

Men Like Us

IN THE FIRST HOUSE WE LIVED IN there was only one bathroom, and sometimes we'd have to share. I'd come in to shave while dad was showering, steam billowing over the curtain like a spell in progress.

"Money, money...money."

I'd hear him muttering the single word over and over, his mantra. Some days it was a puzzle, a Rubik's cube made ever more impenetrable by his tinkering hands. Other days he'd say it with contempt – the name of someone who had kidnapped Mom and me.

I hadn't been shaving long. He taught me how, there in that bathroom, with a single blade. Electric razors, he said, were not for any men in this family.

As I lathered up, I knew the smell of shaving cream was something eternal – in the same league as freshly cut grass or a new can of tennis balls – something you'd remember on your death bed. Maybe you wouldn't remember your wife's name or where you were, but fragrant clouds of Barbasol would drift in a blue sky as you lifted upward through them and towards a brilliant light.

I began in lines, shaving only white and a thin layer of skin.

"Money, money," said the shower.

"Money what?" I said.

"Money, Jeffrey. Money."

If I asked him now – house paid off, me with a BA, Mom retired – he'd deny ever praying to that green god. It had been painted over. Maybe

you could get there with psychiatry or the straight razor of alcohol, scrape back to the original color, though I suspected that those times too were finished.

"Money," I said.

Then I left the bathroom before Dad got out and shaved himself.



"I'm moving out," Dad says over the phone. I'm too astonished to reply.

All last year I lived at home, filling in that gap between college and whatever comes next, but I didn't see this coming. Mom and Dad tiptoed around the rift, and in the matter of their relationship I was regarded more as a houseguest than a son. They were dressing the place in their cleanest sheets so I would enjoy my stay.

I guess there were signs. How my mother disappeared from door to door like an usher who after so many performances of the same production could no longer sit and enjoy the show. How I'd come home at midnight to my father asleep on the recliner, his chest rising and falling in the dim strobe of the Yankees postgame.

But really I had no idea. Amazing, I thought, what you could hide for a time. A terminal illness. A pregnancy. But this was different, a structural failure. A proven bridge collapsing from no stresses other than its own weight. And now, a year after I've moved out, Dad calls to tell me he's living somewhere else?

"I have some friends that I can stay with," he says. But he doesn't have friends like that. He has good friends, but they're friends you meet out, dressed nicely at the teletheater or Brindisi's. It's how we've also come to operate, like associates negotiating over drinks.

That night, we meet at the Boathouse, this campy place on the lake where people pretend they know about boats and horses, use a term like "cutting" and apply it to both sports. The worst thing about the Boathouse: it's practically across the street from my parents' place, where Mom is attending to her newfound widowhood. I'm afraid she might walk in at any moment with her divorced girlfriends and find us sitting here.

"Giambi's having a year," Dad says. The TVs over the bar are turned to the OTB channel and the Yankees game.

"He's on dope," I say. "His liver's having a year."

“Come on. He’s clean. Maybe he had his down season, but he’s clean now.”

“His down season – last year when he was coughing up chew and batting .190 – that’s when he was clean.” I look at Giambi’s arms, twice as thick as his bat. “You know the best way to get over withdrawal? Hit the smack.”

“Well at least he’s not on the Pirates,” Dad says. “And on anti-depressants.”

This is our eternal baseball argument: big market versus small, American versus National – winners and losers, cheaters and scrubs. It’s easy to take cuts at the Yankees because they’re good, but they aren’t a team of talent. They’re a team of good business decisions, and they perform like a hedge fund. Even though you might not understand the instruments of their success, you understood that every year they finished first no matter what.

But hedge funds are legal, are market-driven, and if anything Dad approves of the market. Each spring he buys me a copy of *Kiplinger’s Personal Finance* and encourages me to invest. My first lesson in saving for the future was drawn on the back of an old sheet of past performances for the seventh at Del Mar where he penned the ridgeline of an impressive mountain range – the S&P. He pointed to where I was (in the foothills) and where I would end up (on top of the world). In the long term, my money would surely grow, even if Wall Street took a hit or two. Sometimes you had to descend into a saddle to climb the next peak. The important thing, he said, was to tough it out. Men like us, we were in it for the long haul.

Below Giambi’s warm up cuts, a blue ticker scrolls through the night’s scores.

“So I moved out of the house,” Dad says.

“Who you living with?”

He says some names I’ve never heard before, a man he works with and his wife. They have a room, a studio over their garage.

“I’m looking for a place though,” he says. “Somewhere in town.”

When the barmaid comes to take our order, I get a burger. Dad gets a steak.

“Can I also get another Heineken, Cindy?” Dad has a certain manner, a business manner that he turns on and off, and it always comes out for a waitress. Often he’ll make use of a first name, overheard or lifted from a name tag. I’ve heard that this is one of the best things you can do in a meeting. When people hear their name it settles them a little, drops them into a comfort zone. That, and when your name comes out of the mouth of a complete stranger, you are tricked into thinking, even if only for a moment, that you are famous.

I never address strangers in the service industry by their names. It feels, oddly, like stealing.

“I can’t believe they’re pitching around him,” I say. Giambi’s fouled a few off and the pitcher is getting rattled. The meat of the line-up is just beginning to dawn on him. The camera shows Matsui from above swinging two bats in the practice circle.

“Steroids don’t help your hand-eye coordination,” Dad says.

They walk Giambi, and then the manager comes to the mound. Pitching change.

It’s not long before the food comes and we’re talking about Mom. As I’m sipping my beer, he brings it up. “So what do you think of all this?”

I stare in my glass, at the fresco of foam clinging to its empty insides. What do I think? The last year of my life has completely flatlined, so events no longer have depth or character, leave no room for my heart rate to rise.

“Your mom and I, we just – you must see it too. She’s so obsessed about what’s wrong. It’s all she does, sees counselors, goes to groups. She won’t come out with me. It’s taken her over, she’s *become* her problem.” He says the last bit through a mouthful of steak.

“I know,” I say. “It’s like she’s addicted to the getting better. Those are the type of people who are always sick.” I think about how I probably couldn’t stand living with her either but don’t say it for fear of sounding too on-your-side. “But don’t you feel like you’re abandoning her?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and so I know what the answer is no matter what he says. He has looked at the open door and, for perhaps the first time in his life, done the easier thing. I’m not judging. That’s something Dad always does. He’ll say somebody looks like a pansy because

they have a lip ring; then he'll say, "I'm not making a value judgment." But he is. He's saying you have the values of a pansy.

But I entertain him, listen as he gets into logistics, how she's taken care of financially. He's making payments on the mortgage, the car. Then his emotional involvement, the joint counseling. He offered this, but she refused. He offered that. Refused.

He's a very good public speaker, my father. I can picture him standing behind a podium in front of a room full of the unconvinced. He quotes the Iroquois or Lao Tzu, even Jesus. But not Jesus how Catholics, as my father once was, see him. Jesus as a teacher. When my father is speaking, he gestures and steps, holds his hands open, up and out to the audience, a very Italian manner of gesture. Like he's saying "why?" You see him do this, and you see he's vulnerable, like you, and doesn't have the answers. But together maybe you can work it out. It makes you lean forward in your chair a little.

As he's telling me how he didn't abandon her, he puts down his fork and does it, does the hands. "I tried, Jeffrey. I really did."

I feel like crying but don't. If I do, he'll say it's cause the Yankees are winning and as it is Matsui has doubled and Giambi is rounding third, his big thighs leading the charge home with an unknown percentage of muscle that is not his own.



At the same time my father is busy splitting his house into kindling, mine too has come under the axe. Jessica and I live on Van Rensselaer Street in a late-nineteenth century place with a tin ceiling. We keep it immaculate, but the house is inhabited by an emptiness, one that can't be filled in with second-hand couches and a mismatched set of dishes. It is, as Jessica would say, cold in its bones. Increasingly, it has acquired the feel of an abandoned safe house, as if it were a place to bring affairs and dispose of tightly sealed garbage bags.

VR, I say. Meet you back at VR.

"Why do you call it that?" she says. "It sounds like some kind of venereal disease."

When we broke up, I blamed the house. Cursed, I said. Badly placed astrologically. We'd heard stories of the previous tenants throwing dishes

at each other in the driveway, the woman screaming and shielding her pregnant belly. Too poor and with no credit to be lease breakers we decided to stay on despite the breakup. It was only for a few months and we could be adults, couldn't we?

One of VR's few redeeming qualities is an old-fashioned front porch, and on these first cold nights of spring, I've been sitting out there with a gin and tonic and waiting for her to come home. Tonight, after the Boathouse, it's mostly gin and a lime. Before leaving, Dad told me he wanted us to meet up – him, Mom, and me – to discuss things. Jessica and I have discussed things until I want to vomit up my vocal chords. To an extent, she's troubled at my life choices – how I write in the early morning, button a white shirt and drag myself to the espresso bar at dawn, then drink in the evening, listening to baseball on the radio, and go to bed. It's a college lifestyle, she tells me, a degenerate one. It has undercut a potential she once believed I had tucked away under some secret fold of skin – a belief that smacks unmistakably of my father.

She says I'm not taking charge, that I'm floating along like one of those nursery-rhyme-themed rides for people who lack the gumption for roller coasters.

"But I love roller coasters," I tell her. "Remember when we rode the Comet ten times in a row?" By the third time, I discovered the spot where they take your picture to sell back to you at the end of the ride. Each time, I would make a ridiculous face, or a serious one, the kind no one would ever make on a roller coaster. Once, I pulled out the park map the way tourists do in places where something spectacular is happening – at an opera or a space shuttle launch.

Afterwards we stood in front of monitors that showed all the pictures. It felt like coming across an old watch that had been stolen years before under fogged glass in a pawn shop. The shot with the map – that was the one she bought: me calmly reading as she screamed her face off.

Once, when we were fighting, I pulled out the picture to show her. Proof. "I don't mean real roller coasters," she said.

I was making fun of her, partly, but attempting to make a point. If you didn't love everything about a person, even secretly the parts you pretended to hate, then that person was not the one. You could date, live

together, eat blueberry pie without the aid of plates or silverware (as we did last Fourth of July), but you were missing the point.

“It’s done then,” she said, then shut the door to our room and our life together.

This was followed by several gray weeks where I hung myself like a ghost in every room and listened to her footsteps upstairs. Did I love her? I loved having her around. She brandished a certain freshness – windblown, unexpected. Every time I talked to her it felt like we were meeting for the first time. I had looked forward to living with her since the day our hands had brushed at the coffee bar, each of us looking up to see if the other had experienced the same sensation – gripping a microphone that hasn’t been grounded.

But over time our circuits grow weak, electricity constantly seeking havens of lower potential. While we remain sequestered at VR, she’s begun dating. I will be eating dinner at the big table with *The New York Times*, and she’ll usher each new man through our kitchen with a hasty greeting, as though I’m barely there. She introduces them to the part of me they would expect to meet, as if I’m her cousin or her butler, or her spindly cat that hates people.

As if I care what she does. I’m old enough and so is she. Who cares if tonight she is out with one them, if in her absence the suitors queue up outside her bedroom?

If anything the hurt comes later. Unable to sleep, I imagine my mother, my mirror image across town, simultaneously awake in the dark of our old house while my father cruises around with some tired piece of skin, nameless, faceless, smelling like a cigarette extinguished in an empty tumbler.

I stay out on the porch tonight long after the cold comes. Cradling my gin, I curl my legs up into the thatched nylon of an old beach chair and slip into a dream of my parents.

We’re at the Jersey shore or Cape Cod, some northern beach where I was first introduced to the sea and thought each wave had a score to settle with me personally. I’m alone except for two vacant towels beside me and some wide, flat buoy out beyond the breakers, lolling on the surf.

A pair of binoculars are strapped around my neck, an older model from the eighties – the kind my mother would have brought to scan

the horizon for seabirds. Touching the glass to my eyes, I’m transported to the hundredth power and on top of the thing: my parents in their night clothes, cast away, sheets and all, on a floating Posturpedic mattress. They’re propped up in bed reading, unaware that they’ve come unanchored from finished wood floors and are now traversing fathoms of dark aquatic mystery.

My mother is reading a Barbara Kingsolver novel. My father, the *Daily Racing Form*. In their minds, neither is anywhere but home. I see my dad try to set down his reading glasses. I watch them plop quietly into the water.

I see him yawn and feel myself yawning, the dream stretching away. That’s when I wake to Jessica’s touch, its gentle current on my shoulder. She’s discovered me slumped over in the porch chair and drooling like an invalid. When I see her face all made up in the dark and wearing a long coat I’ve never seen before, it feels as though many years have passed. She looks stunning and like someone else’s wife.

“Just pretend we were never going out.” I see the air crystallize where she says it, and it comes out so soft, so motherly that for a moment I think what she really says is “Goodnight sweetie,” or “You’re going to be okay.” That was something my own mother used to say, when I was six and bent over with stomach flu. I used to ask her to say it. Am I gonna be okay, Mom? Tell me. Tell me. “It’ll be easier if you can stop thinking about me that way.”

“Who’d you see?” I say.

“Yurich.”

“How was it?”

“It was alright.” I can tell she’s softening it for me.

Her hand leaves and I feel sick. The front screen shuts twice against its spring.

Never going out. Certainly, the vernacular of modern love has its intricacies, but what would you call it? It wasn’t going steady – she hated that, said it sounded like something that happened on *The Brady Bunch*. Was it seeing each other? No. We saw each other every day. I saw her in towels, raven hair sticking to all surfaces of her. I saw her in men’s undershirts with no bra, in the kitchen pulling cookies from the oven.

I saw her in a Christine Dior ad's worth of makeup leaving at seven to meet Yurich, the famous Dutch baker or whoever he was.

I stand up and feel worse. The porch light comes on and I try to steady myself by focusing on something. That's when I see my glass on the ground, cracked beside a puddle of gin, as if some time during the night I had tried to set it on a table that wasn't there.



My parents decide we will have our meeting at the state park where a shallow amphitheater has been cut into the earth, grassy steps for sitting. I park next to Dad's car and walk across the field to them. I wear shorts, and my dad is still in nice clothes from work. Mom sits on a bench close by. They both look over at me, Mom smiling but like she wants to cry.

I kick a clump of loose sod down the hill. I first met Yurich here, on the first warm day of spring. On that day the temperature had made it to seventy-eight degrees. Jessica and I had waited for seventy-eight for months, schemed for it. She was from the South and the winter was murder on her. We'd kept ourselves warm by thinking of seventy-eight. When it came, we decided, we'd go to the lake, to the battlefield. We would not wear much. We'd buy a frisbee and come here to this green.

But Yurich came. She met him at the farmer's market, and he'd just returned from a long trip, kayaking along the coast to Florida with his friend. We ran into him at the park. Jessica introduced us. His hands were bigger than mine and coarse when we shook, but his eyes were quiet and blue.

The three of us spread out with the frisbee. Yurich and I were able to accomplish some terrific distance until a wind kicked up behind him and all my throws started coming back to me. Later we sat in the grass and I picked choke cherry while he told us about his trip.

I had no idea then. It was there, I'm sure, in the back of her eyes. How she listened.

We both had our things. Yurich's were practical. He knew about wind speed and bringing the dough to bench, things that mattered to her, and I knew about phrasing and setting the right mood and nothing. I knew about walking across the green and seeing how my parents looked. Like two people sitting in the park who bore no relation to each other.

I ride my bike over to Mom's one long morning. Yurich has begun teaching Jessica how to bake and I have forgotten how to sleep. I get up at about four and follow the roads that flank Fish Creek, through morning mist and horse farms. Everyone else is just turning off their alarms, hundreds of people lost in the smell of toast, coffee, the taste of Listerine, and I'm speeding silently past, soaked in a film of heavy air.

Riding back into town, I think of going to Mom's because at VR they'd just be getting home with *The New York Times* and the fresh bread that they'd baked, that he'd shown her how to roll and mark with a straight razor. I hadn't been to Mom's since the separation, and I thought of how she might just be getting up. But with nowhere to go it wouldn't matter. And Dad wouldn't be there in his suit. I imagine him asking why I'm up and what I'm doing at this hour.

"Nothing good happens before dawn," he'd say.

When I get there sprinklers are on at all the houses, clicked on by timers before the sun comes up. The neighborhood reminds me of an amusement park or college campus, the new sidewalks and streetlights, the synchronized watering – it's someplace that doesn't really exist.

I pull out my key, the new one Mom gave me at the park. She's changed the locks. It's pretty early, maybe seven, and I have the vague fear that she's become overcautious and leaned Dad's old Louisville Slugger in a corner by the door, just in case. I try to picture my mother swinging a bat at somebody's gut and can't.

"Mom," I say immediately. "It's me."

No bats come. Nothing comes but a faint light, so sparse that everything feels like it's in black and white. I lived in that house for a year after college and the feeling of home is gone from it. A dust has settled over things. There are piles of papers and magazines on the table. A wastebasket is full. For most, this is a normal home scene, the clutter of living, and with it the warmth. But never my parents' place. Theirs was always an open house, spartan and clean to the socket panels, as if at any moment they might decide to put it on the market.

"Mom!" I slip off my shoes and head toward the bedroom. Aside from the neighborhood, I've always liked the house. Even though it's new, it's small and open, lots of hardwood – easy to tell that no child has ever lived there.

I stick my head in the bedroom and hear a toilet flushing. The bed is unmade, and from the look of it the night has been fitful. I'm suddenly hot from the ride and in the quiet I hear my heart in my ears. Out of the corner of my eye I see a tremendous pile of clothes on the floor and her underwear in it. I've never seen her room like this.

"Jeff?" She comes out and smiles at me, pajamas on, the lines of her face curving with her mouth and around her eyes. She looks so small. Not good, certainly. But not haggish either, not worn or withered.

We hug and there is a smell I recognize, the smell of my grandfather's – her father's – house. It smells like breakfast being prepared in a distant room, two puffs of something from a pink bottle, and not my father. I feel her bones through her back and know more than half of me is her.

"How are you doing?"

"Okay," she says. But she's shaking her head. "Not really, actually."

"Sorry to burst in like this, so early, I just – I didn't want to go home."

"Oh, Jeff. You're welcome anytime," she says. "Anyway I knew it was you. He doesn't have a key." At first I think she's going to start straightening up, but then she's peeling back sheets to get back in bed.

"I'm cold."

I sit on top of the comforter and lay back against propped pillows. Dad's side. The lamp on the dresser is turned on but illuminating no pictures of Mom and me, no book about Mickey Mantle. It's funny, whenever I share a bed with a girl, I pick the side closest to the door. Jessica says guys always pick that side, to bar entry against a killer in the dark or sex-crazed drunkard who might defile her. I tell her it's for the opposite reason: in the event of a fire, it's easier to escape if there isn't a hysterical girl in a tangle of sheets between you and the door.

For whatever the reason, Dad picked the far side. I could never figure it out.

"So what's new with you?"

"Jessica's starting to see somebody. I think they're at the house now. That's why – I don't care really, but I guess I do. Why else would I be here?"

She doesn't ask about Dad and I don't bring him up. But I want to. I want to lay a hand on the column of her legs and tell her that it will be okay, but I can't. For a week at least he has left her and she has left me and we both of us have seen how saints can fall from their perches in

holy frosted windows, can break into shards upon white-washed stone just as everyone is getting up from their pews, smiling to say, "peace be with you, peace be with you."

I can't bring myself to say it until a week later – Mom, Mom! It's going to be okay – when I find her limply crying against the tall cabinets in the kitchen. I rush in to the sound of her screaming, bawling really, but in perfectly formed syllables: "It's. So. Hard."

Each word is coming out long and high, in even alarm tones. There's a yam on the counter and she has her hand around a fork and isn't just putting holes in it for the oven – she's quite clearly stabbing someone, perhaps my father, a man certainly, through his dirty orange flesh.



One morning Jessica and I walk over to the flat track. We don't do much together now, but Yurich wants to bake alone and the day is brilliant, too shimmering to spend indoors or alone. She likes going to the track with me because I know about horses from the decade of summer afternoons I've spent there with my father. She likes how I can explain it all for her, can decode the pages in the *Daily Racing Form* that look like stock sheets to her.

"What are first time blinkers?" she asks.

"It's like these goggles." I cup my hands against the sides of my eyes to show her. "So they don't get spooked by all the screaming people or other horses. Keeps their eyes on the prize."

"What's Lasix?"

"Dope for horses."

We make our way towards the back entrance, the way my dad always comes, past rows of houses with cars parked all over their lawns. The lane is already packed, people spilling off the sidewalks and into the street. It's a big race day – the Whitney, a Grade I stakes. Women wear plastic visors, hold signs that say: PARK HERE! 8\$. Old men wave many-colored pick sheets in front of their mouths, broadcasting at the volume of a used car commercial.

"Rick's Picks! Six winners yesterday including a fifty dollar long shot in the third..."

Jessica's fishing for money but I put a hand on her arm.

“Don’t buy that,” I say. “If he could really pick horses why would he waste time selling crap in the parking lot?”

“Oh, I forgot. You’re smart.”

“We’ll get a program inside,” I say. My dad’s been coming here since he was a teenager. I tell Jessica he once knew a guy who had some kind of printer in the back of his station wagon and would make up new sheets after each race, adjusting his picks to reflect the day’s winners and make himself look like the man.

“Your dad’s the man, isn’t he – when it comes to betting?”

“He wins more than his share if that’s what you mean.”

And of course that’s when I see him: my father. He’s easy to spot, tall with a ring of dark hair and a mustache, like the actors who always play police commissioners. “Well, speak of the devil.”

His black car is parked awkwardly in a throng of people where no cars are allowed. He’s really dressed too, in a sharp suit, but there is sweat on his neck and he looks unnerved, like an ambassador who has just escaped an assassination attempt.

Then I notice the woman. She has a California look, a red dress and pearls, hair so blonde it must be dyed. Her arm is around his shoulder and she’s limping, hopping along towards the car on the crutch of my father.

At first I think, *oh my God he hit her with the car, broke her leg*. But then I realize he’s smiling. He knows her.

I push through the crowd and Jessica follows.

“Hey, you can’t park that here!” I yell.

He’s helping her into the front seat, but looks up when he hears me, calling out my name and squinting to make sure it’s really me. Funny how he’s always surprised to see me when I’m never surprised to run into him. I can almost predict it.

“This is my friend Samantha.” I lean into the cold air and leather to meet her. Distance hid her age. I’d thought she was much younger, maybe even a model, but she’s older than he is. She reaches a spotted hand across the driver’s seat to meet mine.

“What a klutz,” she says. “He can’t take me anywhere.”

Damn right he can’t.

“She took a bad step, twisted her ankle.”

“I heard something pop,” she says.

“Anyway she can’t walk and we need to get it looked at.” I glance down at her naked feet as if I’ll be able to make a diagnosis on sight. I can’t even tell which has been injured.

“You’re gonna miss the Whitney,” I say, saddened suddenly – that something could come between my father and his favorite thing.

“Nonsense, we’ll see it on tv.” I wanted him to say, “Nonsense, I’ll be right back” or, “Nonsense, she can wait in the car with the AC running.”

“Alright. I hope you feel better,” I say to California. Dad gets in and they both wave. The car starts off slowly as people trickle out of its way. For a moment I stand against the movement of the crowd to watch them go. They look famous, her in the red gown, he in his sharp suit, their glossy hired car trapped by a hundred adoring hands. Then I feel Jessica’s hand on my back. She turns me away from them and then we are moving along again towards the gate, in the same direction as all the others.

“That didn’t look good,” Jessica says as we wait in line to get in.

“What? He entertains people all the time for work. Wines and dines. I’m sure he’ll tell me all about how she’s a new client from the West Coast.”

“I think I saw a hand on his chest,” she says.

“Jesus, Jessica. She was limping.”

“It just – it didn’t look good.”

“Well, you would know.”

We walk silently through the gates and I pay our way, buy us a program – all the rote dating maneuvers that have become habitual. The track is pulsing and attendance may be a record, the day already hot and smelling like an enormous cigar. We walk over to the paddock where they’re saddling horses for the first race. Jessica likes a tall black horse and finds his name in the program: Thin Mint.

“Bad name,” I say.

In the past performances she points at a prominent G in the margin by his times.

“What does this mean?” she asks.

“Gelding. He’s – how do you say – lost his manhood.”

She cringes a little, makes a face like tasting a poorly made cocktail. “Why?”

“It’s supposed to focus them, keep their minds on racing. Some horses genes are a commodity if they’re really talented or have famous parents.

Those would never be gelded. But a mediocre horse, maybe all he needs is a little push to be great. You might geld a horse like that.”

“So he’s mediocre?” Jessica lowers her red hat.

“No, not at all. Kelso was a gelding and he was one of the winningest horses ever. He raced years beyond what’s normal for a thoroughbred. Probably because he never had the urge to go out to pasture with the ladies.”

“Hmm. A gelding,” she says, trying on the word. “So it’s kind of like blinkers.”

She pulls off the cap to let her hair down. I don’t look but can almost see it, dark and slinking, come to rest on the smooth line of her neck. I keep my eyes on the paddock, on the slow parade of animals heading out to the track with everyone’s money.

“Yes,” I say. I’d forgotten how perceptive she can be. “It’s like that exactly.”



It’s what I’ve dreaded. Jessica is right.

She is, Dad says, an old friend, someone he’s known for years. He’s living with her. This is a difficult time for him and she’s gone through something similar, can sympathize, is helping him through it.

“I want you to be in the know,” he says over the phone. “I’ve told your mother.”

I don’t say anything and he asks if I understand. “Yes,” I say. “I understand.”

She’s not a hooker.

“Anyway, she’s really a great person and we’d love it if you could come over for dinner sometime.”

She lives in a big house out by the reservoir and I drive there one night after work. The water flashes silver as streetlights come on. The house is incredible, the driveway touching the street in two places. It’s built into a hill and the architecture is all prominent rectangles and big pane glass windows. I park at the peak of a big U and climb up through the terraced lawn on a vague path. I wonder why the hell no one has turned on any lights for me.

A motion sensor clicks on and suddenly my father is there, just standing behind the glass door like he’s been watching the whole time. He looks larger than life, spot lit in the doorway to that giant house,

the kingpin of some private mafia. As if the life he led with my mother and me were the façade and this place of opulence contained his true identity. He opens the door and offers a hand.

“Sorry. One of the lights is out. I should have told you to come in through the garage.”

It’s been a few weeks since our meeting at the track and he tells me I look good, slaps a big hand on my back, more forcefully than is necessary. When I was born he used to tell me I fit completely into that hand, my extremities waving like those of an upturned turtle. I was yelling and screaming, he’d say, but nurses put me into his hand and I was quiet. Ever since then his hand has thudded against the back of my rib cage in meetings like this one, like two ballplayers reuniting at the plate after a home run.

“Where’s Jessica?” he asks. Jessica has been invited, but I didn’t invite her, confident there will be plenty of awkward things to talk about without her.

“Plans,” I say. “That and we sort of broke up.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. Come on, Samantha’s in the kitchen.” His face is red, jovial even, as he leads me down a long space that gives the impression of a hallway.

Usually it’s awkward seeing him in an unfamiliar place. I think of the time I met him at the Sheraton in Austin and we watched the Weather Channel for ten minutes before deciding what to do. “Is it always this hot?” he asked. Or the time I picked him up at Gatwick and he refused to take the tube with me back to London, insisting instead on a black cab. Then he was a fish out of water, the business manner in high effect. But here he is strangely relaxed.

Samantha is standing over a marble countertop, shelling prawns in a black blouse and tan pants. When she walks over to me one hip seems higher than the other. As soon as I put out a hand I know she wants a hug. It’s one of those forearm only hugs, her hands avoiding my back for fear of tainting them with shellfish.

“I’m sorry we had to meet like that the other day,” she says, and I wonder if she means as a cripple or without any prompting on the part of my father.

Beer and wine are offered, a bottle of red already tapped, but I accept only an orange juice – what I used to drink in bars before I liked the taste of alcohol. I laugh on the inside at how they're both dressed for cocktail hour, and I wonder if this is what it means to have money, to banish all semblance of comfortable clothes to a rusting Salvation Army bin or a plastic tub in the basement.

"It looks like you're getting around much better," I say.

"Yes, off the crutches."

A nervous silence follows and next thing I know Dad's giving me the tour. If my parents' place prided itself on an ethic of preservation, Samantha's house was a genuine museum. It was cluttered but not kitschy. Everything had its own stand and lighting – period vases, ancient masks.

Dad shows me the basement, which has accepted his traveling shrine to the Yankees. It's where the two of them watch night games with pepperoni pizza and beers on number seven coasters. He shows me his office which overlooks the reservoir and a photo she's taken of him in black and white and so recently it bears little resemblance.

When we come to the bedroom, I pray we'll keep walking. But he turns in and there it is: a queen-sized bed with a silvery comforter, windows facing the lush backyard. I walk over to the nearest nightstand and see a DeLillo novel I gave him and a photo of me home for my first college break, my hair long but neat, my face clean and bright. For a moment I expect to see a picture of Mom.

"Recognize anybody?" he asks as I straighten my picture.

"This is your side, huh?" Closest to the door.

I really want to leave the bedroom, but I can tell he wants to talk here so I sit on the mattress edge. I don't know why it's so hard for me to imagine the two of them. Is it because they're older? Could you become comfortable with a half a century mapped over another's skin unless you'd seen it get that way? Could you live in a place without the thousands of nights spent embalmed in each other's scents until it became one distinct smell, one that, when you walked in the front door after a week away, you recognized instantly as home.

"I know it's different," he says. And I wonder what Jessica would call it. Not dating certainly. But not an affair either. It's an arrangement, she'd say.

"But I'm comfortable here. And I want you to be comfortable too. You're welcome whenever you like." He pulls a gold key from his pocket and I dutifully thread it through the ring attached to my wallet. It comes to rest next to the silver key my mother gave me and the bulky key to VR.

I stand and see the wallet no longer fits in my pocket. The keys hang over the side like a janitor's. They jingle as we head down circular stairs towards the smell of cooking that is not my mother's. That may be better. And she is talking to us – "Come on gentlemen" – her voice indistinguishable from the jangling keys, the sound of all the doors I'd rather keep closed.



It's 6:00 a.m. when Jessica gets home, and I'm standing in the bathroom with no lights on. The sun is just starting to fire over a stand of pines out the tiny window. I'm back from a ride and my face looks like hell – longer and paler, in need of a shave. I've become fascinated with the little tuft of hair at the top of my forehead that is thinner than the rest and looks like it's making plans to secede.

Jessica comes upstairs and stands in the doorway. She's jogged home from the bakery and is flushed and breathless.

"I always thought baldness was inherited through your mother's line," I say.

"It is, I think."

"I hate to break it to the Human Genome Project, but there is not a single bald person in my mother's family."

She shifts her weight from one leg to the other and I watch soft muscles go taut under breezy synthetic shorts.

"Well, your father's bald right?"

I turn back to the mirror. Of course, it is a possibility. It's there in every cell, the jigsaw of them. That was why people had kids wasn't it? You could refuse your reflection, glimpse it sidelong, avoid staring it in the face. But there was truth in flesh. Everything you loved about yourself was there, but so were the little bits you couldn't stand, and those had a way of speaking up.

"So you ever watch Yurich shave?" I shake the can – an aerosol shimmer and then in my palm, a tiny cloud.

“Yeah, but he has an electric.”

“Aha!”

Proof of his soul's infirmity.

Here is where electrics fail: philosophically. With a razor, you weren't just removing hair but a thin graft of skin. You were molting, letting the water collect the dead bits of you that no longer mattered and spiral them away into darkness.

“Electric razors are not for men like us,” I say with hardly any breath.

“Men like who?”

Exactly.

In that instant I want to cover her with shaving cream and chase her laughing through this skeletal house. I want to tackle her and roll headlong like a reel taking up tape.

“Go ahead.” She lifts a hand. “Continue. This interests me.” It's a lesson she wants. She too is an electric girl, leaves it sleeping in a pink nest on the edge of the tub.

“You understand, once I show you this there's no going back.”

She nods once, gravely.

“Careful.” I hold up the razor. “It can cut you.”

Then I'm showing her how to start the lather, how to inhale it, a factory made petunia. Next the mechanics – wetting the blade. How to shave in one direction and one direction only. How to pull skin around the bones of your jaw to get where straight razors can't always go. You're performing surgery how a snake does. Abandoning an old husk for the neighborhood children to find – transparent, paper-thin – in the high grass by the garden. 🌿