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Four Stories by Donato Silenzio

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Four Stories by Donato Silenzio

Domenick Acocella

One

"Donato's Love"

by Donato Silenzio

Do they really know what they're talking about?

Should I listen to them banter about the right approach with Britney? Jesus, they're like three bells pounding away at my ears. Just leave me alone, please. I'm in Starbucks. Friday afternoon—my only time to be with a book and my thoughts.

Sometimes I don't read. I might listen to "Malaguena."

Sometimes I just stare into space and think.

I think about writing, eating, sex.

I discovered girls later than most kids in my neighborhood. I grew up in the suburbs. The houses stood side by side, close enough for the sounds of the bathroom from next door to seem like they came from the next room. It was a good neighborhood: busybody neighbors and tree-lined streets which all lead to the same place, Holy Name of Jesus Christ Church and grade school. Two places that treated human desire as a necessary evil. Yeah, I was taught it was better to marry than to burn. I'm sure this explains a lot about me. Maybe not everything but a lot. I'm sure I picked on these ideas more than other kids. The teachings fell on our attentive but deaf ears. At ten or eleven years of age, boys were talking about

girls—the groping, the hugging, the stealing glances or clothing, or at least stealing Dad’s magazines—but not me. At twelve, when girls should have occupied my mind, I was asking for the latest GI Joe action figures.

But I had my intrigues.

At nine, I liked Hall and Oates’s Daryl Hall. It was the long blonde hair and effete behavior that I found attractive, but I knew I couldn’t say this to anyone. Instinctively I knew this was wrong—and then there were the warnings during Tuesday evening “relig” classes that homosexuality is a sin and that God is just waiting to smite my fat ass down for such thoughts, especially if I were to say such thoughts aloud. So my attraction to Hall remained my scary little secret.

“God made man and woman to go, you know, together,” Mrs O’Connor explained.

“What d’ya mean,” asked Martin, who knew very well what she meant because he and Clyde, another student in the class, had gotten their hands on a video out of Clyde’s father’s liquor cabinet, next to the loaded gun he kept...

...“Because I’m a proud American whose ancestors fought and died face down in the muck so that I can carry a firearm to protect my family” boasted Clyde Senior...

...a video that explicitly depicted how many ways a man and a woman could go, you know, together.

“Martin. Please,” she pleaded, her face changing hue.

The class laughed. I laughed.

"God makes it clear that there are certain things you should do, like pray, and give thanks, and help the needy, and love your neighbor," she continued. "But He also makes it clear that there are unacceptable things, sinful things, that love is an important and sometimes uncontrollable emotion, but we have to control it. And those of us who don't, well... Not all love is really *love*. It may *look* like love, and those who take part in it, that kind of behavior, only *think* they love each other, but a man cannot love another, uhm, man the way he, you know—stop it, *Martin*—would love a woman and a woman cannot love another woman the way she would love a man. It happens, but that's not love," she shook her head and her auburn waves of hair quivered, "and it's not natural. And men and women love each other to help God bring more children into the world. Two men or two women can't do that."

"Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, right Mrs O'Connor?" said Kyle.

Uncomfortable, wishing to move on with the lesson, knowing how her boys were when it came to these talks, the teacher smiled and nodded.

"That's *bullshit*," Professor Kim MacIntosh bellowed. She was seated on the lectern, legs swinging almost violently, at the front of the auditorium, ten years later. I was at Purchase College, pursuing a degree in liberal arts, the concentration of which I still hadn't declared but believed would be anthropology peppered with a minor in Women's Studies.

"Anyone who has spent, as I have, any amount of time on a farm can see homosexuality right there, in the barns, male cattle mounting other male cattle! It happens. And it's completely natural."

The class laughed. I like to think I was loudest.

"Adam and Eve. Adam and Steve. Eve and Eve."

But she wasn't there when I was growing up in the contradictory tradition of loving all God's animals, yet spiting and spitting upon those animals who failed to line up with the rest of the flock, herd, crowd, or gaggle.

I was attracted to whatever was attractive. Someone would ask me what's my type and I'd say I've no idea. Back then, like now, I couldn't explain it—actually, I didn't want to. I didn't want to make those wrong feelings real by thinking about them. In high school, my friends and I got together on Friday nights, after band rehearsal. I usually was quiet or playing guitar and the others talked. Inevitably the conversation came to girls and what they liked. My friends were scientific. On the night of our band's epic, so we thought, first rehearsal, which lasted ten minutes, we shared our romantic aspirations thus.

"I love blonde hair, petite, Irish or Italian, blue eyes—but I can go for brown eyes and hair because in the dark you can't see anyway," said Stephan. "Yeah, brown's okay if she's, y'know, really hot and wants to do me right there."

"I don't even know what color eyes Jane has," said Jeb.

We laughed.

"What?" said Stephan. "You've been together for two months. Don't you look at her eyes?"

"She's always wearing sunglasses. How the fuck should I know?"

Jeb was into alternative girls, like Jane, ones who were into the strange and quirky or "the ones who'd suck my dick in the backseat of my car," though he'd settle for whatever he could get.

"Man," said Julius, "eyes? Whatever." Two years older than everyone else, Julius was a dog. The scientific part for him was the experiment: "Amputees, nasty skanks, I don't fuckin' care, man. As long as I bust my nut, word. Eyes."

"Dan," Stephan had to ask.

"What?" I said, looking up from my guitar.

"What? What about you, bro? What's your thing?"

"I want someone who'll sit and bullshit and talk and get into what I get into, you know?" said I, the lofty and idealistic and inexperienced.

"No, Dan," said Jeb, "we don't."

"Man," Julius said, looking at the floor, frowning, "what the fuck're you talking about. Shutthefuckup."

"Dick, I want someone who's cool and can hang out with us. Of course, pretty would be really nice..."

"...ha, ha, ha," guffawed Julius, "yo, man, in your case, anything would be 'really nice.' When're you gonna get some,

man? Come on, man, let's take his punk ass to the city and get him a blowjob."

With such a supportive group, smaller wonder, right?

That night ended with four six packs of Budweiser and a walk to the docks down the street where we continued to wish we had some girls with us.

My fiancé at one point was convinced that I was either in denial or oblivious.

"You're gay, aren't you?" she'd ask, half-jokingly.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You just don't know it."

"Funny."

"No, seriously," she'd say, humor dwindling, conviction creeping in.

One time she told me "it's okay if you are. I know some guys who said they think you're good-looking."

"Oh really? Who said that?"

"Law"—who would become one of our best men at our quiet, judicial marriage—"said he'd do you. I can hook you guys up if you want."

"Nice," I said aloud, smiling, and thought, *but he's not my type.*

I could've sat with her and explained that I was a social constructionist and that sexuality was a product of culture and not the loins and that therefore everyone could be gay, straight, or bisexual if they wanted to or were taught to be,

but then I thought how ridiculous the whole lecture would be—to her, to me—and that I'd rather read a book than explain anything about myself to other people, fiancé included, which is probably why my fiancé, who would eventually become my wife, is now my ex-wife.

"But, if God made everything, all people, all things, all everything, right, Mrs O'Connor," said Harold, the class skeptic, his nose scrunching up as it always did when he was not asking a question but deceptively making a point his liberal-pro-choice-Catholic mom would tell him to say to Mrs O'Connor, "and we're supposed to respect that, then how can we be like that to any of God's creatures, even the fags?"

"Please don't say that word, Harry." Mrs O'Connor was Irish, married, and, of course, Catholic. I thought she was pretty decent-looking. Thanks to my cousin Dave's father's poorly stashed porn tapes, I had a constant image of two or three grainy frames running through my head with Mrs O'Connor performing fellatio, which was what they did in the city called Sodom in the Bible, on her proper husband. The thoughts made my pants quickly fit strangely and I'd grow quiet.

"What word?" he asked, smiling.

"That word!" O'Connor, very red, struggled.

"'Fag', Harry," Kyle yelled. "You're not supposed to call homos 'fags'."

"Yeah, use 'homo'," said Martin, "don't say 'fag.' You cannot say 'fag' in a relig class. It's wrong to say 'fag.'"

"Okay, okay, okay," pleaded Mrs O'Connor, looking toward the open classroom door to the hallway, which was shared by other classrooms in which classes were concurrently taught by other teachers—who were starting to look out of their rooms and into O'Connor's room, "I think everyone gets the point."

"Yeah. Stop, guys. Don't say 'fag' out loud. 'Fag' is not a nice word, is it, Mrs O'Connor?"

Deeply red, Mr O'Connor squeezed out: "Not a nice word."

"'Fag'?"

"'Fag,'" she whispered, gulping.

"We can't say 'fag?' What about 'homo'?"

"Is that as bad as 'fag,' Mrs O'Connor?"

Verging on tears, she whispered, "Yes, it is. Now stop, please."

Soon everyone repeated this to Harold until Mrs O'Connor announced it was time to read from *The Gospel of Mark*.

"Do you like girls?" asked Stephan, six years later.

"Of course," answered I, "what the fuck kinda question is that?"

"Nothing, bro, nothing, it's just that you don't seem to try to hit on anyone."

"I like Candy."

"Really? Candy?" his nose scrunched in disdain. "She's so skinny though, no?"

"Well, I guess, but I think she's cute."

"Okay, well, cool. I can talk to her for you. Want that?"

No way did I want that. I felt stupid thinking about what I'd say to her. What would we talk about?

"No."

"No? Why? Come on. I'll talk to her for you."

"Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because..."

"...because...why?" asked Stephan.

Two nights later, Stephan and I prepared for a double date with Lana and Candy by smoking too many cigarettes. It wasn't a date. We stayed around Lana's neighborhood. We smoked more cigarettes and talked and I found out that little Candy, dressed in tight-fitting dark blue denim jeans and a Slayer t-shirt, was not interested in me, that she was really interested in Stephan, who was somewhere in the neighborhood with his tongue, he would later tell me, down Lana's throat. The kiss at the end of the night between me and Candy was fast, forceful, and tasted like Parliament cigarettes.

The fucker. Stephan was such a pretty boy. He still is. Women dump the contents of their purses at his feet for his attention. Pathetic. Every girl I liked was interested in Stephan or some other guy. I stopped bothering by the end of high school. So I had no girlfriend, which helped that illusion that I was if not gay then simply not interested in the girls I saw or the girls who showed interest. I was shy. I was. I'm not kidding. But shy was and still is not an option

for boys. My failures began to make me think that I must be at least a little gay which then got me thinking whether it was possible to be a little gay or a little straight. Think about it. Did this, if I were a little gay or straight, mean that I was only a little damned? Would I be in the waiting room of hell—purgatory—sure, purgatory was neither here nor there, neither heaven nor hell—it was death with the afterlife on hold, but to me, it was the standing eight-count. Every guilt-induced good Catholic in purgatory knows he or she is fucked. But this gay issue would only *bother* me intermittently. I usually didn't think about my fate too often, though, as I was well into spiritual doubt by high school, I'd nonetheless quickly utter a prayer after each "fuck" and "shit" I'd said while practicing guitar or running from school administrators. And yet these deep fears of being gay stayed with me until I took Professor Esther Norman's second class on American culture, an interdisciplinary anthropology, history, women's studies course which argued that sexual orientation and preference were social constructs, not biological designations—you know, biology is not destiny. My worries were before I met Alfred Kinsey and the scale of sexuality and before I learned I was not alone.

"The sex organ," Professor Norman stated in her customary dry way, "is the pituitary gland, not the penis or the clitoris. Those are not what make men hard and women moist, respectively; it is not the breasts or buttocks or penis that

reacts to sexual stimuli but the message from that gland which in turn signals the aforementioned to react, signaling that what we see is what we now find attractive, makes us horny."

Sexuality was becoming complex. So complex that I became more confused. Experientially, it was "dry like my fuckin' AA meetings," quipped Julius, who had to go to AA meetings for the DUI he was found guilty of one year earlier, during my, Jeb, and Stephan's senior year in high school.

At Purchase College, I started to understand how bad my sex life—not the accumulation of sex acts but rather the whole notion of a sexual world and my place in that cosmos—would be. To me, and to most other sexually interested homo sapiens in college, no sex or too little sex was a bad sex life. Unless one had a boyfriend or girlfriend because then too little sex was preparation for marriage, like moving in together and deciding on which toothpaste to buy. If I'd had any sexual opportunities, these were ruined by pursuing the unattainable—she had a boyfriend or girlfriend, was clearly not interested, was too young, was too old or usually too good-looking, was only in the States for one week and then off to Austria—and distant.

But there were other cases that I screwed up because I just didn't believe I'd had a chance.

On the night before graduation day, Clair, a friend I'd come to know over the years at Purchase but never thought of sexually, told me "you, you used to spend so much time with

Tatiana, who never cared for you, *Dan*. She jus' kept you around because you were always there for her. And you ignored so many others who were interested in you, who practically threw themselves at you, who told you, *Dan*, subtly and sometimes directly, and you didn't care or care to notice!"

When I heard this—on the eve of graduation—I wondered, "Didn't care? Didn't notice?"

I stared at her in confusion. I looked at her sweatshirt. I could see her wonderful breasts and thought about my hands on them.

"I did... Uh... Like who?" asked I.

"There were a few," she smiled, shrugged.

"You?"

She smiled.

And I passed out, I think. I'm not sure what happened. I woke up still drunk and put on a graduation gown and marched to the stage. I was depressed and full of glee. And I never saw Clair again.

That night before graduation, an hour earlier, Rena, too, had whispered, drunkenly, "I shoulda went with you." She told me this, *confessed this to me*, as we held each other in a friendly embrace on that last night on campus.

You know, I think about that night once a week. Sometimes twice a week. I've had stretches of two or three days during which it was nothing but Rena, Rena, Rena—what might've been. I'm sure, or I'd like to believe, that had I responded to

Rena's comment with a kiss on the lips, we would have awoken, with hangovers and regrets (at least for Rena), in bed the next day, late for graduation.

O, misery, leave me be!

But no, when she said that to me, I was stumped. I smiled at her and said, smiling the dumbest smile I could pull my lips into, "oh well."

Oh? Well?

It hurts. I think about that night. Right now, I am looking at this window. Should I try it? Just kidding. I can't break it by hurling myself into it.

But, seriously, don't you get it? Of course you don't. I didn't explain Rena, did I? *Rena was the ideal*. She had transferred from U Conn to Purchase in freshman year. But she began dating Carl almost immediately. I was drawn to her as soon as I saw her and I was even more hooked once I got to know her: Feminist, violin major, bubbly, and sharp, she was everything I thought I'd want in a partner, the sort of woman I talked about in high school. You may think this means that I am stuck with some sort of high school mentality, but remember that what I wanted in high school was more mature than what my friends wanted. My friends may have not set the bar high but I was way above theirs.

Anyway. She and Carl broke up in senior year and I was busy pursuing Alana, from Brighton Beach, who loved pot and solitude and despised men who only wanted to fuck her. She

told me this, quietly seething with rage at me. She was wearing the shirt she wore the night we drunkenly kissed. The shirt was too small. My pants were fitting me awkwardly. I wanted Alana, she was right about that, but I also wanted to, at the time, I thought, marry and be with her.

One week later, Alana left after one semester and I was alone.

And remained alone.

And strangely uncomfortable around women. Which made me a strange feminist.

In graduate school, I didn't make time for people, friends or lovers, not that there were any signs of interest from others that I picked up.

And am alone.

And I love it. I'm alone in this coffee house. My usual place. Every staff member knows me, nods to me. I'm reading something my professor at City merely suggested in an e-mail. I haven't been able to put it down. The author's Dreiser. So powerful and blunt. I cringe at his honesty and his characters' idiocy—mainly because I can see myself acting just as hopelessly and as stupidly. But every now and then, I glance from the page and think about my trials with love and how quickly I fall in love—or, really, lust, but that's another story—and I consistently remind myself of all the fallout with which falling in love comes. All that danger. All that emotion. All that final disappointment.

Professors Norton and MacIntosh and Mrs O'Connor stand before me and they know I'm pretending to read.

Their toes are tapping.

"Are you going to talk to her?" asks MacIntosh, who always reminds me of a pixie, and jumps up to sit on a table. "What are you waiting for? Come on. You spend three hours a day here and drink sixty ounces of coffee. Where's your nerve?"

Norton, who taps the loudest, seethes, "and it's so cold in here. I don't understand why you make it so difficult."

I keep glancing over at the barista, Britney. Britney is thirty-four. She lost her job at a law firm last winter, right before Christmas, and came back to serving coffee for ninety-five an hour.

I know this because I hear her say this to those regular customers, like myself, with a minute to spare, like myself, and enough time to ask and listen. I can listen to her all day.

Before the economy flopped, Britney worked as a paralegal for twelve years. The pay was great and the atmosphere intellectual, even for a law firm, but not so pushy as to toss her back to Valhalla, where she had been sent for three months her senior year of college, a time when she was trying her hardest to balance forty-plus hours at a Starbucks in the city and eighteen honors credits a semester to graduate in three years, leading her to public shouting matches with potted

plants and a fire hydrant on Broadway and Ninety-fifth Street one late morning and an arrest and subsequent psych evaluation.

Losing her job at that law firm—she still had thoughts of law school—took her that close to Valhalla's Grasslands once again. What saved her was her barista experience.

This information about the hospital she shared.

The Valhalla part caught my attention. Should I tell her that I'd spent some time there in my sophomore year of high school?

Could it be that all I had to do was tell her this?

To start talking to her?

To show that I knew what it was like to not have anyone to talk to who cared enough to listen without judgment? To let her know that I, Donato "Dan" Silenzio, was that person?

But I'd been coming here for so long, only spoken my order, a thank you, and good day.

When I'd first heard her talk about her hospitalization and describe the same places and difficulties and experiences I'd seen and had years earlier, I wanted to reach over the counter to her and stroke her hair, smile into her eyes, say "I know you."

Like in the movies.

I'm not like that. I can't even look her in her eyes for too long when I'm ordering a freaking coffee. When I'm sitting and reading and glancing, I prefer to look and turn away quickly if she even *seems* as though *she might* turn toward me

or if I think her glance might move toward me because she looks like one of those people who can feel it when others stare. She's endured years of abuse and ostracism. I recognize her. I do know her. Whether she's ever actually looked my way is impossible to know since I've never held my glance long enough to verify that she's looked at me.

It's complicated.

I make it complicated.

I've imagined conversations we could have, outside, while she smokes and I, having quit years ago, hold my breath long enough to avoid the smoke but not so long that I'd pass out from lack of oxygen to the brain, which, I remember from biology class, in tenth grade, the year before my breakdown, leads to further retardation.

"I was in Valhalla too," I'd say.

"Really?" her eyes, so lovely, so brown, would open, the whites expanding, "when?"

"I was in eleventh grade."

"What year was that?"

I'd smile.

"A long time ago."

"What happened?"

"I freaked out in high school. Thought the whole school was after me. I wrote about it."

No, no, not that. Let me revise the last part so that I don't tell Britney, yet, that I've written about that.

"How long did you stay?"

"Two months, one week, and a day. I turned seventeen in there."

"Really? Shit, I spent three months. I hated that fucking (I'd note the "g" and smile slightly) place."

Nope. That's not it. Too neat. Too obvious.

Revise, Silenzio, revise.

What event, what exchange, what difference would there be this day that she and I finally talk? How would it come up?

Would she be talking to someone in line right before me, and would I happen to be standing closely—it is a small store—enough so that I'd overhear and, therefore, be justified, somewhat, in piggybacking the conversation?

"I couldn't help but overhear that you were in..."

No. No, no, no!

That's being a busybody—I don't want to be a busybody. No! Worse! With all the time, the number of weekends which can't be counted on all ten fingers and all tens toes, that I've spent here, I'd become *freaky stalker guy* and that status—given to me by an entire staff who already knows me—would ruin my chances, scant as they probably are already, with Britney.

How would I start this conversation?

"Why not start by saying 'hello' one day and asking her how she is?"

I stare at Mrs O'Connor.

"I'm not kidding. She won't bite your head off, for Saint Paul's sake."

"You know," says Professor Norton, "I hate to say this, but I agree with her. She's right. Say hello. Ask her how she's doing. That's polite. Unimposing." She pauses, looking over her wire-rimmed spectacles, and says, "Swapping war stories about the psych ward might not be the chick's favorite starting point."

"Good point!" says MacIntosh, from the table top, swinging her legs and chewing on a raspberry scone.

I've misgivings about listening to them. Go up and start talking to her? Do they know whom they are talking to? I'm a looker, not a talker. Talking takes confidence. I don't do confidence well. I don't like the sound of Dan's confident voice. I like to *look* at Britney, petite, slim, and tattooed and pierced as she is. Looking is safe. No one's hurt. No one's rejected or mocked for looking. If I talk, it's over. I'll fuck it up. I'll say something irretrievably and magnificently stupid. Or worse. I'll come off okay, even charming. It's happened before! She'll be charmed and expect me to be that way *all the time*. That's too much work! Better to keep silent and just look. She's beautiful. I like her piercings. Not too many, not too few. Thought was put into each needle prick. I have one piercing left, a sign of maturity, my left earring, a sign of old age, but I still have tattoos—wait. Tattoos! Those are good conversation-starting

points. Maybe that...I can try that. I can talk about ink. Why not? That's easy. Talk of tattoos always interests people who have them.

"Sure," scoffs Norton, "if you were both still, like, in high school."

"Dan," says MacIntosh, "you're both mature, sexual beings. Just go up and talk to her. You don't need to make carnal or corporal references. That you and she are talking is enough to signify your interest. Right, Esther?"

Mrs O'Connor, bright red, looks at the two of them quickly, looks away, crosses herself, and says, "Dan, go ahead and introduce yourself. There's no sin in that. Just don't, you know, act on it."

"What are you talking about, sin?" says Norton, unfolding her arms and placing her hands on her hips. "Sin. The man's clearly interested in her..."

"...but this doesn't need to..."

"There's no harm," continues Norton, raising her voice to counter O'Connor's interruption, "in talking to her—even if he's got sex on the mind. It's perfectly normal. Nothing may come of it, but he's used to the defeat anyway. He loses even more if he doesn't even try! Try and fail. And fail again. And if he masturbates," she says, looking at O'Connor, and O'Connor and I wince, "so what? It's been done for thousands of years and no one's died from that."

O'Connor snaps her fingers and points to Norton.

"Onan..."

Norton rolls her eyes and turns to me.

"Dan. Go up to her. Say you've been looking at her because..."

"...wait," I say, horrified, "you think she's noticed?"

"Of course. The whole staff knows."

"Oh, God..." I think about the next closest coffee shop.

"Trust me on this. Say that you have wanted to introduce yourself for a long time now. Ask her to dinner or lunch or a drink or whatever. Just do something. Anything. She's not going to scream at you."

Norton's right. I feel like such a putz. What do I do? Just go up?

"Yes, Dan, go up."

Can it get worse? Probably. There are other Starbucks in the area so if I fuck this up enough I can go to another one...so...why not?

I stand up and adjust my pants. Britney's looking down at her hands. Her brow is furled. She's reading a book. No one likes to be interrupted during reading. I should go back or walk to the bathroom. This is not going to go well.

"Just. Go."

I look at the book. The cover looks familiar but I can't see the title. I only know the book's got her attention. I've seen her reading it these past few days, between customers,

while her coworkers laugh aloud or clean up. What is it?

Should I ask her about it?

"That might be a good idea. You won't seem too desperate or creepy, smart even," says MacIntosh, "which I knew from your thesis at Purchase."

She dusts off the crumbs from her lap and jumps down from the table. She walks off to the restroom, while Mrs O'Connor and Norton nod, the three the bells of the church from my childhood, the three resonant metallic notes which used to warn, cajole, and entice to do something one wouldn't normally think to do, something unexpected, different, but necessary. There are only five other people in here. I am one of them and Britney's another. The two other employees are in the back banging around, creating the sounds of work. I look around the store quickly. The only other customer here is far from the counter and listening to music with earplugs.

Now is the time.

Norton and the others don't say this. I do.

Smile, I remind myself as I walk up to the counter.

Hi, I'm Dan and I'd like to take you to dinner.

No, no, no.

Hi, I love to read. Looks like you like to read too.

What're you reading?

Um. No.

Hi. What're you reading?

Eh...

Hi, may I have a refill please and the title of your book?

Oh, what do I say, what do I say? I'm at the counter and Britney is looking up at me. A smile flashes across her lips just before she closes her book. I smile at her and still, after endless weeks of thinking about this moment, after endless rehearsals for this moment, and after so many revisions of what I'd finally say to her if I only had the chance and the balls to use that chance, I'm silent.

Two

"For a Friend, Anything"

By Donato Silenzio

Frank couldn't say whether he and Gwendolyn, or Gwen, were friends, but he said it anyway. Frank said to Gwen, "for a friend, anything" after she'd thanked him for not trying to stop her as they both stood there on the bridge watching pieces of ice break away and drift downstream.

And then she jumped into the cold stream that December night and floated away.

The problem for him started to take shape when she wrote, "that's why I don't tell people things."

She had not been playing. She was serious. When he said he was jumping off a bridge, he was referring to that old saying about following others mindlessly. It was a joke—but for Gwen it was her chance to tell him that she had already chosen a bridge and wanted to jump from it.

He had thought she was kidding and asked if she had a date in mind.

"December," she wrote.

"Why December?" he asked.

"Because that is the time I selected. If things don't look better by then, I'll kill myself."

Frank ignored the tightness in his stomach as he continued to play along. She wouldn't, the smaller and smaller voice in his head said, blurt a thing like that out.

As the writing went back and forth, slowly, the strength of internet connection in Frank's building oscillating, delaying the "conversation" they were having, she continued to explain why she planned to do it.

Life was not getting better.

Her misery had only grown worse in Korea. Her alienation now had a language barrier. She didn't fit in anywhere. Women in clothing stores told her she was too big. Men barely looked at her and when they did, they turned away, a disgusted or disinterested look belying what they thought of her. Her friends, other foreign teachers, constantly invited her out. But she could not go out. She was always short on cash, she would say, and they berated her for not hanging out. When she would say she had to work early the next day, they then gave her a hard time for working too much.

"Sure, nobody knows how I am really feeling but nobody seems to ask me either. No one seems to care. Everyone always has things to do and never can sit and talk."

"I care," Frank wrote. He asked her to write, to speak—she would not talk on the phone. She didn't like talking and her voice was shot from speaking as loudly as she could, which she had never in her thirty years done before, to get her students' attention.

She talked about the teacher at the school who'd convinced all the other teachers that she was purposely being difficult, that she was not a good teacher, that she didn't know what she was doing. She was a strange person, a nasty person who didn't like anyone, he claimed.

She went on these rants over the chat. Frank sympathized but then grew bored. It wasn't a conversation but a therapy. Frank thought he should write notes and type "hm, that's interesting; why do you (think, say, feel) that?" every two minutes.

Another voice in Frank's head told him there were signs that she was not kidding. And Frank listened to this voice, Stephan's voice.

When he realized he had real suicidal tendencies being written across his screen, he was almost too late.

He thought about what he had written about suicide in his journal, how it was an act of courage, something not to be trifled with but not to vilified either. Like any bored, tired, frustrated teacher, Frank thought about suicide.

And yet this is not where the Gwen problem for Frank began. The problem, he realized as he lay in bed later that evening, unable to sleep, rested in understanding what he had to do with this problem belonging to someone he didn't know. Intervene? He didn't want to. He didn't think suicide was wrong or bad, but he was not sure how he should ask her about her wish to die. He wanted to talk to her about it, in person,

not over a stupid chat where tone died, where he came off as insensitive and harsh. He was not as interested in stopping her from committing suicide as he was in understanding her motivations.

What else happened to her?

What secrets did she have?

"You can share anything you need to," he wrote. Frank's stomach flipped. He felt his arms getting heavier and his eyes misting over. He thought he was about to pass out. He exhaled.

"Some things should not be shared," she wrote and Frank, for the next five days—while running; while at work; while teaching the differences between "died" and "dead;" while waiting in the cold November air for the crowded, stifling bus; while shopping for groceries comparing Korean characters to see which package contained low fat and less sugar, "Fade to Black" blasting in his ears over and over; while researching methods for intervening in suicidal cases; while pacing his apartment, sore from too many sets of elevated pushups; while writing his journal entries—wondered what those things were that should not be shared. He was obsessed. He not only wanted to know. He had to—needed to know.

The need to know was out of his power to control.

There was the perverse interest.

There was the writer's interest.

There was the concerned, lapsed Catholic interest.

There was the sexual interest.

There were probably more adjectives, but Frank stopped at those. Those were enough reasons for him. He was sure no one else, but her family, knew her pain, what she was planning, what she was going through. Frank hadn't seen it at first. He just thought she was reserved, poised. At times he thought, embarrassed now for judging, she was stuck up. Rude. Now she was traumatized, hurt, beyond hope. Wounded irreparably. Why couldn't it have been someone else, someone less serious, someone about whom he didn't care as much—and why he cared at all frightened him because his reason for caring anymore for her than for anyone else escaped him.

She was fascinating. The first person to ever tell him so clearly that she wanted to end her own life.

He wanted to save her and he wanted to watch her die. He didn't have a preference. Either would do. He couldn't think of anything he would say to encourage her in either direction. Staying silent showed he respected her, cared for her thoughts, that he wasn't out to belittle her.

Frank paced his apartment, an apartment too small for pacing. His laptop played "Falling to Pieces." He did sets of pushups. Between sets and pacing, he looked in his refrigerator and closed the door. He had no snacks.

He dropped to the floor.

Two, three, four...

"Back and forth I sway with the wind"

This was not his problem.

"resolution slips away again"

...five, six, seven...

"right through my fingers, back into my heart"

But becoming his problem.

...eight, nine, ten...

He paced. His arms and shoulders burned and his breathing sped up. His head felt light. The room spun. The light above, a too bright, too big light for such a small place, faded and brightened. And started to think, to wander, to imagine.

On a bridge. The two of them. Standing side by side. Two feet apart. Staring out at the serene water, puffs of steam coming out of her small nose and thin parted lips. He looked at her. He was on the bridge with her. She didn't look at him. She only nodded, slowly, mechanically—a song in her head guiding her.

Earlier. He would have tried to dissuade her indirectly. He would try to have her not do it. His imaginings offer no suggestion of what to say, what to try. He has no interest in telling her what to do or think about. She's told him this was in the plans for years. Korea was the last stop. So he would not, when he'd fail, try to stop her. It was never his place to intervene. He only asks her for her reasons. He says he wants to know. Could he tell her story? Would she mind? Indirectly, he'd thought, she would be convinced that suicide was not the best way. But he could not say this. He didn't believe there was anything wrong with suicide. And he would

not say this to her. He'd say he was interested in her. In her suicide.

She would glare at him and then look away.

With each repetition, the floor came closer and closer to his face. He saw the texture of his floor mat. The purple was not as deep as it had looked from the distance of his standing over it. He bought the mat because it would remind him to do his pushups and crunches, alternately, every morning. The mat, a knock-off Ovation acoustic guitar, and a traditional fan given to him by his boss were the only decorations in his apartment. No distractions of art and ornament.

It was scientific interest. He'd say he would not try to save her unless she wanted to be stopped. But he wouldn't even say that much. Say nothing. She didn't need a lecture. But he would tell her some would argue that her telling him was a sign that she didn't really want to kill herself. And he imagined anger creasing her face, her angry stride after she'd excused herself to use the restroom, returning with red downcast eyes, eyes that looked past everything and everyone and stared into whatever emotional abyss she only knew. He would decide to not intervene. He would support her. Convince her that he would be there for her, should she want him. Be there for her however she wished, anything for a friend, in any way she wished. He would have a rope to throw out to her and pull her to safety and a razor blade in case she lost nerve and the need persisted. And she—in his mind, while he

paced his apartment between sets of pushups, while Mike Patton revealed that he knew the feeling, that it is the real thing—would not tell him to leave. Her silence would be her agreement.

She revealed her desire to die, in the most illogical of fashions, through a non sequitur, in apropos of nothing, in the middle of November, on a cold Sunday night. Two weeks later, a Friday night, he'd imagine, they would stand at the bridge together. He would be stoic, in shock, and she would be sad but determined. Thoughts in Frank's mind were of the crime he was about to witness and walk away from. They would have agreed to meet here, not at her place. They would meet at nine pm.

"Don't be late, please. If I don't see you at nine, I will go alone. You will never see me again. I don't know what that means to you, but to me it means a lot that you are there."

He did not want her. She did not want him. Theirs was mutual pain. He told her about his suicide attempts. His time in the hospital in New York. His failures. The many failures, disappointments. He told her how he still could not come to terms with his failed marriage and that watching her float away to her cold, breathless death would make his pain of failure rip through him again. He told her this, he said, not to dissuade, but to connect with her. And he thought how true

that was, that he was not lying, that he was not perversely interested, not interested in typing out another story.

And she appreciated that. He knew she appreciated that because she told him. She said, "I appreciate that." And smiled.

And jumped.

He watched these events unfold. He watched her jump. The splash a body makes as it plunges into a river from twenty feet above is all he heard. And then she was under. She didn't resurface for some time. It seemed like forever.

He wanted to jump in. He wanted to stop her, tell her he was there for her, as a friend, a confidant, a reason to live. But he respected her too much to do that, to interfere with her plans. For once he would not think for someone else. He needed to not intervene as much as she needed to kill herself. She was not a child or insane or deficient. She knew what she wanted.

And he didn't. He didn't know what he wanted. Guilt and jealousy tore their individual paths through him. Guilt coursed through his heart and into his arms, the fingers caressing the rope. He tried to comfort himself by reminding himself that her family knew and would be only sad but not shocked. Back and forth he thought. He should have stopped her, called the police, some sort of agency. Korea had the fourth highest rate of suicide in the world—there must have been a number he could have called. He did see numbers.

But why was he worrying about this now? Was he responsible?

She floated and bobbed down the stream, buoyed by the hope death might bring, quickly and peacefully. He wished he had that strength. Frank understood. He understood her.

She was right.

Yes.

It made sense.

Three

"The Maturing of the Hot Writer; or, Typos and Zippos"

by Donato Silenzio

Little things matter to you. Those little things come together and make a big thing, and eventually, one hopes, the little things fall off to the side or get gulped into the larger things, but it's usually the little things that matter, that come back in strange ways, and these little things are the little things that stop you when they matter too much to go on.

You don't sweat the small stuff. You dread the small stuff.

Take wallet inserts and a dog bone and your parents don't kill you because they take turns holding each other back.

Argue with an ex-junkie drunkard and end up spending the night you were supposed to be on your way to Split Rock, Pennsylvania, in Queens county's central booking.

It's mostly your fault. This is what you think as you feel the heat. The Zippo's in your hand and burning lighter fluid and you feel the heat of the flame on your left pinky and ring finger knuckles as these hold the paper you are about to burn.

Let's go back a little bit, to before you are about to set fire to the list.

The list is on your screen. This is what it says:

Do whatever you want to do.

Talk to whomever you want to talk to.

Listen to whomever you want to listen to.

Read whatever you want to read.

Go out on Friday night and have a good time or leave one hour into the festivities, blaming a cold in the winter and heat exhaustion in the summer. In the fall and spring you can blame either.

Endure no one who makes you wonder if you should bother to endure him or her. One day you will apply this to yourself.

Make every effort to be honest and loving to those—and only those—who have made every effort to be that way with you.

Stay away from smokers and drinkers.

Eat more raw foods and no meat.

Call your mother at least once a week.

Your list. Your New Year's list. There it is. You never did this before. Look at your list and smile. This is a start, the start you've needed for a long time. But you need to write one thing on that list before everything else. You need to write "make a list of resolutions each year two days before New Year's Day."

Start over. Or at least write that first resolution before the others. Without that one as the first one, how are you sure you will ever write your list again?

Look at the screen. Copy and paste the first resolution before "Do whatever you want to do." Go ahead.

Okay. Let's have a look.

Make a list of resolutions each year two days before New Year's Day.

Do whatever you want to do.

Talk to whomever you want to talk to.

Listen to whomever you want to listen to.

Read whatever you want to read.

Go out on Friday night and have a good time or leave one hour into the festivities, blaming a cold in the winter and heat exhaustion in the summer. In the fall and spring you can blame either.

Endure no one who makes you wonder if you should bother to endure him or her. One day you will apply this to yourself.

Make every effort to be honest and loving to those—and only those—who have made every effort to be that way with you.

Stay away from smokers and drinkers.

Eat more raw foods and no meat.

Call your mother at least once a week.

Isn't that better now?

As the hot writer, you'll make a new list of New Year's resolutions every year. You used to create and store one in your head. You'd never bothered with writing because you'd had reservations, felt silly writing promises to yourself. How, you'd rationalize, can I forget what I want? (Those burdensome memories of trips to the grocery store sans grocery list—trips that took thirty minutes longer than they ought to have taken since you inevitably wandered around the store because you

knew there was *one item* you were forgetting, the one item she wanted you to get *for her*, the one item she'd knowingly predicted you'd forget, the one item the forgetting of which would stand for how little you actually thought *about her* and how much you only thought about yourself, trips after which you'd curse yourself, while walking home, for having forgotten *her cereal* and your raisins—the memories of those trips didn't seem to register with you yet.) But you need a plan. After years of recalling your new plans for your new self somewhere in March or April, finally, Dan, you need a plan.

This year, you tell yourself, it will be different. Those resolutions will come to fruition because, this time, you've written down—well, actually, typed out—your promises to yourself. Such a simple thing, such a simple *little thing* to do. But this will make things happen. Writing is agency. Writing is thinking on paper. Writing is action. Isn't this what you've always told those struggling, wonderful students of yours who *hated writing* but *loved talking* in class while you were also, as the instructor, talking to the class? Write it down! That is a big difference. That is already one hundred percent more than what you'd done last year and the years before. Ignore that tiny tinny voice which says that this is an act of desperation. There is no desperation here. You are now too cool to life to be desperate about anything. You look at this list and smile—but then frown.

There's a typo.

But why are you frowning? All you have to do is fix it. No one will see this list. Yours is the only set of eyes which will gaze upon these simple plans. Why the frown? Just press backspace until it's gone.

Go ahead.

Why not? Just press the backspace button.

You're kidding? You're not kidding. There is no way for us to take you seriously at this point. No, no, this is silly. If this is your biggest problem, then you are the hot writer and we should all bow to you because most writers get stuck on ideas or words and you don't seem to have that problem, but if this problem of typos stops you from continuing to write because you are so pigheaded and, what is it? What can we call you to have this make more sense?

Irrational?

Full of yourself?

No, the typo does not bespeak what you really are. You don't believe that—and what the hell does that mean anyway? And don't use *bespeak* since you never use it in real life.

No, you don't.

Okay. When?

That does not count. That was your character in a short story of yours, a story which never went anywhere, quoting from Shakespeare. That is not your diction. What is that?

Because I can.

Because.

Okay, I'll explain. I can use *diction* because I'm not a character.

You're taking us way off course here.

Sit down. Look at the screen. Shake your head and scratch your butt because it itches and scratching it is second—a far second, perhaps, but second nonetheless—to sex. This staring at the screen by now is familiar, comfortable, dependable, deplorable. Think you've made enough resolutions, Dan? Don't people usually have one or two they break within a month and not, how many are there [one, two, three, four, five...eleven] eleven, Dan? *Eleven*. Eleven. Isn't eleven a high number? It's ambitious? It's the best way to set up for failure, Dan, which is what ambitious people and only ambitious people experience. You're ambitious? Didn't we discard that idea years ago? Okay, maybe you aren't the most ambitious, which is a good thing, no?

No? Really? Well, then—should that be number twelve, “be more ambitious?”

But writing down “be more ambitious” sort of takes from the power of ambition. Using “sort of” waters ambition down, doesn't it?

“If I am elected president of this nation, I promise to make this great country sort of even greater!”

“I sort of want to be there to contribute to the dynamic work your organization has produced over decades of progressive action.”

“Your writing sort of rocks!”

Get it, Dan?

You water your writing down a lot. But this is far from the course, again.

The heat from the lighter is *sort of* hot, isn't it, Dan?

Ralph suggested the list. Ralph got his act together in his last semester of school and was hired by a community college in Vermont to teach composition in the fall. In Vermont!

"I just sent out my CV to, like, every school I thought of and that some of the profs recommended and boom in, like, three weeks I was getting e-mails and scheduling interviews."

Ralph is from California. Los Angeles, California. Didn't you once believe that Californians were relaxed? This ambitiousness in Ralph makes you regard all Californians in a new light.

"You don't say," you say.

"No shit," he says. "Do it, man. Trust me on this."

You want to be in Vermont. You've wanted to live there ever since you'd first gone there with friends for four days, a New Year's Eve weekend of snowboarding. You were not joking, though Roger thought you were and laughed, when you said that you could kill him and steal his identity. That's how badly you want to be in Vermont.

Ralph. He can't even correct a run-on sentence! Ralph
"Strunk and Who?" Ralph!

No. You're not envious. You are mad with jealousy!

He will teach four classes a semester plus he'll have the chance, he says, to teach what he "like, really wants" to teach: creative writing. How did you do that? you asked in a jealously, murderously joking way. I made a plan, he answered. What do you mean by plan, you asked in a way that mimicked interest and you hoped did not belie disbelief and confusion. I, like, wrote down where I wanted, like, to be after graduation? What direction will I, like, walk in as I leave that podium, degree in hand? Forward, to my future, or back, to my past? Oh, you said. I see, you said. Like one of those self-help exercises, right? you said. Ralph frowned. Sort of, not really, said he. I just know that when I write things down, I remember them, like, better? My problem was not that I did not have plans but that I never remembered what I, like, really wanted at important points in my life. I'd keep making, like, the same mistakes and end up going in the wrong direction, you know? I think you should, like, try it? He paused here and looked at you meaningfully. You looked back. He said: What do you think about that?

He was sincere. He had that tone that soft-sell spiritual religious types used when you cared to debate belief—that tone which made it difficult to argue with—or be jealous of or hate—him.

You looked at him and hesitated to answer.

Ralph. All *that is* from some self-help book that salespeople shit out. Because of shit like that writers like

us can't get anything published unless we're Jonathan "I'm So Fabulous I Can Overwrite" Franzen. Life is not that easy and how yours turns out does not depend on you and what you do *only*. There are tremendous forces out there that are stronger than you, much stronger. They control life's events and outcomes and we are nothing but those little ants on that stick in that fire at the end of that Hemingway piece. Remember that image? Do you remember its significance? Haven't you read Dreiser? What's to stop the school that hired you from burning down to the ground? Fires happen all the time, Ralph. Or having its budget cut and there goes the new comp instructor position? Or what if, on your first day, on your way to your first class, a tree falls and knocks you on your head and—boom—there, like, go all your abilities as a writer? What if a student goes ballistic in your class and shoots up the room and you get blamed and fired for it?

What if?

My father and grandfather came to the States thanks to my grandfather's brother. You see, Ralph, my dad's uncle was already here. My dad and his dad came to New York. My grandfather and his brother were horticulturalists. They planted vegetables and trees that grew shit like fruit. I never had a backyard because any backyard we had was converted into farmland. Seriously. In Italy they planted and cultivated grapevines. Grapevines. These grow grapes, Ralph. Grapes for making wine. Vineyards. They planted and cultivated entire

vineyards. You're from California, Ralph. You've been to Napa. You know what I mean. California in the sixties and still now but especially in the sixties was just beginning to make some serious wine. Gallo, Rossi—all Italians, right? Had Grandpa and Zio Sandrino moved to California, where you're from, instead of New York State, in the sixties, they could have been millionaires, but, no, New York wasn't ready for wine. Get it? There was no way for them to do this because they didn't have the money to move there and, besides, the timing just wasn't there. Someone or something wasn't on their side.

Still not convinced?

My parents had the chance to invest a couple thousand dollars they really didn't have and, even if they had it, were still more afraid to lose it with a little burger joint that was supposed to be big one day so they didn't do it. They didn't buy into this business. What did they know? They came from Italy. What is a hamburger to two people from the country part of a country that doesn't eat hamburgers? Dad was convinced by this little voice in his head that this hamburger thing was probably a long shot—he was also convinced otherwise by my grandfather's dire warnings to save, save, save, but that, Ralph, that's another story. My dad and mom opted to buy a house instead. And they still have that house. It isn't a windfall of money and the rent they get from one family does help but my sister lives in the other half of the house so it breaks just about even.

Not good not bad, right? But what of that burger joint?

I'll tell you. Every time we would drive by a McDonalds, they reminded me and my sisters about failing to invest in the joint. Billions of burgers later.

Things happen that you cannot control. You can't plan them. We don't have complete control over our ships. Some sort of navigator controls us and controls the shit that goes on around us. You know that, Ralph. Call it what you will. Call it whatever it needs to be called, whatever your religion or politics declares it to be: the white man, the oligarchy, the government, the gods, God, the devil, the cosmos, Thor, Karma, Life, life, living—whatever. How can you, of all people, buy into that idea that if you just write down your goals and aspirations they will come true? I thought you were smart, smarter than that. I thought you were willing to work your ass off even though it would often prove pointless to do so. I thought you understood *Camus*. I thought you were one of us and not one of them, man, those who get set up for a rude sense of disillusionment by all the blather about positive thinking and self-help. It's pathetic to think that simply writing your goals down will help you. Nothing will help or hamper you. Accidents and right places and wrong places are the way of the world.

Give up!

Give!

Up!

But he did land a teaching gig before graduating.

Oh, that makes sense, you said instead. You should give it a try, Dan, he said.

You wanted to turn around and run. You're not sure why you didn't just ignore this suggestion. You stayed and talked more about it. You said you'd try it once you handed in your final essays and finished grading the piles of freshmen essays, the stack of which had begun to take on biblical proportions that lest you should want to deal with the Babelesque aftermath of that—pages and pages and pages from unstapled papers flying about your tiny office—you had to first take on those responsibilities (should "do not procrastinate" make it on the list? If you have to ask, if you have to put it off by asking, if you are not sure and have to ask and by asking put it off—how can you forget that you procrastinate?) before sitting down and addressing the list issue.

Two days after you submitted your final grades; one day after you quickly responded to the twenty-seven e-mails contesting, complaining about, or thanking you for the grades you submitted (Resolution number thirteen: "Do not change grades" or "Do not spend too much time writing explanatory e-mails about final grades."); one day after you more slowly responded to those who "were just wondering" whether the B+ could become an A so that they could maintain their four-point-oh averages; and a week after you submitted your last essay for the semester (on Beethoven's craft) and here you are,

incapable of writing a single creative line toward your thesis but immersed in this list of things you want to do in the following year so that you are no longer the you who upsets your mother, misleads others, and angers yourself over the little things. This list!

But it all stops because of that one typo.

The typo hasn't stopped you. It's the least of your concerns and, anyway, easily fixed. What you can't fix about this list runs deeper.

You've been staring at the list for two hours and it hasn't changed. You're filled with doubt. It's back. But you are not sure it's doubt. It feels like doubt. You can see the shadow. You see it, though it moves quickly when you look directly at it. But there it is. It is telling you things again, isn't it? You won't change. There is nothing to this list you should want to change. Not yet. Maybe next year's will have new content. But for now, it has not changed. It hasn't changed in twenty-five years. Sure, the way you carry the list has changed. It's now neatly typed so you can stare at it. It will be pasted to your wall, there to remind you of what you think you should do. But the content is the same as it has been since you'd become conscience of the offense you cause to and influence you have over others. Are these your thoughts or are these doubt's thoughts?

Again, you are not sure. It's doubt. But if you are not sure it's doubt... Can anyone be sure of doubt? If someone is

sure of doubt then how is there any room for doubt? Can anyone doubt being doubtful?

This is a conundrum. No doubt.

Stop that.

Print the list and delete it from your computer. Stand up. Put on your coat. Take that printed list with you. Go outside. Take in the world as it is and stop yourself from becoming the banal and broken idiot that list will make you. Before you go outside, find Ralph. He smokes. He'll have matches or a lighter you can borrow. You can't just crumble the list into a ball and throw it into the trash. You need to burn this list. And you must get the matches or lighter from Ralph. He started this and it should be his lighter or match that ends it. How fitting. How symbolic.

"Ralph."

"Dan."

"Ralph?"

"Dan?"

"Ralph, you got a light?"

"Dan, I do, my man. Didn't know you smoke."

"I don't. Just need to use your matches or lighter."

He looks at you and shrugs and extracts from his breast pocket a little metal box.

You stare. A child in a candy store.

"It's a Zippo, man. My grandfather's. He had it with him in World War Two."

You know Zippos.

"No shit," you say.

"Yup," he pauses. Stares at it. "My grandfather died last year. Gave me that on his deathbed. Smoked until his last breath."

"Wow." What else can you say?

You remember the Zippo, don't you? You remember the seven that you'd owned as a teenager and college student and how those lighters were the ones you lost in the snow twice, at Streets once, and somewhere in your bedroom in your parents' house when you were sixteen. Three others were lost somewhere between sip of beer number one and can of beer number eight-nine-ten; on a bet that didn't go your way; and by Stephan on a camping trip in Vermont.

You'd tried to steal a Zippo. That didn't work for you. It was at O'Flare's, a discount store. You were with Stephan and three other boys. It was a Saturday. You had just quit your job at Marina Deli because of that near fall you took down the stairs. The boss didn't ask if you were okay. She was concerned about the three cans of soda that hit the ground and burst. Your well-being was beside the point. That Saturday, you and the others were bored and decided to go to the mall and look at girls. Somewhere between Stephan's house and the entrance to O'Flare's you thought to help yourself to all the goods you could quickly stuff—including a new Zippo for yourself—into the pockets of your leather or denim or army

jackets and not look at girls. Four of you and no one thought that four long-haired teenagers walking shoulder to shoulder into a *discount store* would raise suspicions. Not so smart, Dan. Not one of you thought about security.

Where was doubt then, huh?

Certainly none of you thought that a security guard doesn't *always* wear a dark blue uniform with high-water pants and white socks. As you walked in, a couple of shoppers quickly looked at you and looked away. An elderly woman who chewed her cud stared holding a new broomstick, still in its packaging. A black man in a sweatshirt and jeans with a weird right eye issue, a right eye that didn't seem to look at anything the left eye and rest of the body were concerned with, looked at you and nodded and smiled. You smiled back. A girl pointed at Paul, who had the looks of a heavy metal god, and said, Mommy, that boy's hair is long! The four of you walked toward the back of the store and started stuffing things into your pockets.

And you were caught. The plural you. The singular you would have gotten away with three Bic lighters (O'Flare's didn't carry Zippos), two packs of playing cards, a Snickers bar, and a dog bone, for Lisa, Stephan's dog.

"Yo," Stephan whispers, "get something for Lisa."

"You get something for Lisa. She's *your* dog. She doesn't even like me."

"Come on," he points to a chew toy, "get her this bone."

"No."

"Please?"

"She doesn't like me and, honestly, I don't like her."

Stephan sucks his teeth.

"She does too like you."

It would be easier to believe the dog constantly barked at you because she liked you if Stephan wasn't smiling when he said this.

"She barks at me every time I come over."

"She barks at everyone she likes."

"Whatever," you say, looking over his shoulder.

"She's blind. She barks at everyone."

You take the bone and motion to put it in the deep pocket of your field jacket, burying it, as a dog might, beneath everything else.

"Why don't you put it in your jacket? I don't get it."

"Come on, man, look at my jacket. I don't have the pockets. Come on, bro. For my dog..."

He has a point. There isn't much he could stuff into his jacket.

You look at him and look at the sky and think how silly the whole stealing thing is becoming. You roll your eyes and take the bone.

Stephan had a way with people and if his way didn't work, well, he would fight them. You took to Stephan immediately when you met up that first day of high school. You didn't have

many friends and he welcomed you to his world of heavy metal, cigarettes, and hot chicks. You skipped classes together. You smoked cigarettes behind the church up the street from his house together. But that day, standing in O'Flare's with a dog bone in your pocket, it took all your control to not yell at him and suggest that he take the fucking bone and lodge it neatly up his ass. Ten years later, he would badger you to drive faster in Binghamton, New York, and you would get a ticket for speeding, the responsibility for which Stephan would claim was in no way his.

Bastard.

"It's just a dog bone."

It was his dog, the angry little mutt that made an ass out of you every time you walked by it as it blindly prowled Stephan's kitchen. Sure, everyone got a good laugh out of your hesitation to enter his kitchen when that little dog prowled about, but not you. You were uncomfortable around dogs. It showed. And now you were hiding a stolen bone for her.

Nice. How do these things happen to you?

Besides, your pockets were full and you had your doubts about stealing, especially with *these* guys. They were too noisy, too obvious. Too fucking stupid. They continued to search for those inserts and you suggested leaving immediately. You looked around and saw that no one was watching. Now was the time to leave.

"Guys," you say as quietly and quickly as you can without alerting anyone else in the store, "we gotta get the fuck out of here. Come on."

What dumb managers and employees there were at this store. Together you came in and together, with defiance, you would leave. The four of you headed to the exit, a wide opening which was also the entrance.

"Hey boys, turn around. Please. Follow us."

You hear him but keep walking.

"Boys," says the voice, again, with more authority. "Turn around and follow us."

You stop and turn around. The others do the same thing. A tall, heavysset balding white man with a red complexion and no smile and another man, a black man, *with a right eye that seems to go about its own business*, whom you then realize looks familiar because you'd seen him on your way in. He'd nodded and smiled at you. *You'd smiled back!* And didn't you notice him walk by a couple times as Stephan and Paul searched for the wallet inserts?

"What's going on?" asks Stephan.

Your stomach begins to hurt, the urge to defecate dropping on you immediately.

"We want to talk to you boys," says the black man, who isn't smiling now. How different he looks without a smile. You aren't smiling either.

You were taken to the backroom. All discount stores have these backrooms. Like all the other backrooms, this one smelled of smoke and coffee. Two old coats hung from rusty nails driven into the wooden door. A glass coffee pot sat with a couple ounces of thick-looking coffee. The guard had a strange look to him, as though he never looked at anyone directly. He looked beyond you. It was his eye, that freaky crooked eye.

He placed his hands on his hips.

"Where are the inserts?"

No one speaks.

"I'm looking for inserts. I watched you boys. I passed you a few times, and you were looking through the wallets and talking about inserts. Where are the inserts?"

You look at Stephan. Stephan looks at the floor.

"We're not going to search you," says the other man.

"Empty your pockets or we can have the cops search you."

You need to use the bathroom. Cops? Cops. Arrested. Jailed. That old movie with Sean Penn comes to mind. You would not do well in jail. You don't want to go to jail. Fucking Stephan and his goddamned inserts.

"Inserts, boys. Where are the inserts?"

You empty your pockets first. It feels like that awkward moment each summer when the nurse leaves the room with instructions to remove your clothing. The doctor will be with you in a moment and there you sit, in underwear, waiting for

him. You start to feel silly as you empty your pockets, taking out cheap lighters and other insignificant things. Then your hand settles on the last thing in your pocket that you had not planned to pay for. It is soft, yet firm. What is it? You need to really use the restroom, now, as you realize exactly what it is.

The dog bone.

The flame is starting to singe your skin and the list is still not on fire and Ralph sucks his teeth.

Do you have to take the dog bone out? Is it really necessary? They had had no idea of the other things you'd taken. You could pretend, couldn't you, that your pockets are clean. There is no more stolen contraband. No one would know, no one except Stephan. You look at Stephan and he has a smile on his face, a knowing smile, a smirk, an anticipatory, knowing smile-smirk. He would stay shut up about this. He has to. But he looks like he's going to burst and you want to burst—in laughter and then run to a restroom to vomit and shit violently.

"Let's go, son. I ain't got all day," says the other man.

If they do search you and find the bone, not only would they—what would they do? The cops were on the way. You and the rest were practically prisoners already. But wouldn't trying to steal once again make matters worse? They might give you a longer, harsher sentence still. You had to. You had to give up the bone.

You pull the bone out. Stephan coughs. But there's no other noise. Then he starts to shake and laugh and so do the other boys, who hadn't known about the bone. Now, three boys in denim and leather jackets, with long hair and mean scowls, are laughing and coughing and shaking their heads.

"You boys," says the fat one who looks constipated, "think something's funny?"

"Yeah," says the eye, "laugh it up, boys. You won't think this's so funny when you're'll locked up. So laugh it up while you can. Go ahead."

And your friends did. They laughed and laughed.

That dog bone would be the butt of Stephan's jokes—one of many you would be part of—for years. If only you had said, no, Stephan, no, I am not taking that fucking dog bone for your terrorist dog, you would not have been subject, all these years, to his jokes.

Later that night, no one was laughing.

"Why are you stealing? Did someone talk you into stealing? Don't you have your own mind? Where did you learn to steal? And why did you steal *that stuff*?" Your father looks out the window and exhales. "It was all shit! Garbage! You didn't even take anything valuable. If you clowns took a television or a radio or stole a fuckin' car, I'd almost understand a little better, but a dog bone? I don't get it."

Had your mother left the room, you'd have been dead. The man would have killed you. The only reason he didn't was

because of her. The law forbidding killing did not hold him back. She did.

"And a fucking dog bone? We don't even have a dog? Why did you take the dog bone?"

You stay silent.

"Well? Are you going to just sit there and stare at the floor? Why did you steal that stuff? Lighters and dog bones..."

Silence.

You have to say something.

"It was only one bone..."

Hence the need for your list.

Ralph looks at you as you stare at the flame from the Zippo, which is merely inches from the paper.

You should set this list ablaze and you should keep the list.

It was your fault that you tried to steal that bone. Not anyone else's. You did something you should have known better than to do. Besides, Stephan is your closest friend, though, just as close friends are inclined to become every now and then, he's a pain in the ass. But he's also a generous person who would do anything for you—including getting arrested for assault and battery the night of your skiing trip together, eight years later, to Pennsylvania.

You were roommates during graduate school. You lived in Astoria, in a one-bedroom apartment passed off as a two-

bedroom apartment by virtue of the laughable wall the owner had put up in the living room to make another bedroom. You and Stephan had lived in a shabbier, smaller place the year before. In that place, your bedroom was the size of a rich person's second walk-in closet. Comparatively this new place was the Taj Mahal. At the time, you may or may not have been in love with two or three different girls who knew you existed but either got your name wrong or couldn't remember where they'd met you. Your list—which you are about to burn using Ralph's Zippo—already deals with unrequited love.

Move on.

It was ten thirty at night. You and Stephan had brought down all but one piece of luggage. He went back up to the apartment to get it. It was his travel bag. And while you waited, smoking a cigarette, which you lit with your Zippo, a figure came into focus about thirty feet away. He saw you and walked over. As he got closer, you thought:

Shit. Charlie.

Charlie was a thirty-something recovering heroin addict alcoholic who lived with his underage girlfriend, mother, and half-brother with whom he fought constantly.

This, you thought, is not good.

You and Stephan and Charlie had a brief history of altercation. The first time you'd met Charlie was back in October, on an unseasonably cold Sunday morning. You were waiting for Melanie to pick you up to go to an exhibit at the

Met. She was, of course, late. Standing outside in the bitter cold, leaning against a low retaining wall that led to the entrance of the building complex, you and Stephan smoked and talked. A young man came walking about, slightly crooked in stature and wearing jeans and sneakers but no socks and an open denim jacket and no shirt. The jacket was wide open but the cold seemed to not affect him. He shook and his head jerked as he dug in his jacket and pulled out a bent cigarette. He was pale and had no muscle tone and a belly that preceded him. He looked at you and Stephan as he put the cigarette in his mouth. He leaned back, cautiously, against the other retaining wall across from you. He lit the cigarette. He wobbled a little. Then he pushed off from the wall and walked up to Stephan and looked him in the face and wobbled some more and blew smoke. Even with high winds shooting cold air past you, you smelled alcohol on him.

"Hey man, what's up?" said Stephan. Four years ago, you thought, Stephan would have punched him.

The man walked off and leaned back once again, against the opposite low wall.

You and Stephan continued to talk. You looked over at the guy and wondered where the hell Melanie was.

"What?" said the man.

"Excuse me?" said Stephan.

"What're you sayin' 'bout me?"

"Bro, I don't know what you're talking about," said Stephan, smiling. "Why don't you go home and put on a shirt and maybe sober up."

The man said nothing. He could barely stand and he was now shaking more.

Where the hell is Melanie, you thought. God, always fucking late.

"What?"

You looked at the man.

"What yourself, man. Fuck off."

You didn't want to say what you said but you thought if you just showed him that you and Stephan were not going to suffer a shaking, drunken fool, he'd move on.

He didn't. He moved over closer to you.

"What you sayin' 'bou me, man."

"Listen," said Stephan, "no one's talking to you. You need to move along, boy. Seriously."

"Seriously," said Charlie, wobbling.

Melanie came driving down the street, fast.

And he and Stephan started yelling at each other.

And Melanie appeared and you and Stephan got in the car and the drunkard warned you and you and Stephan laughed it off.

"Who was that," asked Melanie.

"No one," you said. "Some fucking loser."

That, you thought with relief, is the end of that.

A couple of months later.

"Look," Charlie says, "if we both drop the charges, man, we get out of here with no problems? Get it?"

"Uh-huh," you say.

You are standing in a cell with ten other people, men who will later try to convince you to attack Charlie as he lies on the floor of the cell, fast asleep. Instead, you picture him, repeatedly, eating that rancid bologna sandwich the guards had handed out which no one else touches.

Earlier that night, after you'd thought, *oh shit*, Charlie came up to you, smelling of beer, and claimed that a couple nights ago you threw batteries at him from your window. No, you hadn't thrown anything at anyone from any window in over ten years. But this fact did not matter. Not to Charlie, who seemed intent on starting something with you. There was no way around this, no way to talk him out of it.

"Man," you said, "what're you fucking talking about? I...listen just get going, all right?"

And though you hadn't seen him in weeks, he was not to be convinced that he was wrong.

"I'm gonna get a bat. Just wait here, man."

He turned around and walked into the building. Yes, he lived in your building. Neither of you knew this man lived in the same building. This, you thought, is why I need to stay quiet more often.

Come on, Stephan, you thought. You couldn't go anywhere because of the luggage you had to watch outside. You sat

outside with it, hoping Stephan came down soon. A minute later, Stephan finally did.

And so did Charlie. They were talking and walking quickly. This was a good time to shout out to Stephan, to say something, to move, to move, you think, the Zippo in hand, the hand warm, the paper right above the Zippo-warmed hand, knuckles on fire, Ralph staring at you and the paper, Ralph silent, with a look on his face that seems to ask *what's going on* but knows enough to not say anything. Apparently, Stephan had had no idea what had just transpired. Charlie had a bottle tucked to his side. Stephan did not see it.

Before you could say anything, Charlie hit you with the bottle, and Stephan, without delay, dropped his bag and went for Charlie. Stephan threw a punch. The right hook connected with Charlie's jaw, Stephan's fist and Charlie's face making one meaty sound, and you, head wobbly and eyesight blurry, grabbed Charlie's throat and squeezed and pushed him up against a wall. And Stephan kicked and kicked and kicked and now you were holding Charlie up and Stephan continued to kick him. It felt like hours passed. Finally, police came and they broke it up.

You let go of Charlie when you saw the officers, and Charlie crumbled to the ground, moaning and reeling.

"Just get on your knees while we get to the other one," an officer told you and Stephan moments later. No handcuffs, no Miranda Rights. Nothing. You and Stephan kneeled on the

hard, cold ground. All you knew for sure at that point was that you needed a restroom.

Minutes later, you and Stephan were placing your luggage in the back of your dad's truck, which he'd let you borrow (And this is how you fucking repay his kindness? By getting into a fight? With a local crazy in Astoria?) to drive to Pennsylvania. You and Stephan, however, would not be getting into that truck. You were supposed to follow the officers to the station to fill out a report. One officer had said they were going to let you go—two of the officers knew Charlie by first name—but that changed.

Seeing all the open cuts on Charlie's face, ones he must've gotten from an earlier fight with his brother, another officer came up to you and Stephan after you loaded the truck. The officer was followed by two other officers.

"Sorry boys, but you have to turn around."

It didn't occur to you what was happening.

"How am I supposed to drive with handcuffs, sir?" you asked.

"You have the right to remain..."

"...Wait," you wanted to cry, "what's going..."

"...Sarg wants to take you all in and settle there, sorry." You want to believe the officer said sorry. Or that at least his tone said *sorry, I know, but what can I tell you? Shit happens. Nothing's ever fair.*

They arrested the three of you because of the bloody mess Charlie had become.

Now, in Central Booking for the County of Queens, it is the next morning, you guess. You have no watch. The police took it. You see the cuts and scratches all over his face and smell the urine and alcohol on him. You watch him as he lies there, still asleep on the floor. Earlier that night or morning, you had wanted him to die. It was one of those wishes of yours. *Just fall over and fucking die, you useless prick. You're nothing to this world. You have no right to consume. You are a miserable waste of air and food and toilet flushes and my sincere and only hope is that you only die a horrible death, one so painful it almost makes me feel something akin to sorrow for you.* That was what you felt. Before. Before seeing this pathetic heap of piss and alcohol and waste on the floor, snoring away. Now you pity him. You are in jail because of him and yet you feel nothing but sorrow. That night, you did not sleep. As everyone else slept, you stayed awake, continuing to keep an eye on him.

The arrest screwed up everything for you and Stephan but it also drove everyone else mad. Family and friends scoured all of Astoria that evening looking for you. Your mother, you'd later learn with a complete lack of surprise, was initially in hysterics. At first, she was convinced you and Stephan had crashed somewhere between New York and New Jersey, burst into flames, and died. But then Stephan's girlfriend

Lisa and her brother found the vehicle you were supposed to take (the one your poor father lent you—and this is how you fucking repay him and his hard work, by getting arrested, again, after doing something stupid, again, with Stephan, again) and Mom's learning that the vehicle was found, intact and free of blemish, parked two blocks from your building, luggage inside, gave rise to even more frightening worst-case-scenarios in Mom's mind. There was no sign of you or Stephan *but the luggage was in the truck*. This made her imagine more of the worst. She did not go into details about her thoughts, her worries, her dreads, but you know your mother well enough to know she thought only the worst—a diehard fatalist and mother, she has only ever thought the worst when it comes to what-could-have-happened scenarios—and probably considered whom in Italy to call first to tell, blubbering, screaming, and flogging herself for encouraging you to take a break and go away in the first place, that her firstborn was dead. He's dead, she'd say. And it's my fault! He was killed by the mafia. And it's my fault! He and his friend were taken hostage by drug dealers, taken to the Con Ed plant down the street from their apartment, each shot in the back of the head twice, and thrown into the Hudson River. And it's my fault! It was an attempted robbery—didn't I tell him to just give them whatever they wanted!

Your father, because your mother is freaking out sufficiently enough, would simply stare at the floor, thinking *he's fine—he's all right—there is nothing to worry about.*

They've run away, she'd think, more positively, more hopefully. They're both tired of school and the torture and push of this fucking country that makes young people go completely crazy. It's because Americans worry about money and fame and not enough about God and family. They've had enough and run away and we—society, parents, the media—have made running away their only escape! On the outside she'd maintain calm or what passes in her mind and for others as calm. The only sign of her nervousness others would miss. Her eyes. She would be looking up and down, left and right. And her hands. Yes, her hands, Donato, her hands would tell all because she would squeeze a generous amount of lotion on them and moisturize those hands, as moist as they already are because of her nerves and the moisturizing session of not-more-than five minutes ago! No one would see this, though, and that's her way. She won't show what she is feeling. She and your father, too, will keep it in: Let others show worry and believe in defeat.

The next morning in the cell, while keeping one eye on Charlie, who still slept, you looked at the phone. *Should've called hours ago. I wonder if they're worried.* When you finally gathered the nerve, in that cell, to make that first call from the free payphone in that cell...

"Free?" you asked.

"Yeah, free," he said.

"Free," said another, "so those motherfuckers can listen to our calls, man. Shoot. I ain't trustin' no fuckin' phones. Man, fuckin' pigs."

...a call you ought to have made when you were first locked in that cell, you were starting to feel sickeningly comfortable being, once again, in an institution. As the phone connected to the line outside and traveled to the line in that home you'd spent seven years of your life in—a home the lawn of which you'd mown every Saturday for years, a home in which you'd gotten drunk, played pool, been surprised for your eighteenth birthday, and watched hundreds of people come and go and visit and eat meals with your family—you weren't sure what to say to the voice on the other end of the line. The guys in the cell were awake and looking at each other and looking at the walls. No one said anything to anyone. They would hear you speak on the phone.

Arrested! Again! With Stephan! Again! What will your parents say? How will they take this? Will your father come to the precinct this time and just kill you? Will he come armed with his deer-hunting thirty-oh-six and just shoot you between the eyes? If he did, you'd understand. Really, you would. Arrested? You were in graduate school, studying anthropology. Stephan was studying social work. What kind of graduate student gets arrested in a fight? You were twenty-four years

old. An adult! Unmarried, perpetually single, and living with another man, but an adult nonetheless! When, Dan, will you finally grow up! Would you two be kicked out of school? Would Stephan be able to get a job in social work? Would this arrest make you unemployable at the check casher because New York State banking authorities did not allow your boss to employ convicts?

"Hello," says your father.

"Dad? It's me."

"Hi."

"Hi. Um, Dad," you say, fighting a catch in your throat, "I'm not, eh, in Pennsylvania."

"Oh?"

Oh?

"Yeah, we've had a bit of a delay."

The snap and sparkle of the Zippo startle you and you nod to Ralph. He nods back. The list.

To burn or not to burn.

A bit of a delay...

This understatement, this *bit of a delay*, and the dog bone episode, would be the Dan lore told for years. Your father did come to Queens with your mother, who swore, over the phone she took from your father's ear, that when her heart rate dropped to normal levels she would try to kill you for what you'd put her through by not at least calling her and saying you were okay because Stephan (the kiss ass) did call

his father at two am to let him know that he was okay and that you were okay and Stephan's father had then called your parents at two fifteen am to let them know not to worry, that his son and their son were in Central Booking for the County of Queens, arrested for assault and battery, but they were just fine and that in the morning they would all go together to collect you two.

So Mom knew you were okay but still:

"You should've effing called. Ah! We were worried even though Stephan's father told us not to. It would have been nice to hear you say, *hey, ma, I'm okay, don't worry*. I mean, I would've still worried, because that's what mothers fucking do all the time—worry, worry, worry—but at least I would have been able to not *worry worry* but only worry. You lousy..."

Lisa and the people you and Stephan were supposed to meet in New Jersey, on the way to Pennsylvania, were out all night looking for you. They'd slept in cars parked right outside the building. It was vigilesque. This was a time when cell phones were not so common and so they had had no way of calling anyone and honestly did not want to unnecessarily scare Stephan's father.

Stephan's father and your parents stood outside central booking that morning after you and Stephan had agreed to have all charges on both sides dropped and behave as though nothing had happened.

You did exactly that. But as you and Stephan left the court, the judge announced that Charlie had to stay behind because the judge wanted "to talk": as it turned out there were other legal matters Charlie needed to answer some questions about.

Turning around to leave the court, you looked one last time at Charlie and he looked at you. Neither of you smiled. You wanted to point at him and laugh but you felt no real reason to do it and no real emotion toward him. So you just walked out the court room.

Outside, in the cool day, you were greeted by a keen sense of relief but you wondered about whether this problem with Charlie was put to rest. And there it was, once again. There was doubt. Doubt looked over your shoulder, at the situation you were trying to read and now trying to type into some story form, and doubt just stared. *Here I am*, it said, just as it says now. *Trust me, Dan, I will never leave you.*

Something about this was too easy. Mom and Dad were smiling at you (because thank goodness there were too many witnesses around for your father to just off you right there or your mother to beat you with her shoe) and everyone decided to go to a diner. The excitement of having found you, of sitting around and eating together—you, Stephan, your friends and families—was thick but you were still shaken from spending the night in a cell with a person who'd tried to hurt you. But you didn't say anything about what you were really thinking.

You stayed quiet and no one seemed to notice how quiet you were. You didn't show that you were still upset and unnerved. You wanted everyone to know that you were fine. It was best to keep what you felt with you. You ate a little bit but you didn't taste anything and ended up returning most of the whole meal. The food made you sick. Stephan talked and explained the situation and how it had all happened and everyone laughed and you laughed but there was nothing in your mind to really laugh about. Laugh? How? How, when all you wanted to do was cry? After you had a meal together, everyone parted ways and you and Stephan and everyone destined for the trip took off for Pennsylvania.

The rest is another story, of course, one that—at this moment, as you stand there with Ralph's Zippo in one hand and your list in the other and think about the little things come together to play into something big, you're not sure what to do and not sure if what you do will be the right thing to do, which is why you never do anything (and why this list, which you are about to burn, may not be the enemy after all), that fear of making a mistake—you have to force yourself to not think about for now.

Four

“‘Talking to My Father’ by Domenick Acocella”

by Donato Silenzio

Dan’s professor was not impressed with Dan’s stories. Dan submitted a lot of work that first semester but nothing seemed to interest the professor or the rest of the group in the workshop. Some of Dan’s stories were considered funny and well written but they didn’t rouse any strong emotion in the readers and the professor didn’t think Dan was writing his own stories.

“Your voice, Dan. Where is it? Where’s your accent? Where’s your father’s accent? I want to know what he sounds like.”

“What do you mean?” asked Dan.

“You have no accent in your writing.”

“I don’t speak with an accent, well, maybe a New York accent, but I don’t have an Italian accent, if that’s what you mean.”

“And your father? Does he have an Italian accent?”

“Yes,” said Dan, smiling.

“Well, I want to hear it. I want to hear you and your father talking. Do you two agree a lot or disagree often? What does he think of your writing?”

“My father lost his ability to talk to me after I left the hospital.” Dan had told his professor about his time in

Valhalla, didn't he? He wasn't sure. What would the professor think of him now?

"Dan," he said, smiling, "stop talking to me and go write that down and tell me your father's story."

"What do you want to know..."

"Go now and write. Stop talking to me and start writing."

<>

"Talking to My Father"

by Donato Silenzio

I

My father lost his ability to talk to me after I left the hospital.

"He's afraid that you'll get sick, again, that's all. Of course he loves you, Domenee," my mom says.

I was seventeen years and one day old, but he couldn't tell me what he felt about and toward me. He was afraid he would come off as harsh or insensitive and that that might land me back in Valhalla's Grasslands facilities. He didn't want to sound like he was dictating how to live and what to do.

"I don't care what you do, so long as you like it, you're happy," is all I remember him ever saying as he'd glare at some point in the distance though, even before my incarceration.

My friend's father's advice, when I tried to cutely explain an aspect of my character, was different. He said,

"that's not good, Domenick. You should know what you want. Make decisions. It's not good to be indecisive."

"I might not talk right but I know, believe me, I know. Okay?"

"Yes, Dad."

"No, I'm not..."

"...No...I know...I know."

"I'm not angry with you. You had to go to that hospital, but I hated that fuckin' place. I couldn't take you outta there. They wouldn't let me. My own son," he'd recall. (Years later, I remembered my father's woeful powerlessness as he, my sisters, and I listened to doctors telling us that his wife and our mother might be home soon. His sad, confused face lightened with hope and joy, but then I chimed in with "we shouldn't push for her to come home as soon as possible if she's not ready" and counseled patience from my father and sisters.)

He felt and may still feel responsible for what had happened to me.

From what I remember, this is what placed me in Valhalla.

I was in the eleventh grade. Half of the school year had passed and with each day it was becoming stranger and stranger. I kept imagining a large group of loosely related and cliquish students was talking about me behind my back and had been planning to jump me at graduation in a year. I'd hear people whispering about me as I passed them. I didn't know them but

they seemed to know me. I couldn't eat. I was too fat and needed to lose weight. I had stopped smoking a few months before and seriously wanted a cigarette. No longer smoking, I no longer smelled of cigarettes. I smelled worse: unwashed, unclean, unhealthy, frightened. And I ended up in a mental hospital.

"But these are obvious teenage things, Domenick," I imagine myself as Doctor Acocella cajoling my inmate self, Domenick. "What really put you there? What do you really think it is?"

The patient, a little uneasy, starts to recall.

It may have gone like this.

One Tuesday morning, I needed to leave my chemistry class immediately. It was making no sense. Chemistry never made any sense to me under whatever passed for normal circumstances, but on that day the subject was exotic. The class was exotic. No one else in the class seemed to mind the room's slow, clockwise spinning. No one seemed to mind the teacher's slow speech and constantly blinking eyes. He spoke clearly, in English and I always understood him—a chess master, a genius who tucked his dress shirts into his briefs and let his pants sag to the crack of his ass and ate nothing but hotdogs from the truck parked just outside the school's borders—but that day he seemed to be in on *it*, the jokes, the laughter, the pointing, the fucking conspiracy against me; the teacher was sinister, far worse than any of the students because he was

smart and the students—some bound for good colleges, others bound for another stint of Grade Eleven—were not. My eyes ached. I couldn't stay in the room. There were too many students, mean students who said horrible things to each other, to the teacher, who, I remind you, was also evil that day, and I wasn't sure what I would do to one of them if they should start taunting me. I was lost. We were talking about what happens when oxygen connects with certain metals such as copper. The Statue of Liberty was an example but still I was lost. Nothing made sense. I had God on the mind. I still believed enough to recognize evil when it was there.

And the evil didn't stay in the halls or the chemistry classroom only. My English teacher's quirky lecture on *The Scarlet Letter* the Friday before had troubled me and was still bothering me. A story about the evil people do to each other, she needn't have made it worse, but she did. Her face made it worse, made the story more frightening. She had a maniacal look as she said that we should read from left to right and not up to down.

"Remember," she intoned, slowly, eyebrows arched, "you have to read carefully. There is a lot to this story that you'll miss if you just barrel right through it."

She then motioned with her hand up and down shaking her head, "don't read up and down," and then she went side to side with her pen in hand and nodded, "read left to right, left to right."

She's making the sign of the cross, the cross upon which Jesus was crucified, I thought. And she's looking at me and only me. She was trying to tell me something.

I remember that I looked at her and needed to leave the room, to go outside, but I couldn't. The windows in the room looked out onto the very place I would go if I were to leave the classroom: the bridge. And on that day, the bridge felt dangerous. People who were up to no good, who could and wanted to harm me, were out there. I stayed in class, not sure what to do. I avoided looking at her.

Back in my chemistry class, I started feeling worse. Without saying anything to the teacher, I left sweating. A couple of students murmured something. My left eye was twitching. Walking down the hallway, I saw people, teachers and students who, I believed, kept looking at me, their glances ephemeral, and whispering, giggling things to each other.

Domenick! Hey, Domenick!

I'd turn around, in the direction of the voices. I'd just miss them or no one would be there.

The hallways seemed to never end, but I continued to walk until I realized that I was lost. I saw no exit signs. The only light, made brighter by the hallway's dimness, I saw came from the classrooms, places I could not go. I couldn't remember which way was out. The hallways all had the same number of doors, all the same polished oak doorframes. The

numbers to each room were the same. I didn't want to go outside but I couldn't stay inside either. I couldn't go outside to the bridge because that was where all my friends were, smoking and drinking and making asses out of themselves. They must have been talking about me, too. Everyone seemed to be talking about me. And I still kept hearing my name shouted from down the hallway. And I still looked. And, still, no one was there. The soft, dim lights in the hallway flickered but remained on. Then they faded to black. I needed out.

I *needed* a cigarette. My friends would have given me one. But I couldn't smoke one because I had stopped four months ago, so, in even more of a panic, a panic I could not place or understand, I decided I should go straight to my guidance counselor's office. I was scared and couldn't explain why, to myself or anyone else. But my guidance counselor? He could help. I thought about the threat I felt as I walked the halls, lost, and found myself in an even stranger part of the building. I didn't recognize anything and I stopped. And I looked around me slowly. It all became familiar. The panic subsided.

But wait.

Where was his office? Wasn't it on the third floor? What floor was I on? I was on the right floor but at the wrong end of the building. I wanted to ask a hall monitor, a burly Bible-toting man with a huge ass that swayed whenever he ran, a man whom everyone called "Ding Booty," but every one of the

guards had a problem with me. All the guards eyed me suspiciously anyway. What was worse was that I didn't have, I realized, a hall pass and I had already cut too many classes.

Finally, after a lucky turn, sweaty and disheveled, I found my counselor's office. He took one look at me and called the school's psychologist. Together they had no clue what to do. They were used to my saying something, some sort of wise remark or even a pleasantry, but I said nothing.

"Domenick? What's up? You okay?"

I hesitated. What could I say? "Uh, yeah." And then, stifling the tears warming my eyes, "um, no."

The counselor turned the psychologist and said, "he doesn't look too good."

We talked a little bit. I don't remember what we said. I don't remember most of what I said that day. The counselor and psychologist were used, the counselor would tell me ten years later when I visited the school and sought him out to say hello, to problem students who threw things at the teacher or pummeled each other or stole underwear from the girls' locker room.

"Obvious problems, Dom. You know? When I saw you," the counselor sat back in his office chair, "I had no idea how to handle it. I do now but not back then. It was so sudden. You looked scared sick."

After ten minutes, they decided that this was something too unusual for them to handle and that they should notify my

parents. They called my parents to come meet us at New Rochelle Hospital. I don't remember what happened in New Rochelle hospital, though. Not one of the questions or doctors comes back to me—the only thing I do recall is that we were there for merely half an hour and then we went outside. My parents hadn't even made it to the hospital yet and we were already outside. So that meant that my parents were coming to take me home. I'd get some rest and then be back in school the next day. I was okay.

And then I wasn't.

"We have to take you to Valhalla to run some tests, just for a day or two," said my counselor, as I waited for my mother to arrive, "d'you understand, Domenick? They need to do this." I wasn't okay. My stomach started to hurt. Tears formed behind my eyes. It turned out that New Rochelle Hospital couldn't help either.

"Okay, sure...I...understand." I didn't really understand. I didn't understand what he was saying or what he was saying could mean, that I would be staying somewhere other than home without my family and friends. I didn't understand anyone.

My mother came to pick me up. Her face was creased and she suddenly looked older than her thirty-nine years. She would turn to cast furtive glances at me when the road was straightaway. At red lights, she would search my face for answers. We didn't talk much. At home, Mom and I packed a couple of items for an overnight stay at the hospital. A

couple pairs of underwear, socks, some t-shirts, and two pairs of jeans. I wanted to take my guitar, as I was starting to feel better and looking to affect that prison blues feel but more important to show them that, *hey, I am okay now*, but I was told I couldn't take it with me, that apparently metal strings are dangerous. I was really going away somewhere. I thought about that movie with Sean Penn in juvenile hall. While Mom and I packed and talked about what I was feeling, Dad, who left work as soon as my mother told him what was going on, was on the phone in the kitchen.

Save for the quiet in the house, it was like any other day and none of us showed much concern. The quiet in the house made me think about my sisters, who were in school, learning whatever they were supposed to learn. They didn't know I would not be home that night. I tried not to show concern or worry. I was fine. Before leaving, we had turkey and cheese sandwiches. I usually didn't eat during the day because I needed to lose weight. The food, however, was welcome. I was very hungry and the sandwiches were good. My mom and I joked about the whole thing, this whole mess my little excursion had created—I didn't talk about the near hallucinatory experiences in the hallway. Dad nodded and smiled but ate silently.

"I don't have to go, do I? I'm fine," I asked between sessions of mad chewing.

"You have to go. Just to be sure."

"But I'm okay now," I pushed.

"Just to be sure," my mother said. My dad had quietly finished eating and had already left the table to go start the car.

My mom and I finished eating in silence.

What could they have known?

My mom and I got in the car. My father, still quiet, was in the driver's seat.

My mother turned to me and smiled.

I smiled back.

My father backed out of the garage and drove off.

Here is what I can remember from when we arrived at Valhalla toward the end of that winter.

My home for the next couple of days was the Westchester County Medical Center, a large, gated facility separated and tucked neatly away from the rest of the White Plains/Grasslands area. You enter this facility once a security guard has absently looked you over—do you have a gun or a knife or ill intentions, are you dangerous, are you supposed to come in—and let you in. Once in, you are surrounded by tall evergreens and other trees and bushes and carefully tended lawns. In winter time, these lawns are gleaming white sheets of virgin ice. All the buildings in the psychiatric hospital area have brown-brick exteriors. At a distance, these buildings provide a contrast to the remaining mounds of snow left, in the early part of spring, here and there throughout the various parking lots and in the middle of

expanses of lawn. The buildings ruin the otherwise pristine landscape. The roads that lead to these buildings wind around the area so that you can, while still outdoors, one might presume, see lots of trees before seeing only through glass and tall fences, nothing but brick structures, all brown, surrounded by handsome trees, some pretty flowers in later spring, and young and old people, who are not quite fit to be outside the grounds, ambling and swaying about with hospital-issue flip flops and white socks, nicely bundled up, neatly medicated, and permanently trapped.

My dad parked the car, and we walked in to one of these brick buildings through what appeared to be a back entrance. We were now in a sparse white room.

"How can I help you?" asked a bored receptionist whose ear was stuck to a phone that emanated from a glossy helmet of chestnut hair.

"I'm Peter Acocella and this is my son, Domenick, Domenick Acocella," said my father.

"Oh, yes, okay," she responded, sitting forward. Her hair didn't move. The doctors knew we were on our way and had told all who needed to know about me.

"I'll call you later," the receptionist whispered into the receiver before hanging up. She smiled butter-colored teeth. "Follow me, Domenick."

"We'll be right here, *Do*, go," said Mom, smiling.

Dad looked around, hands in his pockets.

"Oh, okay," I said. I followed the receptionist through another maze of white halls, the scents of bleach and death tickling my nose, to a room.

"Have a seat. The doctor will be right with you," she said, still smiling.

"Okay. Thanks."

There were two metal-and-plastic chairs and four white walls. There was no music. I heard people walking by outside the door, some laughing, some talking, but all muffled. The door, directly in front of me, was closed.

I had no idea what was going on. I was afraid to even talk to myself. Are there cameras? I wondered.

The door opened and a tall man in a white lab coat and wire-rimmed glasses walked in. He smiled and closed the door.

"Hello!" he said, sitting down across from me, looking at me, smiling at me, studying me.

"Hi," I smiled back.

He continued to smile.

A second man, also in a white lab coat and a thicker set of glasses, opened the door, glanced at me, and stood behind the first one, who said nothing and didn't motion for him to sit down.

The seated one spoke: "Domenick? Is that the right," he looked down at his clipboard, "way to say your name?"

"Yes."

"Good! How are you?"

"I'm all right, really, fine." *This is all a mistake*, was what I'd have liked to have said but couldn't because I thought I shouldn't. I recalled a friend telling me an admission like that would signal to the seasoned professional that there was something wrong.

He smiled. "Good. Very good." He looked at me and said nothing. Ten seconds passed. "I want you to remember these three items: ball, cat, and blue. Can you do that for me, Domenick? Dom or Domenick?"

I smiled. "Whatever, Dom is fine."

"Can you remember those three things, Dom?"

"Sure." I loved memory games.

He looked at the other man, who nodded back but still said nothing. The seated one started to ask me another question. I don't remember what he asked. I began to answer. I don't recall what I said.

Ball. Cat. Blue.

A third man, in khakis and a green, no blue, turtleneck, with salt-and-pepper hair, stepped into the room. He said, "hello, sorry I'm late" and sat and said nothing else. He had a name tag. I saw only "RN" and could not make out the name.

"No problem, James. This is Dom."

"Hello," I said.

James nodded.

The seated doctor and I continued our conversation, going back and forth for a few minutes.

"How's school?"

"Are you sleeping enough?"

Ball. Cat. Blue. Can't trick me, I thought.

"Do you use drugs? Have you ever used drugs?"

We started talking about things I like and would like to forget—thrash metal concerts, my being arrested for shoplifting, my mother and father's rage at that incident, girls, drugs, cigarettes, crazy people, long hair, more drugs.

At times we were laughing together. Sometimes we simply nodded, slight smiles on our faces.

Then we stopped talking for a couple seconds. And I thought this was the point where he tells me, *hold on a second, we're going to discuss this outside, we'll be right back*, and in minutes they'd all return, and the silent doctor would say, *you are fine, Dom, go to your parents and go home.*

I felt my breathing ease even more and I started to smile. *Free, free, free! I will never, ever freak out again. I am fine, just fine and these doctors will tell me just that!*

"Dom," the seated one, no longer laughing, no longer smiling, paused, "what are the three things I'd asked you to remember?"

I smiled widely and said, "A ball...blue, no brown, no blue..."

Fuck me, what's the word, what's the word?

My smile dropped and I panicked and then in my panic, I forgot everything.

I failed their test.

And I was admitted to the hospital. For two days or so. Just for further testing. Be home by Saturday, in time for the Kreator show at Streets.

There was (and still is) a blur and somehow, I came back to reality, wearing pajamas, thinking it was three days later.

Charlie, a hulk-like, stray-eyed, six-foot-seven chain-smoking orderly whose job it was to make sure I didn't kill myself in the shower, told me that I had been there for more like a week and a half.

Time had been moving all along and I had—and still have at the time of this writing—no recollection of it.

Where were my parents? Where was my father? Why was he so silent the whole time? Was it because he knew all along? And my mother? What did she know? Was she part of it? Were they in on it with everyone else? Surely they understood what was about to happen to me. Why else would they just leave me? Why else was my father avoiding my eyes? Was this supposed to be some sort of rite of passage? Was this what I had to do to prove myself, to prove that I was becoming a man? But in pajamas? Had my parents had left me in hell?

Naked or clothed, awake or asleep, I was constantly watched. I did not like being watched. Charlie watched me often. He would come in even on his days off. (Charlie took an immediate liking to me. He was Italian American. His parents were from Italy. "My parents," he would look at me with that

one eye that could focus on whatever object while the other looked elsewhere and pull at his cigarette and exhale gingerly, "are like yours. They came to this country and worked hard to give me and my sisters a good life."

"When I first saw you and your parents, I felt so bad for you guys. Man, Dom, you were so quiet, so fucked up, you wouldn't talk at all.")

Every day I was watched. I was drugged. I began to get used to it. And for some reason, after a while, I began to not mind that I was watched. Well, one reason is that I was in a psychiatric hospital. I was on drugs doctors thought might help. Stelazine, ativan, lithium, and others. What those drugs did to me was the worst part of my stay. Time was screwed up, my appetite was increased, and I ended up shooting up in weight.

But it wasn't always bad. There were times where I felt really nice and calm on the drugs that turned out to be appropriate for someone in my state. Other drugs were unnecessary and toxic. There were times that I remember being so lethargic and cranky that my parents, when visiting, could only stay a minute or two, and then I had to be put back to bed. I felt that I was only sleeping for seconds and minutes at a time.

"No, Dom, you've been asleep for two days," Shirley, a two-hundred-fifty-pound orderly with platinum blonde hair, would say with a curious smile.

"What?" I'd say, eyes barely open.

"Two days. Yep. Straight through like a baby. You snore."

"I snore—I don't snore."

"Yeah, you do. It's cute."

I became used to showering while a fully clothed orderly, male or female, sat next to my stall in a chair reading *Vogue*. I learned to fall asleep with bright hallway lights shining into my room because the door was wide open, propped by a well-cushioned chair dragged in from the recreation room so that Charlie or Shirley or someone else could watch me for ten hours as I slept and woke up and slept. I started to recognize, slowly, the screams of other inmates in the middle of the night. I understood that Valerie, victim of sexual abuse that had begun at age eight and ended three weeks ago, when she had been brought to the hospital as she awaited trial for allegedly murdering her abuser, her father, had nightmares and only needed some more meds. I knew that Tony was not really that uncontrollably violent, as the youth officers had claimed at his hearing. I couldn't believe he had thrown a knife at his grandmother. In my head and given my state, I didn't mind having no control over anything in my day besides selecting from a form what I'd eat for breakfast (faux eggs), lunch (more faux eggs), and dinner (faux eggs, unless there was the vegetarian meatloaf-and-mashed-potatoes option).

I knew everyone was talking about me, some laughing, some concerned, and, unlike in high school, I didn't care what they

said and thought. Suddenly, who was talking about me mattered little to me. I looked forward every day to stupid little things that I had not bothered with in the real world: eating breakfast and lunch and dinner and snacks and gaining weight and not caring, playing ping pong and outdoor (surrounded by a barbed-wire fence) basketball, getting a phone call from a friend, seeing my parents...

I stayed in Grasslands for two months, one week, and one day, and my entire family went to counseling while I was incarcerated. And when I came home, I could feel and see the difference in everyone. Through counseling, they learned a new ways of communicating. Everyone still yelled, but it was yelling accompanied by listening and arguing. In some ways, my going away brought us closer together.

"You know, Mom, I fuckin' hate it when you say that."

"Michela!" Then Mom would pause. "Well, what do you want me to say, huh?"

"Can't you just listen?"

"Okay. Okay, I'm sorry."

They were much more careful, especially my father, with what they said, and how they said it, to me.

We talked more to and with each other, rather than at and against one another, but, after some months, thank goodness, things were back to whatever passed for normal in any family.

"I'm taking the car tonight."

"Um, no, you took it last night. I want it tonight."

"No I need it. I have plans, Mich."

"I have plans too. Why are yours more important than mine? Don't your friends have a car? What about Eric?"

"He's not feeling well."

And it would go on until my father or mother would suggest a solution.

My mother still thought the music I loved was horrifyingly loud and obscene; I sent out applications for college, though without a clue as to what I would study.

Things were normal for everyone in my family.

Well, almost.

My dad began masonry at the age of nine. He didn't have a childhood the way my sisters and I had had a childhood. My mother was the youngest of five children and she did domestic things at a young age, too. My parents ruefully told harrowing tales of when parents beat their children for minor infractions, but the parents were expected to know their children's habits. In their time, children did not do drugs the parents did not know of because *the parents knew everything*. The neighbors would talk, would discuss anyone whose children were not upstanding and diligent and respectful and sound. They grew up in small towns that successful people who were not farmers left for the city or America. No one left home unmarried. No one left home to go to a mental hospital because of undetermined issues.

So when I went to the hospital that was it. My father and my mother had failed to watch over their only son and oldest child. In Valhalla all I could do was imagine what my parents were thinking.

My father would say, "what are they going to say; what're people going to think?"

My mother would say, "they can all fuck themselves, Pietro!"

What could the friends and family have said about me or thought about me? What did they say when my parents and sisters were not around? I imagined this:

"Is he crazy?"

"Why he's so reckless?"

"But what happened to him? I don't understand. Just last week we saw him and he looked fine, a little skinny and his hair was too long, but he looked happy."

I could see it in their faces. The tight smiles, the inability to look at me, the fear of offending, the jokers like my uncle Sal no longer joking with me...

"It's that Goddamned devil-worshipper music."

Some of my dad's friends were convinced I was a drug user. (I did not necessarily possess any of these qualities or have any of these habits or take part in these practices, but that didn't matter to them.)

That's what my parents came from, and so it was important that my dad be very careful about what he said and how he said it around, and to, me.

"I can't say anything to my kids!" my dad used to jest. "I don't know anything. What does Daddy know, right? Sure I only went to fifth grade but I know some things. Hm."

Now it was no longer a joke. It was no longer something to joke about, his inability to say anything, his obligation to be careful when speaking.

Did some family counselor or doctor or television personality or good friend suggest that my father should be more sensitive?

He still won't tell me what they said to him.

Did someone say that I might not have required institutionalization if I'd had the sounding board that he and my mother didn't provide? My father worked long days that more often than not spilled into his nights. Imagine what an accusation like "you need to support your son more" sounds like to a man who has always told his son and daughters to do what would ultimately make them happy—imagine what that could possibly sound like to a man who'd lived in a German-speaking town in Switzerland for eight years with his father and was called names by children and well-to-do women in the market—imagine what "you need to be more understanding of your son" must sound like to a man who once lamented to me how he was not contracted by IBM to repair and pour the concrete walkways

around the perimeter of its banal offices in Westchester. He did not make the right impression on the building's supervisor because he appeared at the location at four pm, Thursday afternoon, his clothing covered in dust, having just come directly from the job, and he was not in a suit and tie. He said to me "son, make sure you dress right and talk professional se no, you know, they think you're stupid."

Our conversations are sometimes easygoing, more often strained. There is not one thing he and I can speak about that does not come to series of reassurances, hesitations, fronts, and bitten tongues.

Not having had the time in this country to go to school and learn proper English, Dad's is the English of the immigrant who has worked on the construction sites of the homes of the affluent and not-so affluent. He's worked closely with men who have gone to college—though my dad says they cannot have done too well at what they studied because they are "so fuckin' stupid, sometimes, y'know."

And I'll say, smiling, "why, what do you mean," smiling because I know exactly what he means.

I love to hear him rant.

When he's at work, construction is his language.

I used to work for him. Listening to him talk about how the well-educated are below incompetent takes me back to a time when I could smell the site of construction, a mixture of

concrete and diesel fumes and earth and unpretentious masculinity—not the masculinity of the ridiculous construction worker you see in commercials for soap or cell phones whose skin is perfect, muscle-tone well-formed, and face unlined.

This is not the construction-worker image that adorns the soft-core pornography of the checkout lines at the A&P. These men are overweight, with serious back and neck injuries, have families who depend on them, are up to their ever-expanding torsos in debt and living the American dreamy nightmare.

To me, these were the creators. His was the language of a god.

"Domenick," calls Joe Spunelli of Spunelli and Son, a landscaping company that operates out of Mount Vernon, New York.

"Yeah," I say, as I stumble, again, over a rock or piece of concrete, I'm not sure, one of thousands of rocks and pieces of concrete on the seventy-two acre estate of Jason Supple, a financial consultant whose forty-two-room, six-car garage, pool-and-movie-theater-in-the-basement home needs another tennis court since the present one is too close to the stone-face and Italian granite doghouse.

"You go to college?" he shouts.

"Yeah."

"You finish?"

"Not yet. One year left." I trip.

"And then what?" he asks.

"Graduate school, I guess."

He pauses, looks at a stone, and points, saying something in Spanish-flavored Italian-speckled English.

He turns back to our exchange.

"Christ. When do you fuckin' finish?"

My dad and I laugh.

"In a few years."

"What are you studying?" he asks. His son and another worker, carrying very big stones, look up at me. I think one of them is smiling or the sun's in his eyes.

"Anthropology."

"What th'heck is that?" Joe scoffs.

"It's the study of culture, of human interaction, of, well, anything people do."

"What'd'ya do with that?"

"Teach. Write books."

"Oh yeah?" Joe says, stretching. He's been bending over and pointing to stones and places to place those stones.

Joe stops, stands up straight, and says "well, fuck college. He"—points to his son, Joe Junior, and continues—"went to college and now he's workin' for me. Fuck college."

He turns and says nothing else to me. His son smirks. The other guy laughs. So does my dad.

I laugh, too, not sure if I am laughing with them or if they are laughing at me and I have just joined them.

Construction is his language.

I love to listen to my father talk business, hear him cut down the high-priced, low-knowledge characters who call themselves engineers and architects and home-improvement experts.

"Up at Stoneplumb (a company out of Georgia that specializes in making big ridiculous multi-million dollar homes even bigger for people who often do not spend much time in them)..."

We're sitting in the backyard. I have a beer and my dad is drinking a gin and tonic, his favorite. I am smoking a cigarette because I am an adult now and my dad knows it. I keep the cigarette under the table.

"...Where is this, Dad, again," I interrupt. I need all the detail, even the minor stuff.

"Connecticut..." he says.

"Okay. Right."

"Mark tells me that 'we got to pull, put up the wall, the retaining wall that we put up last week. You know"—he says not to me but more to Mark who is not in my father's backyard in New Rochelle, New York, but on his ranch in Wyoming with his wife and children—"you can't put a retainin' wall at that angle. It's not going to work. They think that I'm stupid. Huh. I may only have the fifth grade..."

He used to smile when he would say this. He used to say that the smile was his way of not blowing up. These days, he doesn't really smile anymore about these overpriced architects and job supervisors.

It just isn't funny anymore.

II

We're sitting on the backyard patio. It is July and we are eating hotdogs and hamburgers and roasted peppers and there are two bottles of wine—one red and one white my grandfather made last season—and an assortment of plastic cups and cutlery (we've actually cut back on the formalities; there was a time where Mom would set a proper table, outdoors, with metal forks and spoons and knives and real glassware) and spilled beverages decorates the round table, a part of the metal weaved patio furniture outside that blights the flagstone and cobblestone.

My father and I and grandfather and sister and her husband and their daughter and my uncle, through marriage, and his oldest daughter and my other uncle, my father's first cousin and his wife and a family friend (from the former Yugoslavia who lived in the other neighborhood where I grew up before this one to which my parents moved) are sitting around, eating and drinking and talking about whatever people talk about on this country's birthday. It's the day before the

Fourth of July and we will all be in different places tomorrow, so we have all come together today.

"Pass the ketchup," whines my sister. It's not really a whine. It's the way she speaks, as a tired mother, as a victim of July's brutal heat wave.

Still chewing, my brother-in-law reaches over the table, grabs the Heinz, and hands it to her.

"Thanks, hon."

"Y'welcome," he half says, half burps. He's from Yonkers.

Save for the random explosion somewhere in the surrounding landscape of trees and houses, the neighborhood is quiet. There is a breeze that reminds us it's there every two or three minutes.

My dad's eyes are downcast when he eats. He eats too much, sometimes, because he eats so quickly. He should slow down. I would tell him this, especially since my mom is not here to suggest that he slow down, but there are guests at the house.

I should know better than to tell my father to do anything.

Yes, son. I know.

Respect your father in his house, my uncle, through marriage, would say.

I am not used to telling my dad to do anything, but lately I feel my turn to do so, to tell him what to do, is slowly coming up. It moves up, in twelve-month increments. But it's too early. Mom is still around. She tells him what to do

for his own good, but on this hot July day, she is in Italy. Her mother is sick and dying and my mom needs to be there.

It is a hot, humid day. It is usually hot and humid in July and I cannot stand the weather of New York. It makes me moody and cagey. Everyone else is moody and cagey. They pick up my moodiness and caginess and throw it back at me.

"What a day, ah?" says Vera, the now-Croatian woman who's been a family friend ever since having moved thirty years ago to the US from what, at the time, was called Yugoslavia. She's fanning herself with a used napkin. This will only make her hotter, I think, but I keep that to myself too.

"Yeah, it's nice," says my uncle through marriage. His wife, who is my dad's first cousin, is in Florida, visiting their middle daughter who's going to school in Miami.

"Yes, it is," chimes in my dad's other cousin, who is in his eighties and fit from playing golf and watching what he eats.

"You see what happens, Dommie?" he barks. His tone is that of the feared and respected ex-army physical education instructor he had been decades ago. When I was a kid, walking around New Rochelle with him was like walking with the town's mayor. Everyone said hello to him, called him "Mr Ac."

He squeezes a piece of the soft inside of a clump of French bread between his thumb and index finger, "*that* sticks to you, causes adipose tissue. I don't eat a lot of bread."

I ask, "So you don't eat a lot of pasta, either?"

"Why not?" he asks.

"It's the same thing almost, no?"

"No way. It's not the same."

"It's made with white flour, just like that bread, no?" I insist.

"It's not the same."

I let this go. I could push him but it is the holiday. Who needs to start an argument on a hot July day?

His wife, who smokes too much, nods her head. She is perpetually tanned (tempting melanoma). She smiles.

He stops chewing and asks, "So, Dommie..." He pauses. Swallows. "How's school going? Are you off?"

I hate that nickname. It was fun when I was eight and only when I was eight. It's not a mature name for a no-longer-eight-year-old man.

"Yes," I say through clenched teeth, "we are off for the next couple weeks." I have taught for almost eight years at the same school. Shouldn't he know this by now, that I am off for two weeks around the holiday? I inhale slowly and exhale more slowly.

"Are you off for the summer," asks his wife.

I'm about to answer but my uncle steps in.

"No, Mattie." He turns to her, knife still up in the air, raises his voice and slowly reports, "he is off for two weeks and then goes back. It's not like the public school, right?" He asks this slowly, for his wife's sake. It's not that she

doesn't understand English. Rather, she is a little slow. Age does that, I guess, but I too wish people would slow down when they speak to me. Maybe age has nothing to do with it.

I'm bored. I look around the table and everyone is old. My little cousin is now a full-grown woman—ditzzy as ever, of course, but she is in her twenties, in college, and looks like an adult—and my sister is a mother. I am not a mother or a father and have no plans for such a life.

I push away from the table, needing a cigarette.

My father is a quiet man.

So he talks very little, especially when he eats.

He's lost when my mother is not around at gatherings like barbeques. Even when he's the host. The house is theirs. It doesn't belong to my father or my mother but to them. The events are theirs. You can see it when they have guests.

They have been married for many years and it is cute to see the two of them, a combined ten feet in height, dancing together at weddings and dressed impeccably at funerals.

He speaks.

"So how's Danny?" Danny, or Donato, my cousin-through-marriage Phil's father, has bone marrow cancer. He won't be around for much longer. Phil is going to visit him today.

His mother, a year or two younger than his father, is already there, at the hospital. She is not wearing the black clothing yet.

She hasn't much time left, many suppose, either.

They're all dying.

"Eh, he's not doing too good, Pete. He's in constant pain..."

"*Managia sadana...*" murmurs my grandfather. He has been silently chomping away at steak and red roasted peppers on his plate. A survivor of two world wars and two bouts of colon cancer, he shakes his head. He doesn't speak too much English, but he knows the name, knows the situation. He knows cancer for sure. We all do. My grandfather and Donato have been friends for many years, even before my uncle-through-marriage had met and married my grandfather's niece. It's a small world.

"I'm sure," says my ex-army physical education instructor uncle, Mr Ac, who's seen his share of friends and family, including an ex-wife and daughter, succumb to cancer.

"Well, pray to God that he starts to feel better." Mattie, smoking away, is already starting to wheeze. She used to be able to speak without losing her breath. I have smoked for sixteen years. I have no sympathy for smokers paying the price for smoking. I know that one day I will pay a handsome fee for my smoking, and I don't want the sympathy. I don't deserve it.

I need a cigarette.

Donato, my Uncle Phil's father, never smoked. Phil smokes anything. He's had operations and grafting and therapies and interventions.

He still smokes and drinks.

"Yeah," mumbles Dad. His mother having died of breast cancer, my dad always gets very silent whenever any sort of cancer is brought up. He's often quiet but with cancer it's a morbid silence. Thinking. About what, I'm not sure. He doesn't say. I won't ask. His lower lip trembles and his eyes redden whenever he recalls the speed at which his mother succumbed to the onslaught, but he fights the tears back. He chews silently. He won't say that he misses her. He won't say that he is angry at me. He won't say a lot of things. (The day I moved out to go to graduate school at Hunter College, he was upset that I hadn't talked to him about moving out. Though I had mentioned and planned and mentioned some more that I was going to move out by the end of summer, he was surprised that I had not discussed it with him. He did not tell me he was upset. My mother did. Or at least she thought he was upset. He never said anything directly to her about it either.)

I start to get antsy. "Well, let's hope those doctors can find a cure for him."

My sister, Michela, is picking at another piece of pie she says she doesn't want. She stops and looks at me and rolls her eyes after my comment. She knows what I am implying and wants me to shut up. I look back at her and smile. Her daughter was born three months early. The doctors in NICU saved her daughter's life. Why is she looking at me?

My dad eyes me without looking up.

"It's cancer. Hopefully he doesn't suffer too much, God willing."

I can blame it on the humidity. I can blame it on the nicotine not yet rushing through my system. I can blame it on the two beers that I've drunk in the last three hours.

"I don't get it. You all look to this hope for God seriously? Come on. There is no God and so there is no hope there. And, as my case shows, if there is a God, he'll leave you to suffer, just as I'm sure he'll leave Dan to suffer—but that's the Christian thing to do anyway. Isn't it?" No one says anything so I continue. "There are doctors and it is the doctors who may save him."

"Enough, Dom." My sister almost stopped believing thanks to what she and her family went through. I thought of this, thought of my niece's baptism, when the priest thanked God for her making it—without saying a *single word* about the nurses and doctors who kept her alive. My stomach starts to ache.

"No, seriously. You give God all this credit for the good that happens and nothing is said when things start to get bad. Right, Mich? Like when Chiara was left out there to die, if it weren't for the NICU. Nothing is said about God and that perhaps (here, I look at everyone in the eye for a second) — just perhaps —he should take a little of the credit he deserves."

"Domenick..." my father smiles. He starts to laugh: it's a warning.

"Yes, Dad, I know. I am just saying..."

"...Stop..." he says.

"...all that I am saying is that with the good comes the bad and if people want to thank God, which they can all they want all day long, then they need to also reprimand him for his cruelty..."

"Enough," Dad says, calmly.

Everyone looks at us.

Why should I back down? We are conversing. It's harmless discussion.

"For some people, believing is important, okay?" the former Yugoslavian intones.

"I understand, Vera, I do," I say. "I just think there should be a little more reality to it, you know?"

"But it's faith," she says sententiously.

"I know and that's my problem with it."

"Enough Dom, come on," says my sister.

My dad wipes his mouth and places his napkin on the table.

My grandfather looks to me to stop. He sees my father becoming angrier and angrier.

I carry on.

"I think people can believe whatever they want. Hey, look, the world is a flat disk and the sky is really blue. The President of the United States really did exhaust all options before going to war. Priests don't really fondle all those boys. UFOs are for real, which they are, but this doesn't mean

they are space aliens. Bankers are your friend. The Lord works in mysterious ways. I understand why people need such reassurance, insane as these reassurances may be. I just don't have any sympathy for such craziness."

My dad leans forward. His shoulders are hunched inward, like he's playing cards. He rolls and unrolls his napkin.

Without looking at me, he says, "My son. He knows everything. Hm," he snickers, "Watch him, hm. He's got all the answers."

My uncles and grandfather give a collective "hmmm" and smile. The joke's on me. *Look at the smart one*, it seems to say.

I take a deep breath and look at my father, a man I like to think of as my co-conspirator in plotting against liars and charlatans.

"Dad," I say, "do you really believe? Come on. You go to church because Mom goes, not 'cause you want to. She makes you go..."

(What I find out, later: Things have changed. For the last month or so that my mother had been away, he had been going to church *on his own*. Had I known, the following would not have happened.

Or maybe it would have happened.

What I find out for sure: he's not my co-conspirator.)

"...and all that I am saying is that it's bullshit. Where was God when I entered the hospital? *Where was he?* Huh? I

didn't see him? Did you? When you went to church with Mom and prayed for me, did he answer?"

"You got out, didn't you?" says Michela.

"Sure I did, thanks to good drugs and smart doctors."

"But we prayed and it helped."

"Really? How? Why, if it helped, did he take so long to respond? Why the fuck did I spend two months, one week, and one day? What was it? To test me? To see that I was ready?"

Ball. Cat. Blue.

"Dom, enough..." warns my father.

But I don't hear him.

"I can't believe that such smart people believe such stupidity. It's crap. It's crap. You all go to church not because you want to but out of fear of God's rage, right? What a racket."

His brow furls and lips turn downward into a familiar, long-unseen frown: my pre-psycho-ward father.

"I said enough! So stop. I go to church 'cause I like to go"—he looks right at me and points to himself—"no one forces me, okay!"

A fork falls off the table and clanks on the ground. A napkin falls to the ground and I can hear it rustling on the flagstone. No one else is speaking. A spoon unwittingly taps against a plate.

"*Pee-eh, Petrino, 'basta, basta, non ce male.*" He turns to me, "*Moon-goo, abbastanza, le. Enough.*" My grandfather's pleas are quiet, nervous, and aggravated.

I'm stunned into speechlessness by my dad's explosion. I did not really mean to offend him.

You know, says my counselor self, you really have big issues, don't you, with God. Isn't that the least bit troubling since you don't even believe in him? Why are you so concerned with what others believe? Wouldn't you be better off minding your own business instead of trying to hold thinly veiled arguments against this and that as conversations? Around a barbeque?

"You know everything, huh? Go to school and come home and disrespect everything Mommy and I taught you, huh? I don't care what you believe! Leave us alone! We do what we want, okay? Damn it."

He slams his fist on the table, making a sound like a thousand snare drums hit at once, rattling bottles and toppling one of them over. He gets up and goes into the house.

I sit there. We all sit there.

No one else looks at anyone else.

Michela flashes me her usual chagrined look.

I want to tell everyone that I am not sorry for what I said, but that I am sorry for the way I acted, the way I said it, and want to say something about the ways of my father, who,

even at this point, I want to say, I still think is not a believer.

Instead, I shut up. It's not his fault that I went to the hospital. He knows that, I hope. I want to say something to someone, maybe tell my father it's not his fault, that it isn't with him that I have the problem, that it was never his fault or Mom's or anyone else's. I want to tell him that if any of his friends or coworkers have ever suggested he didn't do enough or listen closely enough to me, he should tell them to fuck off. I would tell him that I would be upset with him only if he failed to tell them that, failed to let them know that they couldn't know enough to offer corrections.

"You should've stopped, Dom," my sister admonishes.

She is absolutely right. But I don't tell her that.

I should go inside and talk to him, tell him something, anything. Tell him I'm sorry for saying what I said. I'm sorry for putting him and Mom through so much.

I think he knows I'm sorry. I think he knows it wasn't his fault. I think he's told them to fuck off. There is no need for me to say any of this.

I stay seated.

I don't need a cigarette.

I feel relaxed, a little relieved.

But I don't tell anyone.

<>

"Dan, this isn't bad. I think the voices come out strongly and you stayed away from the psychobabble and pop-psychology your other material suffers from."

Dan smiled. This was an easy story to write. It was hard to think about and recall and relive but the writing of it was pretty fast.

The students in the workshop were very happy with the story. They didn't like everything but most had good things to say about the story. Dan thought the story would flop, like the others. He was beginning to feel that his writing instincts were at best backward. What he thought was shit was good and what he thought was good was shit. He thought "Talking to My Father," another quasi-autobiographical account creatively told about his family and teen years, would be shit.

The class and the professor did not.

So much for instinct.