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The last invisible continent

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University of Iowa

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THE LAST INVISIBLE CONTINENT

by

Michael Allen Potter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

July 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Patricia Foster
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of Michael Allen Potter has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English at the July 2011 graduation.

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CHAPTER I

ITHAKA, 1989

On the night of January 25th, 2010, I was standing on a bridge on the Cornell campus holding a bottle of Ommegang Rare Vos and an old university course catalog. Above the din of the water below, I did my best to act normal when pedestrians approached from either side in order to avoid interaction, pretending for a few strides, at most, that I also had a destination elsewhere.

From page five of the January 26th, 1989, edition of The Citizen, in Auburn, New York:

“Missing Student’s Body Found”

ITHACA (AP) – The body of a Cornell University freshman who disappeared last month during exam week was found Wednesday in a creek near campus, police said.

Ithaca police divers pulled the body of Adam Stross, 18, of Loudonville, from Fall Creek at about 11:05 a.m., police said. His body was found in a 10-foot pool of water about 200 feet from Triphammer Bridge, a suspension bridge that spans Fall Creek Gorge along the campus’ border.

Ithaca police and Cornell campus security officers had been searching for Stross since he disappeared on the afternoon of Dec. 15 after helping a fellow student pack her car.

Police did not rule Stross’ death a suicide and said an autopsy is scheduled."

Twenty-one years after the fact, I was suspended above that very same lethal topography having second thoughts about my dark pilgrimage. There was only one person on the planet who knew where I was, but that was an accident. I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t want to get talked out of going. Part of me knew before I boarded the bus
to Ithaca that this would be one of the most difficult things I’d ever done, but the entirety of me that was staring into the frigid black-and-white water churning between the jagged cliff walls hundreds of feet down had no doubt whatsoever.

I spent my freshman year of college at Cornell, but I was only truly present for a month or two. The brightness of my (projected) Ivy-League future was eclipsed by my friend’s disappearance and death and a series of funerals and memorial services (for others who lost their lives to terrorism and various cancers) that clustered relentlessly around the opening months of my life in higher education.

Two decades later, I’m shocked by two things: 1) That I ever graduated from any college at all, and 2) That I’m still in school to this day. I withdrew from Cornell University (by phone) after that first year, thinking that it was a big, punk-rock fuck you to the conventional life that was being scripted for me at the time. What I could not have predicted then was just how unconventional things would become, that there would be so many casualties, so many drugs, cops, and court dates.

I met a man at Cornell (not in the way that I would meet men later) who inspired me to change my own life in that first year. He was a foul-mouthed PhD candidate who taught the two sections of composition that I was required to take as a freshman. His name was Kirk and he encouraged me and another student to pursue both writing and publishing (even though we were not yet declared English majors) and for me to submit work to an annual undergraduate fiction competition. I did and I won with a piece of nonfiction that read like a play (which makes total sense in retrospect). My happiest memories of my time at Cornell all seem to involve Kirk in some way, like the dramatic reading of Don Quixote that he choreographed one afternoon where I played the role of a
nonspeaking, but energetic, windmill spinning on top of a seminar table in Morrill Hall. Or the intimate nights that I spent with Freidrich Nietzsche in the A.D. White Library trying to keep up with the (relentless) readings for his classes. I let the pages in my psych and sociology classes pile up, untouched, in my room as I read outside of my official course of study in a gorgeous oasis of wrought-iron and polished wood that had nothing to do with it, either.

I’ve always been wary of, and uncomfortable with, anything overly-formalized: Education, religion, conversations, meals. I was often the target of chalk, erasers, and other projectiles thrown by frustrated teachers, priests, and commanding officers prior to my acceptance at Cornell (at a baker’s dozen of Catholic, public, military, and Catholic military schools). This innate skepticism about the educational system was cemented for me when they pulled Adam’s decision into the light of day.

There was one bright afternoon, just before finals, though, when the four of us rejected the idea of another trip to Uris Library and, instead, replaced it with some quality time on the ice at Lynah Rink. (Adam was dating my girlfriend’s roommate and we were their romantic interlopers allowed, often with lightest of knocks, into the darkest and quietest parts of their nights). What started as a leisurely couples’ skate quickly became a competitive game of tag and, by far, one of the best days of my life. Jill and Sarah squealed like the teenage girls that they were and played along while Adam and I tried to outskate and outmaneuver each other like wild animals who found themselves suddenly upright and balanced on slivers of stainless steel. I don’t know if I was wearing gloves that day or not, but I left the rink bleeding, bruised, exhausted, and euphoric, the ice anaesthetisizing my wounds until my hands, knees, and shins thawed out later.
Within weeks, however, I was papering the campus with XEROXed fliers with his picture and physical description on them.

And that exercise changed me and it changed those around me, too. We started telling each other lies about where he was. The most popular version of the lie was inspired by the music that he loved, particularly Otis Redding’s, Dock of the Bay. We conjured idyllic images of him with his bare feet dangling off of a pier into the Pacific Ocean leaving the cold, and the pressure, and Cornell far behind. We comforted and we counseled Sarah who was, of course, immediately shaken by his sudden, wordless absence. Everyone in our circle of friends upped their collective alcohol intake and people on the outside seemed to want in on our pain. (Maybe they just wanted to be there at the exact moment that one of us cracked, so that they could slip off to their own room, click the door shut, and call their friends back home to tell them just how rough it really was.) There was one Saturday night in the dorm, where we all lived on the fourth floor, when the party was confined to a single elevator shaft. Ed (one of my roommate’s friends from down the hall) spent hours with his girlfriend (I can’t remember her name if I ever knew it) strumming his acoustic guitar and screaming Lola, by The Kinks, for hours and hours while people got in and out of the box adding their drunken voices and contributing bottles of whatever to the cacophony as they did. The same song, over and over and over again. Somehow I knew that this was the calm before the storm. Adam was also fond of The Who’s Baba O’Reilly, the song that everyone calls, “Teenage Wasteland.” The one that opens every g*ddamn episode of CSI.

I didn’t drink until after I left Cornell, but as people in my life have often pointed out, I more than made up for the lost time. My introduction to demon alcohol was in the
parking lot of St. John The “Divine,” where Adam’s memorial was held by his family, where I told his mother that it was “an honor” to have known her son, where his best friend broke down on the altar and pointed his finger at that very same woman and her husband and screamed, “They did this! They did this to him!” before he was escorted from the pulpit by another lacrosse player from our floor. I wanted to stand and yell, “Yes, yes, yes!” because I knew that kind of pressure and because I knew that Adam had felt incredible shame at being waitlisted at MIT. That Cornell was his safety school.

When the university sent counselors to Cascadilla Hall to help us process the discovery of his body, I reacted like a pit bull on a leash to their therapeutic tones and bullshit theories, actually shouting, “Where were you before? Where were you?” before being pulled to the floor by Sarah, Jill, and (maybe) Ed. Pete then escorted me back to our room where he stood in front of the door with his arms folded across his broad chest refusing to let me leave until the suicide presentation was over and the clinicians had left the building. (Pete had executed a similar maneuver once before when I got into a fist fight with the two steroid-loving frat boys from down the hall just after I had been lofted into a wall by one of them. He remains that awesome to this day.)

My friend, Michelle, gave me a new nickname after I was accepted to Iowa. She called me “The Degree Collector” and I thought it was howlingly funny at the time. My plan, my goal, before I landed in The Midwest was to leave The Writing University with another MFA, the right one this time, and a completed memoir. I went to force my own hand, to separate my life story from my daily life through writing, to workshop the pain away. I left Ithaca to escape the memory of Adam’s suicide, I moved to California to escape an abusive past in Albany, and I fled Iowa City to escape the devil in my bed. But
all of this running, ultimately, landed me in an exorbitantly-priced studio apartment back in my hometown almost equidistant from the hospital where I was born and the orphanage where I was subsequently placed. I see the patterns, I understand the mistakes I’ve made, but I’m still not convinced that I will ever write what I need to write, to ever clear that fence. Five years into my three-year program, all that I’ve seemed to accomplish is to shovel more cash onto the mountain of my pre-existing student debt and to confuse yet another weary thesis director.

“Writer’s block” is a concept that I have never given much credence to and a phrase that I’ve actively avoided using in print, online, and in conversation, but I could be the poster child for the national campaign. Friends, colleagues, and people that I’ve never liked (but have been forced to interact with), have used the phrase as a get-out-of-jail card for failed papers and missed deadlines like a fake doctor’s note for another hangover. I’d always thought that they were just lazy and weak. When I’ve read about Famous Authors and their heroic battles with it, I’ve scoffed at their luxurious (and well-documented) temper tantrums. But now I think I’m starting to understand because now I’m outing myself as something of a sham. For years and years, I’ve been busy convincing friends and professors, both near and far, that I’ve been diligently typing away at my “difficult” memoir, publishing just enough every so often to convince myself that this was true along the way, as well. The truth is, however, that I’ve been trying to run from myself and my story for over half of my life now. The problem these days is that I’ve gotten to a point (personally, professionally, and academically) that requires me to have finished the manuscript yesterday. Last year. Ten years ago. I can’t move forward because I don’t want to write about myself anymore (even though I do, in fact, want to write). Friends
have suggested that I should present my life as fiction, to write a semi-autobiographical novel, but I can’t, I couldn’t, and I won’t. Which probably makes me one of the most-reluctant memoirist that Iowa may ever see.

All of which brought me back to the bridge in Ithaca, even though I’d sworn off bridges in general out in California. When I used to play tour guide to the legions of friends who visited my shabby railroad apartment next to The Central Freeway in San Francisco, I would often organize a hike across The Golden Gate, but after a half-dozen successful field trips back-and-forth to Tiburon and Sausalito, I just couldn’t bring myself to do it anymore. Part of the problem was the dipshit fascination with signs that, essentially, asked people not to jump expressed by one tourist in particular during one of her visits. And another part of the problem was the way my body started to feel drained of blood, my legs to jelly, my head to feel so heavy and unsteady on my shoulders as to pull me accidentally over the railing. The views of The San Francisco Bay from the bridge are well-documented and breathtaking in person, but I started to crouch a little bit more every time I went, to bear left on the path toward the traffic and away from the wide-open potential of the buena vistas, all the while putting on a brave face for my out-of-town guests. Making jokes, even (but never ever in the direction of self-destruction). Was this out of respect for what Adam had done in Ithaca? Partially. It was also out of respect for the other strangers who had thrown themselves from this iconic structure. And another small part of it had to do with self-preservation. I think that some of the impetus behind my own silence has been the fear that if I spoke about the unspeakable, that it would somehow unleash, or even encourage, the same behavior in myself. The same fear, and then some, can be applied to my reluctance to write about my time at Cornell.
Complicating this gag order were myriad questions of tact and respect for the dead. Did I have the right to tell this part of Adam’s life story? What if his father read what I’d written? His mother? Why would I subject a reader, any reader (familial or not), to something so unfathomable and so ugly? And why would I ever want to think about this again?

I’m writing about my friend now, twenty-two years after his death, because I’m still not over his loss and because I haven’t been able to move on. Rather than simply forgetting, I have been trying, very un成功fully, to unthink this epoch completely. Therapy hasn’t put a dent into my avoidance. Sobriety didn’t do the trick, either, as much as I wanted it to be The Silver Bullet of Well-Adjustment. This isn’t simply an exercise in how fucked-up I still feel, but a conscious declaration of my vehement non-acceptance of what happened at Cornell back in 1989 (as body counts should have no place in academia). But I’m also writing about my friend now, twenty-two years after his death, because I need to let go of some of the anger that I felt then and some of the pain (a fraction, anything) that I’ve been carrying with me for so long (both literally and metaphorically). The autumn of 2010 found me moving into a new apartment in a new city, with another mattress on another unfamiliar floor, like a forty-year-old foster kid moving his box of allotted belongings from one placement to another. Except that I’ve got more than one box now after all of the living that I’ve done and the weight is something that I don’t want to bear any longer.

That night on that bridge was a memorial. An exorcism. Immersion therapy of my own design. Even though my hands were shaking so badly that my dexterity was almost lost, I tore out the first page from the book indiscriminately and let the sheaf of yellowed
newsprint fall over the railing. The way it meandered through the night air conveyed its indifference to its mission, its significance. After I’d started the process, I knew that I’d have to see it through, but I was not sure that I could complete my mission without drawing unwanted attention from strangers who actually wanted to use the bridge to get from point A to point B or from students or security (who could have seen me from the path that runs along the edge of the Arts Quad above). I let another page go. And another. And another. And then I had to step into the shadows on the other side of the gorge to avoid the scrutiny of a well-dressed Asian man who looked like he might have been on the faculty. I feinted to my right with my head bowed in order to exude “purpose” and waited for the sound of his footsteps to recede into the distance. Aware of the fact that my time might have been more limited than I had previously thought, I sped up my efforts until I got to fourteen and had to stop again, had to convey “destination” with my gait and my deportment to the undergraduates who looked my way, mid-conversation, and then abruptly looked away as they passed. And then it was just me and my mission again, alone together, and I tore the remaining pages from the catalog and let them fall in rapid sequence, like a school of two-dimensional fish, caught and then released, returning to their aquatic habitat below.

Twenty-one pages, one for each of the years that Adam had been gone and that I’d still been here. I pulled the bottle out of my bag, keenly aware of the fact that this was the first alcohol that I’d purchased since I quit drinking and wondered, for more than a moment or two, if I was just going to down its contents right there, right then. For some reason I had assumed that it was a screw-top, but it wasn’t and I hadn’t thought to bring a bottle opener (as my first choice had been whiskey), so I used the bridge itself to pull it
off, scraping the fresh coat of battleship grey in the process. And I was dismayed by the
damage for some reason. I held the bottle over the rail and drained its contents into the
roar, but I did not pray because there was no point. I capped the empty bottle and
returned it to my bag, pulling out my camera in the hopes that, with the determined
gesture and the new prop, I might cloak myself in the guise of a lost tourist. With my
hands trembling more than ever, I pointed the lens at one of the faces that had been
stenciled onto several surfaces, onto different planes of the bridge's construction, and I
started shooting as many as I could, but the tunnel vision of the view finder left me alone
with the portrait of someone who looked like my dead friend and my heart throbbed in
my chest, my temples, and my ears and I had to look away. It was the same face
replicated in different colors and sizes and their collective gaze was disquieting, the paint
running down their faces like tears or stigmata. Like they’d all seen something that
should never be witnessed.

Was this Adam’s countenance abstracted (because that would just be fucked)? Or
were these tributes and protests for the lives of other lost men who had gone over this
very same edge? I’ve had a year to consider both options and I still have no idea
(although I heard that there was, in fact, a rash of suicides on the Cornell campus before I
went back to make this particular peace). Either scenario is problematic.

My life stopped on January 25th, 1989, when police divers discovered my friend’s
lifeless body in that icy water, but my story also begins on that very same day.

I have never written about this before.

I had to tell someone.

I’m sorry that it had to be you.
I had to steal time to meet my mother, time between Thanksgiving dinner with my adoptive family in Albany, New York, and my flight back to San Francisco on Sunday morning. Originally, the plan had been to do it on Friday, but I had so much to drink and to smoke (and I met a man at the bar) on Thursday night that I was still buzzing with the subatomic hum of a two-day hangover by the time I landed on her doorstep on Saturday afternoon in Schenectady (about twenty minutes from the aforementioned fake family).

I’m standing on my mother’s porch (thinking of the song, “The Summer of ’69” -- just about the time I was conceived now that I do the math on it) holding the hand of an old friend before I ring the doorbell to the upper apartment of a building that wouldn’t look out of place on the sad side of Old Sacramento, a gold-rush ghost town. I’m thirty years old and have lived my life almost entirely in reverse: I grew up, got a degree, ran away to the West Coast, and went to graduate school only to boomerang back to Upstate New York to search for my actual family. My heart is beating in my temples and my brain feels swollen in my skull. I squeeze my old friend’s hand again as we wait, hardly breathing at all, while a woman that I hope is my mother descends the stairs somewhere in the deep wooden recesses of a long-neglected structure. The air outside is crisp, but not cold. There is little happening on the street, but passing cars seem to slow like they sense that something is about to happen. We sat and listened to “Levon,” the second track from Elton John’s 1971 Madman Across the Water album (“He was born a pauper to a pawn on a Christmas Day/When The New York Times said, “God is dead””) in my old friend’s
Chevy, but the extra time didn’t (couldn’t, really) help to prepare me for this moment. Nothing could. No one could. I couldn’t and now I want to run and run and run and never stop.

The door opens and there is a tentative, “Hellooo?” and there she is. My mother. I recognize her wavy hair and slow-burn smile from the mirror. As she wipes away tears with a shredded Kleenex, I introduce her to my old friend, thank my old friend for everything’s she’s done to get me to this moment, and then step into the darkness. There is an incredible emptiness to the dirty hallway as it is simply a large room containing a stairwell that was paved over years ago with warped Linoleum. Straight ahead and to the left is the door to the first-floor apartment and, in front of us, the steps leading to my mother’s Section 8 apartment. Apologies rush across my tongue and crowd behind my teeth like morning commuters to a departing train, but I say nothing as we climb the lopsided flight. There are a half-dozen locks staggered along the back of the inside door and my mother engages them all after we enter. We’re in a small paneled living room and the air is dense with cigarette smoke and the chem-lab sting of cat piss. The blinds are closed, the curtains drawn. There is a dusty over-stuffed loveseat facing a mammoth console TV whose screen is layered with grey fuzz. The door to the room off to the left is open. The blinds are also closed, but there is light coming through and landing on a single bed with white sheets. A manic blue-and-yellow bird in a cage bounces between the planes of its wire confines. There is a short hallway off to the right and another room off of that. My mother flicks the switch to this small dark square as we move slowly towards the kitchen and black cats scatter away from filthy plastic bowls. An old microwave perched on an off-white filing cabinet reminds me of the televisions in the window of
The Noc-Noc club on Haight Street. In the large kitchen are two women seated at a large country blond-wood table.

One of the women is actually a man who lives downstairs and goes by the regal moniker of “Sir Jeffrey.” Sir Jeffrey is decked out in a black turtleneck from the 60s, thick black glasses from the 70s that take up most of his face, and a tall, black, beehive wig. Aunt Céline introduces herself by extending a wan bony hand and I think to myself how much she looks like a deranged Diana Ross impersonator with something like MS (there is a limp and a jerk to her gait as she approaches). I’m fascinated by the thick foundation trowled across the sharp angles of Aunt Céline’s face. The other woman has been staring at me with such intensity that I want to get through these formalities so that she can dial down the wattage on the whites of her eyes. Debbie is short and black and her hair is heading in so many directions simultaneously that it makes her look not unlike Buckwheat from *The Lil’ Rascals*. She’s been speaking nonstop since we stepped into the kitchen, a verbal loop of “ohmygoodnessohmygoodnessohmygoodness” that may never have ended if I hadn’t taken one of her hands in both of mine and introduced myself to her with an artificial exhuberance meant to cut her off immediately. No such luck, though. Her monologue continued with the cadence of a woman playing a role in a movie set on a Southern plantation before Abolition. “Oh, lawdy, Sonja! He look juss like you! Look at he hair an’ them blue eyes!”

Grease and nicotine have combined in this flat to give almost every surface an amber patina like fly paper. There’s not just one, but two depictions of The Last Supper on the wall behind the table, one between the windows that look out on the bar next door and another on a wall near the bathroom. A kitten hangs from a branch over the sink
above the caption: “Lord, Help Me Hang in There” and there is a glossy black unicorn clock with no hands opposite the refrigerator. (The mythical beast looks pained, like it’s been trapped against its will under layers of polyurethane for decades, while still retaining the hope of returning to the side of a van where it once lived.) My mother motions me into another room where a portrait of Jesus shoots light out of his outstretched palm over a Smith-Corona Sterling typewriter on a metal desk (that doesn’t quite match the filing cabinet in the room next door). There is an enormous, sun-faded dollar-store map of The United States on the opposite wall and I point out San Francisco to my mother and she smiles and moves back into the kitchen. Aunt Céline catches my arm before I get to the table and I’m suddenly deep in conference with The Supremes’ knock-off. Our voices are suddenly, and almost inexplicably, hushed as she runs down a laundry-list of issues that I need to know about my mother that my mother, who is well within earshot, isn’t supposed to hear, though. Aunt Céline is relishing her role of nosy neighbor/know-it-all (that she was clearly born to), but I haven’t spent years searching and, most recently, traveling across the width of the North American continent to hear about my mother third-hand. I’m polite, but cut Aunt Céline off before she can ramp up for Emmy gold and take a seat adjacent to my mother. (She is smoking, smiling, and still crying softly.) All the while indulging Debbie’s blathering better than I ever could under the best of circumstances. After a few moments, the neighbors finally receive my psychic FAX and we exchange more strange pleasantries before my mother unshackles the front door to release Debbie and Aunt Céline back into the wild.

I don’t know anything about schizophrenia except that my mother has it (and that my father does too). As my mother speaks (elliptically, relentlessly), I’m writing down
key names, addresses, and dates in a tiny green notebook like a rookie cop at his first bloody crime scene. There is now something like somatic recognition, as if every cell in my body is now screaming, “You found her! You found her! There she is! Right there! In front of you!” One location in particular stands out from the crowd of details: 83 Morris Street. I spent years on that very same Morris Street (at number 476) with various members of my fake families and, somewhere in between, there are nearly-identical apartment buildings (maybe five or six stories high) and zig/zaging up the sides of these solid brick structures are black iron fire escapes. When I was young (somewhere in the single digits), I would jump to catch the bottom of these steps in order to climb up on the roof of one or the other (it didn’t matter which). Once there (feeling tall and invincible), I would take a running start and hurtle from one asphalt-and-tar-covered roof to the other. The collective hang time above the shared courtyard comprises one of the best memories I have of growing up. In the air, I was in a state of something like suspended animation with time stopping as I took off and starting up again once I touched down again. Except for the joy of the thrill and the additional satisfaction of knowing that the friend back on the other roof (Nino? Jason? Danny? Duane?) wasn’t going to follow my flight path, dare or no dare, taunts of “chicken” or “chicken shit” falling like snowballs in July at their Keds while they made their lame excuses. Once, I convinced one of these long-lost friends into an apartment through an open window. We took nothing and didn’t stay long, but the transgression felt like a different type of flight entirely.

“I saw you,” she says.

“What?” I said, like people do when they don’t want to hear what they’ve heard or need more time to think about what they think they might have heard.
“I saw you,” she says again.

“Where?”

“At The Trading Port. You said, ‘Bad, bad, bad,’ and your mother took you out of the store,” which is a really fucked up thing to hear your mother say over twenty-five years after the fact. She tells me about another time that she saw me on Morris Street, when I was out riding my bike, but that “the officers of the APD” (Albany Police Department) pushed her away and told her to go home. Which is also a really fucked up thing to hear your mother say over twenty-five years after the fact because, in the interim, I have learned that most children at that time (and in this area) were adopted within a fifty-mile radius of the homes from which they were originally removed. I was just up the street.

My mother cries almost imperceptibly as she continues to tell me things about our family that I was never meant to know. She speaks in a nearly-nonstop monologue and the details about people, places, and events that I’ve never met, never been to, and wasn’t there for are too much for me to keep up with in my tiny green notebook (amazed all the while that I’m not on the floor in the fetal position sobbing uncontrollably as I had imagined that I would when I finally met my mother). Somehow, her tears have prompted me to be stronger for both of us, even though some of her stories feel like sucker punches to my bloated gut.

I have to stop her, however, when she starts speaking about the birth of my sister because I always had the vague notion of having an older sister, like a photograph with nothing written on the back that falls out of the same book every time you open it. My mother then delivers a trio of clues about her: 1) The letter ‘H,’ 2) The Dean’s List at The
State University of New York, and 3) A State Trooper. (These, however, I make certain to write down.) Then she asks me about my brother and I do it again.

“What?”

Her answer is miraculous: Out of a small, worn, turquoise leather handbag she produces a yellow rectangle of paper, held together with brittle Scotch tape which she unfolds like an archivist at The Smithsonian. She pushes the document gently across the table and I see my brother’s name printed across his original birth certificate. He is named after my father and my mother doesn’t know where he is, either.

“They told me that they were going to put all you kids together.”

“Well,” I said, “They lied.”

She drops back into the atonal oral history of our family as if she were working her way through a speech (written for her by someone else) that she had memorized in anticipation of my unannounced arrival. That I have two siblings is unfathomable to me and I have to tune out briefly for a while just to catch my breath. In an attempt to divert the flow of information to something more pedestrian, I ask my mother how she met my father and her answer explains a lot about my life.

“Oh, through *The National Enquirer.*”

*The National Enquirer*, come to find out, once coordinated a Pen Pal Club and my mother was matched with my father because they were both born in May of 1944 and not, presumably, because they are both schizophrenic. This was the last detail that I recorded in my tiny green notebook before I asked to use the phone on the wall to call for a ride. I had spent about an hour and-a-half with my mother that first day and when I stood, I did a slow twirl to take in as much as I could, but it didn’t really work. (For
example, I brought gifts, but I couldn’t tell you what they were. Just that she loved them.)

At the door, I wrapped my arms around her and she kissed the side of my neck.

And then I was standing on the porch again facing a boarded-up furniture store across the street where I worked, briefly, in college moving overstuffed loveseats and couches from one neglected showroom to another. I’m standing on the same porch, but I am a different man, no longer Irish Catholic, but of Norwegian and Dutch descent. My mother has risen from the dead and my sister, and now my brother, are out there. Somewhere. Once the tar clears from my lungs and the alcohol clears my veins, I will be done with that life forever, too. A block from where I am standing is a church (whose name I can never remember) that reminds me a little of The St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. (Except here there are no tourists, no banana trees swaying in a breeze, no beignets, and no coffee infused with chicory.) Ten years ago, when I lived in a rooming house full of recently-divorced men, smoking dust and dropping acid to cauterize the gaping hole I felt in my chest, I heard the bells ring on the Sunday mornings that I wasn’t passed out, or passed out elsewhere.

And I had no idea that my mother was listening to those same bells ring out from Our Lady of The Electric City, sitting at her kitchen table on those same Sunday mornings (smoking one generic cigarette after another), either.
CHAPTER III

GOD IS ELECTRIC, JESUS ELECTROCHEMICAL

The rifle rests on my lap, solidly bridging the gap between my knees as I listen to St. Mark (not his real name) pontificate about The Church. He goes on and on about solace, comfort and our Lord. I feign attentiveness, but really my focus is directed at jamming the striker back into the bolt. Oblivious, he prattles on about choices, decisions and faith. We are alone in the basement of our high school, sitting on the floor. It is a bright Sunday morning. There is not another soul in the building.

He is convinced that The Holy Spirit will be the panacea for my problems at home. Will quiet my cerebral rage. Will banish my teen angst forever if I will just open my heart. St. Mark’s expression is earnest and serene, and I am silent and respectful while he urges me “not to cultivate this anger, to let go,” but all I want to do is change the subject.

I have issues. I listen to speed metal constantly.

I have been pushed through the phases of Catholic family farming: baptism, Sunday school, first communion, and confession. I have come out on the other end mangled and dubious.

I grab another gun from the wall, stand, and push the heavy stocks against my hips. The Sabbath sunlight catches the corner of my eye and I squint, like Eastwood. Gingerly, I press the sights of both Enfields against St. Mark’s temples and implore him to “Shut the fuck up.” He complies.

St. Mark and I are cadets at a military academy in upstate New York and I am
simply grateful to be out of my house for an extended period of time. But St. Mark, I know, has conversion on his mind as we drive out of the city and into suburbs I am not familiar with. He’s been lobbying for this moment for four years and he has simply worn me down. I’ve agreed to attend a single Charismatic Mass, and I hope to put an end to his missionary work, once and for all, this afternoon.

I do my best to be invisible once we arrive.

The church itself is modern, with angular, unadorned, yet highly-polished rows of pews. Unfinished crossbeams span the ceiling and lend a Fisher Price barn-like quality to the space. The altar looks like an outdated Danish conference room. The congregation is completely white, with a neo-hippie aesthetic.

I refuse to sing, despite the guitars and tambourines. My heart rate triples when I’m forced to hold hands with strangers and pretend to pray. I am not nearly this social by nature. I am not a joiner. Still, the overall tone of the mass is different from the fire and brimstone of the traditional Catholic programming that I am forced to endure weekly. St. Mark smiles at me at the end of the service like a dental assistant after a root canal, and then he urges me out into the aisle. I try to indicate to him, discreetly, that I am going nowhere except back out to the car, but I am navigated by this alleged friend, wide eyed, into a line of devout Christians waiting to be “prayed over.”

After the members of Emmett Otter’s Jug Band have finally silenced their instruments, I end up in front of the altar standing before a person who tells me not to be afraid. He promises that the man behind me will catch my fall. I begin to explain that that won’t be necessary. But he places his hands on my head and starts to pray gently, insistently.
I fall to the floor.

I feel like I’ve been sucker punched, but without the actual blow. My body is flooded with a sensation similar to when your foot falls asleep, tingly and numb. As if my spine is Jell-O and the rest of me is liquefied. Until everything is suddenly reconstituted on the cold marble floor.

When I returned to the orphanage where I spent a great deal of my early childhood, I was warned about the possibility of “flashbacks,” but none occurred. I had no movie-of-the-week freak out, but I did become newly aware of certain memories. I remembered how, as a child, I felt quiet and withdrawn whenever I passed the brick building, how I focused my attention on the statue of the Virgin Mary above the front entrance. I remembered that my school friends made fun of me for this, asked what my problem was, and that I had no idea.

But it was different when I returned to the place. I finally understood the fascination when I walked beneath her virtuous stone feet for the first time as an adult. This is where I spent the first years of my life, a fact that I learned over twenty-five years after the fact.

Nancy Drew (also not her real name) and I entered the building together, with twenty years of friendship between us, looking for anything that might lead me to my family. We were first struck by the silence, the absolutely oppressive silence of the interior of the building. Part of me was expecting packs of wild orphans running in the halls, but there were no voices, just two elderly volunteers staring at us from behind a desk.

Nancy Drew spoke to them privately for a moment and then they both grinned
from ear-to-ear and watched as she took my hand and led me out of the foyer, in pursuit of records, files and some sort of vague accountability. But we were waylaid by photography and portraiture.

All along the hallways, bishops and cardinals watched us pass with suspicion and disapproval. They looked miserable, each and every one of them, but their vestments were rendered in expensive, supple oils, the most vibrant purples and reds. These men glowed.

And then we saw the children. Hundreds of them, mostly in black-and-white, in archival photos on the upper floors near the administrative offices. Many of the photographs showed white nuns and nurses holding black babies against the backdrop of rows and rows of pristine hospital beds. Some of them were taken the day that a child was adopted or placed with a foster family. Everyone was smiling, except for a few children who seemed to know that they were merchandise, from a sort of Salvation Army.

The color photographs almost stopped my heart when I realized that one of them might contain an image of me, of the former me, of me before my identity was completely erased. Nancy Drew held my hand tightly as we walked slowly past these pictures like we had done a hundred times, in museums and galleries all over the Northeast.

It took us a while to figure out why everyone that we passed in those creepy, fluorescent hallways smiled so sheepishly at us. It took us awhile to understand that we looked the part, like potential customers. All of the people we passed were simply acknowledging our Christian hearts, so full of love that we were ready to open our home
to an unfortunate, unwanted child. Their sanctimonious stares made me furious. After a session with a secular caseworker (sympathetic eyes, children of her own, net result: absolute zero), we found ourselves in front of a twenty-something blonde receptionist. I explained to her that I was looking for some information about my own adoption.

To which she replied, “You want to be adopted?”

After we helped her over this mental speed bump, by explaining that I was a former resident of this institution and not some sort of confused volunteer, she dialed an extension for Sister Mary SomethingOrOther and we sat down so I could regain my composure.

Sister Mary SomethingOrOther had been the head nun during my tenure at the orphanage, and I wondered if there would be an instantaneous recognition on her part, if she might embrace me and regale Nancy Drew with stories about my Little Rascals-esque behavior during those first few years.

I wondered if she might be the trigger for the aforementioned flashback and if I would soon be escorted out of the building by some sort of Catholic Rent-A-Cop who’d been hired, ultimately, because of his uncanny resemblance to Saint Paul.

All I really wanted was a picture of my father or my mother. All I wanted was my sister’s address or my brother’s phone number. Something. I wanted my fucking family back.

The receptionist held the receiver slightly away from her ear and her eyebrows were almost touching her hairline. She said, “Yes, Sister,” into the receiver before dropping the phone like a piece of rotten fruit. Then she said to us, by way of apology, “Sister Mary keeps her secrets well.”
We were refused an audience with Her Majesty because orphans aren’t supposed to come back. So we left.

The first time that my mother met Jesus Christ was in a Redwood forest near a pond of brilliant blue water. She was impressed by His stunning robes, but deeply disappointed with His lack of white wings. The first question that my mother thought to ask the Son of God was whether or not she could keep smoking. He said that He didn’t care.

The first time that I met my mother, at the age of thirty, I was able to shed the Irish Catholicism of my adolescence after learning about the Norwegian Lutheranism of my biological family. Until that day, I lived my entire life without any knowledge whatsoever of my background or heritage. My legal and “official” birth certificate is post-dated a full decade.

She asked me if I remembered being strapped to the bed in the orphanage, if I remembered the beatings, if I remembered the spinal taps.

My mother is a paranoid schizophrenic who rarely leaves the house due to acute agoraphobia. She listens to religious broadcasting 24/7 on an old AM radio and chain-smokes generic cigarettes at her lopsided kitchen table. Weeks before our reunion, she sent me *365 Read-Aloud Bedtime Bible Stories* with this inscription, “What I would of read to you early in Life.” Statistically, I have roughly a 50% chance of developing schizophrenia at some point in my life.

I am so generically and incredibly Caucasian that my skin throbs a deep crimson soon after it is exposed to natural light, and this fact seems to have been the only criteria used to determine my placement in foster care. I am certain that Sister Mary
Something or Other signed my release papers fully convinced of the righteousness of the decisions she was somehow authorized to make on my behalf. But I also believe her hand was guided by the Devil Himself when she wrote my name across form after notarized form for various state agencies, because those forms, after receiving approval from blind administrators and stamps from zealous automatons, released me into the custody of abusive strangers.

My mother overdosed shortly after I was born and arrived, supine, at the gates of Heaven on a hospital stretcher. Jesus refused her entrance and told her to go back down into the world to spread the Good News.

When I went to visit my mother for the second time in my life, she gave me a list, a chronicle of all the visions she had experienced since the late 1960s. She also gave me a letter addressed to Oral Roberts. I stood in the snow outside of her apartment, around the corner from where I had once lived in college, and debated whether or not to put the envelope into the mailbox.

Her particular brand of paranoia manifests itself as a kind of ultra-religiousness. She talks about God constantly. Every card and every letter that I receive from her has a long closing salutation that, she hopes, will bring me into the light of God’s love. The strange and fascinating thing about certain symptoms of schizophrenia, particularly my mother’s devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ is that they are culturally specific. Paranoid schizophrenics in other parts of the world display different psychoses, but because of my mother’s own religious background, her entire adult life has been spent chasing angels and waiting for miracles.

Do I believe in God? No. Do I believe that God exists? Yes. God exists in the
electrical storms and irregular dopamine levels of my mother’s frontal lobes, limbic pathway, and cerebral cortex.

Do I have faith, give thanks and praise, and worship the Lord Jesus Christ? No. The Church has given up on me and I have given up on The Church. St. Mark gave up on me as soon as I told him that I was gay. The disdain is now quite mutual.

Because of my mother’s condition, I know that her Christianity is simply the institutionalized misunderstanding of mental illness. Each time God appears to Abraham in Genesis, to Moses in Exodus, and when the apostle John has a vision of Christ in the Book of Revelation, I am convinced that what they all truly experienced were separate and distinct undiagnosed, psychotic episodes. These were self-reported, recorded by others, and then they made the transition from oral history to gospel truth. We all suffer to this day.

I did mail the check to Oral Roberts before catching my flight back to California. Not because I am a believer myself, but because I love an old woman who has faith, gives thanks and praise, and worships the Lord Jesus Christ. She is my own, personal savior.
I have one photograph of my brother. It's a Polaroid of him driving his old Cherokee with one hand on the wheel. His clear, bright smile is amplified by the blurry sunshine of the California landscape speeding outside of his open window. The silver Timex our sister gave him for his twenty-first birthday hangs from his wrist. He's lost weight since then and looks good. Happy even. You can almost feel the vibrations from the crappy speakers in the dashboard when you hold the corner of the picture between your thumb and forefinger. His hair is blond and his eyes are blue, like mine, but his coloring is altogether different. For every day that I've spent inside with my face in a book, he's been at the beach, on a soccer field, or out throwing a ball against the garage. There is a reason why I sometimes refer to myself as Casper the Friendly Caucasian. He's wearing a tank top, but the day is so brilliant through the windshield that his chest is whiter than the fabric. I have no idea who took the picture.

The day after Valentine's Day, I am in my mother's kitchen arranging flowers in an old juice container. Water is heating in a small pot on the stove, just like the last time I was here, and she is asking me about Montréal. I tell her that my sunburn is killing me and she chokes back laughter in a haze of cigarette smoke. I was on the patch when I was here at Thanksgiving.

"There is an entire city underground. You can get almost anywhere and do almost anything you want. Go to the movies, have some coffee, go ice skating."

"Is that right, Mighty Michael?" she asks. She has never been, but tells me that
she always wanted to go to Canada. She's almost sixty now and grew up near the border.

"Water's ready."

Adam and I spent Christmas in London this year and I bought her some tea at Harrods in one of those fake, old-fashioned green tins. We got back to San Francisco a week before I was fired from another dot com. I sit across the table from her and put stamps that I have brought onto envelopes addressed to Niagara Mohawk and Oral Roberts. She is writing a letter to me as we sit and listen to religious talk radio. Some preacher is thumping an unseen Bible and telling all of those who will listen that "misery is a choice." His thesis, essentially, being that you can either accept the Lord as your personal savior and bask in the joy of His light or you can just be in a crappy mood for the rest of your life. I decide to check on the typewriter that I've brought from California. I borrowed it from the first dot com and simply forgot to bring it back before they went under.

In her office, I move my mother's old typewriter ("ten dollars from the City Mission") to the edge of the desk. I type her name and address on a scrap of paper just to make sure that everything works after crossing the country in my luggage. Jesus stares down at me from the wall. He is seated behind the table at the Last Supper. His image is framed in so many places and graces so many surfaces in this house that I think we might be related. If He were my brother, I wonder, would He get pissed if I didn't send Him a birthday and a Christmas card every December 25th? And would He ever turn anything other than thirty-three years old? No black balloons for Him at His office party on His unfortunate fortieth.

"It's electric?"
My mother stands suddenly in the doorway. I nod and stand. Her machine is so antiquated that I couldn't replace the ribbon. She sits and pulls an envelope from a drawer. I have to explain the difference between SHIFT and CAPS LOCK as she tentatively hunts and pecks her way through my name. The return address on the envelope is from the psychiatric hospital. She is absolutely thrilled.

My brother's birthday was about three weeks ago, but none of us have called or sent him a card. He just turned twenty-eight and I have never met him. My mother asks me again if I have found him or my sister. I tell her no, that things are more complicated than I had originally thought.

I found that Polaroid years ago under the freeway on Market Street in a pile of homeless refuse. Someone had obviously blown a fuse and decided to unburden themselves of their trash and other worldly possessions in a wide arc across the street from my apartment.

It is possible that the man in the picture is my younger brother. I think I've seen him a thousand times before. Once on the subway in New York, once at a gas station in Omaha, and another time in a check out line at Safeway in Vancouver. Sometimes I wonder if we went to school together or if I ever stumbled home with him through pre-dawn snow after another forgotten last call.

I stare at people more than I should on the subway. I know that my expression when I do this unnerves and angers some passengers, but there is no way to explain this behavior to a stranger on a train without making the situation infinitely worse. "Well you see, mister, my mother is a paranoid schizophrenic and me and my brother and my sister were all taken by the county when we were all very young and you just look like, well, do
you think we might be related?" One of my greatest fears is to be two seats behind my brother or my sister and not realize it until they've stepped onto the platform and the doors are closing behind them. Whenever I leave the house, I have it in the back of my mind that today might be the day that one of them grabs my sleeve on the street. Back at the kitchen table, my mother lights another GPC and starts talking about her brother and sister and her aunts and uncles and other members of my extended family whom, more than likely, I will never meet. Apparently I come from a long line of suicidal drunks. She tells stories in an excited monotone, if that is at all possible. Every other person she mentions has a gun to his head, a highball glass in his hand at breakfast, or is forever falling to his death from windows in myriad post-industrial cities all over the Northeastern United States.

"Look what I got," I say, pulling my wallet from my back pocket. Sometimes I find it necessary to break up her streams of consciousness.

"Oh, okay Mighty Michael. What is it?"

I hand her a silver coin that was given to me in change one night at the liquor store on Valencia by the guy who once wrote my name in Arabic on the back of my receipt. I explain to her that it's a Norwegian krone, dated 1968, and that the man in profile on the front is King Olav. It is easily mistaken for an American quarter. She runs her fingers over the front and back of the coin and exclaims that she is Norwegian.

"Me, too," I say and she laughs. "You can have it if you want."

She hands it back to me, says "Okay," but asks me to write down everything printed on both sides first, along with my name and the date that I've given it to her. Her eyes are that bad. She slips the coin into her floral cigarette case after I finish.
Now she is talking about giving birth to my sister. She says that the delivery went well and went quickly and I feel relieved for some reason. As if I were glad that none of us had caused her any more pain then we did in our subsequent absence. Then she tells me things about when we all lived together: my mother and father and my sister and myself, and then I start to feel the loss and the grief again. It starts to override the sheer amazement of sitting with my mother at her kitchen table and looking into her somehow familiar blue eyes and laughing to myself about her curly (read: unruly) hair.

Then the anger starts to creep back into my consciousness at all of the lost days and irrevocable nights that could have been spent with my siblings. Fuck the person who made these decisions thirty years ago (while eating lunch one day at their desk?) and sealed the records and court papers that would make us strangers for the rest of our lives. And fuck the file cabinet that holds the notarized documents, coffee stained and yellow with age, that state explicitly that I must never call my sister or send my brother a birthday present.

The tea is much better than I expected. We sit for a moment and she tells me that she's got lung cancer, but she says it in such a way that it sounds like something she picked up at the store the other day. Or was it emphysema? She can never remember. She does insist, however, on being buried in her favorite blue butterfly dress.

I ask my mother where she wants the flowers and she directs me to her room. I follow her down the hall, past a room devoid of anything save the cat food scattered on the floor, and on through the living room. Madonna gyrates on TV in an ad for the Grammy Awards. My mother has two parakeets on either side of the doorway just inside her room. The birds get excited when we walk in and she introduces me to them one at a
time. Then she asks me if I like to fly and what it's like. I tell her that I'm becoming more and more skeptical of the whole operation the older I get. She smiles again and I tell her that I've got to go.

She seals my letter meticulously and hands it to me with the others that she wants mailed. Included in my envelope is a Xeroxed list of miracles that she has experienced since 1966. I hug her and she kisses the side of my neck like she did the last time. She thanks me again for finding her. And for the tea. In college, almost ten years ago, I lived around the corner from where we now stand.

Walking down the wooden steps of my mother's house for the second time in my life, smelling of cigarettes that I did not smoke, all that I can think about is the three of us standing side by side along the edge of her grave. My sister's face is indistinct, but my brother looks just like his picture.
CHAPTER V
NORWAY DAY, 2001

Everyone is drinking on the train. Everyone. As we pull out of the station at 4th and King, I appear to be the only passenger without a king can or a forty-ounce in a brown paper bag. I feel very self-conscious, almost prudish, as if I've just wandered into a high school graduation party with a biology textbook and a scientific calculator. What do I have? A feeling like Christmas Eve somewhere in my chest, a raging coffee buzz, and a vague southern trajectory.

There is a book in my bag, in fact, but it is apparently something less-than-remarkable and I spend my time staring out the window. Even after five years, I am still relatively ignorant of the geography just outside of San Francisco. I do know that if you step too far into the water at Ocean Beach, that your ass can get sucked straight to Oahu and that to walk across the Golden Gate Bridge and back can take hours. From the cheap seat of a commuter train heading down the peninsula, however, the landscape is a strange mix of new hotel aspirations and abandoned tire resentment. Sometimes I pretend to understand the economics of this area (as I am still reeling from the dot com bust), but I don’t know much. After months of uncertainty and unemployment, however, I am now the proud owner of one of the worst dead-end jobs that I have ever had. Sometimes I think that I’ve stayed in school for far too long and irrevocably scorched my piece of the pie.

The woman checking fares and taking tickets is of such a stature physically, and so completely over done cosmetically, that I think she could be a drag queen. As she
travels from one end of the car to the other, the word *puta* crackles and pops around the interior of the train. So much so that, if it weren’t for Maria’s gentle instruction on *Sesame Street*, I would be forced to conclude that it was actually the Spanish word for “thank you.” She is unfazed by the profane bubbles floating behind her head as she hands my ticket back to me. I wonder if I would last a day at her job.

I interviewed once in Silicon Valley. I remember this as the train approaches Hayward Park station, which is essentially two disembodied sidewalks behind a salvage yard. I was met by an exuberant blonde woman in a black Saab who insisted that it was “absolutely no trouble” to pick me up for the interview and “however did I ever get by without a car in the city?” The offices were gorgeous, the people were gorgeous, but I was not asked to become a dynamic team player at one of the premiere online providers of video content. My fate was sealed when I failed to produce the name of the United States Secretary General, or some such crap, on one of the myriad written exams. I declined a ride back to the station and ended up wandering around a strip mall looking for cigarettes.

The San Mateo station is a bit more ornate as I step out into the intensity of the late-morning sun. There is a tasteful one-story structure with downtown San Mateo visible just a block behind it, pay phones, and some really atrocious public art. Downtown, on a Saturday afternoon in May, is slightly less than populous. The nail salons and *taquerías* are all closed along B Street upon my arrival. Apparently no one needs a French manicure or an *enchilada* on the weekend in this part of the world. Halfway up the block, a husband and wife are disengaging their infant daughter from a car seat in the backseat of a very subcompact import. I approach the woman.
“Excuse me, but can you tell me where the Expo Center is?” She freezes. “The San Mateo Expo Center. Can you just point me in a general direction?”

Her husband says something in Spanish and she looks at me like she’s trying to figure out whether or not to surrender her purse. I say, “thank you,” (in English) and continue up the street. I couldn’t possibly look any more “boy next door” and am annoyed by their reaction. Everything is still closed and my blood sugar is dropping so I walk faster, for blocks and blocks, intent on more coffee. At the counter of the Istanbul Café, I order a large to go.

“Turkish coffee?”

“Sure.”

“You like Turkish coffee?”

“Well, actually, I don’t know.” I’m surveying the pastries and anxious about time.

“Is strong,” the man says and smiles.

I nod and realize that I’m thinking of Turkish delight, which I have also never tasted. He motions to one of the men behind him and then asks me to sit down. To relax and enjoy myself. Little does he know.

“Can you tell me how do you get to the Expo Center?” I say, trying very hard in the final syllables of this question not to sound exactly like fucking Big Bird.

“’Expo Center?’ Is far.”

“That way?” I motion with my thumb like Uma Thurman in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.

“B Street.”

“Right.”
One of the other men is suddenly behind me as I shake a packet of sugar over my very first Turkish coffee.

“No milk, no milk! Sugar okay. In my country, same.”

I turn. His eyes, whose intensity takes me by surprise, hold splinters of green and blue suspended in a deep, deep amber. He is dark, muscular, and absolutely stunning. I recognize the smile and wonder if his father, who is now standing behind the display case like a guard at a natural history museum, would be so hospitable if he could read my thoughts at this moment.

Come to find out, I do like Turkish coffee. I do not, however, think that my directions are at all correct after another long stretch of sidewalk. The manicured lawns suddenly vying for my attention make me realize that I haven’t seen grass in a very long time. My immediate surroundings have become much more residential and I can’t imagine that I am going to find anything remotely resembling an expo center in this part of town. Everything looks so familiar to me, though, as if I could walk up to any given door in this neighborhood and be received by someone I know or by someone who knows my parents. The metallic fragrance of cold water running from neglected hoses reminds me of a handful of summer days in upstate New York when life was absolute perfection.

But then the palm trees register somewhere in the midst of my hectic perambulation to remind me that I am an entire continent away from those days. They still sometimes strike me as visually discordant, something too exotic for everyday, appropriate only for travel brochures and Disney vacations. These are much taller and thinner than the ones that populate the traffic islands on Market Street in San Francisco.
Adam once told me that they have to fly them up from LA, like props, because they’re not indigenous to Northern California.

After two more sets of directions, one from a fireman with a handlebar mustache and another from a startled man pumping gas, I am fumbling for my wallet in front of a ticket booth. There is a large man packed into a small wooden structure and I am really, really nervous. The whole situation makes me feel like I’m about to drop a quarter into one of those mechanical fortunetellers.

“Student, please.” I flash my graduate ID from San Francisco State, which has no date on it. All of my friends make fun of the fact that I still try this whenever the opportunity presents itself. (“You can’t win if you don’t enter.” Ed McMahon taught me that one.) In return for my deception, I am given a blue circus ticket and a smile that would seem to suggest that I was standing next to him at graduation and that he knows that the Rolodex is spinning uselessly in my head right now.

The Expo Center is, well, much shorter than I had expected. Structurally, I had visions of something more along the lines of the *Casino de Montréal*, but it is actually two wide, but low, beige buildings suspended on the surface of an asphalt sea. I’m thinking converted military something-or-other, like the old hangars on Treasure Island. It has the same arid, outpost kind of feel to it. There is a stage set up on the grass in the courtyard between the buildings and there are people dancing to a quartet of seated musicians. All of the performers are wearing costumes of bright blues, greens, and reds with flowered accents and lace fringe that look vaguely Germanic from a distance.

The Sámi table along the periphery is completely empty.
I feel like there should be rides somewhere in the vicinity, a Ferris wheel or a Tilt-A-Whirl with long lines of hyperactive children asking a million-and-one frenetic questions from behind pink beehives of pure sugar, but there are none. Arbitrarily, I walk through the double doors of the building to my left to escape the scorch and burn of the California sun. I stand for a moment before a table full of candies from Iceland, Sweden, and Norway. After my eyes adjust, I impulsively buy several chocolate bars from Oslo as if I remembered them fondly from an extended stay in the capital city and now spend all of my free time lamenting the fact that this particular brand isn’t available in the States.

As I move away from the smiling confectioner, the gravity of my mission conjures up old feelings akin to walking the corridor to the principal’s office or to buying rubbers for the first time. The rest of the tables and the booths are set out in such a way that this could be a junior high science fair or a gun show somewhere in Ohio. The space is enormous, so I do a lap to get a general sense of my options. I marvel at the tanned reindeer pelts, salmon fillets, and various fish oils on display, but light on a stall of “vintage and rare” (ragtag) books. Feigning expertise in Scandinavian Literature as I peruse the titles, my heart pounds and my mind races with the hope that someone will gently grip the back of my arm and whisper my first name in the form of a question.

Across the courtyard in the second building, I study the features of people shopping for cassettes, recipe books, key chains, bumper stickers, and crafty woodcarvings. I reference each and every face of each and every person in the pavilion like a murder witness flipping through a binder full of mug shots. Secrets contained within variations and themes in hair color, skin texture, stature, facial expressions, and eye color are all involuntarily catalogued for future analysis in the laboratory of my
subconscious. I am overwhelmed by the fact that I am now surrounded by hundreds of people who look like me. I find exactly what I am looking for, approach decisively, and then suddenly walk away. For some time, I sit in a plastic folding chair with a plate of heart-shaped waffles in front a film loop about fishing.

Feeling as if I should genuflect and cross myself in the direction of the television, I stand and walk directly into the strange white tent marked “Genealogy.” There is a group talking seriously in the corner by a stack of brochures, a woman seated in front of a microfilm machine, and a father with his two daughters, maybe ten people in total. The girls are making no secret of their boredom as their dad listens to the details of their family tree in a very biblical, “so-and-so begat so-and-so” fashion. The man doing the explaining is the reason that I am standing here. I form a line, stand in it, and loom.

An older gentleman enters the circus-less tent and attempts to use his extraordinary height and obvious seniority to obtain an audience out of turn. As soon as the other man makes motions to stand and depart, I thrust myself at the genealogist from Minnesota. He smiles in a guarded way, clears his computer screen (which is being projected onto a larger screen about ten feet in front of the two of us), and asks me what I need. Attempting to form a coherent, if not casual, response is difficult as I extract a motley stack of papers from my bag. I push a hand-written schematic of the three generations I have discovered since Thanksgiving.

“I’m trying to find out any information that I can,” I say, attempting again to mask the true state of my desperation.

He looks dubiously at my diagram and starts to plug various things into Internet search fields. Lurch, the nosy senior citizen, listens attentively as he explains to me that
older surnames in Norway often didn’t refer directly to family lines, but to the locations of farms and rural communities.

“Think of them more like ZIP codes,” he says to me.

There seems to be an echo to what he says and I wonder if the electronic equipment is conspiring to make this exchange even more difficult than I had expected. I mutter inaudible things to him and he responds in simple declarative statements with space-age reverb, as if he were an NFL ref calling a questionable penalty. He asks me something and I tell him that everything I have is relatively phonetic because I have been conducting “a series of oral history interviews” with older family members. This is intended to give my inquiries a vague academic credibility.

I actively avoid words and phrases such as “adoption,” “paranoid schizophrenia,” and “Social Services” when gaps or omissions in my family history present themselves like vacant lots in a city like Pittsburgh. He drops the letter ‘e’ from one of the names I’ve given him and suddenly becomes very animated by what materializes in his crystal ball. From his face I turn to discover the source of his excitement.

“Agnes,” he says,” is she—“

“She’s my… What would she be?” I fumble, as Lurch consults my pedigree from on high.

“She’s just passed,” he says directly into the lavaliere microphone. “I’m sorry,” he adds, dropping his eyes and lowering his voice.

Born in 1902, Agnes Karoline Wikelsmo died approximately five months prior to this moment and roughly a week after I was laid off for the second time this year. My mind races backwards and I realize that I could have attended her funeral, could have
held her hand while she prepared to leave this world, could have heard her voice for the first time in my life. I am overcome with the urge to embrace the stranger next to me, to taste the saline of my own tears on his lips, to kiss him violently until he understands fully the intimacy and the rage that I now feel towards him. He has given and he has taken away without knowing at all what he has done.

Back on the train, the party is in full swing. Today is *cinco de mayo*. I stare at the passing terrain from behind the invisible veil of my own obsessive curiosity and wonder if today will be the day that I start drinking again.
CHAPTER VI
SUCH RUINS

No amount of study could have prepared me for that day in April of 2002 when I traveled thousands of miles from my creaky railroad apartment in San Francisco to move my mother out of a crack house in Schenectady, New York. The wooden steps of the decrepit two-family structure stressed and gave under my feet like loose fillings suddenly examined in long-neglected molars. When I set foot on the front porch, curious fingers slowly bent the slats of the Venetian blind drawn across the front window of the first floor. My pulse throbbed again in my temples, in my throat, behind my ears. I rang the bell. I waited. My mother opened the door slowly and smiled broadly. I stepped across the rotten threshold and wrapped my arms around her. She kissed my neck as I engulfed her in my concern and surveyed the damage that was all around us.

We took the stairs to the second floor slowly and she chattered breezily as if I had just flown across the country to take her to the movies, but in taking stock of her new surroundings, I knew that we were walking deeper into The House of Usher. The walls and ceiling were stained, split, patched half-heartedly, painted and/or wallpapered (I couldn't really tell), and covered with some sort of thick mold or fungus that seemed to congregate most heavily in the dank seams and dark corners of the interior. The air was dense and corrosive like smog from Los Angeles blown off course and then trapped indoors. Things did not improve when we stepped into the apartment proper. Where the living room should have been, or where the space would seem to suggest a dining room table, there were instead piles of garbage; newspapers and empty fast food containers,
miniature Ziploc baggies strewn like dingy confetti, and rolling hills of old clothing. Literally. All four of the front rooms were decorated in similar fashion. There was no furniture, just filth. Among these ruins were scattered old toys, stuffed animals, strollers and other evidence of small children. And knives. Kitchen, utility, and serrated versions were also visible throughout this mess. As we toured, I dropped these discretely into open bags, pushed them behind greasy boxes, and slipped them into open drawers that begged for more, more, more like grimy collection baskets.

In the kitchen, she boiled water for tea in a pan with chipped enamel and a floral pattern. On the table between us, a bulbous glass pipe (scorched and translucent like a cataract on a stick) lay at a jaunty angle on the stiff cover of an unread bible like a still life assembled by an art professor who suspects that his contract might not be renewed in the fall. My mother, who stared expectantly at me from across this post-modern tableaux, was not (and is not) a drug addict. (I don't know that my mother even understands the concept of addiction.) She is, however, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic who has developed no Nobel-worthy economic theories and has never, to my knowledge, issued a manifesto of any kind. When she asked me if the smoke from her very generic cigarette bothered me, I lied and said, “No,” because I’ve learned that nicotine binds to certain key receptors in her brain and acts as a mild, self-administered antipsychotic. The acrid chemical smell of stale crack also lingered in the air like the aftermath of metal soldered under chlorinated water. She tried to wave these things away with gestures that looked like blessings.

Because of her condition, I was not raised by mother and met her for the first time, after years of searching, just 18 months prior. My older sister, my younger brother,
and myself were systematically removed from her custody by the Department of Social Services and farmed out to various foster families. ("The worst thing in the world you could do to a person," she has told me repeatedly, "is take their children.") At the age of thirty-one, because of the archaic legislation that still keeps adoption records permanently sealed in the State of New York, I have yet to meet either of my siblings. Each and every time that we speak on the phone, she asks me if I’ve found the other two and all that I am able to offer her is silence.

In my mother's wavy hair was a new streak of blonde that, coupled with the deep maroon of her shimmering velour blouse, gave her the look of a faded Hollywood starlet who now spends her days in quiet seclusion far from the intrusive glare of paparazzi flashbulbs. I told her that after she finished her cigarette that we were going to start moving her things back to her apartment.

"Oh, that's okay, Mighty Michael. I've decided to stay here. But I thank you for coming all of this way for a visit."

They arrived at my mother's apartment, a Section 8 flat three doors down, at midnight a few weeks before my arrival and informed her that she was moving. She was absolutely terrified when five or six men and women threw her belongings into bags, pushed her mattress down two flights of stairs, and kicked the front doors wide open for her three cats to run though for the last time. I imagine her panicked, suddenly incontinent, and scrambling for her dentures in the darkness while being screamed at by strangers, not at all aware that she might have the option to refuse. This intrepid family moved my mother out of an apartment for which she paid roughly $80 a month in rent, into a dingy room in their drugged-out building where they charged her $300 a month (or
more), by essentially seizing her SSI checks in return for junk food and cigarettes from the liquor store on the corner. She was being used as a source of supplemental income for these criminals, who treated her like an organic ATM, by holding her against her will. (She had left several messages on my answering machine in California in the weeks preceding, but I was never able to return the call because the numbers changed so frequently in her new "home.")

After carefully reaching for the pan behind her, she then trailed scalding water across her lap. I rushed to take over, trying not to betray my panic. Typical of someone with my mother’s condition, she reacted neither to the physical pain nor to the urgency of the larger situation. Well aware of the fact that my arrival had piqued the interest of the people under the stairs, I wanted to get this over with before anyone had the chance to say otherwise. I handed her two or three shopping bags and instructed her, gently but firmly, to start collecting her things and that I would return shortly with one of her case workers and that we would, definitely, have her moved by the end of the day.

“Please,” I implored, as trust was something I wasn’t certain that we had yet established.

“Okay.”

Permission finally granted with two flat syllables, I returned within the half hour with another man (also named Michael) and we rushed to disassemble her furniture and collect her personal belongings in something that started to resemble a military maneuver. We made it as far as the top landing of the stairs with my mother's incredibly heavy bed frame, before we were stopped by a man on a cell phone.
He stood directly in front of me and was relaying the situation to someone on the other end and ignoring my repeated questions and requests for him to move. I suddenly wished that I had gone to the gym more often. I wished that I had stayed with Tae Kwon Do. I wished that I were unafraid, but I don't, I didn't, and I was not.

And then, as if suddenly possessed by the demon of each and every Jerry Springer episode ever aired, the following just shot right out of my mouth: "And who the fuck are you?" Attention now firmly secured, he lowered the phone to his side and turned to face me. The man (built, black, and wearing a shirt that read "School of Hard Knocks, Brooklyn") cocked his head to the side and threw the question right back at me.

My mother stared from above. Michael stared from above. They were both shaking. The bed dangled over the top step like a car about to fall over the side of a cliff in a TV movie. The phrase, "I'm her son and she is leaving today," ignited the screaming and the profanity in earnest and "the landlord" ordered Michael off of the property. The man in my way threatened to call the police. I offered to dial, knowing full well how that situation would pan out, because I had no other choice. (Schenectady’s finest would arrive, would question the three of us, and then they would ask my mother if she wanted to leave. As she is deathly afraid of the police, she would say “no,” the cops would declare her situation “voluntary,” and I would be hauled off for trespassing or some such shit.) At this point, I wanted to kick him down the steps if only to watch the blood slowly fill in the spaces between his teeth. Instead, I forced the issue by pulling the bed over the edge of the upper landing in order to put an end (at least temporarily) to these remedial negotiations. By sheer force of will, we got it out the front door and back to my mother's apartment which had stood silent and vacant for nearly a month.
Clearly relieved to be home, she was still trembling visibly in the doorway after Michael sheepishly returned to his office and I went back for more. On the porch with my finger on the doorbell again, I wondered why I hadn't thought to pack a Louisville Slugger. I also wondered if my perspective had changed with time and distance or if Schenectady had actually gotten worse since I had lived here. More than ten years ago, I had lived around the corner (literally) while I was as an undergraduate at Union College. In answer to this unspoken question, five or so Cadillac Escalades (with tinted windows vibrating from the heavy bass booming within) slowly cruised the street behind me -- A far cry from the cavalcade of antique cars driven by geriatric alumni that would sometimes tool around campus on special occasions. When the door started to open, it occurred to me that Shakespeare did not have my back at that moment. That Milton had yet to come to my aid. My stomach churned pure paint thinner and pushed it out into my bloodstream. (To date, I’ve never seen anything like a manual for dealing with this type of situation.)

In the hallway, I braced myself for what I assumed would be a physical altercation with my mother's soon-to-be-former landlord. I informed him again, in so many words, that she would not be returning and that each and every one of her possessions would be restored to her apartment by the end of the day. He started yelling and screaming in such an incoherent and elliptical fashion that I kept repeating the phrase, "I don't care" over and over again until he started talking money. I demanded a copy of the rental agreement or of the lease. He said that there was a "verbal agreement" between his father and my mother, but that his father was "out on business" and couldn't be reached by phone. I repeated my mantra to which he stated simply, "I need to get
paid." Again, I resisted the temptation of physical violence. I told him to give me a figure and I was back out on the sidewalk not at all certain of my trajectory.

Randomly, Michael picked me up a block later on his way home and we talked a bit about what had happened after he left. I filled him in as we drove and added that I was glad that the father wasn't present because I "wanted to kill him." Stopped at a light, Michael calmly informed me that if he had been home that I would have "been stabbed by now [because] he's got a record from here to the Bronx." The light blinked from red to green. "And back again."

At a supermarket where I had shopped a thousand times as a student, I made copies of my and my brother's birth certificates that my mother keeps folded in the bottom of her purse and that I had never seen before in my life. I tried to take a cash advance from one of my credit cards, but my mind was so shot from the events of the day that I couldn't remember the PIN number. The teller at the in-store bank processed my request, but maintained a look of mild confusion as she passed my California license back to me and counted out the bills. I stared at the portraits of Benjamin Franklin propagating on the counter in front of me and all I could think of was Andy Warhol and how utterly impossible it would be for me to explain the circumstances that delivered me to her particular window on that particular day.

For the next ten hours I moved my mother's personal effects back and forth between the two flats. My arms started to quake and convulse as I lifted cabinets and dresser drawers and her microwave oven and I remembered an old episode of Leonard Nimoy's In Search Of... that I had seen as a kid that showed how stress and adrenaline could enable ordinary people to lift cars off of family members trapped underneath.
At some point during all of this, my mother produced an old shopping cart from behind her building and suggested that it would be easier to move the bags and bags of clothing that still remained in the crack house. I declined at first, but then set out again to recover stolen property with the aid of a stolen shopping cart (a small gift from the surrounding wasteland). She was in the driveway, smiling like I had just arrived with dozens of red roses in the crook of my arm when I came back with the first load of Hefty bags. It was at that moment I realized that I had seen her features echoed every day in the faces of the thousands upon thousands of men and women who live on the streets of San Francisco. Most of the people I knew in my neighborhood were homeless. Actually, most of the people I knew in my neighborhood by name were homeless. (For example, there were four units in my apartment building and I only spoke, occasionally, to the guy who lived downstairs. His first name was Dan, but I didn’t know his last name so I ended up referring to him in conversation as Dan Downstairs.) Johnny, a veteran of the Vietnam War who lived under the Central Freeway, projected his deep, boozy baritone into this makeshift urban amphitheater for hours and hours every night as he recited lines from movies starring Tommy Lee Jones and Nick Nolte (his favorites). Michael (we are truly everywhere) served in the military for years in Alabama and always smiled, laughed, and then graciously declined my repeated invitations to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners because he perpetually “had plans.” Otis, who carried a collapsible cardboard sign that read, “Hello. My name is Otis,” was constantly amazed when I said, “Hello, Otis,” before he had a chance to flash his painstakingly handwritten copy. Many of them, I now know, were schizophrenic and I am not proud of the attitudes that I held about them collectively,
or of the hostility that I reserved for them at times as individuals, before learning about the alcoholism and mental illness that runs rampant through my own family history.

On my way up to my mother’s apartment with the last of her belongings, a man with a handlebar mustache and various welts and boils on his face emerged from the apartment downstairs with a pit bull on a taut, leather leash. He was a shorter version of Lemmy from Motörhead. When I told him who I was he said, "I hope your mother ain't afraid a' dogs." I took two steps back down the stairs, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "I hope she doesn't have any reason to be afraid of dogs." I wanted to kick his ass for no other reason than I had already had such a crap day. Approaching sixty, my mother lives alone and has for a number of years after my father (also schizophrenic), left her for parts unknown. Since our reunion, I have done my best to see that her utilities (lights, heat, and phone service) and medications (too numerous to list) are all paid and up to date. Accomplishing these things from a distance, and running interference for her through a phone line, has been particularly maddening for me. By way of example, the initial reconnaissance for her recent relocation was completed by one of the women from the crack house who had gone door-to-door months before offering her domestic services to anyone who would let her in. Her agenda, once she gained access, was to case the apartments of each of her new clients, gauge their respective levels of vulnerability, and report these findings back to her accomplices/family members. My mother, whose judgment is neurologically impaired, made her a prime candidate for home invasion. When I am with her, I treat everyone in the vicinity as a potential threat to her safety regardless of how brightly they may smile.
With plans to stay with a friend in Albany (where I grew up twenty minutes away), I caught a CDTA bus on State Street on a route that used to be the #55 when I once rode it back-and-forth between various jobs. Somewhere in the stretch of Central Avenue that is nothing but car dealerships (that reminds me of the worst of LA's Santa Monica Boulevard), I became aware of the fact that more than half of the people on the bus were either buying or selling drugs. My heart sank. To answer a question that I posed to myself earlier: Yes, emphatically, Schenectady had gotten much worse since I lived there.

Days after my return to California, I got a string of calls from my mother informing me that the crack family was still harassing her for money. They claimed that she owed them for "back rent" because the son that I had dealt with hadn't delivered all of the cash to his father upon his return home “from work.” (From a double-shift at The Salvation Army or from setting up another branch of his patented abduction-followed-by-mob-style-protection franchise elsewhere in the city?) I spent the next day at work calmly, and covertly, drafting the following letter:

Michael --
151 McCoppin Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

May 10, 2002

Mr. D. Brownstown, Sr.
### Eastern Parkway
Schenectady, NY 12308

Mr. Brownstone:

Enclosed please find a copy of the agreement that was made between your son and myself on April 26, 2002.
It has recently come to my attention that you have continued your pursuit of my mother's money and I would like to remind you that the aforementioned agreement releases her from any, and I repeat any, further financial obligations to you, your son, or anyone else remotely related to you or residing at ### Eastern Parkway.

Please note the amount of payment made to D. at the end of last month. I did not pay him $400.00, but rather the sum total of $700.00. If he reported something other than $700.00, or has difficulty with basic addition and subtraction, then that is a problem that must be worked out between you and your son.

As for outstanding balances that you think you might have with my mother, please forward any invoice for goods and/or services rendered to me at the address above. Do not attempt to collect these funds from my mother.

I will get a restraining order.

I will go to the police. I will press charges for kidnapping. In fact, I will call them on a daily basis to inform them of the narcotics on the premises of ### Eastern Parkway if you do not cease any and all contact with my mother.

What you have done is absolutely reprehensible. If you don't understand that word, put down the pipe, get a job, buy a dictionary, and then look it up.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours Sincerely,
Michael –

Adam, my partner of nearly a decade, made fun of me when I showed him a copy of this letter. His response was something to the effect of, "Hell hath no fury like an English major scorned." The fire-and-brimstone bravado of this missive was not born out of the faith that I had in the local authorities or of any secret connections that I had with nefarious criminals to whom I could simply outsource my murderous thoughts with a single cryptic phone call. Quite the contrary, as my threats were total smoke-and-mirrors designed to hide the crushing impotence and rage that I felt in this situation. The police, well aware of the activities on Eastern Parkway, would need a body lying in the street
with a fractured skull and a bullet wound in order to intervene. Barring homicide, they would require being on the premises at the exact moment that rock cocaine was either being bought or sold and neither of these scenarios could I realistically choreograph on my lunch breaks from the opposite side of the country.

Before I made the decision to fly to New York, I made dozens of phone calls to social workers, case managers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals who had worked with my mother at one time or another. The woman who took my call at Adult Protective Services laughed for a full 60 seconds when I relayed the scenario to her. (Her derision clearly stating that: 1) She couldn’t cure crazy, and 2) That “urban renewal” was distinctly someone else’s responsibility.) One of the psychologists then told me that my mother’s involuntary relocation was “a good thing.” A good thing because it could possibly precipitate a crisis that would allow officials, such as himself, to reassess her level of care. A beneficial crisis could be something like diabetic shock or bodily harm, either self-inflicted or perpetrated by one of the other residents of her new building and preferably visible on her person well after the fact. If my mother could just attempt suicide one more time or if she could get herself stabbed badly enough by one of the addicts-in-residence as to require emergency medical attention then, yes, things would certainly start looking up for her on the social services front. (I half expected him to recommend that she do her best, in either case, to bleed as profusely as possible in order to maximize her potential benefits.) The consensus was that everyone’s “hands [were] tied” because, officially, the situation was completely voluntary. “She asked for it,” was the rationale used by both the crack family and by many of the alleged professionals that I spoke with.
Weeks after I sent the letter, there was a fire at ### Eastern Parkway. The blaze was apparently set by another one of the other crack children who moved her family into my mother's old room, which is to say, I was nowhere near the building when it went up. Understandably, I was elated for days (as I would gladly have torched the place myself if I could have somehow avoided prosecution). The true terror of the situation, however, lies in the potential for what could have happened after the fact, in the purely hypothetical course of events that can still wake me out of a sound sleep in the dead of the night. If, because of the actions of a group of parasitic junkies, my mother had lost her government-subsidized housing, she could have waited more than five years for another property to become available to her. And then, at the exact moment she was evicted from the crack house (as this was certainly the only outcome of such an unstable living arrangement), she would have been rendered homeless instantaneously. Losing her again, this time with the knowledge that I might have done something to prevent our separation and to alleviate some her suffering, is something I’m not sure that I could survive. (How many times can one disease destroy the same family? How many times does one woman have to be punished simply for being ill?)

Schenectady was once stunning. I lament the city's downward spiral in the same way that I grieve for the loss of the San Francisco that existed before the 1906 earthquake. In the Union bookstore, I impulsively bought a copy of Images of America: Schenectady, by Susan Rosenthal. On page 32 is a photograph of downtown Schenectady taken in 1921 that, to my untrained eye, could be passed off as having been taken in Montréal or in New York City. The number of viable businesses in the photo is truly shocking in light of the street's current state of affairs. (General Electric, once a beacon of
progress and innovation, pulled the plug on this Electric City in the 1970s when it started slashing jobs by the tens-of-thousands and things have been pretty dim ever since.) An article that ran in The Times Union on April 11, 1999, quoted the following statistic: "At Union, more than 60 percent of prospective students who turn down the college do so because of Schenectady." On June 6th of that same year, The Washington Post raved that "Union College [i]s stuck in Schenectady." Situated on the banks of the Mohawk River with the Erie Canal running through the city center, its once-strategic location within the State of New York as a center for commerce and industry now virtually guarantees that it will never recover from the ravages of its now-flourishing drug trade. Its coordinates on a map of the Northeastern United States places it directly in the crosshairs of a distribution network that runs up from New York City to points north, west, and east (Montréal, Toronto, and Boston, respectively). The New York State Thruway, as well as dozens of hollow Amtrak and Greyhound stations in other forgotten towns and cities in the region, provide shelter and sodium-lit anonymity to the new entrepreneurs who follow in the footsteps of the Iroquois as well as those of the early Dutch, British, and French explorers.

Founded in 1795 and originally an Ivy-League school, Union now fights for prestige and status based on its history as it simultaneously tries to keep the urban decay of the surrounding post-industrial city at bay with gates and guards. The incredible affluence displayed by the student body in the midst of such rising poverty has put this particular town and this particular campus increasingly at odds. (Good fences have not made for good neighbors in this particular arrangement.) An anti-drug commercial, shown in heavy rotation at the time in California, showed the connection between the
murder of an entire family in Latin America by the same cartel that supplied the marijuana to the American kid smoking a joint at the beginning of the ad. In an overly simplistic connect-the-dots kind of way I realized that I was one of those asshole students who bought the drugs that helped to perpetuate, and to accelerate, the cycle of decline in the city of Schenectady. Before I graduated, I had consumed my weight in pot, hash, cocaine, mushrooms, acid, and angel dust and had justified my behavior by thinking that I was simply being “creative” and "experimental." Distance, time, and sobriety have since forced me to rethink these adjectival choices.

Unfortunately, I am in no position myself to move back to New York State in order to stand guard on my mother’s front steps in an attempt to ward off the growing number of addicts and dealers who have become her neighbors. I was living then in a metropolitan area of over six million people at the time, but never feared for my life in San Francisco the way that I did that day on the once familiar, and now quite hostile, streets of my old college town in upstate New York. Taking this into account, I did something I swore to myself that I would never do just before Christmas of that year. I made a donation to the college annual fund. It was my hope that a contribution to one of the last viable companies in the area, however negligible, would trickle down to somehow improve the life of an old woman that I love who is also stuck in a city that I fled years ago.
CHAPTER VII
FOREIGN ARRIVALS

On our descent into the capital, I am most amazed by the houses situated so close to the airport. San Francisco, New York, and Frankfurt (pushpins on the map of the last five days) have dulled my expectations to the predictable piles of concrete and the self-important overlap of freeways and off ramps. Instead, we are falling into farmland and forests and buzzing the rooftops of bright red houses. The water of the Oslo Fjord is black and blue and fathomless. The air around me compresses and decompresses and I wonder if the molecules of oxygen and hydrogen in the cabin are still technically German as the plane touches down in Norway.

_Gardermoen_ airport is elegant and spacious and constructed of glass and pale wood framed by thin lines of iron and steel. The reverent pace of the escalator and the solemnity of the other travelers make this feel like the steps leading into a cathedral where people stop, briefly, to worship at the twin altars of transience and technology.

Over the hum of the conveyor belt in the baggage claim area, I listen to the language that has been spoken by my family for centuries. On the connecting flight, several members of the crew approached me in Norwegian and each interaction progressed in exactly the same way. The initial greeting was bright and solicitous until enough silence passed between us to warrant the flash of annoyance that invariably moved across the Scandinavian countenance before me. He or she would then rephrase the initial question in oddly inflected English that made me want to apologize. I understand everything and nothing about the conversations erupting around me now and
abandon my post at the carousel before my luggage arrives. I lock myself into a stall in the bathroom. The gravity of the situation has settled in my chest like water mistakenly inhaled and I need to think. Multilingual graffiti is carved into the back of the door and into the walls of the wooden stall and I am grateful for the diversion. There are definite themes. “America is great.” “America sucks.” Someone extols the glory of jihad and the success of the September 11th attacks in a lengthy, and syntactically nightmarish, paragraph.

It is Wednesday and I am deafeningly alone.

On the Friday before, I had arrived at my desk at a scientific publishing company in San Francisco with my bags packed for a flight to New York (and New York only). Later in the day, I opened an e-mail from my sister that read, “I’ll be in Norway on Wednesday. Can you be there?” I found my supervisor immediately, lied shamelessly about my available vacation time, got her approval, ran back to my cube, and replied in the affirmative. It’s been eight years since I first learned that I had a sister (two years my senior) and over a year since I first heard from her, also via e-mail and also at work, first thing on a Monday morning. The Twin Towers collapsed just hours after this connection was made and it was weeks before we were able to resume our basic, binary communication.

In the main terminal, I walk several laps from end to end in an attempt to calm my nerves. Even though I missed my flight out of JFK, I have an eternity to wait before my sister arrives from Japan, where she has been living for years on the island of Shikoku. Fumbling for my wallet, I make my way to the Nordea booth and ask to exchange my US currency for Norwegian kroner. The cherubic woman behind the
bulletproof glass rolls her eyes towards the word EXCHANGE printed above her head as she forces a smile.

“Yes, yes,” she says her face coloring with an impatience that she is paid to keep in check.

When she hands me the brightly colored bills and coins with holes bored through their centers, I linger for too long after my transaction is completed because I want more. I want her to excuse my American-ness and recognize me for the dutiful son of Norway that I am trying to be. She doesn’t and I walk to the other end of the terminal and look down on the trains waiting to return to the city. In my pocket, the silver change cascading through my nervous fingers speaks in different tones than the quarters, dimes, and nickels locked away in my suitcase.

In the bookstore, I flip through titles in translation by Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, and John Grisham, authors I would never read back home, whose work appears more serious and more exotic in its present context. I do not recognize any of the names on the Norwegian books like Fredrik Skagen, Lars Saabye Christensen, or Vigdis Hjorth. In the “Euro Shop” are salmon steaks, Jarlsberg cheeses, ties, fragrances, and candies whose flavors I can’t even begin to guess (“Gott og Blandet!”) There is nothing here that I need. What I want most of all is the company of my sister right here, right now. My mind wanders. I look at the toys that hang in bright packaging in these airport stores, hard plastic tokens bought on the fly to assuage the guilt of prolonged absence, and wonder if they are specifically designed for children of divorced parents and broken homes? If this is true, I want to buy my sister one of everything. Our home, in upstate New York, was irreparable before either one of us arrived and then kept hidden from us after we were
both removed from it by the police or by Social Services (or a combination of these two agencies).

I have yet to walk outside into the Norwegian afternoon even though it is only late August and the weather is stunning; the sky bluer than sky blue and the grass as green as Astroturf. It occurs to me that I haven’t actually left the confines of an airport or an airplane for over a day, but have been herded through customs and time zones through an international network of hermetically sealed tunnels and transports. My body buzzes just underneath the skin with the electricity of adrenaline, sleep deprivation, high-speed travel, and caffeine. In lieu of shot after shot of whiskey, Jaegermeister, and aquavit, I sit and have another coffee with another dense pastry of indeterminate flavor. In the decade before I met my mother, I drank heavily and I drank every day. I’ve been sober for two years, but right now my body and my brain are screaming out for something flammable wrapped in a brown paper bag. I have been on the verge of tears since entering the terminal and I think that I’m making some of the employees, who have had no choice but to track my progress through the waiting area as they ride out the tedium of their shifts, slightly nervous.

Suddenly, I get up, leaving my tray, and walk out through a set of doors closest to my table, inhale deeply, and walk back through a door as far from where I exited as possible. On some level, I know that I was afraid that I wouldn’t be let back in, that I would miss my sister’s arrival altogether. That I would breathe in the air of everything that I’ve ever wanted and be disappointed. But nothing happened. There are taxis and people boarding shuttles to swank hotels and other people smoking cigarettes whose brands I have never heard of before. Back at the table, my fingers rotate my coffee cup in
obsessive circles. The girls behind the café counter laugh and look away.

In front of the bank of screens that display arrival and departure times, I search for KLM flight number 1147 and do a double take as it has landed eleven minutes early and then there she is. My sister files into the terminal in a stream of other dazed passengers recently imported from Amsterdam and I recognize her partially from a photograph and partially from the way I have to catch my breath when our eyes meet. She looks crumpled by the cabin pressure and her brown hair has a vaguely purple tint to it and we both smile like sales reps that have arrived late to a national conference. I wrap my arms around her and the force of our connection causes the earth to spin momentarily on the axis of our embrace. Time stops, my eyes close, and there is no sound except for her voice in my ear. In the intervening year between first contact and this moment, we had attempted to take advantage of the fact that we both live on the Pacific Rim and had entertained thoughts of trying to meet in Tokyo, California, Guam, Alaska, and Hawaii, but none of these destinations had worked out for one reason or another. Within the last 72 hours, though, we have each traveled over 5,000 miles in opposite directions along the graceful curve of the globe to meet for the first time in our lives in a country that our great-grandparents sailed from just over 75 years before. And then we take a step back and the announcements resume over the loudspeakers and people start walking and talking again and we allow the world to accelerate back into its original trajectory around the sun. I offer coffee and beer and then one of the *Kvik Lunsj* candy bars that I bought at the 7-Eleven, all of which she refuses.

The train is immaculately clean and the cars are staffed, making the ride into Oslo shockingly unlike the commuter line that I took to SFO or the A train that brought
me to JFK. We are mostly silent as the scenery rushes by until we arrive at the National Theatre station. Her backpack is massive and we smile at each other on the platform and wait for the noise of the departing train to subside. The smooth cement walls of the subterranean structure resemble black-and-white micrographs of bone cells exploded to thousands of times their actual size. We discuss the logistics of getting out of the subway. Everything is suddenly cinematic for me now and I am convinced that there are Japanese and Norwegian subtitles moving underneath our feet as we walk. This escalator deposits us up onto Drammensveien near the Norwegian Royal Palace. The Power Puff Girls fly by in an ad on the side of a tram. I produce a map that I picked up in May at a Norwegian festival in San Mateo and we ascertain, after a block or two, that we are heading in the exact opposite direction of our accommodations.

At the hotel on Frederik Stangs gate, the blonde woman behind the front desk types queries into her computer with a pointed staccato whose phrasing conveys her annoyance with our reservation. A reservation that I made hastily online from a friend’s Manhattan apartment on Sunday afternoon.

“You requested two suites,” she says. “We have had to turn other guests away because of this request.”

I apologize, assuring her that I was under the impression that I’d made reservations for two single rooms for my sister and myself. Then I suggest that she might want to check the HTML of the hotel’s Web site. I try to send an appeal for understanding and lenience, due to the extenuating circumstances of our arrival, telepathically from my blue eyes to hers. To her estimation, we are just another American couple prone to making unreasonable demands of the staff at odd hours when, in fact, we
are atypically polite siblings who have flown to Norway to return our great-grandmother’s ashes to her home near the Arctic Circle. We wait in silence. There is a copy of the afternoon paper and its pages rise and fall almost imperceptibly on the coffee table near the open window. The fading sunlight filtering through the thick canopy of maple leaves out front makes me anxious to conclude this transaction, but I continue my silent appeal instead of calling for the manager, Texas-style, as she works the keyboard.

“Okay, you now have two single rooms for the two of you,” she says, producing our keys. “I have also given you a special summer discount,” she adds with a bright smile and I know that Agnes (our great-grandmother) must have had something to do with this unexpected change of heart.

The elevator is so old and so comically tiny that its mechanical bluster up two flights strikes me as some sort of Napoleonic overcompensation. We match numbers on key chains to numbers on doors and make plans for dinner within the hour. The window of my small, Spartan room is open onto the street behind the hotel and the light is so warm and the breeze so lazy that I fall asleep as soon as I move onto the bed.

“I’ve never been able to sleep on planes,” I offer in response to my sister’s loud knocking an hour later.

She is unfazed by my narcoleptic fit and we walk back the way we came, past the fur shops and strange convenience stores, and eat at a Middle Eastern restaurant around the corner from the Nobel Institute. (As we pass it again, I notice that behind the bust of Alfred Nobel on the front lawn, the second “I” is missing from above *Det Norske Nobelinst_tutt*, making it look like a broken motel sign on a forgotten back road.) I had seen the word FALAFEL earlier, illuminated by red neon in the distance, and the food
tastes better than anything I’ve ever had in my life after days of prepackaged meals served tens of thousands of feet in the air. Halfway through dinner, I take out my wallet and push a coin across the smooth wooden surface like someone placing a bet at a blackjack table. She laughs at the polar bear on the back as I begin to explain the significance of this two-dollar Canadian coin.

“It’s a toonie,” I tell her. “A friend of mine said that if you throw it on the sidewalk hard enough, and at just the right angle, you can pop the middle part right out.”

According to public record, there are nineteen women in the United States with my sister’s name and date of birth. In the last twelve months, I have called each of them at their homes in Minnesota, Washington, Texas, Georgia, and Ohio. I have listened to their answering machine messages over and over again trying to discern if their surnames were acquired by marriage so that I might cross them off of my list and move on to the next address and phone number. On the rare occasion that one of them actually answered the phone, they would invariably become angry at the invasion of privacy and would demand to know how I found their information. If they let me explain that I was looking for my sister whom I had never met because we had been separated as children, then their tones would soften abruptly before they hung up on me. It wasn’t until last September, while my partner and I were bouncing around western New York and southern Ontario that I found myself standing on her front porch just outside of Rochester. We had been invited to a friend’s wedding in Buffalo and I leapt at the opportunity to run down one of my nineteen leads in person, but no one answered the door for three days in a row. Each time, I had tried to divine the details of her life by the names listed on the mailbox, the smattering of children’s toys in the driveway, the way the curtains hung across the
darkened windows. And each time we approached the house in our oversized rental car, I panicked and feared success as much as I feared the failure that I had become so accustomed to during this search. Hours before we were to fly back to San Francisco, I located her foster mother at work by following one of the most tenuous leads that I had from a payphone in a mall parking lot. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” is all that she could say after the receptionist finally put me through to her office. Two days before this meeting, we had been in Toronto and I have kept the coin in my pocket ever since as a souvenir of that trip, like a receipt that I could produce if the events of that weekend were ever called into question. It had become an oversized arcade token, redeemable only by me, for a single birthday candle extinguished on a wish wasted in the twenty odd years before I even knew that I had a sister. In the course of our e-mail correspondence, we determined that we had been moving in concentric circles through the State of New York while being raised by different families. The cities and towns where we lived then seem more foreign to me than the country in which we now sit: Oswego, Ithaca, Schenectady.

She hands back the coin, now warm from her touch, and I convince her to ignore her jet lag and to walk with me into the city center. Turning onto Karl Johans gate just before Slottsparken and the bright yellow Royal Palace, we are swept up into the current of conversation and laughter past the university, the Grand Café, and the semi-circular entrance of the stolid parliament building. And it is in this crowd that I see the shadow, hear the silence, and feel the absence most acutely, but I say nothing. Any one of these men, whose hair is the color of wheat from farms in the American Midwest, could be him. Any one of these men, whose eyes have stolen their blues, greens, and grays from fallen snow in bright sun and from January ice suspended above swift current, could be
the third of our trinity. Any one of these men, whose skin is like mine, so pale as to appear etiolated, could be our brother, but I say nothing because I am with my sister.

Just below City Hall, on the edge of the harbor, is the Akershus Festning that was built sometime in the 1300s. We pass our cameras back and forth and take pictures in front of the fortress and underneath the turrets and spires of the castle inside. I take my time setting up the shots and direct her “one step forward” and “a little bit to the left” because I simply want to look at her. Want to scan her for similarities and imagine what she looked like while she was growing up and burn her image into my brain so that I can never, ever forget. She is stylish and reserved, two adjectives that will never be used to modify the noun of me. I wonder if Asia has affected her disposition, but I have absolutely no frame of reference. She is patient while I rotate the disposable camera and I know that, despite my photographic bravado, these pictures will never come out. It is far too dark.

When I drop my hands from my face to advance the film, we are dwarfed once again by the stone wall and its stoic density. The Akershus Festning served as the seat of military power for Denmark for centuries, for Sweden for decades, and was used as the Nazi headquarters in Norway from 1940 to 1945 during World War II. And I think: This is how I’ve felt for most of my life. Conquered. Occupied. Acquired. Acculturated. To be adopted in America is to be erased. New birth certificates are drafted with new names to expunge the details of the family that existed prior to the application of the judge’s signature to the adoption decree. These records, and our identities, are then sealed by court order and anyone convicted of releasing any of this information to someone like me faces substantial financial penalties and jail time. According to New York State Law, I
was never meant to be here, to travel with my sister, or to know that my ancestors sailed from this country in 1926.

In front of the National Theatre, there are statues of famous Norwegian playwrights such as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. I sit for a photo and think about an afternoon as an undergraduate when I volunteered to assist with the inventory at an independent bookstore off campus. For my time, I was offered any title on the shelves. I left with a hardcover edition of *Four Plays of Henrik Ibsen* (“An Enemy of the People,” “The Wild Duck,” “Hedda Gabler,” and “The Lady from the Sea”) published by Grosset & Dunlap, New York. This decision, made over a decade earlier, is suddenly significant in the flash of the camera. On my way from New York to California, I took a 60-mile detour from the Trans-Canadian Highway to snap a similar shot underneath a Viking monument in the former Icelandic colony of Gimli, Manitoba. In graduate school, I wrote and produced a play set off of the coast of Stockholm, Sweden. All of these things happened before I discovered my actual heritage and now seem to be related incidents of a soul in search of its origins. And now that I finally know, I would gladly trade the stars and stripes for the red, white, and blue of the Norwegian flag that waves proudly all around us.

I was once the middle of three children until we disappeared, one by one, and became other people. In the coming days, I will learn from various relatives that the government of Norway has made it a point of national policy not to separate siblings who were removed from their familial homes because of issues of abuse or neglect. In the UK, records are not sealed as adoptions are conducted in the open, with the knowledge and consent of all parties involved, allowing contact with one or both of a child’s relinquishing parents. Canada is in the process of repealing its restrictive access laws,
province by province, and opening records to generations of adults who were raised in adoptive homes. America, as is so often the case, has turned a blind eye to such progressive social reform in other parts of the world by prohibiting access to original birth records to the citizens of forty-four of its fifty United States.

On the way back to Frederik Stangs gate, I ask her to take a picture of me standing behind the pole for a street named Inkognitogata because I think it’s funny that so few people even know that I am here. Of course, this picture won’t develop properly, either. I know that it will return to me an oily black rectangle that contains a thinner, iridescent silver rectangle whose black lettering is obliterated by the intensity of the flash. But I don’t care. I just want a visual reminder of the elation that I feel right at this moment in Oslo, Norway, with my sister.

The bartender has already cleaned the coffeepots by the time we return to our hotel, so I order a single espresso. We sit down at something that resembles a picnic table and are quiet for a moment. My sister has been able to supply some information about family members that I had not known about until very recently as she lived, for a number of years, with our great-grandparents (Agnes and Ivar) before she entered into the foster care system. (Alcoholism, Multiple Sclerosis, and Parkinson’s, I have learned, having claimed the lives of several men and women in our family during the second half of the 20th century.)

And then, from just above the lip of her pint glass, my sister says, “So, you don’t drink at all?”

“Nope.” Not any more. And this is all I can muster right now, at this hour, at this table, in this country, on this occasion.
“I got a letter from her once. When I was about twelve,” she says. “It didn’t make any sense and it scared me. I didn’t write back.” Her short, quiet phrases sound like haiku. Our mother’s schizophrenia (the disease responsible for our separation so many years ago) is something we have yet to really discuss, but we are both far too exhausted to deal with the details or the potential ramifications of her condition on this first day.

In the space between our rooms, we hug and say good night and start to hazily sketch out travel plans for the morning. We both smile and give up knowing that the other is already half-asleep and retire noiselessly behind our respective doors.

There are days that slip by quickly and unnoticed like curious pets through open doors and shy children absent from school, but this is not one of them. I turn on the antiquated television and listen to a Norwegian version of MTV while slowly undressing for bed. A phrase that caught my attention at the airport loops through my head: “Ankomst Utland/Foreign Arrivals/Ankomst Utland/Foreign Arrivals…” A video from the new a-ha album comes on and I recognize Morten Harket’s distinctive falsetto coming through the set’s single speaker and I am amazed by how much this hotel room feels like home halfway around the world from where I actually live. Tomorrow we will begin a weeklong journey north by rail to the small farming village of Snåsa where we will bury the ashes of our great-grandmother. Standing in the small churchyard under a canopy of delicate birch trees, the sound of my family’s voices joined together in song will fill my eyes with tears of some of the greatest joy I was never meant to know.
CHAPTER VIII
CHECKING THE BASTARD BOX

When I arrived in San Francisco, late in the summer of 1996, I had someone else’s name. In my bags were packed photographs of someone else’s family and every form of ID that I brought with me was fake; my driver’s license, all of the credit cards that helped to propel me across the continent, my birth certificate, my Social Security and ATM cards. All fraudulent. My medical records contain no information. My blood type has never been recorded. The person whose name appears in thick block lettering on my English degree is just as fictitious as the Pucks and Oberons of my undergraduate studies.

I lived in a hotel at the corner of Ellis and Cyril Magnin and fell asleep to the bells clanging on the cable cars coming and going at the Powell Street turnaround two blocks away. I knew no one in San Francisco, let alone California, and the anonymity and distance from the chaos that I left back in New York produced a profound sense of liberation and safety that I had never before experienced in my life. I could not be found, had no obligations to anyone or anything, and had absolutely no history in the state I currently found myself in. What I felt then was an immense relief and a certain self-satisfaction in successfully orchestrating the details of my own disappearance.

For over two weeks, I left my room early in the morning and returned after dinner while searching for an apartment or a room or some other semi-permanent place to live. Somewhere in the midst of all of this running around, I caught a glimpse of a Chronicle headline that announced the city’s residential occupancy rate had risen to just shy of 100%. I had no concept of the dot com revolution, could not find Silicon Valley on a
map, and had packed a friend’s electric typewriter at the last minute as I left my hometown on the East Coast to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. I was a self-professed Luddite and hadn’t thought to factor an impromptu housing crisis into my escape plans. After two weeks of this 9-to-5 schedule, I had two leads on potential living accommodations and neither was really that appealing when it came right down to it. The first was a sliver of a closet space in an artists’ co-op at 22nd and Mission that was already bursting at the seams with poets, painters, and other assorted drama queens that would require me to cook for the house on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. The second was a spacious room in one of the famous painted ladies that line Alamo Square Park, but this scenario included a dysfunctional gay couple (one a minister, the other a newly “reformed” go-go boy) and they explicitly prohibited drinking, smoking, and drugs. (I neglected to tell either of these men, at the time, that I found those three things to be unquestionably integral to my own development as a writer.)

Pure luck, and not the multiple agencies with whom I had registered, led me to the room that I ended up renting for $375 a month. There was a hand-drawn ad tacked to a board in a Laundromat at Market and Laguna, decorated with flowers and smiley faces, that encouraged me to call a woman who was an interpretive dancer with two recent vacancies in her three-bedroom flat. After a rambling conversation about my housing needs and her plans to study in Spain, I made an appointment to meet her in two days in order to look at the apartment. The next day, however, I happened to be walking by the building and saw a slender woman heading up the stairs. I introduced myself and, after a quick assessment, she let me in to see the flat earlier than expected. The place was huge,
disheveled, bright, and cheap, so I jumped at the opportunity to land one of the front bedrooms that boasted bay windows and panoramic views of The Central Freeway, Market Street, and the sex club across the street.

I called my friend, Michelle, in Manhattan from a payphone on Fifth Street to tell her the good news. As we were melodramatically screaming at each other about my good fortune, a woman clad in a silver lamé gown, white wings, and a glittery halo rode by on an oversized tricycle built around an actual harp. She smiled at me from her perch several feet above the sidewalk as she rolled by and I took this as a sign that I was, in fact, destined to be here all along. I spent the night at The Gold Dust Lounge near Union Square celebrating my arrival in San Francisco by drinking my weight in Anchor Steam while the Dixieland band further elevated my spirits to heights unimaginable in the weeks prior. Hours before last call I had joined a group of French tourists who were all traveling on the same tacky rouge, blanc, et bleu chartered bus and we sang the Marseillaise at the top of our lungs that night like a bunch of Gallic Christmas carolers whose calendars were all broken.

The next afternoon, I moved out of the Hotel Gates by making several trips back-and-forth to my new apartment on streetcars from Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles on the beautiful, and historic, F-Market line. When I was finished, and my easel was set up in the corner of my new room, I thought I was done. I thought I had accomplished what I had set out to do, which was to simply to escape from my own life in Upstate New York and everything that that had entailed. To simply be away, untouchable, unreachable. Unfortunately, I could not have been more wrong. Over the course of the next four years
I unpacked my baggage (both literal and metaphorical) as I unraveled publicly, and privately, before finally coming completely undone in the summer just after graduation.

San Francisco, initially, was both a destination and a salve for me as I moved westward. By moving as far away as continentally possible from the complex issues of identity and ownership that I once thought were confined within the city limits of my hometown, I thought that I could resolve problems and vanquish personal demons through geography. By obliterating my own contexts and emotional frames of reference, I had hoped to erase the memories of my fucked up childhood and violent adolescence, but San Francisco had other plans for me completely. As soon as I thought I had found my place in the world, the city itself seemed to start questioning my previous affiliations and, at the same time, to categorize me now that I was there. Gay, male, and Caucasian were really the only descriptors that I could bring to the table when I stepped off the Greyhound at the Transbay Terminal and those identifiers, I would come to find out, were not sufficient enough for me or for the city.

I caught the tail of the dot comet after completing my degree and worked for a series of Web companies until I was laid off by a series of Web companies. As I scrambled for work in the wake of the burst bubble, I filled out hundreds of applications in dozens of offices and each interview, inadvertently, made me more desperate to know who I was and where the hell I came from. After running the gauntlet of admins and introductions, I would ultimately be left alone with the daunting task of copying all of the information from my résumé onto the prefab corporate forms piled in front of me. Somewhere in this mix, underneath the fields for Social Security Number, Permanent Residence Address, Gender, and Date of Birth, would be the set of boxes that I dreaded
most. Regardless of their order, they are invariably introduced by the same innocuous phrase: “Please Check One Only:”

- African-American Non-Hispanic
- Filipino
- American Indian/Alaskan Native

To live in a city like San Francisco, where every neighborhood has its own separate and distinct ethnic and cultural identity, became a particular version of hell for me (a virtual John Doe).

- Chinese
- Japanese
- Korean
- Laotian
- Cambodian
- Vietnamese

Walking through the crowds on Geary Boulevard at the Nihonmachi Street Fair, chasing the dragons up Grant Avenue and on into Chinatown during the New Year’s parade, learning about ugly fruit and lumpia in the strange subterranean food court on Columbus, losing hours at Stella Pastry in North Beach staring out the big picture window at all of the people crowding the pavement of the Italian neighborhood, running drunk through the gauntlets of dealers and junkies in The Mission on so many nights with the sounds of Latin oom-pah-pah! polkas bouncing out of every open window along Valencia Street, and eating my way through the long provincial city blocks out in the Richmond District one Thai restaurant at a time – All of these things, either wonderful, dangerous, delicious, or some combination thereof, all of them hammered home the fact that I was no one from Nowhere. I used to think that my situation was advantageous, that my total inability to be labeled, from within or from without, allowed me to move through life more freely than others. I had always answered with a vague, “I have no
idea,” when anyone would ask about my background or my family. During these awkward conversations I imagined myself to be an enigmatic *citoyen du monde* who defied categorization solely on the basis of my fiercely independent nature.

Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano  
Central American  
South American  
Guamanian  
Hawaiian  
Samoan

I spent innumerable nights drunk and alone in my studio designing a tattoo of a question mark in a font of my own creation. I had always imagined it on my right shoulder, just above my bicep, so that I could offer it up as a silent response to anyone who might inquire about my background by simply rolling up my sleeve. Because there has never been a box to check, or a circle to fill in darkly and completely with a No. 2 pencil, on any form that would allow me to accurately identify, classify, or categorize myself:

Bastard  
Orphan  
Abandoned  
Unknown

Every block of every neighborhood in San Francisco was a physical reminder of what I was not. I was not Italian, Latin, Asian. I did not speak Spanish, Mandarin, or Tagalog and the only nomenclature that was truly applicable to me at the time were my genus and species. The politics of identity, with their requisite inclusion by exclusion, seemed to float in with the afternoon fog and work their way into my thoughts, decisions, and dreams more than they had ever before. Rather than being the escapist paradise that I
had naïvely envisioned, San Francisco stripped away layer upon layer of scar tissue that had been built up by years of silence, guilt, shame, and institutionally sanctioned deceit.

I met my mother for the first time when I was thirty and learned that I had actually lived around the corner from her for years while I was in college in New York. She told me things that I was never legally supposed to know such as the names of my grandparents, my younger brother, and of my older sister. Like millions of other American adults raised in adoptive and foster homes, I do not have legal access to my own immediate and extended family members, medical records, or heritage. My name was changed three times before my tenth birthday and these name changes were meant to convey a sense of inclusion into these new facsimiles of family units. In reality, however, what adoption did in both cases was to simply transfer ownership of a human being from the state to unrelated private citizens upon completion of sizable financial transactions.

Twenty-five years after my past was erased by the State of New York, I stood before a judge in San Francisco Superior Court and took back my own name. I had filed the petition back in March and the first date available for my hearing was 9AM on May 19th, 2003. While I am, by no means, a numerologist I took this as a sign and my heart leapt when the clerk behind the bulletproof glass gave me this date. I had her repeat it because I thought she might just have been verifying some of the information on the court documents fanned out in front of her. When I told her that the nineteenth of May was my birthday, she asked me if I wanted to make my appointment for later that summer.

When I returned for my day in court, I was shaking from too much caffeine and a pent up frustration resulting from years spent searching for my parents and raging at the
machine. For the judge, I'm sure it was just another day at the office as she was calm, cool, and collected when she asked me two simple questions and then sent me on my way. As the focal point of the proceedings, I was damn near twitching and truly unsure if I would actually be able to contain myself once I was face-to-face with a representative of a system that had made so many decisions on my behalf without my input or consent. I had visions of Norma Rae and Erin Brokovich looping through my brain and had half-expected to be dragged from the building while spitting bile and invective at the cogs whose mere presence lent their support to adoption laws and legislation in this country that cause so much pain to so many to this day.

The judge, instead, quietly and confidently returned something to me that had been mine all along. The remainder of my thirty-third birthday was spent in interminable lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles and at the Social Security Administration Office as I started the process of replacing the false papers that I once carried in my wallet with valid forms of ID. At the DMV, I looked directly at the camera, newly sober and born again, and smiled like I had just won the lottery.
CHAPTER IX

WHO I AM

My parents met through *The National Enquirer’s* Pen Pal Club. My father worked at The Post Office on South Pearl Street at the time and my mother was living in a town farther upstate that is, more often than not, difficult to find on a map. They started writing to each other in the late 1960s and, soon after, my mother took a Greyhound bus to “the big city” to visit her future husband. They were married within months.

The fact that I owe my existence to a supermarket tabloid perhaps explains the often cinematic qualities that my life has had to date. The person responsible for coordinating the pen pal club at *The National Enquirer*, as the story goes, paired my mother with my father because they were both born in May 1944. I doubt that he or she also knew that they were both schizophrenic.

I read the first letter that I ever received from my mother on New Year’s Eve 1999 in a diner on Church Street in San Francisco. The West Coast, like the rest of the planet, was holding its collective breath to see if the world was actually going to come to an end. Y2K was the talk of the town. The millennium was upon us. Newspapers and magazines polled the hell out of us trying to find out how we were going to spend our collective last night on Earth.

I hardly noticed and didn’t much care.

The letter I held suspended above my French toast and strawberries was written on a manual typewriter in Albany and dated March 21, 1972. The name at the bottom was whited out completely and efficiently because the orphanage where I spent the first years
of my life is, even to this day, legally bound to keep all records of my biological parents confidential.

Adam, my partner of almost a decade, held my hand across the black tabletop as I started to cry, not boisterously, but enough that people started to notice. Black Sabbath blared in the background and it occurred to me that the other patrons likely assumed that I was being dumped.

There were other documents included with the letter from my anonymous mother, including one written by a nun at the orphanage to a social worker assigned to my case.

Dear XXXX:

I am writing to you to express my concern about the possibility of Michael’s discharge to his parents. The child was referred here for emergency placement because of the mother’s attempted suicide. My contacts with both parents would indicate that there is much risk involved in considering Michael’s discharge to them. Both parents manifest much emotional disturbance and confusion in thought process. The mother seems much more aware of the realities of her problems than Mr. X. The latter is excessively pre-occupied with medical problems—real or imagined—and has made several requests for a variety of diagnostic services for Michael. As much as the parents’ situation precludes a feeling of optimism in discharge of Michael to them, we are concerned about his need for further observation. He has been observed to walk on his tip toes and to “hug the wall”—both of which are manifestations of a child deprived emotionally and living out of reality.

XXXX

This letter was also unsigned, but closed with a series of dates and results underneath the heading “Tests & Innoculations.”

We went to a party in Oakland that night and rang in the new year every hour on the hour with people in various time zones on television. We all wore cardboard tiaras and threw a lot of glitter. After everyone had gone to bed or simply lay where they had fallen, I sat on the front porch with a bottle of wine and a pack of cigarettes and drank a
hole in my heart and smoked a spot onto my lung.

Having spent most of my life searching for her, I met my mother for the first time the following November. When I started looking for her in earnest 11, 12, 13 years ago, all I had to work with was her last name. I took this single word and, with the help of several phenomenal friends, scoured print and Web archives, databases, genealogical societies, city directories, phone books and church records all over the country to find my mother’s first name. I then submitted this information to a professional investigation firm in Southern California, which returned 37 listings nationwide. After receiving this list, every day felt like a free fall from a great height while I whittled down the possibilities by a process of intuition and blind luck. Eventually I found her.

When I met my mother, I was 30 and had been living in California for almost five years. I had flown back to New York for the long holiday weekend, and I stood on her front porch in Schenectady and waited with one of my best friends from grade school. It took some time for her to descend the stairs from her second-floor apartment. As a student at Union College, 10 years prior, I had lived directly around the corner from her, but had never seen her face until that Saturday after Thanksgiving.

At the time, I was working as a scientific editor for a major Web directory in San Francisco and began conducting my own research on the causes and symptoms of schizophrenia on the sly. I had studied psychology, briefly, at Cornell and started to recall some of the images that were projected onto massive screens for the almost 2,000 students usually in attendance in Bailey Hall for the Psych 101 lectures. They were short film reels of patients undergoing electroshock therapy, cross sections of malformed and diseased brains, and near-silent clips of catatonic patients in stark facilities.
The woman who greeted me at the door that day (who had my blue eyes and my kinky hair!), however, wore one of the gentlest expressions I have ever seen, and she changed my life in an instant. I had resigned myself to the fact that I would be overcome by choking sobs and searing tears, but I was not. My mother, however, wiped her eyes for the hour and a half that I spent with her. She told me stories about our family and about relatives I didn’t even know I had, and I listened, every once in a while wondering how much more I could stand. In the course of my research, I had discovered that because of her condition I was predisposed to the development of certain conditions like depression (check) and alcoholism (check, check, check), but I was not prepared to hear about all of the lives cut short in my family by drinking and violence.

My mother kissed me on the neck as I left (I’m a bit taller than she is) and I felt the weight and trauma of a decade of my own substance abuse fall away from my body as I walked back down the steps of her apartment building. The whole experience was like making a pilgrimage to Lourdes without having to cross the Atlantic, but I was the only one who could see the crutches and leg braces falling to the sidewalk.

In February 2000, I received the results from the New York State Department of Health’s Adoption and Medical Information Registry. Almost 30 years after the fact, Peter M. Carucci, director of vital records, wrote to inform me that my parents were white Americans and that my father was male and that my mother was female.

According to public record, there are 19 women in the United States with my sister’s name and date of birth. I have called each of them at their homes in Minnesota, Washington, Texas, Georgia and Ohio. I listened to their answering machine messages over and over again trying to discern if their surnames were acquired by marriage so that
I might cross them off of my list and move on to the next address and phone number. On the rare occasion that one of them actually answered the phone, she would invariably become angry at the invasion of privacy and would demand to know how I found her information. When I was able to explain that I was looking for my sister whom I had never met because we had been separated as children, then her tone would soften abruptly before she hung up on me.

It wasn’t until September 2001, while Adam and I were bouncing around western New York and southern Ontario, that I found myself standing on her front porch just outside of Rochester. We had been invited to a friend’s wedding in Buffalo and I leapt at the opportunity to run down one of my 19 leads in person, but no one answered the door for three days in a row. Each time we approached the house in our oversized rental car, I panicked and feared success as much as I feared the failure I had become so accustomed to. Hours before we were to fly back to San Francisco, I located her foster mother at work by following one of the most tenuous leads that I had (a name in an article about a local food drive). “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” is all she could say after the receptionist finally put me through to her office.

I met my half-sister for the first time last August at the airport in Oslo. She flew in from Japan, where she has lived for the last eight years, and I paced the terminal for hours and hours, waiting for her connecting flight from Amsterdam to arrive, rehearsing the things I might say and the things I wanted to say when she walked through the gate. Statistically, there is a 15 percent chance of developing schizophrenia if one of your parents has the disease. I think that this number was in the back of my mind when I scanned her face and lost all of my words and simply offered her a piece of my Kvik
Lunsj chocolate bar on that bright, unforgettable, Scandinavian afternoon. We traveled for a week by train north through the country until we arrived in a small farming village just south of the Arctic Circle. There we buried the ashes of our great-grandmother, Agnes, alongside her own brothers and sisters. I never had the privilege, nor the legal right, to meet Agnes, but hers was the first memorial that I have ever attended for a member of my own family.

Statistically, I am screwed. I am screwed because my father also has the official diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, so my risk of developing the disease jumps to just shy of 50 percent. My father, bless his congenitally defective heart, has refused any and all contact, and I have respected his wishes. He returned a Christmas card and a picture of me that I had sent to him with the following holiday greeting scrawled across the front of the envelope:

DOES – NOT LIVE – ANYMORE. NO – MORE MAIL. I’M – A CRIME VICTIM AT – STATE AND – FEDERAL LEVELS. ANYMORE MAIL – I’M RETURNING TO SENDER.

He resides on a locked ward near the Québec border and hordes batteries, stamps and bits of machinery (among other things) in anticipation of the coming apocalypse. My mother talked about him that first day, in a monotone that is peculiar to people with schizophrenia, and told me about his inexplicable tantrums in the middle of the night when he would wake up screaming and smash glasses and dishes in the kitchen until there was nothing left to break. I take solace in the knowledge that his response to me was (hopefully) a product of an altered brain structure and erratic dopamine levels rather than a pointed rejection of his long-lost son.
I located one of his brothers (my uncle Duane) and have spoken to him twice. The first time that I summoned the courage to pick up the phone and introduce myself to yet another unknown relative, he asked me, point blank, what was “wrong” with his brother. They hadn’t spoken in years and my father, apparently, was a bit off while they were growing up. When I got to the word “schizophrenic,” he interrupted and barked, “What’s that?”

My uncle has a son named Larry. I have a picture of my uncle Duane and my cousin Larry taken in 1988, and it saddens me because I know that they too have not spoken in years. I don’t have the heart to tell my uncle and his new wife that Larry’s got it, too. You can see it in his awkward stance, the Velcro shoes on his adult feet, and the expression on his face. It could be described as “dim,” but I’ve come to perceive it as extreme disinterest coupled with a very self-conscious and overwhelming confusion. I have a picture of my mother as a child, given to me by a distant relation while I was in Norway with my sister, and she has the exact same heaviness in her eyelids that makes them both look like they’re trying, unsuccessfully, to hide a great sadness from the camera.

At my desk, months before meeting my mother, I had discovered a condition known as alcohol-induced schizoaffective disorder in the course of preparing for the reunion. I was stunned. I have threatened, and attempted, to take my own life on several occasions (with alcohol, drugs, gravity, speed, blades) and had attributed these episodes to certain unfortunate aspects of my strange upbringing. The more I’ve learned about this particular brand of psychosis, triggered both by substance abuse and by withdrawal, the more the scales tipped toward a clinical explanation for my desperate and terrifying
actions and away from an overblown artistic temperament caused by a difficult childhood. As with alcoholism and depression, I have inherited another predisposition that I’ve come to think of as a “schizophrenic sensitivity” that is expressed only when I am under the influence.

In their now-famous paper about the form and structure of DNA, James Watson and Francis Crick wrote: “It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing [of purine and pyrimidine bases] we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material.” (From “A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid,” by James D. Watson and Francis H. C. Crick, April 25, 1953, Nature, Vol. 171.) What this says to me 50 years later is that, despite the fact that my name changed three times within the first 10 years of my life, I was and will continue to be myself, genotypically speaking. Gattaca notwithstanding, there should have been a label slapped on my ass as I was being scanned through the orphanage checkout that read: “Warning: This Product May Self Destruct When Combined with Alcohol.” I was placed with a foster family, however, solely on the basis of my blond hair and blue eyes, and all of my actual hereditary traits and potentialities were sealed away, essentially forever, with my medical records. No one thought it necessary, then or now, for me to know that suicide runs rampant through my family history.

I assume that this was also the case with my brother, whom I found out about on that first afternoon at my mother’s kitchen table. He is named after my father and turned 30 at the end of January. I’ve got a copy of his birth certificate, but little else. Unlike my sister and I, he was taken by social services at birth, and his name was changed almost immediately. My mother has told me the story of that day dozens of times in the last three
years. She describes his hair and his eyes and the birthmark on the back of his neck and how the nurses refused to ever let her hold him.

While I do not question the fact that my parents were unable to care for their own children, I do take offense at the fact that the three of us were expected to never look back after our placements in the various households full of strangers who raised us throughout New York State after we were separated. I doubt that professional scientific journals such as *Nature* were required reading for social workers, attorneys or members of the clergy in the early 1970s, but in retrospect, I think they really should have been. I find it criminal that the people responsible for my placements used my physical appearance as the sole criterion to match me with potential foster and adoptive families. These same “professionals,” however, turned a collective blind eye to a number of potentially life-threatening inheritable traits that I then had the pleasure to discover, by way of a nightmarish process of trial and error, later in my life.

In July, I stood on the front steps of a home on one of the quiet side streets behind Crossgates Mall. After I rang the doorbell, I stood face-to-face with a man who was born on my brother’s birthday (Jan. 28, 1973) and who was born at the same hospital (St. Peter’s). The man standing in front of me was angry for the intrusion and had an olive complexion, brown eyes and fine, straight brown hair parted in the middle. The man standing in front of me was born on my brother’s birthday at the same hospital, but the man standing in front of me was, unfortunately, not my brother. His features were distinctly not Scandinavian in the least, so I asked him what his background actually was. (“Italian? French?” I queried.) And he didn’t know because his father had been adopted. I thanked him for his time and left angrier at the system and the laws than I had been
before I had walked the excruciatingly long block from the rental car to his front door.

There was another letter from Peter M. Carucci in my mailbox when I returned home to California that informed me that “the adoptee,” my brother, “has not yet registered.” The letter went on to say that my brother’s parents were white Americans and that my father was male, that my mother was female, and that my brother was (astonishingly) male.

The New York State Adoption Information Sibling Registry is, for all intents and purposes, a cruel joke. In order for a reunion to be facilitated, both siblings must submit their respective applications to the New York State Department of Health. However, in order to submit an application in the first place the adoptee is required to supply a copy of his or her original birth certificate with both parents’ names listed on the document. This, simply stated, is unrealistic and offensive to a population of American adults who may not even know their own family surnames. My “official” birth certificate, on record in the Office of Vital Statistics in Albany’s City Hall, contains only the names of my adopted parents and is dated 1980, a full decade after my actual birth.

Crazy is a word that no longer peppers my casual conversations these days, because crazy is also a word that may already have taken my brother’s life. He is the last member of my family that I need to find, and I hope that one day in the near future I’ll be able to pick up the phone, dial his number and tell him secrets like “SNAP-25,” “RGS4” and “HLA-B44.” These are proteins, genes, and gene types thought to be involved with the development of schizophrenia, and they may have already conspired against him. Crazy is the fact that, when I am finally able to locate and dial the number that will allow me to warn him about the electrical storms that might one day rage through his prefrontal
cortex, there might not be anyone to pick up the phone when I call.

In May, I stood in front of a judge in San Francisco Superior Court and petitioned my adopted state for the legal right to use my own name. I filed the papers for this in March, and the first available court date was early morning on my 33rd birthday, a total coincidence that I jumped at instantaneously. At 9 AM on May 19, 2003, I reclaimed what was taken from me by the archaic adoption laws that are still in effect in my home state. Before the doors of the courtroom actually opened, I noted that since I was representing myself in court without the assistance of an attorney, under my adopted name were the words Propria Persona (“In one’s own proper person”) and I thought this a fitting title for one of the proudest days of my life. I took back my own name for myself, but I also did it for my sister and my brother and for the thousands of other adoptees whose lives, identities and families are still being held hostage by The State of New York.
CHAPTER X

MEAT

I credit my vegetarianism to E.F. Schumacher and to years of food service. First, I worked part-time in the kitchen for a year at Sage Hall at Cornell prepping food until I dropped out (withdrawing from the university by phone) and then I worked full-time on the line at West College (the freshman dining hall) at Union College for another three until I finished my degree. It was during that first year at Sage, though, that I decided to cut meat out of my diet along with leather, and other animal products and byproducts, from my life. Cornell, although a much briefer residency, was an exponentially bloodier affair with my assignments often involving a large slab of unidentifiable meat, pools of shiny mercurial blood pooling in the corners of a warped silver pan, a knife so large that I thought of it more as a scimitar, and instructions to “cut the fat off of this thing.” This thing was the flesh of another social animal who experienced thoughts and feelings like fear, hunger, curiosity, and contentment just as I did. I didn’t, however, anthropomorphize or romanticize the lives of my pounds of flesh, but I realized that I became increasingly more convinced that animals were not, in fact, put on this Earth simply to be consumed by humans. At eighteen, I stopped eating beef and by twenty-one I had eradicated fish and poultry from my diet, as well. There were no doctrines, no g*ds, involved; Just a staunch pragmatism that told me that the meat that could be removed from the bones of my forearms, my thighs, and my calves could just as easily be substituted into the food I was preparing if I were to apply the scimitar to my own body. I consider the decision to become an ethical vegetarian to be one of the most definitive of my life.
And then fourteen years later, I found myself on a farm in Norway just south of the Arctic Circle questioning these same beliefs, inadvertently embroiled in an internal battle against my own ethics. The circumstances that brought me to the tiny fishing village of Snåsa were the result of over a decade’s worth of searching for my family, from whom I had been separated by adoption. To be adopted in America, it should be noted, is to be erased entirely, to be entered into a bizarre version of The Federal Witness Protection Plan complete with false documents (birth certificates and Social Security cards) that reflect fictitious, revisionist personal histories about an individual’s religious, medical, and ancestral backgrounds. Ethnic identities are often reassigned and individuals who grew up in adoptive environments are then denied legal access to their own records even as adults. (Additionally, anyone employed by a state agency involved with the adoption, adoption hearings, or charged with the safekeeping of these sealed adoption records faces jail time and exorbitant fines if convicted of releasing any of this information to a US citizen raised by adoptive guardians.) Adults in these cases (such as myself) are invariably seeking the same basic information, such as: their original name or surname, pertinent medical information about his/or her parents, and whether or not there are family members still alive and residing in the area. Raised predominately in Irish/Catholic households after I was entered into the foster care system at the age four, I was proud to discover that I am actually descended from a long line of Dutch and Norwegian Protestants.

In August of 2002, I flew to Oslo from San Francisco to meet the first of my two siblings for the first time, and while in Norway I was offered an array of meats from various relatives that I politely declined with the help of a small Norwegian phrasebook as I traveled with my sister, by train, up the west coast of the country. In Begnadalen where I awkwardly
avoided a tray of salmon hors d’oeuvres, I was then offered steak (or vice versa) and had to explain again to a gang of relatives at the train station in Trondheim that I did not eat meat. Our arrival in Snåsa with the ashes of our great-grandmother, however, was cause for such celebration that we were offered moose as the main course of a raucous dinner that went on for hours. Momentary silence (as is often the case) was the initial response to my declaration of vegetarianism, but this was quickly replaced by more laughter after my empty plate was piled high with organic vegetables that they pulled out of the ground, just steps from the front door of the main house, and steamed for me and for me, only. (Apparently, I am not the first vegetarian on this side of my family, but the last one lived and died sometime in the 1800s and she was quite odd, as this story goes.)

Because of the trouble that had gone into getting me fed on that first night, I insisted on clearing the table and cleaning the kitchen before we retired to the living room to cluster around an ancient wood-burning stove. The massive moose bone, however, large enough to my eye to not seem at all out of place if it were to be displayed in a natural history museum somewhere as the femur of a large dinosaur, was a bit problematic for me (conjuring as it did all of the time I had spent with cadaverous chunks of flesh and bone in stainless-steel industrial kitchens). I didn’t comment, however, as there is a vast difference for me between handling and consuming meat. While I find it vile to touch and to smell, I have ceased to complain about its ubiquity in the lives of others.

In the living room and on into the dining room, the taxidermied heads and bodies of countless species were displayed on almost every available square inch of wall space and flat surface in the two rooms. (Earlier in the afternoon, I had asked my sister to take a picture of me next to a mounted cougar while I held a hefty black pistol in the palm of my hand at the
animal’s feet like I had seen Hemingway do in those ridiculous photos of him posing with fresh kill on the plains of Africa and on the docks of the Florida Keys.) For the three days that we spent on the farm, I sat on the floor with a sheepdog, named “Roof,” as we had just inexplicably taken to one another as soon as I had arrived. In fact, I had seen him in action in the fields behind the cluster of farm buildings actually herding sheep, who moved like schools of puffy white clouds against the green, green background of the late-summer grass, before dinner. Roof looked exuberant chasing the stray sheep and he was fast as hell. I remember thinking that this type of collaboration between, and among, species was closer to the symbiosis that I believed in on a completely philosophical level. On his off hours, Roof and I walked side-by-side together into the forest surrounding the farm and spent our time indoors looking up into the conversations taking place around us in English and in Norwegian like we knew something that everyone else couldn’t express in any language even if they tried.

Very early on the second morning, though, I was up before my sister and something unexpected happened to me that I still can’t quite figure out while I had breakfast with Åtle and his son, Kåre, at the kitchen table. Neither of them spoke a word of English and I hadn’t heard, let alone spoken, a word of Norwegian before I landed in Oslo just days prior, but they told me stories about picking reindeer off, one-by-one, in the dead of night with the rifles from the glass case in the next room as the animals slept along the perimeter of a neighbor’s home seeking warmth and shelter from the snow. They told me how they also tracked and killed the massive bobcat last winter, the one that we saw preserved (in what looked like mid-attack with his teeth barred and his claws extended) out in a freezer in the barn, with a combination of smoke and shotguns and infinite patience. We spread cloudberry preserves on
homemade bread as we talked and talked several cups of black coffee about hunting, fishing, and farming and all of a sudden I thought, “I’m staying. I can do this.” Overwrought with the black-and-white images of men in my family that were shown to me constantly during this time on the farm, men whom I resembled for the first time (literally ever) in my life, I felt like I had arrived in my place in the world. This snap decision to renounce my own code of personal ethics and to pick up a rifle to take life in order to live off of the land in a remote part of northern Norway was heavily influenced by three factors: 1) The fact that I had lived my life totally out of context and was never meant to know, or to know about, all of these family members, 2) I already know how to shoot and maintain my own rifle (perhaps the only marketable skills that I’ve learned in all of my years of schooling), and 3) The respect that these men, and the other men in the area, obviously had for the animals that they killed. There was no sport involved, just skill and necessity.

And although I moved my fingers across the smooth surfaces of some of the small skulls hanging in the work room in the barn (below the loft where reindeer pelts cured in the heat) and noted the tufts of sheepskin nailed to the painted red wood of several buildings where they had once been stretched, I didn’t voice my internal debate to anyone while I was in Norway. Instead, I returned to California where I would soon argue with my boyfriend (for days and days) about the ethics of feeding our cat food made with the meat and bones of other animals after we liberated an extremely loquacious feline from the pound in San Francisco.
CHAPTER XI

TEN YEARS AFTER

When people ask me what it was like to find my mother and to “meet” her again at the age of thirty (my age, not hers), I tell everyone who will listen that she saved my life. I’m currently working on my third degree in English and my response to this familiar question is, admittedly, more poetic than pragmatic. I have found through the years, though, that most people who have not trafficked in the language of adoption don’t (usually) have the vocabulary to understand the monumental significance of such a reunion, so I’ve distilled my response to these queries down to those four monosyllabic, and memorable, words: “She saved my life.”

My life prior to ringing her doorbell was total chaos. (What am I talking about? The chaos still persists, but it was much, much worse before she opened the front door to her apartment building on that incredible grey afternoon, let me tell you.) To search, or not to search: that was never a question for me. It just took more time than I could ever have anticipated. (Our reunion, in fact, was delayed a full day (after a lifetime of waiting already!) because I was so sick from drinking, on what I thought was going to be the night before I met my mother, that I couldn’t eat and I couldn’t shake the tremors that moved through my body and overloaded my brain for the following twenty-four hours.)

When I was a child, when I was someone else, I had two cousins “who lived in
the country” who were also adopted. They were an unrelated brother and sister set that I was always collectively trying to convince to hit the road with me in search of our real families whenever they came into the “big” city. (I was a wannabe Boy Scout who squirreled away things like waterproof matches, astronaut ice cream, and other pseudo-survivalist essentials for just such an opportunity and I dreamt about the three of us keeping pace with traffic on The New York State Thruway on our Big Wheels and our Green Machines.) I wasn’t able to rally these troops and, to my knowledge, they still haven’t hit that particular road (even though they now both have cars and can legally drive on the highway). The chaos of their adult lives is familiar to me, though, from what I’ve heard about them over the years (in reports like smoke signals while I moved from the East Coast, to the West Coast, to the Midwest, and then finally out of The United States altogether) -- One became addicted to crack and the other became addicted to men. To this day, I still wish that they had followed me, metaphorically, out of their incredibly small hometown as I don’t believe that either one of them has searched for their respective families like I did. No one from that time knows where I am (or who I am, for that matter), so I can only hope that they’ll pick up something like this book and start the process before it’s too late.

I sat in my mother’s Section 8 living room just the other day while she looked for a form that I dropped off the last time that I saw her (for The New York State Adoption Information Registry – My latest strategy in the search for my brother, the
youngest of her three children). She was watching TV when I arrived, unannounced, and that made me very happy because I wasn’t ever really sure that her mammoth wooden console set in the corner actually worked or not. (Come to find out, she has cable.) Meals on Wheels had just brought her a sandwich and some applesauce for lunch and she told me that a visiting nurse had seen her a few days prior to administer some of her medication. Fed up with rifling though her own paperwork, she handed me a stack of ephemera to sort through and I was secretly elated to see that she had saved all of the cards and letters from me and my sister that we’ve sent to her over the years amongst the collection of old utility bills, notices about changes to her Medicaid coverage, bits of yellow newspapers, a sun-faded wedding photo, pages from various calendars, and a few (nearly indecipherable) notes from her friend who lives down the street. An hour later, after finding the registry form (*hallelujah!*), she is thanking me for the gifts that I’ve brought for her (two tins of Folgers coffee, a Diet Pepsi, and a bottle of water in a bag that I bought for her in Québec) and I’m promising to call her in a week as we embrace gently. And I am so grateful that she is back in my life, and that I’m back in hers, because I know that I’ve been able to secure some of the food, shelter, medical attention, and phone service that she has today.

Thanksgiving this year (2010) will mark ten full years since I sat at her kitchen table for the first time being stronger than I actually felt as she cried quietly and consistently for the duration of our nearly two-hour conversation. Thanksgiving this year
will also mark ten full years since I’ve had a drink, smoked a cigarette, or taken a drug, as well, but this correlation is something I doubt that I’ll ever be able to explain to my mother. Severely disabled, and diabetic (among other things), I express my gratitude to her by way of groceries (even though I hate shopping for myself). Things I cannot say, I express to her through offerings of low-fat yogurt (she’s particularly fond of blueberry and black cherry), sugar-free cola, single-serve packets of plain oatmeal, low-sodium peanut butter, herbal teas, and other basics. Completely pedestrian, these small gestures are infinitely gratifying to me and some of my most prized possessions, I must confess, are the shopping lists that she’s given to me. I have each and every one of them (with most of the corresponding receipts) and plan to keep them for the rest of my days with the collection of cards and letters from her and my sister that they’ve sent to me over the years.

Like mother, like son.