his own children. He brought a young woman down to the shore at dusk and held her tightly as the waves rose around their legs. He screamed, “You are powerless in the claws of
such a kite as this child!” She managed to get away. He left his wife for an eighteen-year-old actress who performed in his play *The Frozen Deep*. He burned all of his correspondence except for business letters. He became an early member of the Ghost Club. He tended to the wounded after a train crash with a flask of brandy and his hat filled with water. He refashioned himself as a public reader of his works and toured compulsively, against his doctor’s wishes, even after suffering a stroke. His last words were a request to lie on the ground.
Fourteen

As a child she read by gaslight in winter. She read the Bible with a sense that it was written especially for her. She remembered her neighbors in Edinburgh:

If the weather was good the amiable comment was ‘Good morning, Mrs. X. Fine day.’ If it was raining, blowing hard from the north or snowing, the words in passing were ‘Good morning, Mrs. X. Seasonable weather.’

She received a copy of The Oxford Book of Ballads and foretold that the characters described within its pages were the types of people she would meet later in her life. She married an older man with the initials S.O.S. and moved to Southern Rhodesia. They had a son and her husband showed signs of mental illness and became violent. He said, “One day this will all appear to you as a bad dream.” When World War Two began, she left them and took a troopship back to England. She joined a BBC “black” propaganda campaign against the Germans. She took shelter during the bombing of London in a vacant house and was surprised to find it belonged to a famous poet. She used his phone to interest a literary agent in a book she hadn’t started and that was how her literary career began. She wrote a bad poem and sent it to two publications,
both of which accepted it. After a tumultuous period as the General Secretary of the Royal Poetry Society of London, she saw the need for documentary evidence and never again threw away a slip of paper. She published a biography of Mary Shelley. She wrote her first short story about an angel appearing over a river, and it won a newspaper contest. While taking the weight loss drug Dexedrine she began to hear T.S. Eliot’s voice threatening her in her head. She converted to Roman Catholicism and began to see existence as a complete system, as she thought a novelist had to do. She proposed that sentiment be replaced with ridicule. She insisted that all of her translators be male. She attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She wrote strange tragedies in Rome. She disliked revising and so composed most of her works in one draft. She eventually refused to be edited and told a friend, “If I write it, it’s grammatical.” She wrote of a character at a funeral:

Though he knew the general axiom that death was everyone’s lot he could never realise the particular case; each new death gave him something fresh to feel.
Fifteen

His father was arrested and released only when he attempted to kill himself and hurt his back. Two sisters and a brother were killed by the secret police. Other family members perished in the ghetto. He became a prominent cancer researcher, and a raise in pay gave him time to write. He knew almost everything there was to know about Dostoevsky, and he wrote a best-selling novel about the writer on vacation in Germany. All of his other work described the same protagonist, a Russian Jew alike and unlike himself. In one novella the character went on vacation and saw a sliver of Noah’s Ark:

Boris Lvovich stood in front of a piece of a wooden board, tarred and cracked; it was in a large gilded frame as if it were a painting by Leonardo da Vinci or Raphael. That was precisely how he’d imagined it: a piece of smoke-darkened oak, a tiny fragment left from an enormous shipwreck…
PART III:

DEAR SON
Dear Son

It had been a long day at work, and the bus ride home felt even longer than the workday. I could only keep upright sitting on the bus seat by reminding myself that traveling home was part of the job, and so it should be draining. I looked out of the grimy window, past my own puffy reflection, and thought: row house, second row house, shop, second shop, parking lot, empty lot, third shop, second empty lot, empty shop….

I got to the front door, exhausted. My briefcase guided me inside. I removed myself mentally from its great weight and prepared to be cheery for my family.

Really, it was my second family, the one I had joined after faking my own death twenty years before. I had pretended to fall into a rushing river on a treacherous solo mountain hike. I had done it to escape from my first family, a family I couldn’t simply leave. Plus, I loved Suzie and this second family that she and I had started years before. She had helped me plan the whole thing. From now on, the second family, the one I made with Suzie, will be referred to as my family. The other is my first family.

I yelled “I’m home” like I was an actor and being paid for it. I was trying to fill our small two-story house with love and affection, but no one
responded. Then I noticed a faint smell in the air: chicken bacon casserole. It smelled like it was already gone.

So they’d eaten dinner without me. My family was planning to be upset with me. They were planning to maintain their feelings from that morning. Twice at the breakfast table, I had defied them and mentioned my oldest son, the one from the first family. They wanted such behavior to stop, and so they were sitting in the dining room around a table of plates glistening with the residue of my favorite meal, waiting for me to enter. I smelled the rich, faint scent of bacon, cheddar cheese, chicken, herbs, and pasta. I absorbed the silence and considered my options.

This was not an isolated incident, especially recently. I had begun making more and more explicit mention of my oldest son, my only child from the first family. It bothered everyone. It ruined meals and weekend outings and time spent around the television. But, if you look at it one way: so what if I bring up my past? I’d given my all to this family for twenty years, and my two kids were still living at home deep into their twenties, hovering around me, expecting things of me, using my credit card to purchase crap from the Internet and saying it was an “accident.” I was tired. Tired of it all, you might say. Twenty years of working a dead-end job, because that’s the only kind you can get after faking your own death. Twenty years of menial tax preparation at strip-mall outfits with animal mascots. First it was a panther. Then a crab in glasses. Next a dolphin soaring over paperwork. With my first family, with Jennifer and my oldest son, I had been a highly respected corporate accountant
working at a regional office of one of the big four firms. Millionaires told me they couldn’t understand the things I did for them. I wore new ties constantly. I made lavish amounts of money, and all I thought about was numbers.

Now, Suzie and me, we can barely afford this house. In the master bedroom sink we’ve poured so much Drano that the pipes tear like paper. The carpet in the front hall is equally thin. The paint in the living room peels and I’m so exhausted from work that I just paint over it. Then it peels again. My family has never really appreciated what I gave up for them. I never could figure out a foolproof way for me to take money from my savings account in my first life and transfer it to me in this second life without Jennifer finding out. She would’ve found out. Jennifer knows details. Jennifer has no need for the big picture because she can so clearly see each detail. The big picture forms for her from the smaller parts. I fear that about her. Suzie was gracious about not having the money, of course. She chalked it up to “justice.” She likes Jennifer. (They never met, but I showed Suzie pictures and described Jennifer in great detail.)

And sure, besides the money part, it was easier to die than I ever thought it would be, and Suzie reminded me of that whenever I started to complain. “All you did was disappear,” she said. “You abandoned a backpack on a cliff, dropped an expensive camera off of the edge, and then came home to us. You should be happy.” Ok, I was happy! Much happier than I had been with my first family, but I wasn’t happy because it was easy. Ease isn’t happiness.
I imagined crossing the foyer of our home and entering the dining room. The three of them would turn to me, stony and silent, as if posing for a grim photograph. They would expect an apology. I should apologize. But who would I look at while I apologized? These are hard decisions anyone contrite must make. I had to look at somebody. Suzie? With her long black hair styled to intimidate her high school students? My daughter? My son? Their dark features mirrored their mother’s. I stood in the foyer and pictured apologizing to one of them. I tried to pick. I saw relief in the face I apologized to. I saw contentment in the other two faces as I apologized to the first. At first it felt great, but I wearied quickly at the thought of any two of them watching me with contentment apologize to the relieved third. The possible combinations were not the same to me, but the motions and the words were, and so I saw one apology layered on top of the other, a kind of triple apologizing, and I felt old, like I was using technology I didn’t understand. It was becoming unreal to me. I swayed where I stood.

I realized that in each of those layered instances I was envisioning, no matter to whom I was apologizing, one fact remained the same: I was apologizing for mentioning my oldest son. He was the only one who stayed in the same place, at the center of the apology. In apologizing I would give voice to his existence once again. The sound of his name coming out of my mouth in my head felt more real to me than the images of the people sitting in the nearby room waiting for me. If I walked into that dining room, I would say his name. I would make it worse. I would begin to sweat, and I did begin to sweat.
For how long did I stand there? The silence in the house continued. I thought about the big picture: Why had I been mentioning my first son at all? I was afraid of him. It was like I was purposefully cracking the fissures between the two families, so that both could attack me. Why did I have to talk to my family about my life before my death? I began to be very afraid that what I was doing could never end in forgiveness. No wonder the image of apologizing seemed so unreal.

I stood there searching for a way out, and so my mind wandered back to Suzie’s original idea: suicide. After we had eliminated the idea of my divorcing Jennifer, we knew that I had to die in a way that left no body behind. This “no body” element became central to the plan, and Suzie saw suicide as the best way to create a bodiless death. I normally trust Suzie, but this idea did not appeal to me, though I would have been loathe to produce a corpse in a different kind of death. Still, the idea of bodiless death made me anxious. It unnerved me. I brought my worries to Suzie over and over again. We would talk late into the evening, arguing over my death, and then, when I drove across town, arrived home from “work,” and climbed into bed next to Jennifer, my mind would race, trying to determine whether Jennifer could accept my death without my body.

Or would she try to find me? I worried she would, and caught in those thoughts our linen sheets would begin to itch my skin and the scent of her
lavender-smelling hair would drift from floral to chemical, the aroma suddenly a deployed gas meant to lull me into a false sense of security.

I think my reticence about “no body” also had something to do with my being an accountant. To attempt to subtract without taking anything off the ledger… this didn’t seem right. Suzie thought that she had solved the problem with suicide. Why? If I died by suicide, I would have to write a suicide note. A good note, she surmised, was worth a body. “My first love,” Suzie said, “was Arthur. He was in my junior year biology class. But because my parents were so religious, he couldn’t call our house and I found it hard to leave to meet him. I had trouble lying to my parents, too. I still half-believed, and so I sat in my room at all hours and thought about him. I agonized. In the early days of our love I agonized over the thought of Arthur, wanting to bring him closer to me as I lay in my bed.

“To feel closer,” Suzie continued, “Arthur and I began to write each other long letters on notebook paper. The notes were tame. I’m sorry in a way that my father burned them. Nevertheless, I remember there being something romantic about them, even though they were like: This is what I did yesterday. This is what I would do if I ever found out you were crying. Can you believe my dog ate my cereal right off the table? These are the lengths I would go to be with you.

“My point is,” Suzie said, “I spent more time with the letters than I did with Arthur. I was dating the letters. They were my boyfriend. They were my first love,” she said. “You want to give Jennifer a body? Give her a letter. Give
her a letter she can hold in her hand and take to bed at night. It’s the right thing
to do. Jennifer deserves it.”

Suzie looked steadily into my eyes and leaned forward. “I’ll help you
write it if you want.” Like I would need her help. Her offer may have been part
of why I bristled at dying by suicide. Plus, I knew from some accidental
snooping that she still had Arthur’s letters in a shoebox. Not that that bothered
me. We all have our secrets.

People are always offering to help me write, and not just high school
writing teachers like Suzie. They think that because I’m an accountant that I
don’t know how. Or that I lost the ability to write in acquiring my skill with
numbers. But what they don’t know is that I wrote extensively as a corporate
accountant. I wrote to clients, my project manager, the firm’s partner. I wrote
mostly to convince people that they had made the right decision in deciding to
perform a certain task and also in hiring me to perform that task. I found that
the best way to do this was to formulate a writing style in which I made
whatever I said appear as normal as possible. I could write the most outlandish
things about the benchmarks for significant owner equity, the present value of
a client’s debt, or the generally accepted accounting principles we were using
that were anything but generally accepted. Everyone agreed with everything I
wrote. In a way, people loved my writing. And so I didn’t think that I would
have needed Suzie’s help to write a suicide note. I knew how to make what one
wants to say seem as normal as possible.
But I couldn’t write the suicide note. I couldn’t convince Jennifer that I had died by suicide. Every sentence I wrote I inevitably saw from her point of view: *Something about my life seemed so false. I never felt comfortable.* These words screamed that I was still alive. Jennifer would see that. Nothing in my suicide note seemed real. I tried to squeeze all I could out of my accountant writing skills: *If you’re reading this note, that means I’m dead.* Then I imagined Jennifer’s reaction: oh, really? And then she would call up one of the many people she knew in government, and suddenly a tiny clue I left behind would lead them straight to me…. 

I couldn’t write that note, and I couldn’t accept any of Suzie’s drafts of suicide notes, either. *I just want you to know that I’ll always be thinking of you.* Could anything state more clearly that I was still alive? *You deserve better.* What did that even mean? I delayed my death, and Suzie started to hold a grudge. When we compromised on the hiking accident, she was appalled to learn that I had decided to cultivate a fake interest in hiking before I fell into the river and died. But I had to do it that way. I didn’t want my death to be without meaning. I had to work up to the treachery of my final hike. And really, Suzie only had so much leverage. My death would be my choice. 

Sure, some of the hikes I only pretended to go on. Instead, I visited Suzie and the kids. Suzie would be ticking with impatience, wondering why I didn’t just die on my first hike, which seemed so logical to her. The children adored me, though they couldn’t understand me. They called me dad, but quizzically. Where did I go? I was trying my best. We’d all get pancakes in a
town far away, and then afterward in the bathroom I’d stand at the sink and pour handfuls of water onto my neck, face, and chest so that my first family would think that I had been sweating.

Twice I hiked for real, mostly to scope out spots where I could slip to my death. I brought along my oldest son. He was ten then, and those trips, I’m sure, would have been considered disasters in any other family. But my son, armed only with the example of his mother as the leader in family activities, provided me with a benefit of the doubt which may, in only slightly more exaggerated instances, have gotten him killed. Once, for instance, we were hiking to where I said there was “sometimes a waterfall,” but really, I had read that the river flowing through the canyon was fast-moving and deep. We never reached it. We got lost, and I had forgotten the water bottles. I wouldn’t take one trail—the one that turned out to be the correct one—because it would have forced me to walk underneath a hawk circling in the sky. Then, to top it all off, I fell over a root, twisting my ankle. My son immediately took off his shirt.

“Why are you doing that?”

“To apply pressure.” He sounded gleeful.

“I don’t think twisted ankles work like that.” I tried to shake my foot so he couldn’t wrap his shirt around it.

“I’m pretty sure,” he said, while tying a tight knot, “but you should call mom and she’ll know.”

My cell phone didn’t have any reception.
The afternoon cooled and my leg throbbed, perhaps less so because of the tightness of his shirt. The sky was still bright, but I could feel that at any moment evening would approach. My son did not complain. He just looked at me with that perfect hair. He told me stories and tried to find berries. He found what he said were edible leaves—how would he know?—and attempted to give them all to me. I looked at the small tangled stems and said I would only eat them if he would share them with me. He refused. We bickered. The bickering turned into an argument. At a certain point I stood up to make my point, and that’s when I knew I could stand well enough to drag myself back. That night my son told Jennifer how much he had enjoyed the hike. Jennifer was happy that I had found a hobby that relaxed me despite the minor mishaps. “You’ve been so anxious lately,” she said. “I wish there was something I could do to help you, but I know the feeling.

“Sometimes, especially when I think about everything we have to do to keep people safe,” she worked in emerging technologies at the time, “I get so scared, and I want to ask someone else for help, anyone else.” She looked up from the mail she was sorting. “But I don’t. Because I can only do it on my own. You can only do it on your own, too, and I’m happy that you’re doing it. Because it’s only when you make a decision that I can react to it. And you know, honey,” she smiled, “that my reaction will always be to support you in whatever way I can.”

My death took much longer than I had originally planned. It was hard to find wilderness in which to disappear. It put a strain on Suzie and the kids,
who were starting to grow up. My youngest turned three, old enough to have memories. For six years of Suzie’s life, four for my daughter, and three for my son, I wasn’t around very much, even though I loved them very dearly, told them so, and never missed a birthday. To this day, I have my son’s and daughter’s favorite cakes memorized: chocolate.

I couldn’t walk into that dining room. I couldn’t face my family pointing themselves toward me like tombstones. To see those rigid faces, and then to have to say something—what could I really say? What would change? What if I went in the other direction? What if I went into my study instead? In there I could think about him, my oldest son. I could get to the bottom of this before it broke apart my family. What was he like these days? I expected him to be flourishing. That was part of why I had felt comfortable leaving him and his mother. They didn't need me. To tell you the truth, in my first marriage I had married up. Way up. Jennifer was amazing. Even though Jennifer had been given almost every socioeconomic advantage possible, she drove herself harder than anyone I had ever met. Being her partner, living in such proximity to her power and relentlessness, was dizzying. It helped me in my work, and I noticed a direct correlation between meeting her—when she was a representative for a client—and my success and recognition at my job. Still, I maintained my self. I was still a lower-middle-class son of the Midwest who had made good. My father still worked at the steel mill. My brain, sometimes, in a moment of vertiginous re-wirings, could see a glass of milk and say, *Don’t waste that milk by drinking it as a snack. Have water instead.* My mother used
to say that. With our incomes, of course, Jennifer and I could drink as much milk as we wanted. But Jennifer never drank a glass of milk, and so I never broached the subject. Jennifer’s family never drank glasses of milk, or wanted to. They were different.

When you marry up and it’s just the two of you, your humble origins can balance out your spouse’s pedigreed ones. I had felt secure for a while, but having a child changed everything. The moment we had our son, I saw that he had her pedigree, too. That perfect hair. Doubtlessly he had my humbleness, too, but that was harder to see. I had helped create a part-pedigreed, part-humble child, but that that did not mean that he was evenly balanced between the pedigree and the humbleness. Sometimes it was like our son wasn’t even mine. I was out-numbered. I got used to it. I became redundant—at least mentally—very quickly. Jennifer was better at both being a parent and doing her job. My advancements, though impressive, could not match the pace of hers. Though our respective fields, technology and accounting, were both growing rapidly, technology was outpacing accounting. Plus, she could dream of bigger things. I hadn’t figured out how to do that yet. (But then I met Suzie.) Our son did not respond to me. He was only soothed, from a very young age, by playing with Jennifer’s long, light hair. Well, my hair was very short, and so I couldn’t soothe my son.

My frustration, my growing redundancy in my family, these things saddened me at first, but they were also what gave me the opportunity to start this new family with Suzie, who is so much more like me, who enjoys a glass
of milk with dinner. So it wasn’t all bad. Since my first family didn’t need me, I could plan a fall to my death and leave them without too much trouble, with a clear conscience.

I met Suzie in the grocery-store checkout line. She tapped me on the shoulder and when I turned around she said she wondered if I could lift a bag of cat food from the bottom rack of her cart. The way she said it, playfully but honestly, her whole attitude acknowledging that I might say “no,” rattled me. When was the last time someone had talked to me like that? Certainly not my coworkers or clients, and certainly not my wife or son. I think, right then, I fell in love. I also realized, right then, that my first family could never make me feel whole. And if I couldn’t feel whole with them, then at some point, I would become worse than redundant. I would become unnecessary. If I stayed with them, I would disappear.

Why didn’t I just divorce Jennifer? Why didn’t I leave my first family in some less—how should I put this—dramatic way? I saw the answer one night, three years after I had met Suzie, and that was when I knew that I could never divorce Jennifer. No, in some way, I had to die.

My son was just eight years old, and he was fixing his first dinner for our family. Early, you say? I would’ve thought so, too, but my son loved the kitchen, and he loved cooking. Jennifer had instilled this love in him at a young age. Jennifer was an excellent cook. I couldn’t even chop vegetables correctly. She had repeatedly told me—perhaps over one hundred times—that I didn’t need to help more in the kitchen. I became the clean-up crew. I learned
which chemicals most effectively eliminated grease from the stove, and I knew how to set the table the correct way for any combination of utensils. That night my son cooked while I set out the plates and forks and knives like he had asked. “Use the good napkins, Daddy.” He worked under Jennifer’s watchful eye; she did not extend a hand. He made baked chicken with apricots and olives, roasted potatoes with rosemary, and a dressed salad.

It was, first and foremost, a remarkable meal. Seeing my eight-year-old son serve us such a dinner, I was filled with pride. It was a story, I thought, that I would be telling for the rest of my life if I stayed with Jennifer and my son rather than leave them to be with my new family. Staying felt so appealing in that moment. “Well, of course he’s so successful,” I pictured myself saying decades down the road. “Did you know that he first cooked dinner for our family when he was only eight? And it wasn’t just good: it was gourmet!” I toasted his accomplishment multiple times that night, almost in preparation for this future moment, but what I said never got anything more than a polite smile from my wife and son. Maybe I was drinking too much wine, but I don’t think I was. I began to feel anxious.

And then, as my son spooned seconds of chicken au jus onto my plate, I saw a glint in his eyes. We stared at each other, and I saw that he was staring at me as one stares through a window into a pet store. His eyes said: I plan to feed you for the rest of my life. I grew chilly. I suddenly saw this meal from his point of view. Here he was, nourishing his father in a way his father could not
nourish him or himself. I looked into his eyes again: *No matter what.* He grinned. I gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Jennifer asked.

“Nothing.”

I almost jumped away from the table, but I didn’t want to knock anything over. I didn’t want to do anything that would allow one of them to say, “Let me help you.” I needed to look at my son one more time. His eyes continued to shine in the candlelight (a detail upon which he had insisted). *If I have to,* his eyes said, *I will force-feed you, daddy.* I stopped looking at him. I guzzled my wine. He would force-feed me if he had to! They both would! Then I realized that they were both staring at me. I wondered if the moment had come, the moment when they would tie me up, the moment when I would become their pet, their prisoner. But if they tied me up, I thought, they would untie me to let me go to work. They would untie me to let me sleep in Jennifer’s bed. They would let me out to set the table and clean the dishes. And that’s when I realized the truth: I was already tied up.

They kept staring. Then I realized they were staring because I hadn’t said “thank you” yet to my son for serving me seconds, and so I said it. The staring subsided, but my fear did not. To this day, when I think of my son or Jennifer, I feel a phantom feeding tube at the back of my throat.

I walked down the hallway of my home toward my study. And while doing so, while walking away from my family, my oldest son’s outstretched spoon filled with *au jus* felt like an act of compassion in comparison to the
already finished meal my family wanted to shove in front of my face. In fact, I felt at peace thinking of my son. He wasn’t thinking about force-feeding me anymore at all. The force-feeding dream was over. To him, I was dead.

In my study I locked the door. A pad of paper and a pen lay askew on my desk, and the arrangement prompted me to sit down and start to write. I knew immediately I was writing a letter to my son. This had never happened before. My study was dark and shadowy, which helped me pretend that my desk was old and majestic. It was still as cut-rate as the day I bought it at the office-supply store, but I had sprayed it with polyurethane in a half-hearted attempt to approximate my old, mahogany desk—a present from Jennifer’s parents—and this was at least glossy and cool to the touch.

I wrote the words “Dear Son.” Then I sat for five minutes, frozen in contemplation of those words. Dear Son. Dear Son. They were hypnotizing, the way they promised something more. When should a letter end at “Dear Son”? Well, this one did, so far, and it started playing tricks on me. In the dim light, I saw the “Dear” wrapped in darkness, almost completely hidden but also so close to the “Son.” The Dear lost its meaning and I saw it as shape. It looked deadly, with the jagged hook of the ‘r’ pointed right at the “Son.” Then I saw “Son” as shape. He was the “S,” the back of his head exposed to the reaching ‘r’ as he looked down on the smaller, weaker ‘o’ and ’n.’ The longer I looked, the more I saw, and the more those words looked like enough. They were enough. Dear Son. He was thirty now. I placed the letter in an envelope and
wrote my son’s name on the front. I felt a shiver of something pleasurable, a kind of *déjà vu*. Just writing his name again. It felt like it might be enough.

I sat and stared at the letter. In its matte-whiteness in my muted study it looked like a soft light. I felt calm but ready to move. My son had never married. I knew that, and I had an address I had obtained from a private detective, a private detective I had hired a few months ago in hopes that finding out where my son was would dampen my desire to speak his name. It didn’t work. The address looked promising. My son had moved to a nearby mid-sized city which was going through an economic boom. By the address’s downtown location, it looked like he was part of it.

I let out a great sigh, and I thought of how, to deliver the letter, I would have to leave the study, get in the car, drive for three hours, park, climb a set of stairs—if the “2A” in the address meant a second-floor apartment—and then leave the letter somewhere in my son’s home without being caught. Then I let out an even bigger sigh, thinking how easy it would be to call, text, or email my son at that moment. I had his phone number and email address. The P.I. had provided me with those things, too. I hadn’t wanted them, but he had said that they were part of the address.

I hadn’t thought to stop him before he said the phone number and email address to me, and also they were written on the sheet he had handed to me. I yelled at him about this, of course. I didn’t *want* to know his phone number or email address—I only wanted his *address*. “Well,” he replied. “Those are part
of the address.” No they’re not, I had argued, and he said, “Let me tell you something: in my twenty-six years of doing this, off and on some years, in fact, off for some long stretches, but also on for some very long stretches, I’ve never met a freak like you.” I kicked him out of my car.

So I could have emailed my son after I wrote the letter. But would it have been as anonymous as the letter? I don’t know much about computers, but I imagine that the world of computers is one of those worlds in which you can know everything about it and still be blindsided by something you didn’t know that ruins everything you did know. It’s like the study of history in that respect. That’s how Jennifer used to describe it, and that was twenty years ago. So I’m not sure if something can ever really be safe or anonymous on the Internet. But I knew I could be untraceable, and yet totally me, in the letter in my hand.

The walls in our house were unbearably thin, and so I would have heard any movement if it had occurred. I heard nothing. So they were still in the dining room. I emerged from the study, and there was still no sound. The smell of dinner was entirely gone now. There was a light drizzle outside that didn’t deserve an umbrella or deter me from leaving. I took the car and arrived at the highway exit to my son’s city in good time. There was hardly anyone on the road. His squat multi-unit condo looked deserted, too. In the now-descended night, light from streetlamps and illuminated billboards reflected onto the building, giving it a faint glow. There were no lights or movements in any of the large glass windows on the building’s second floor, and so I felt
assured of the truth of my gut feeling, that I knew that my son was not home. He wouldn’t have gone to bed at nine, and he was surely not sitting in his apartment in the dark. I used a fire escape on the building’s back facade and simply walked in through my son’s unlocked window.

Inside, the room was still but pleasantly cool, like central air circulated often. He had plenty of windows, and they stretched around the corner of the perimeter. Enough light filtered from outside for me to see that the living room and open-plan kitchen was almost entirely white: carpet, walls, counters, appliances, couches, end tables, tiling, trimming, sink, stove, fan. Some of the white was heathered. Other whites were matte, glossy, or even close to grayish, but all of it was creamy and clean. The white unity heightened the euphoric feeling I was already experiencing. What a beautiful room. I felt like I had entered a cloud. He had made a life for himself, a good life, the kind I’d had when I was his father. He was working some sort of steady, well-paying job, and he could buy the things he wanted that made life comfortable. He had sharp kitchen knives, a wireless stereo system, a well-designed trashcan. Sure, it was a little frigid, like our life had been, or at least how I had felt it had been. I even wondered, quickly, if the severe monochromatic design he favored had anything to do with the adversity he had faced in overcoming his dumb grief at my death. There were no soft lines at all. I’m not saying it was all right angles and jagged edges, but the swoops and curves of the electronics and counter edges were more like those of a human femur or a racetrack. There was a
forcefulness to them. No intimacy at all. But it was my son’s. Everything around me spoke of success, and I almost wept.

But then I remembered the letter, which I felt suddenly in my hand, and I walked around the apartment to find a suitable place for it. Where would he want to find it? I was glad the envelope was white.

I saw a picture of his mother in a frame on the wall. It was done in pencil, but by an skilled and observant hand. Her features, but also her aura, her whole sharpness in living, was evident from the picture. She had her hair pulled back in a style that she hadn’t favored in our time together, but which I could easily see her adopting. I suddenly wished not to be her lover again, but to be her employee, to take her orders. To have those eyes look down over that nose and tell me what to do. Maybe that was what had been missing in my life with them: a salary. If only I had been a salaried employee. The picture’s prominent placement in the living room told me that he loved her. I did not see a picture of me, but maybe there was one somewhere else, like in the bedroom. But I wasn’t ready to go into his bedroom. Maybe next time. I peeked into the bedroom through the open door and saw the unmade but still very orderly bed. No picture of me was visible from the doorway, but to be honest, I didn’t look too hard. Honestly, I was starting to feel a little disconnected. Yes, I expected to feel disconnected from a son who thought I was dead, but it was also the nicest home I had been in in over a decade, ever since that wild year that my daughter became short-lived best friends with the daughter of a former pro
athlete in town. I was just a visitor, a visitor about to leave something that felt more and more like a comment card rather than a missive from dear old dad.

My son had a second bedroom with what was clearly a guest bed and I felt comfortable going in there. Maybe I’d find a place to leave the letter. Bookshelves lined one wall, and the window over the bed gave the room a muted glow. In a corner of the room there was a unique object, something large and dark. I approached it. The light from the window illuminated its edges. Here I did begin to weep. What I saw before me confirmed my rightness in driving there that night, in setting in motion everything that had followed. I felt a connection not only with my son, but with my whole past. I laid my hand on the mahogany desk. My son had my beautiful desk. And on this desk lay several pens and pencils. And in the center drawer lay a pad of paper. This pad was blank. I checked the box drawer. In the box drawer he had filed dozens of completed drawings. I looked through the drawings. So he was an artist, and an architect, and a political cartoonist, and an urban planner, and a game designer, and so many other things. Or maybe, I thought, he was none of these, really, but he just pretended at them when he sat at his desk. Whatever the case, his breadth of his skill caused me to weep harder. I shut the drawer. I now knew exactly where I would leave the letter. I placed it on the surface of the desk. I adjusted it carefully, listening contentedly to the sound of the paper sliding against the wood. I wanted the envelope to be in the exact center of the desk. It was the least I could do. He would appreciate it. I knew he would.
I stood over the desk as the evening turned into night. I felt a muted joy. I was secure in the certainty that this letter would make meaningful contact with my first son. He would read my words, and the words would relieve some of the stress of his life. I could feel the stress exiting my body as I looked at the letter in its perfect place. I hadn’t realized how closely I had come to cracking. In my newly peaceful mood, I thought of my son and daughter, the ones who had been sitting around that depleted dinner table. Why did they have to be so mad? We had all been so happy once. I felt the dark wood of the desk and remembered when they were young. I remembered the day I had gone to buy each of them a pocketknife. My daughter was eleven, and my son was ten. It was seven years into our time together, and it finally felt like I had always lived with them. That spreading normalcy, the completeness of our family unit, changed every gesture. It reawoke the feeling in me of that first year, right after I had died, when I woke up every morning next to Suzie with the knowledge that a family was precious, that a family could be lost, and that family could be found. A family could disappear forever, too. Or: you could wake up one day next to the woman you loved and walk downstairs to find children eager for your company, your wisdom, your words.

About that first year: within the freshness was an eagerness that, when I thought about it too subtly, made me sad. I’d be stuck in traffic and arrive home late. By the looks on their faces when I walked in the door, you’d think they hadn’t expected me to come home at all, that I was the twist ending in a
movie. I think that’s part of why I became such a talker in that first year, and how the pocketknives became an issue in the seventh. It was the complete opposite of my behavior in the first family, where Jennifer and my son did all of the talking. So with my talking surely I was reacting against my previous silence, but also I was trying to fill the space so that my brain couldn’t flash back to those years, those years my family had endured without me and I had endured in a different family. I wanted to tell my family stories to fill that space, and I learned quickly that they liked stories from my childhood. Stories about me and my parents and my hometown. The blue skies and the flat land and the one hill where we sledded in the winter and rode bikes in the summer. The heavy woods around the river. The creek. The frogs we’d found. The games we played at night. But then one morning during breakfast, my daughter said, “Dad, you sure talk a lot about pocketknives.”

I was surprised by this. “What?” The story I was telling, about breaking a neighbor’s window by accident with a heavy stick fashioned into a spear, dissipated in my mind, and I saw them sitting at the table across from me eating Pop-Tarts.

“It does seem like they come up a lot,” my son said. “Like, everybody had one.”

“Yeah,” I said. I took a bite out of the corner of my cold Pop-Tart and thought about the rusted edges of my childhood friend Mike’s pocketknife prodding an anthill. “I guess we all had them.”

“Why?” my daughter asked.
Yes, why? I didn’t immediately have an answer, and I almost repeated what I had already said, that we just had them. I almost told them about Mike prodding the anthill. But then I remembered how I had felt when my father bought me my pocketknife. It was an initiation. We had gone to the sporting goods store together. We went to the back, where they had the BB guns, the bows and arrows, and the glass case of knives. We looked for several minutes. There were more varieties than I had expected. He chose, but he had asked me which I liked.

“How would you both like pocketknives?”

They looked at each other before they answered, which I didn’t expect. I’d figured we’d all sustain eye contact, and that I would see something in their eyes. I had thought they had mentioned the pocketknives because they’d wanted them. I was reminded again how much they looked like Suzie with their dark hair and round faces. The normalcy threatened to vanish, but then they both erupted: “Yeah!”

That weekend, neither could be bothered to go to the sporting goods store with me. I went alone, and in the back was a glass case of knives not unlike the one from when I was young. While I peered through the glass my cell phone rang. It was Suzie. She said that our daughter wanted to talk to me.

“Daddy,” she said. “It’s really nice that you want to get me a pocketknife, but I don’t really want one. I wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

“You could whittle,” I said. “You can cut things. You could…” I almost said “prod an anthill.”
“I know, Daddy,” she said, “But what’s really important is that you wanted to get them for us. We really appreciate it.” So my son didn’t want one either. I bought a pocketknife anyway, one of the cheapest Swiss Army ones, and I kept it in a drawer in my study, never to be removed.

It was during my reverie over the mahogany desk in the guest room that I heard the metal-on-metal rustling of a doorknob, and then a delicate creak. I froze. It was the front door. My hand jerked in panic and I disturbed the letter where it lay. The letter spun in a circle until it rested vertically on the polished wood desktop. My skin prickled hot with panic and the white letter looked now like a descending monolith over the desk. It looked ominous.

A deep voice and footsteps entered the apartment. I couldn’t hear what the voice was saying, but it was male and assured. The voice, hovering over the tap of leather soles on tile, calmly explained something to someone. Calmly, but insistently. Insistently above all. I felt a surge of knowing. My son. This was my son.

He was home, and so was I. I swallowed my energy and stayed still. Though I felt tense, I knew luck protected me. What besides luck had led me to reject my son’s bedroom for his guest bedroom? Could I have picked a better room as an intruder? I was invisible from where I stood in the corner by the desk, and so I didn’t move. My son continued to talk.

It became clear to me that there was only one set of footsteps, and so my son was talking to someone on a telephone or to himself. This soothed me—my son was alone. He would go through his normal routine. His routine
surely wouldn’t lead him to enter the guest bedroom. In my house, when was the last time had I had entered the guest bedroom on a regular night? Not that the house with my current family had a guest bedroom, but the one I had with my first family, with Jennifer, which had had two. I had hardly ever gone into those rooms. I could picture them clearly. They were beautiful, and they were nearly identical, decorated in shades of beige. We hardly ever used those rooms. In fact, who stepped inside those rooms besides the housekeeper? Jennifer’s young cousin used one of the rooms once. She was in for the weekend looking at a prestigious nearby private liberal arts college. She wanted to study theater. She delivered us a monologue at the dinner table one night.

Her monologue was about a poor Mississippi woman in the early 20th century receiving a gift, a new red dress, and she wished her dead husband, a war casualty, could see it. Jennifer had been moved, but Jennifer hadn’t shown it, and so her cousin apologized and told us both that she was only practicing. And then she locked eyes with me, for I had reacted even less, and she said that back then, during World War One, she would have been old enough to be a war widow.

My son continued to speak. I heard clear words and phrases within his chatter. Something about “foot-candles,” something else about the “legal limits of darkness,” and then he entered another room in which his voice echoed to a comic degree. The phrase “how dark is dark?” reverberated with the spectacular authority of a vengeful god.
He was in the bathroom.

I continued to stand very still. In hindsight, this was when I could’ve made a run for it. I heard him urinate. He continued to talk and did not modulate his voice or attempt to cover the thunderous sounds of his urine. I concluded that he was talking to himself. He asked Siri to look up the words “darkness” and “dullness.” She described dullness as he began to wash his hands.

“One: lack of interest or excitement. Two: lacking brightness, vividness, or sheen. Three: the quality of being slow to understand; the quality of not perceiving things distinctly.” He continued to wash his hands. He was so thorough. Again I felt that twinge of recognition. He turned off the water.

“Sheen.” My son said the word critically. All was quiet for a moment. He rolled it over his tongue once more: “Sheen.” I held my breath. His footsteps echoed into his open-plan living room and kitchen. Metal clattered on marble countertop and then the fridge opened and I realized: he was making dinner.

Over the next thirty minutes, my son boiled water, chopped vegetables, minced herbs. He sauteed. From my vantage point in the darkness by the desk, I could only guess his recipe. But with each emerging sound I inhaled a fresh new fragrance: garlic, onion, basil, chicken. Many of these scents brought back memories of the first family. I also remembered a moment with my other son, only two years before, when he had said that the green beans Suzie had cooked didn’t have any flavor.
“No flavor!” I had said. Suzie then gave me the “you’re loud” look, but I kept going. The comment had lit a fire under me. “No flavor! Why, if there’s no flavor, it should be easy to shovel them down!

“No flavor! That’s a blessing!” I raised my hands to the ceiling. “We should be thankful for a lack of flavor! Because sometimes the flavor is bad. Sometimes things taste bad in this world. I should know. When someone tries to add flavor, sometimes it goes wrong. My first son, he was a great cook, but when it went wrong, it went wrong.”

“I think you need to leave the table,” Suzie said to me. And she was right. It was the first time I had brought up my first son with the family. That was the breach. My daughter gawked at me, wondering I’m sure whether that “first son” I had mentioned was real or not, but my son looked down at his plate, as if he were trying to look at his own reflection. But he couldn’t, because the green beans blocked the way.

Steam wafted into the guest bedroom from the kitchen. As he cooked, my son kept up a steady stream of chatter about this project at work. He sounded eager, ready, full of ideas. Earlier, when I had understood his tone as confident and calm, I had misinterpreted the signals. He had been uneasy, unsure where to go next. And now, while he was cooking, he was brimming with possible solutions. But I knew, from a lifetime of problem-solving in both my professional and private lives, that these were still only possible solutions. He wasn’t out of the woods, and he knew it. I wondered about his project.
He ate swiftly. He placed his dishes into the dishwasher and started it. Against the gentle hum he was quiet. He entered the guest bedroom, where he turned on the lights and found me.

At first neither of us spoke. We faced each other. I stood with one hand on the desk. He was wearing a crisp white dress shirt with a cutaway collar and gray, slim-fitting slacks. His blonde hair was completely shorn. His roguish eyebrows bristled over his eyes. His jawline traced the outlines of his skull. He didn’t speak, but he looked at me as what I was: an intruder.

He was the spitting image of his mother. I saw the nose, the posture, the broad shoulders. To his shorn head I could easily add her hair, either the loose, styled shape of the Jennifer I knew, or the pulled-back bun of the Jennifer I saw in his drawing in the living room. He placed his hands on his hips.

“What the fuck is that?”

I didn’t speak. Did I dare tell him that “that” was his father?

“I said: what the fuck is that?”

Then I looked down at my left hand. I had grabbed the letter off the desk. “It’s a letter.”

“A letter?”

“Yes,” my throat was dry. I sounded raspy. “To you.”

“You broke into my house to leave a letter on my desk?” He moved forward, and I could see in his right hand something I hadn’t seen before: the heel of the handle of a kitchen knife. The blade now gleamed in the overhead
light. Had he heard me? Suddenly, the scene had the hint of something planned.

“I would never hurt you,” I stammered. “Please read the letter.” I offered it to him.

He held the knife up openly as a weapon now, and with his free hand he reached out with the palm up. I gave him the letter. He took the tip of the blade and opened it. I saw on his skull the rivulets and rivers of tiny blond hairs. His hair still looked, even at its least visible, perfect to me. So he still had his hair. He just chosen to shave it. Why? What kind of mind had made these decisions? I noticed terrible veins on his head, veins that pumped as he read the letter and said, “Who sent you?”

“Excuse me?”

“This is my father’s handwriting. I can tell.” He showed the knife to me.

“No one sent me.”

He didn’t seem to believe me. “Who sent you?” he screamed. “Why do you have this letter?” He jabbed the knife closer to me, so that it was nearly two feet away. I moved backward, and as I lurched toward the desk, almost falling into it, I felt my full weight, the sheer difference in me from the man my son knew: the lost hair, the glasses, the moustache, the bags running under the eyes, the girth, the low quality of my clothing. No wonder he didn’t seem to recognize me.
“I said: why are you here?” There was an edge of desperation to in his voice.

This was not how I wanted to meet him. He needed some time to get to know me before he knew who I really was. But still, I didn’t want to lie to him, so I said, “I know your father,” which was true.

“Knew my father, you mean.”

“Knew your father,” I repeated. It wouldn’t have helped to tell the truth about my death at that moment.

“And this is a letter from him,” he said, holding up the letter in his left hand. “Wow.” He moved backwards and leaned against the bookshelves. My message had clearly moved him. I relaxed. “You’re not related to him, are you?” he said.

I thought it would be a mistake to think over my answer too long, and so I went with my instinct. “No.”

“Really?” he asked. “You look kind of like him.”

His eyes were on me. “People used to say that.”

“Well, were you planning on getting out of here or what?” I had to laugh. He was so forthright. He had really learned how to compose himself in this world. He knew how to get what he wanted. He could see relationships. He knew about motivation.

I decided to act amiable. “Yeah, I was just leaving. Sorry about that.”

His posture softened in response to my change in tone. He looked me up and down, anew. Some sort of calculation occurred behind his eyes. He
took out his phone and it looked like he was texting someone. I feared he was texting the police, then I thought, Who texts the police? Still, maybe he was texting them.

Then he said, “You sure you wouldn’t like to stay for a drink?”

The savoir faire! Now this was my son! He still held the knife.

“Sure,” I said. “I’d love a drink.”

“Maybe even two,” he said, “if you can tell me about my father.” He gave me a smirk and motioned with the knife and exited the room. The whole tenor of the night had changed. I was now a strange friend. I followed, and in a comfortable armchair that felt like a cloud I drank vodka so smooth it went down like water. We talked. Really, I talked. My son had a lot of questions about his father. I told him everything I knew about his father’s life, the things he didn’t know, the things I’d never told him. I told him all of this, of course, as if these things hadn’t happened to me. Who was I? I was a childhood friend of myself, and so I was around in a lot of the memories. I even told a story about us playing with pocketknives, and this time I prodded the anthill. Fireants came out! So many of the stories were simple variations of the same ones I had told my other children. In fact, telling these stories to my other children felt like the best preparation for this moment. As I talked about my early hardships and how unexpected life with Jennifer and him was, I hoped he finally understood me. I wasn’t quite sure how he was taking it, because a curious thing happened: my son asked me if I had any kids of my own, and I said that I had had three, but the first one I had lost when he was ten.
“Sorry to hear that,” he said. “Here, have another drink.” He poured me my third vodka, or was it my fourth? my second? and we drank to those we had lost, he for his father, and me for my son. That seemed like the moment to mention to him who I really was, to break through what was so close to the truth. But then he asked me, why the letter now?

“There must be a reason,” he said. “If you’ve had it all these years.”

“I didn’t have it all these years. Only recently,” and I wavered, “did I find it.”

He looked at me intensely. “Where did you find it?”

“I found it in a place I had never thought to look.”

He breathed deeply and leaned back in his chair. I thought he might close his eyes and fall asleep he seemed so relaxed and at peace. Instead he leaned forward and said, “I have a project due at midnight. My boss is going to kill me if it isn’t in.” He said he helped companies determine what kinds of buildings were and weren’t illegal. It was big business. I didn’t ask for more information about his actual job title. He was treating me like the bumpkin whom I was portraying myself to be, and so I accepted it. They were trying to figure out what was the darkest warehouse legally possible. But there were other hurdles, too. Human hurdles.

“So I need your advice: would you work in a factory in the near-dark? Would you do it? I can’t quite get into the mindset of someone who would work there, and I need to. You always need to see people for what they want and what they need.” He took a sip. “So, could you work there?”
As I was ostensibly some sort of low-skilled worker, my answer was valuable to him. And so I made a show of thinking deeply. It all reminded me of when Suzie and I had had that fleeting conversation about whether we should kill Jennifer. It had happened right after I had convinced Suzie that I couldn’t divorce her. My winning argument for no divorce had been: “Just think about it. Can you imagine my having to interact with them? Their floating around in the background of our lives? Our children knowing them? I need to forget them. We need to never know they were there. And believe me, Jennifer is rich enough, smart enough, that if she wants us to know she’s there… we’ll know!”

That, Suzie had understood. And that’s when we’d had the idea that we could kill Jennifer. Just like this moment here, I had leaned back and let the other person know I was thinking deeply. But really, both times, I was thinking: am I capable? Am I capable of doing the things that should be done? Am I capable of doing the things that shouldn’t be done? That night, with Suzie, when we had brought it up, I had pictured myself in a dark room, with some kind of blunt object, killing Jennifer. But, also, I had pictured her jumping out of the way. Also I had pictured all of the ways she could somehow turn it against me. I had pictured my son stopping me, suddenly behind me with a glinting weapon of his own. And so I had said, “No.” And that’s what started talking about my death.

I imagined working in a nearly dark factory, fumbling everyday for a few minutes before my eyes adjusted and I could do my work. It sounded
dangerous, and I didn’t even know what this job hypothetically entailed, but I thought about all of the nearly dark places I had been that night, my study, his apartment, and how much I had enjoyed it, how much I had felt that I’d been my best that night, in the near-darkness. My eyes had adjusted, and I had moved freely. I told my son, “Yes.”

My son’s expression did not change. He looked at his phone. “Well, my boss is coming over here to talk about the project. I would like you to stay.”

I told him I would stay and talk to his boss.

“Great, she’ll be right over. By the way, would you like some dinner?”

I couldn’t resist.

He fed me chicken over pasta with a homemade tomato sauce. He had added a generous portion of basil as a garnish. The flavor was exquisite, and so simple, and I was famished. The memory of the dinner I did not get to eat lingered in my mind. I wished I could have eaten both meals side-by-side to see which one I liked more. My son smiled as he watched me devour his dish at his kitchen table.

“Seconds?”

I said I would love seconds. He took my plate.

The doorbell rang. He spooned more noodles onto my plate. “That must be my boss.” Still, he wasn’t in any sort of hurry. He took his time, chopping more basil using the same knife he had threatened me with in the guest bedroom. The doorbell didn't ring again. The boss, apparently, waited
patiently. How could he keep his boss waiting like that? I thought. What kind of a boss was so patient?

What was this idyllic world my son lived in? He handed me the plate. Then he refilled my glass. I was on the edge of no longer being able to drive, and to empty the cup would seal my fate, but I found it impossible to refuse such a generous offer and I gladly took a rather large swig. I lifted my fork. “I’m glad you’re loving it.” The voice came from right above me. My son had not moved from right beside me. I looked up. “You’re going to love my boss.”

And so what I’m saying is that I shouldn’t have been surprised when the door opened and I saw her outline. It had been a long time, and we both had changed. And though I had tried so hard for so long to banish the idea of seeing her again from my mind, I found that I was prepared. The food nearly fell out of my mouth, but I kept it in. I chewed diligently. I swallowed. Hard.
QUOTATIONS FROM OTHER TEXTS

IN “EARL CROSS”


IN “BIOGRAPHIES”


