The Lost Songs of Somerville

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I

And a one, a two, a one, two, three, four. . .

Remember me? I used to be the face of America, at least according to the painted cover of a once famous magazine. You'll remember the picture if I show it to you: I'm the kid in the middle with the chipped tooth, a small flag planted in one young fist and a dying sparkler in the other; I'm sitting on a grassy hill with my family and some neighbors and the picture's perspective is that of being just downhill looking up at us; our faces, still glowing with wonder, are all staring up into a darkening evening sky filled with fireworks which are, at that moment, in exact full neon blossom. Can't find the likeness? Well, it was a long time ago and though some of us do, I guess most of us don't, as children, much resemble our eventual adult selves. Anyway, the face of America wasn't really me, it was our town, Somerville, they were referring to, back when this country was still knowable enough that one could imagine its true essence being found in such a small and simple space. And once upon a time this really was a special place—there was a harmony to how we passed our time together, an interdependent rhythm in how lives lived themselves around here that was so much more comprehensible than this staticky haze of solitary busyness we're all buzzing around in today. And so allow me to reminisce. Because do any of us ever become all we once thought we could be? We all have a home we'd like to go back to—one we remember, one we imagine—and is it really for another chance to be who we were then, or is it to bring the who we are now back home to the who we still could be? So imagine, for a moment, lifting every appointment on your calendar and every bill on your ledger back into the weightless skies of possibility, and then remember when this whole life you're now trying so hard to live was nothing more than a tiny tingling sensation inside you, just a burst sac of tadpoles still swimming their way through the waters of your mind's eye. Remember what that felt like?

. . . it felt like you could be anything.
It Is Not Down In Any Map; True Places Never Are\textsuperscript{1}

Our oldest records list this place as Somer’s Nest, a settlement the famous Captain Somers negotiated with the Toquam Indian tribe, who kept their hunting grounds across the river and in the hills, at least for a few more treaties. The surrounding hills provided steady weather for well-nourished crops, and the river’s predictable floods left a layer of newborn loam every spring, providing the settlement with enough bounty to not only survive its harsh winters, but to thrive overall by selling its excess grains to the less successful neighboring settlements. Sometime later, beneath the command of another Somers, this one a Colonel, we became a main post for a full brigade of General Washington’s army. A natural basin, the entrance to Somer’s Nest was flanked by rocky hills on three sides which, tapering together, funneled the huge Redcoat regiments into sizes our hungry soldiers found to be, to their initial wonderment, believably defeatable. Colonel Somers and his troops stayed here several months once, and the place kept them safe. Of course, to claim their full independence, our young upstarts would eventually have to leave the Nest and so they marched together in tight formation right up to the very edge of it before tumbling, each one by then a lone screaming soul, out into the bloody chaos, their guns blazing.

\textsuperscript{1} A quote from Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. He was referring to the isle of Kokovoko, the homeland of Queequeg, the would-be savage cum selfless hero; a man born seemingly nowhere and who would go on to become a citizen of the world and perhaps the moral center of America’s greatest novel.
Somerville was small, only three by five miles and what most people remember of it are the smaller and more intimate parts of even that. Coming the way the crow flies, you’d have noticed two main thoroughfares: Elm Street, which poured straight down out of the hills, crossed the southern part of the Toquam River and ended at Main Street, which was, to your left, renamed Old Main Street by then. Old Main Street ran North-South and was less than half a mile long: on the West side of the street (your left), beyond tall, road-iron gates, the Americana Figurine Factory, our largest employer, stood like a huge, dry-docked cargo-ship, and along the other side of the road ran a long, spired stone wall, on the other side of which sat Sunnyside Park and that same hill I’d been painted watching the fireworks from that summer of long ago. Beyond all this the road flared out enough to allow a quarter mile of angled parking spaces in front of the storefronts that came off the unidentical twin clusters of one and two-story brick buildings running down both sides of the street. The buildings were sun-bleached, covered in multi-colored wooden signs, and attired with a handful of striped awnings—each one providing about enough cover for a half-dozen of us to get in out of the rain.

Toward the end of Old Main stood the Federal Trust Bank and Palmer’s Grocery on one side, and the old Dream Lanes Bowling Alley, and the Rialto Movie Palace on the other. Everything still cul-de-sac’d around Veteran’s Park and in front of the old Town Hall, whose grand marble steps were flanked by two tall statues: one of each Somers. The Town Hall was a three story columned
Victorian which, along with the reliable hourly chime of the big bank clock, sort of anchored everything down. The bank is the one thing still there, though it tries on a new alias every few years; its clock still stands too, though it doesn’t tell time anymore—its chime, of course, is long gone.

Most of us lived on the quiet little roads that curled around inside the couple of square miles between the two main roads and the river, roads that had thickened and thrived around one another over the years, a place where the things that had always grown out of the land and the other things that had to be cemented or nailed down to it had seemed to come to some sort of agreement with one another. It was a habitat of crooked sidewalks and leash-less dogs, of watered green lawns, sculpted shrubbery, and those great yawning front porches that came off shingled bungalows colored every color in the crayon box. We had a lot of trees around here, a lot of Elms and a lot of Maples—a schoolteacher had once taken my class for a long walk and pointed out to us the arboreal path by which a Somerville squirrel could circumnavigate our entire little town without ever having to leave the sky.

This was a model town. That deathless song of lament chorusing so many of our local newscasts: I just never thought it could happen here—well, it is Somerville, without their even realizing, that this endless parade of our shocked brethren keep comparing themselves to. So what happened? Hard to say. Small changes we notice: they interrupt our sleep; they set our minds itching. But when everything changes, that’s another matter altogether isn’t it? Because that kind of
change has a way of gathering an imminent and undetectable momentum, because it doesn’t come from the world we live in, it comes from the world that the world we live in *lives in*—and sometimes this larger world wakes from its dream, stretches out its great limbs, turns over to start sunning its other side and, by the time we’ve rubbed our eyes open and taken a good look around, the way we thought things would always be is in puddles around our feet and has already begun to drift, a single drying molecule at a time, back into the universe.

I do not have that which I think you seek, reader, which is an answer. We’re all looking for answers these days, and answers, whatever they always lack in truth, do indeed offer the light touch of brevity and the tranquil warmth of reassurance. But against all instinct I have decided, in my autumn years, to try shedding the numbing comfort of the easy lies I’ve lived by and so what I’ll offer instead is what we all offer when we’re missing an answer: a story.

This is the story of a single summer—that one summer I’ve decided upon as the season of origin in regards to all this change I’ve been going on about. It was nineteen eighty-something, and it was the summer the town’s Heritage Renewal Project began its re-creation of Old Main Street, the summer the Gypsy Moth Caterpillars arrived in soft, silent battalions and defoliated half our green trees, the summer two more of our children would disappear out by the river; and it was the one and only summer for a very talented, and, a very young local rock-n-roll band—called themselves the Milk Carton Kids. I lived next door to the garage they practiced in and though I heard plenty of rehearsals, I never did see
them play myself. I am told they put on quite a show. The kids who did see them, some of whom are still around, most of them parents themselves now, will still stop and talk about what it was like to have really been there. The band played in dungarees and these red-sleeved baseball undershirts, over which they dangled latch-keys, like crucifixes, around their necks, and upon which they'd silk-screened the fuzzy, fading images of their recent sixth-grade selves, images that looked just like the grainy pictures of the real missing kids on the real milk cartons.

But it’s time now, I start telling you our story and see if, by the end, we can’t at least feel like we’ve figured something out. I’ll tell you, honestly, what I know, report accurately what I’ve been told and imagine where imagining’s needed. And of course, thank you, reader, for your time—I know better than most there’s less of it than ever these days. And by all means welcome—or welcome back—to the last summer of Somerville.

**Bruises On The Fruit, Tender Age In Bloom**

I’d come back to Somerville myself early that spring as a middle-aged man set to marry a much younger woman at sunset that summer solstice. But my

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2 From “In Bloom” by Nirvana, a song released in the early nineties. Nirvana was a loud, often distorted, and very imperfect band whose front-man, Kurt Cobain, may well have been touched by genius. A small and sensitive soul, he would be labeled, in his twenties with the infamous “voice of a generation tag”. There may be no purer expression of the American dream than a rock-star—they almost always rise to glory and fame out of nowhere, and Mr. Cobain was no exception. He was born in the backwoods of Spokane, Washington, a child of a broken home and he never would, for all his success, be able to completely reassemble his life. He is considered by many to likely be the last important rock star.
young fiancée had run off, and I spent most of that summer whittling on my front porch, looking for about anything might crowd that pretty young thing out of my mind and found much around me to look at and listen to. A developer had bought up half the lots on the other side of my street and would build two hundred and twenty units of condominiums upon its seventy-five more or less squared acres that summer. It was going to take about every sound in the spectrum to complete the regeneration of the other side of Mayberry Lane and we were all in for a full season of hot noise: of machinery grinding and earth moving and metal clanging and glass breaking and the high pitched strain of human voices screaming to be heard in it all.

On the first afternoon of our story I found myself standing on what would soon be the noisy side of the street and staring into a paper that had been stapled to a telephone pole. The word MISSING, written in oversized capital letters, sat just beneath a fuzzed over school picture of someone’s lost child. It was a boy, though even that was hard to tell from the picture I was staring into, which had been crinkling beneath a season’s worth of rain and which had already arrived here as the copied copy of some other copy’s copy. He wasn’t one of ours—I think he was from Capital City—but like I said, to look at him up on that pole he could have been anyone’s; I don’t remember who he ended up being or whether he was ever found, but his dissolving memory was stapled to and wrinkling around telephone poles all around town and I would often come across my neighbors standing on sidewalks and peering into them with the same
aesthetic arrest we most often experience while staring out from ocean shores or hilltops or gazing into starry night skies. This was a time in America when kids seemed to just up and go missing for some reason, hordes of thousands of them according to the news reports; years later, I read an article in an academic magazine making a very good case that these numbers were profoundly exaggerated and the amount of missing children was only slightly more than normal—in a country as big as ours, I suppose everything is always happening and the patterns we tend to find and give meaning to are the ones, depending upon our collective mood, that we are already hoping for or worried about. Still, this feeling, that it was entirely possible that our children might wander out of our yards, down the sidewalk and then just vanish, was a new and unsettling one made more so by the way the disappeared kept reappearing: their grainy, unfocused images were stamped upon the backs of junk-mail coupons, flickering at the end of late night television talk shows, or, most notably, hovering beside our cereal bowls at the breakfast table on the sides of our milk-cartons—vague, graying images of funny haircuts and smiling braced teeth, and of skinny little arms jutting out of oversized t-shirts—each of them, with a nightmare clownish randomness, tumbling back through our world like the flung-off jokers from some cosmic deck of cards.

The summer’s noise was just grumbling to life as the last of the old neighbors who had sold out were sliding their stuffed cardboard boxes into moving trucks behind me. But through the coming din, back on my side of the
street, I could hear a single voice, straining, alive, and cursing every atom in the galaxy. Joseph A. Merigana: the Patriarch, such as it was, of the family next door whose lives so absorbed me that summer, and whose fates are now going to take up much of our short time together. Joe, to his volcanic aggravation, was disassembling his front porch. Standing in a hole he’d made in the porch’s center, he was sunk right in to his armpits, yanking out a well-nailed board with the claw end of his hammer and grunting with such a crazed ferocity that the entire porch shuddered around him. He appeared to be in a wrestling match with the house itself—like one of those strongmen heroes from an old American folk-tale making a grim last stand in an unwinnable contest of strength.

When I walked over I noticed Joe’s second wife, Myrtle, hovering above him in their picture window. Myrtle noticed me back, acknowledging me in that way she had, without so much as a wave, a nod, or even a smile, but noticing me nonetheless. Still weak from her chemotherapy session, she pulled a shawl around herself and tried to warm her face in a patch of sunlight. The private storms of a twelve year illness had whittled Myrtle down to her wiry core, leaving only the weakening severity of her disposition and a feline attraction to the sunnier, sleepier parts of the house; but what you would notice most about Myrtle would be those eyes, gone so light a blue by then they were nearly colorless, and the dying embers of her anger set them glowering out of her pained face the way a winter sun ignites a frozen window.
Joe nodded to me as I climbed his porch stairs. “You still whittling this home into your little wooden world?” His voice was winded with exertion. “Tell me if there’s anything else wrong with it.”

I walked around and knelt behind him. “From across the street,” I pointed past his ear to show him my sightline. “It looks a little like this house is whittling you.”

Joe, panting, rolled an eye toward me. “You’re just too damn smart for me professor.” He ducked all the way down into his hole a few seconds and then popped back out. “Your missing fiancée’s not under here if that’s who you’re still looking for.”

I chuckled and lit my pipe. “You heard about Joe Clark?”

“Talked to him three days ago. We talked about the ballgame. I’m telling you, he was fine.”

“Went in his sleep,” I said. “I suppose we should all want that.”

“I don’t want to die when everything’s fine—I’d rather die sick.” Joe wiped his forehead. “The post-office will go to hell without him.”

Joe Clark had been the Somerville postmaster-general. Joe was a man, all in all, with a pair of old teal-colored navy tattoos curdling into either shoulder, and a crew-cut tight enough to set your watch to. His death, as almost all deaths tend to, came as a shock to those of us who knew him: he was only fifty-four years old and had no prior health problems that anyone knew of. A man of reliable habit and few words, the only thing remarkable, or even noticeable about him would be
his absence; in fact, the only picture the Somerville Gazette had on file for old Joe Clark was when he received a good-citizenship plaque from the mayor after someone noticed that he had not, in over twenty years, missed a single day of work.

“So strange,” I told Joe. “That he died on a Monday morning.”

I let Joe ponder that one a second as I stood to watch his seventeen year old daughter and that unmistakable profile of hers as she walked over to stare a few seconds into the same missing child poster I had just come from. I never had, and haven’t since, witnessed a human being more alive than Rose was that summer. A long way from the tom-girl she’d been raised as, Rose had rouged her cheeks, thickened her eyelashes, and let her long, glossy curls trickle all the way down into the small of her back as her body ripened into the full bloom of womanhood beneath these sundresses that always seemed to liquefy around her as she walked. She backed away from the picture on the pole and sighed, sweeping a long curtain of that dark hair back over her shoulder as she padded, barefoot and without looking, across the street with a cup of borrowed sugar.

Not sure if he saw her or not, but Joe was suddenly up out of his hole and busying himself scooping up large bits of debris. Standing only five foot six, he still moved with the agility of the athlete he used to be and capable packs of muscle tumbled themselves warm beneath a thin blanket of middle-aged fat as he hurled armfuls of his old porch floor over the railing and into the bed of his red pick-up truck parked in the driveway below. So big, Joe was, for a small man.
Rose smiled at me for a full second, asked me how I was, and then looked sideways at her father as she headed into the house. “You need to stop playing around out here and get in the shower.”

“I have time yet.”

“Not much—the phone still isn’t working, by the way.” The screen door slammed behind her.

“Apparently, there’s some clause in our phone contract.” Joe dumped another armful of wood over the railing. “Since when do we even need a contract? Anyway, apparently there’s some clause in there that I’m not allowed to fix any phone equipment myself. I went along the little print with a magnifying glass the other night and couldn’t find a damn thing that said so, but everyone keeps warning me that if I touch anything, I’ll be suddenly held responsible for all kinds of things I can’t possibly understand.” I followed him down the stairs as he put his tools in his truck.

“Let them do it,” I said. ‘It’s one less thing for you to do.”

“One less thing,” he repeated under his breath. “A man doesn’t even own his own wiring anymore.” Something fell across the street and he stopped to look. Then he shook his head. “They should have never broken up Ma Bell.”

“Weren’t we all complaining about her back then?”

“At least we still knew who to complain about,” he said. “And who to complain to. Have you ever tried calling that place?”
I sighed, laughed a little and slapped him on the shoulder. “I suppose I should start getting ready.”

Joe smacked the dust out of his shirt. “I suppose we all should.”

It was supposed to be a big day for Joe—to commemorate Somerville’s Tri-Centennial, the mayor’s office had undertaken the Heritage Renewal Project to restore Old Main Street and as the project’s lead foreman, the mayor had tapped Joe to be the one on television cutting the tape. That spring was Somerville Cable News 76’s inception, and the mayor and the cable company had coordinated everything so that the groundbreaking of the Heritage Renewal Project would be shown live as the channel’s inaugural broadcast.

Cable television itself had only come to Somerville the previous winter when teams of faceless men in brown coveralls arrived in blinking, chirping trucks and unwound miles of wire from these humongous spools; within two months, less than a season, they had stitched, pole by pole, about fifty extra television channels—about a thousand percent increase at the time—right into our town. Strangers called from a huge bank of phones from some office park between here and Capital City and most of us agreed to appointments where more strangers showed up at our door with clipboards and pamphlets to sign us up. We all did. Most of us, back then, had a little money in the bank, liked our TV, and were excited to get so much more of it for what seemed, at the time anyway, a reasonable price.
I was to be an honoree myself at that evening’s ceremony, as was Joe’s stepson Sam, whom I spied through my kitchen window as I made myself a sandwich for dinner. He was strumming his guitar as usual, laid out on the back deck in a long beach-chair that he’d pulled right up to the edge, dangling his feet from it as if he were out on a dock somewhere, staring off, as was his wont, into the woods behind us. When Rose called his name out a window behind him he took notice, smiling and leaning his head back a bit, but then quickly settled back into wherever that wandering mind of his had taken him until Rose slipped out the sliding door, grabbed a clump of his hair, tugged him to his feet and pulled him behind her into the kitchen.

Any one of the four Meriganas could fill a good book, but it was Sam, more than any of the others, I always found myself wondering about. I do still. It was that faraway look most of us who remember Sam remember—he always seemed to be staring off into some distance and whatever it was he saw there seemed to very much frighten and excite him simultaneously. As with Myrtle, it was his eyes that struck you, though in a different way: his weren’t the quicksilver of his mother’s, but a much slower blue—eyes that never seemed to be looking at so much as listening to you. But above all Sam was just one of those someones we all know: a young someone who always seemed old, a someone who couldn’t help noticing too much—both about himself and others—one of those brooding, dreamy sort of someones whose very dreaminess seems to rise from a deep
need to reimagine that unremembered yet never-ending something wrong with all of us.

But back in the Merigana kitchen, Rose was making an apple-pie for the festivities and Sam grabbed things out of the pantry as she called for them and set them all down next to a brown paper-bag full of apples. With Rose in it, that house always smelled like something cooking. Every bit as capable in the kitchen as her father was out in the yard, she had that same drive her father had to do things as well as things could be done, the same ease in completely immersing herself in her work, and took the same comfort in organizing her life’s time into a recurring series of completable concrete tasks. After she’d poured the milk over the powdered ingredients in her mixing-bowl, Sam plucked the carton from her hands; he stared a few moments into the child’s picture on the side of it and then showed it to her.

“Answers to the name of Joey,” Sam said, wiggling the carton at her.

“Twelve years old, five feet tall—we’ve had him, you know, in this kitchen before.”

“Cut it out,” she said. “That’s so morbid.”

“So,” Sam said. “Where are Ozzie and Harriet?”

“He’s playing around out in the yard and if you want to try and get her out of her room, good luck,” she put a big soft blob of dough on the counter.

“We’re the kids, they’re the parents—why are we always the ones cooking?”

“I cook, you mostly watch,” she said. “How was school?”
“Everything’s inside-out, wrong-side up in this house.”

“How was band?”

“How it always is.”

She stopped and stared at him. “I know you quit,” she said. “Of all things, how could you quit music?”

“I quit their music,” he said. “What does it matter—I’ll be gone soon anyway.”

“Stop saying that. When were you going to tell me?”

“I can’t stand that lady,” he said. “How do you even know?”

“You can’t hide things from me,” she said. “You’re the lead violinist—you can’t just quit.”

“I can and have.”

“I can talk to her on Monday—I bet she’d take you back.”

“Can I drop out?”

“Of school?” She stopped a second and shook her head. “No.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

“You sure about that?” She said, laughing. “You just asked for it.”

“I’ll be sixteen. That’s old enough.”

“There’s only a few weeks left,” she said. “Just finish out the year and we can talk about it again at the end of the summer.” She handed him a bag of apples to go through.

“I should be long gone by then.”
“So you keep saying.”

“Are these okay?” Sam held several discolored apples up to her.

Rose emptied the bag on the counter and her fingers methodically searched among the rolling herd of wounded apples. Then she stopped and drew a long, angry breath.

“All I asked for was apples,” she said. “He couldn’t get apples?”

Myrtle came into the kitchen and doused her cigarette under the faucet. She pulled her robe tighter around herself and looked over the two kids and the apples, still rolling between them. “So,” she said. “Who bruised the fruit?”

Though she was more her father’s daughter, her missing mother’s madness marbled through Rose’s nurturing demeanor in the form of a capable temper, which her stepmother could tickle to the surface at will. Myrtle did this out of pettiness, of course, but also out of admiration. Of surprising ferocity, these fits of Rose’s, once fastened upon the object of her discomposure, usually burned themselves out rather quickly, though they did, on occasion, hijack the rest of her personality—like the time, when she was only ten years old and right after her parents split up, she followed Joe to work in her mother’s car one morning, weaving behind her father for several blocks before finally rear-ending him at a stoplight.

The front door slammed. Sam and his mother pulled up to either side of the living room window, each of them lighting a cigarette as they waited for the coming goings on in the front yard. Rose, several rotting apples in her arms,
fanned out toward the sidewalk to give herself a good angle and then fired the apples in rapid succession. Joe, gyrating wildly, avoided the first two bruised apples until a third one thumped off his broad back, leaving a rancid stain on his shirt, and tipping him over into a semi-literate fury as he bounded across the yard toward his daughter. But Rose, who had been tall enough for a couple of years by then to look her father right in the eye, met him halfway, holding a last apple up to his face and soon had him backpedaling in a semi-circle around the yard trying to explain himself. Sam and his mother, a cloud of smoke billowing between them, laughed without looking at one another as it all ended in a screaming match that washed right up past the hole in the front porch and into the house.

Bye-Bye Miss American Pie

An hour later, I stood with the Meriganas at the foot of their front stairs, ready to leave for our televised groundbreaking. Joe had showered and shaved and smacked some aftershave into that stubbly face of his, even squeezing himself, good-naturedly, into a sport-coat and tie. It was nice to see him so

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3 From “American Pie”, a #1 hit for four weeks in 1972 for Don Mclean. It has since become a prodigiously radio-played, and much over-interpreted seminal song of the Rock & Roll songbook. The lyrics, which are almost complete allegory, originate in McLean’s youth when, in 1959, as a young paperboy still dreaming of becoming a musician, McLean noticed the headlines announcing the plane crash that killed The Big Bopper, Richie Valens, and Buddy Holly. The song continues through what the song’s narrator sees as the troubling sixties, always wistfully longing for the lost exuberant simplicity of the fifties, its chorus continually returning to the morning a young paperboy learned that the men who made his music died.
happy—at least until Rose bounded down his front stairs in a previous summer’s sundress that had gone so snug in a couple of places that I turned away before that girl gave me a chest pain. Joe stared at her, the blood gone from his face, but didn’t, to his credit, say a word at first. The kids in front, we turned together and began to walk to Old Main Street.

Joe, though, looked like he might just burst out of his own clothes and was pulling so violently at his tie that I found myself wondering if he might not pop his own head off. As we turned down Elm Street, Joe could stand it no longer—he shoved Sam ahead and walked next to his daughter. “What’s the difference,” he said to her. “It’s not like anyone can see the damn apples—they weren’t rotten.”

“They were overripe. Why can’t you just pay for things,” Rose said. “Every month you fix someone’s car over there and all they ever give you is the stuff they’re getting ready to throw away.”

“They’ve always treated me fair.”

“Those guys, the last ones, or the ones before that?”

“What century is this anyway,” Sam came back to chime in. “Who barters for food anymore?” He smiled as Joe shoved him on ahead.

“From now on I’ll just send Sam.”

“He takes forever.”

“And then comes back with exactly what I need.”

“I’m sorry about the damn apples,” Joe said. “Would you go put something else on?”
Sam walked backwards ahead of them, just then noticing the dress.

Joe grabbed a fistful of Sam’s shirt and tried to put him behind them this time, but Sam slipped him and stayed in front. Joe looked to his wife. “We still have time, right?”

Myrtle brought her watch to her face and then dropped her arm. “Not if everyone wants to make their television debuts.”

“She looks fine, Joe.” I said, trying to calm him down.

“Aren’t you cold?” He asked her.

When Sam poked himself back between them, Joe shoved him back ahead and Rose smirked. “Actually,” she said. “I’m hot.”

“Everyone’ll see you.”

“Who, dad?” Rose looked to the sky. “Who are you even talking about?”

“The same people,” Sam said. “He thought were getting him the apples.”

Rose laughed and skipped ahead to be next to Sam as we approached Elm Street. Peeking back at her father a little, Rose asked Sam something in his ear and then pulled back for him to look at her. He whispered something back, laughing spastically at himself until she checked him with a punch to the arm.

Myrtle stopped Joe when he started back toward the kids. “I’ve got an extra jacket,” she whispered, showing it to him. “She’ll get cold if you let her calm down a bit.”
Sam looked back to let them know he heard them. “What if I go home and get everyone a change of clothes?” He asked. “We can each be whole other people.”

“You’re not getting out of this.” Joe said.

Sam poked at Rose until she punched him again. “You’re Miss babysitter of the year, Miss all-American blue-ribbon pie baker,” he said. “Does it make any sense I’m in the middle of all this patriotic crap and not you?”

Sam stopped walking when he got to the huge Maple on the northwest corner of Elm and Main and began circling it, looking it up and down with enough intensity that we all stopped walking.

“What is all this?”

I backed off a little and noticed many of the tree’s upper leaves missing and on the sidewalk around our feet, spots of green crud were splashed about in a way that looked like dripped wax, as if the tree were a giant candelabra someone had set there and left the flames to gutter themselves out. Rose crept up to the trunk, peered into the bark and pulled off a thick furry caterpillar, setting it on the back of her hand, where it seemed completely comfortable, oblivious to any danger it might be in as we all gathered around to stare at it. She asked her dad what it was.

Joe looked from the bug up into the trees and back again. “That’s a Gypsy-Moth Caterpillar.”

Sam repeated the name under his breath.
“They’re cute,” Rose stroked the back of it with her ring-finger, which it seemed to enjoy.

“They’re really not, hon. They infested this whole park up in Capital City last summer,” Joe said. “They killed all the trees. For some reason, no birds or anything wants to eat them.”

“Really?” Sam looked at the green blotches on the sidewalk. “You’d think they’d be full of chlorophyll.”

Rose looked back to it. “Where do they come from?”

“Same place we all come from.” Myrtle tapped the face of her watch.

“Joe was walking around and inspecting the other trees. “I heard they escaped from a lab somewhere. You should have seen the park they were in—by the Fourth of July, the whole place looked like winter.” Joe stopped. “I should quarantine these trees.”

Myrtle tapped her watch again. “You’ll miss your ribbon cutting.”

Rose offered to stand in for him and Joe thought a moment. “I’ll just come back after. Remind me,” he said to his wife as we all walked on.

“Nothing eats them?” Sam asked.

“Nothing around here.”

“So they can just feed themselves stupid in complete safety and there’s nothing to ever bother them?”

Joe didn’t answer.
Sam whirled and pointed at all the trees. “They’ve come from God knows where, all the way to Somerville,” he said. “And founded their paradise.”

Once we’d passed the last of the darkened storefronts on Old Main, Sam, sensing Joe’s swelling vexation and still, I believe, considering skipping out on the festivities altogether, peeled off from us, disappearing through an archway that led down to the park just before we entered the crowd that was gathering in a ring in front of Town Hall where the night’s festivities were scheduled to begin.

As we approached, one child and then several others called Rose by name and came tumbling out of the crowd toward her. Rose had been babysitting since she was eleven years old, having inherited her mother’s sentimental affection for gurgling young imaginations as well as her father’s need to be relied upon; Rose, however, had not just inherited these tendencies, but had very much overdeveloped each one of her parent’s defining characteristics the way the offspring of broken families sometimes do, as if by gathering the right mix of gasses and enough galactic matter, they could burn themselves into a sun strong enough to pull the drifting planets that had once been their family, back into a close enough orbit.

As we settled into the crowd, Mayor Wilson waddled over to us. Amiably, graciously, splendidly rotund, Mayor Wilson had a white walrus mustache thick enough to run a comb through and an ever present pink boutonniere over the left breast-pocket of his overlong sport-coat—if you’d have given him a gold-chained monocle and popped a top-hat on him, he would have looked just like the Uncle
Pennybags cartoon figure from the Monopoloy game logo. He had big hands, small feet, and disproportionately short legs that wheeled around a belly shaped like an overfull bowl of porridge. He was, indeed, the last of a breed: a real old-timey politician, he performed his vocation mostly outside of his office, loving nothing better than to light his cigar, trundle down the steps of City-Hall, and saunter right out into Old Main Street to roam his hands over his constituency; a man of thoughtful, effusive tactility, he had a special handshake or a hug for everyone and had pressed his warm lips to the cheek of every mother and to the scalp of every child in Somerville. He also possessed a combination of traits gone all too rare among public figures today—that of possessing an eloquence entirely commensurate with his remarkable loquaciousness.

He said to all of us a quick hello before pillowing Joe’s rough face in his big, soft hands. “Poor old Joe Clark,” the mayor said. “Doctor says his heart just stopped. Can you believe it?”

“He was fine,” Joe said. “I keep trying to tell everybody that.”

His honor let Joe’s face go and looked at him with sad, waterlogged eyes. “First Joe Smith two Christmas’s ago, then Joe Morgan this past winter, Joe’s Herzog, Klein, and Whitfield all moved away. . . .” the mayor took a step back and lifted his open palms to the sky. “What in the world is happening to all our Joe’s?”

Our own Joe gave a mournful shake of his head and the mayor quickly and tightly embraced him.
“There’s a pump left yet,” he said to all of us, and here he laid his hand on Joe’s chest as if laying it upon a bible, “strong enough to keep the world’s tides regular.”

Myrtle smirked as Joe pretended to be embarrassed.

“Gotta make the rounds, kiddo,” he slapped Joe on the shoulder and gave the rest of us a collective good-bye. “You stay close.”

Rose smiled hello at the mayor as he passed by her. The children had now surrounded her like a small tribe of monkeys all vying for treats and some of her attention; within a minute, she’d shushed and stroked the yowling pandemonium into a cohesive murmur of obedient expectation, taking some brownies out of her bag, laughing as a couple of the smaller ones began to climb about her limbs, until one slipped and grasped one of the straps of her dress to keep himself from falling. She pulled him off and set him down, wriggling the strap back over her shoulder, but the others, sensing something different about her, a nervousness where they had never known anything but assurance, had soon boiled over in excitement and several began to pull themselves up out of the crowd using her dress; she did an awkward dance and peeled them off one at a time, trying to let them down gently and to keep her top from falling as she tossed the last of her brownies into their gathering frenzy and beat a quick retreat back to her father.

Myrtle, who had noticed, as she always did, everything, smirked and dangled her extra jacket in front of her. When Rose reached for it however, she
pulled it back. “The second you pull this jacket on, Rose, your childhood’s gone forever.”

Rose stepped right up to Myrtle, staring down hard at her for several seconds before snatching her by the wrist. When her step-mother tried to wrestle free, she tightened her grip, never once breaking her stare until Myrtle stopped smirking and audibly whimpered as Rose lifted the jacket from her fingers and then, at last, let go. Myrtle, rubbing her wrist, drifted back toward Joe as Rose, pulling the jacket around her, went off to find Sam.

Sam, in his time in Somerville, did not much participate in any of the town gatherings, but he never missed them either. He always hovered, appearing to enjoy the drowsy warmth of a crowd’s collective conversation, always noticeably outside the herd yet well within earshot. Sam had a startling talent for hiding in plain sight and the well-tuned hearing, even at that young age, of a serious musician, and so he found this way of always being alone and yet part of the crowd too, always standing off to the side or sitting behind a tree, always free from it all and yet watching or, more likely, listening to everything.

Sam’s prodigious ability to disappear was already well known in Somerville; he had, in fact, been awarded and commended for it. In the Fifties, the Americana Figurine Company released a best-selling set of figurines depicting children playing a game of hide-n-seek: one was of the kid counting, his eyes against his arm and his arm against a tree-trunk; one was of a boy attempting to shoo his dog away from his hiding spot; another depicted a girl
crouched down beneath a porch and peeking out between the slats—you get the concept. As a promotional idea, the company decided to sponsor a huge Hide-n-Seek contest right in Sunnyside Park every summer with the winner receiving a sizeable cash prize and getting their picture in a national magazine. They always held it on the Saturday before the Fourth of July and for years—decades—up to five-hundred cars would arrive in Somerville that morning and form a huge queue that took over two hours get through; beginning on Main Street, the long chain of four-door sedans and wood-paneled station-wagons would inch their way through the park and to the registration tables behind the school gymnasium with the deliberation of rosary beads working their way through wrinkled praying fingers. It was a big weekend around here, and entire volunteer corps set up play areas so the children didn’t have to wait in the car, and handed out iced bottles of soda-pop to the overheated fathers.

But after the sixties had come and gone, the national interest in our little summer ritual steadily waned and by the Eighties, when Myrtle and Sam moved onto Mayberry Lane, the contest was drawing dwindling numbers of out-of-towners. But though the cameras were long gone, they still paid a decent cash prize and Sam retired (we had an age limit of fourteen) as Somerville’s Famous Summertime Hide-n-Seek Tournament’s all-time champion. The contest went by a “contamination rules” version of hide-n-seek whereby each caught contestant had to help find the others until everyone was out of hiding, save one. Sam never once had to run or even touch base—for five straight years (1981-1985) that boy
was never found. Years later, Rose told me some of the spots he’d been hiding in, which were nothing special—for apparently three of the five years he merely drifted back into the woods directly behind the tree, waited for the seeker to run off searching in the other direction and then scaled the very tree he’d counted from—no one ever thought to look there. The amazing thing was how he got up it (or, for that matter, back down) without being noticed, but then that was Sam, he just had this way of always seeing us without our seeing him.

Rose, still struggling with Myrtle’s jacket, found Sam sitting in the grass against the back of a stone wall atop the hill that separated the Old Main Street from the park. His legs were splayed out before him and his eyes were closed as he listened to everything on the other side of it.

“Unless you’re about to light out for the territories,” she said. “You better come back.”

“I haven’t heard the old man come yet.”

“He’s on his way,” she sat down next to him. “So what are you really going to say?”

“Nothing they’ll ever put on television.”

She rolled her eyes and kept tugging at the jacket. “For the record, to the cameras, and with the whole town watching?”

“Don’t think I will?”

“It’ll be harder than you think.”
“My childhood ends today too. “

“You could hear that?” She elbowed him and stood to look over the wall.

“Here he comes,” said Sam.

Somerville’s oldest antique fire engine rolled slowly down Old Main Street, its horn seeming to clear its throat a couple of times before letting out a rusty, yet nerve-jangling yawp over the rooftops of Somerville, sending everyone’s fingers into their ears with the announced arrival of the evening’s main attraction. The old man was perched on the back and tossing candy and sparklers into the throng of kids following the engine—his eyes, even and perhaps especially the one that had stopped working, seemed brighter than ever—burning on with such youthful potency that the aging skin thinning over his face seemed to be shrinking and crinkling right around them.

The esteemed Mr. Samuel Wilson: patriot, ubiquitous commercial artist, Somerville’s illustrious pride and joy. Most of what you already know about Somerville is due to this man’s paintings and the popular weekly magazine that used to put them on its covers. Deplored by the critics and beloved by the faceless masses, he used his fellow Somervillians as models for what would turn out to be more than five hundred commissioned paintings.

His paintings were known for their striking detail (even his critics acknowledged his skills as an illustrator) and for romanticizing what I suppose many of us now look back upon as the American simple life; he liked to paint narrative scenes, scenes peopled with aproned mothers, steam from ladled gravy
setting their faces aglow, scabby-kneed kids holding fishing-rods or baseball-bats, father’s patching roofs and building garages, the foregrounds showing work-grimed knuckles around swung hammers—I suppose he didn’t glorify so much as sacrilize his subjects. The magazine that commissioned him had planted his simple utopic vision deep down into the fertile omniscience of the American marketplace, where it really took, its roots going deep enough that it was still flowering decades later, mostly in the forms of cheap domestic adornments such as lunch-pails, wall calendars, holiday snow-globes and, courtesy of the Americana Figurine Company, those ubiquitous little ceramic statues that quietly stood among the family heirlooms and recipe boxes and bottles of holy water upon the kitchen shelving of so many of our childhood homes.

Sam, when he was about ten years old, had modeled for him once and he hated the old man. The painting depicted Sam as a frustrated young music student who was crying, and not just crying, but crying in these huge, blue, gumdrop tears that rolled down his over-freckled cheeks as he tried in vain to blow the right notes out of his trumpet. The old man, who often painted himself into his own compositions, stood himself as the music teacher just behind the boy, offering gentle encouragement. Myrtle had told Sam at the time that it was an honor to sit for him and to stop it already about the added freckles and the tears. But the kids at school had always made fun of him about it and certain
older people would still cluck their tongue at him and ask had he ever learned to play that song.

By now, a shiny new Cable News 76 van was idling on the far side of Old Main Street. A cold blue light from the screens inside flickered in its windows and its cables stretched across the street and into the crowd like the searching tentacles of some parasitic life-form. Megaphoned interns broke us into smaller groups for camera shots, peeling off others to be interviewed as individuals; people stared wide eyed, dazed by all the equipment and everyone did as they were told, obeying commands in a way that was unforced yet recognizably involuntary. The talking fell to whispering, which in turn fell to mouthing voiceless words to one another, the small rumbling cloud of conversation dissipating, then disappearing altogether as everyone settled down alone into their thoughts, each one of us wondering if we would be the one who got on TV.

The Heritage Renewal Project was going to refurbish and restore Old Main Street to its glory days—that is, not to what it had ever really looked like, but to the more famous sentimentalized version brought to national attention by the old man’s populist artistry, and driven into something of a national identity by the movies and especially the old television sit-coms, all of whom seemed to base the neighborhoods they set their shows in upon the ones in the old man’s paintings. To kick everything off, the town had commissioned a dozen bronze sculptures based upon characters from the old man’s paintings and made a little village out of them in Heritage Park.
Sam and Rose had come out from behind the wall and settled down into the crowd near their parents. Rose still couldn’t get Myrtle’s jacket all the way around her and Sam chuckled as he watched her fight with it.

“I think you’ve outgrown my mother’s clothes.”

“There’s not much to her,” Rose said, staring at Myrtle, who smiled, unoffended, without looking back.

Another television van pulled up.

“So,” Rose said. “Ready to be famous?”

“Infamous,” Sam answered.

“Just respect the old man,” Joe said. “You’ll be on every television in town.”

“I won’t,” Sam said. “And I will.”

Everyone ducked and squinted a little as a bank of lights went on. Channel 76 wanted to interview the last surviving models from the old man’s paintings who were still local: Sam, Joe, and myself—and we were each bronzed beneath tarpaulins in the park as well—and an elderly couple who had been married over sixty years and who had to scream just to hear one another by then. Sam, I could tell, was nervous.

As it turned out, for months Sam had been mentally rehearsing this interview in his mind, seeing it as his chance to incinerate that painted image of himself forever, and to make his long planned break from our little town. As far back as he could remember having a thought about anything, Sam had always
been burdened by these endless loops of film that perpetually ran, independent of his want or his will, upon any of the many screens of his mind—private picture-shows starring an ever-evolving and always seemingly reachable better version of himself. Sam too, was seduced by the power of television and thought that if he could just, while the camera rolled, say something meaningful, important, something devastating and true, something that would make everyone look at him different, make them remember him and forget the old man, something that would make him, after he said it, someone else, something that would, once he set it flickering upon the television screens in every family room in Somerville, cauterize this new self from his old one forever.

Myrtle, as if sensing her son’s reverie, turned to him. “I sit here wondering, Sam, what you’ll have the courage to do.”

“Does it feel that good to make him feel so bad about himself?” Rose said.

“So you know what he needs, Rose?” Myrtle smiled at her. “Enlighten me.”

“I’ve been more of a mother to him than you ever have.”

Sam, desperate to siphon off at least some of his inner chatter, jumped into it. “She’s got you there, Ma,” he said laughing. “She cleans my clothes, makes my dinner—she even cuts my hair.”

“Is that what explains you two? Everyone’s always wondered. You’re his best friend, his stepsister and, as it turns out, his mother too? Well,” Myrtle feigned amazement. “Aren’t you the able juggler of his many needed hats.” She
glanced at Sam and then turned to Joe. “No wonder he’s always walking around so confused.”

“You did that to him,” Rose said.

“Confused about what?” Sam threw his arms up. “Do I have any say in this?”

“That priest that wouldn’t marry us turned out to be an oracle, Joe.” Joe took two steps ahead to get away from all of them. “We started a family halfway through and just look at what it’s morphed into.”

Rose’s parents had divorced when she was ten; Sam hadn’t set eyes on his biological father since he was two, and though he sometimes claimed otherwise to Rose, he remembered nothing about him. The nation’s divorce rate had already finished tripling itself at this point, but broken marriages, like most social pandemics, had paid a late-arriving visitation to Somerville. I doubt they were the first, but they were the first I can remember of their kind in town, that of divorcees and unrelated kids re-forming a family and, like many first models, the pieces never quite fit right and nothing ran smoothly in that house for long.

The people with the cameras returned and we were all coaxed and prodded and herded around to one side of the fire engine as the old man settled into the back seat to deliver his speech and thereby consecrate the new television station, the statues, and the Heritage Renewal Project all together. A woman arrived to take Joe, Sam and myself to a spot they’d cleared just below the old man’s seat for interviews. She tugged Sam along through the crowd by
his sleeve ahead of us. Sam stumbled a little as he looked around, his growing agitation becoming obvious as the woman whispered into his ear. When we arrived in our spot at the side of the truck, Joe stared up at the old man and waved to him. The woman wouldn’t let Sam free and was once again whispering what I guess were suggested answers to her coming questions into his ear, continuing to talk to him until he finally snapped at her and yanked his arm away.

The old man lost the paper he’d written his speech on. We were close enough to hear the panicked noises that escaped his throat and I noticed Sam peeking up and listening to him as he slapped about his clothes and turned his pockets out, then back in, then backside out again. The lights went off, followed by a few minutes of muffled commotion and by the time they’d lit the old man back up, someone had decided he didn’t need to give a speech after all and so he sat and waved in silence to the crowd as his free hand, apparently still believing it would find his lost words, continued to slowly worm its way into and out of his trouser pockets.

Sam, meanwhile, stood marinating in his own nervousness. One by one, the rest of us took turns bleating out platitudes and homespun clichés, our voices shrinking, our eyes squinting into the lights, our sentimental palaver pouring forth like an offering beneath the old man’s unbroken gaze. Joe prattled on the longest. The old man had painted Joe in his backswing, his eyes widening as he watched the flight of an imaginary home-run. About the best ballplayer to ever come out of these parts, Joe had won numerous tournament MVP’s, been named
All-County three times and All-State twice—Joe had made it, in fact, halfway through the St. Louis Cardinals minor league system before coming back home to strap on his tool-belt.

Sam, being the youngest, went last; he looked around for Rose, but couldn’t pick her out of the crowd anymore and some other hand pulled his own down when he tried to shield himself from the bright lights. A voice asked him what it was like to have his childhood’s music immortalized by the famous painter. Sam was startled by the wording of the question and found himself unable to stop tumbling it around in his mind. The asking voice cleared its throat and Sam, flustered now, gave a blank stare to the cameras. Several full seconds passed, a couple of people scratched their necks and whispered to themselves and he could feel everyone leaning in to will an answer out of him. Sam closed his eyes, his hands shoving themselves into his pockets as he searched for his own lost words, which had, by then, washed down some drain in the back of his head and reentered his bloodstream. He could feel perspiration beading upon his forehead as he began to melt beneath the lights and the loud silence behind them. Thirty full seconds passed. At last, he cleared his throat and stared straight into the camera. “I suppose we’ll all look back someday,” he said. “And we’ll wish we could still be as he made us.” Someone clapped, then someone else, and soon enough what rose out of the crowd was not just the enervated clapping of relief, but a surprisingly inspired and bounteous cheering that scrubbed all the tension and discomfort right out of the air.
Joe insisted on holding the ribbon and letting the old man cut it as a group of firemen, on a count of three, whipped the tarpaulins off and unveiled the statues simultaneously. We all milled around in the little park. No one said much. The statues, missing all that vivid color and detail, resembled funerary monuments more than the paintings they were based upon. I stared at my own a long time: there I was, bronzed forever, still ten years old, still staring up into those Fourth of July fireworks from long ago. It reminded me a little of those plaster casts of the doomed Pompeians, cowering after their great volcano erupted and smothering to death beneath that reliably blue Mediterranean sky that had suddenly turned all to ash and then literally fallen down upon them.

What a strange thing indeed to stare into the colorless, unenkindled re-creation of your own ten-year old eyes; it has a way of setting your soul shivering, a portal opens up and for a few moments you’re stuck staring into what we all spend our entire lives looking away from—you have this blinding sudden awareness of all you’ll never see and, even worse, all that won’t see you. I couldn’t, for quite a while, pull myself away—my attention sort of clenched around it the way our muscles fasten themselves around a live wire that’s electrocuting us. When I did finally walk away, I noticed Sam, ten yards off, still staring into his own. Some statues came out better than others and Sam’s didn’t much look like him at all. When Rose came up from behind and pointed this out he laughed and walked away, blinking himself awake as he took a last glance back.
The little red lights went quiet and the television cameras went dark. Before the cameras were loaded into the van, the most spellbound Somervillians crept right up to them, tapping their lenses with their fingernails as if doing so might reopen their lifeless eyes back upon them. Sam smiled in spite of himself when Joe lifted him into a bear-hug and then clapped him on the back. A little further down Main Street, fired grills poured smoke from the tents and upon the stage a swing orchestra, the same one that played at every one of these events I can remember, set it all to an old-time music the crowd drifted toward.

Myrtle looked at her son out of the corner of her eye. “Some rebel you turned out to be.”

Sam winced and turned away from her.

“Leave him alone,” Rose said. She squeezed his arm. “You were the best one—you’ll be all over the show.”

“Some rebel,” Myrtle said again. “You should have seen all the young girls out here, just fanning themselves in order not to faint as they bore witness to such defiance.”

“What would you have had him say?” Rose was trying to pull Sam away.

“What does that matter?” Myrtle said. “He was allowed to say anything he wanted.”

“Who says he didn’t.”
Myrtle laughed, slipping her arm through Joe's as the two of them slid into the wake of the departing crowd. She looked back over her shoulder. “You won’t always have Rose to stick up for you, Sam.”

Looking back toward the crowd on Old Main, Rose followed Sam as he tramped through the shadows of the abandoned Dream Lanes bowling alley, cutting through the construction site on his way home. The figurine company was in partnership with the real-estate developer they’d sold the land to. All the construction had been a great controversy with the town at first, and many of us protested with picket signs that spring in front of the site. Sam was fuming and Rose moved ahead and walked backward in front of him to make him look at her a while and when he swept past her she still pulled and tugged at him and then wiggled a finger in his ear until he laughed a little and calmed down. They each threw a couple of rocks back toward the bowling alley.

“You should have just gone ahead and baked those bruised apples—rotting apple-pie—it would’ve been the perfect desert for all this,” he waved his hand back toward Old Main.

“Stop letting your mother ruin whatever she wants—I loved what you said.”

“That whole thing tonight was just a sham to shut everyone up about all these condos they’re building.”

Rose stopped to play with her reflection in the window of a parked pick-up truck. “If you were a painter, would you paint me how I was?” She asked. “Or how I am now?”
“Whatever answer you’re looking for—can we just pretend I’ve given it to you already?”

A dog, his thin tongue dangling, tail wagging, trailed them down the bumpy sidewalks of their street until Rose reached down and scratched him behind his ears. Everyone was still out at Old Main Street and the light of every home’s waiting front porch glowed, giving Mayberry Lane the quiet luminescence of a candlelit room as the two kids walked home.

The Merigana’s house still had shingles missing and there were palates of them all over the yard. Joe had bought his childhood home, marrying Myrtle on its front porch five years earlier, expecting to have the entire house completely finished by the end of that summer—the exact way it used to be only better. But he’d gotten over-excited when it was put up for sale and in his fit of nostalgia, had under-examined and overpaid for it: the electrical system needed upgrading; the plumbing needed work and the drywall behind the shower tile in the bathroom was rotting out—all to Joe’s unending chagrin, as his reputation as a carpenter in his work-life was beyond reproach—nothing Joe ever worked on ever took longer than he said it would, nothing ever leaked or creaked after, and everything was always done right up to code and then some.

He was just as exacting with his own home, but for some reason he just went at it all with his head down, assuming that through exertion and will alone, he could pull this home he’d never stopped thinking about, back out of his head and into the world. What he never did, and what was so out of character, was to
pull back and take an honest look at what it was he had to work with. His mother, a prideful and protective woman, never, when she could help it, took advantage of her son’s free labor and, being a child herself of the depression, had always over-valued the reasonableness, price-wise, of those she did hire. Fifteen more years of shoddy work had been slapped and tacked and puttied down over it all since she’d sold it, and so every small week-end project Joe planned seemed to metastasize—all things needed fixing, and so days turned into weeks, weeks months, months years. The more he worked, the more work he found. So, what had begun five years earlier as an outside facelift and a winter’s worth of interior remodeling, would, even this last summer, go right back to the foundations as the pickets from the fence he’d never finish lay stacked and rotting among the wild uncut thatches of grass that swirled madly around them in the front yard.

Drea-ea-ea-ea-eam. . . Dream, Dream, Dream

Rose stood marveling at herself in her mirror. “This dress sure didn’t look like this on me last summer—no wonder he’s all wound up.”

When Sam didn’t respond she snapped her fingers in front of his face.

“Hello?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I assumed you were talking to the mirror.”

She walked over, kicked him, and went back to it. “And I’ll tell you something else. To hell with the two of them—they’re lousy parents. I’ll have five-

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4 From the Everly Brothers humungous 1958 #1 hit “All I have to do is dream”.
hundred boyfriends this summer and I'll make sure every one of them is
someone who will piss him off.”

“Anyone will piss him off.”

She looked sideways at him, brushing her long, dark hair out. “You never
like them much either.”

“I hated that he made me go with you.”

“He thought sending you was being lenient. Chaperoned dating,” she
squinted her eyes and shook her head. “Has any girl but me had to do that since
like 1940?”

“Your dad’s right at home wandering around that fake-retro Main Street.”

“You were a protective guardian though,” she came over to tickle him
behind his ear and he knocked her hand away. “You started fights with almost
every one of them.”

“They started it.”

She opened her closet door and stepped behind it, wiggling out of her
dress. “You’re as possessive as he is. In a different way, I guess, but still.”

“You really want to hurt him, just run off with me,” Sam said. “Like we
always talked about.”

“Like you always talked about,” she came out from behind the door, pulling
one of Sam’s shirts on. “And I didn’t say I wanted to hurt him.”

Rose had fit capably and comfortably into familial adult roles since she
was still a scabby-kneed girl and had for a while been the unchallenged head of
the Merigana household. It was she who kept everyone’s appointments on the kitchen calendar, who made sure the men in the house had clean clothes, who made sure Joe took his lunch with him to work in the morning and that Sam didn’t just eat junk-food all day—even Myrtle, so long as she remained responsible for and to no one, and so long as she was asked and not told to do things, accepted her authority. All this made the sudden, open, and insuppressible elation with which she regarded her transfiguring body a bit perplexing, as did the puckish glee she’d taken to torturing her father with it—it had become impossible for her to pass any reflective surface without stopping to bat her new reflection around in it like a kitten would a ball of yarn.

All the athletics of Rose’s youth had assured her delayed physical maturity, but when it happened, the change in her from one summer to the next—the thickening hips, the swelling breasts—was dramatic, and soon this fuller body had grown right over the old taught-muscled one she’d run around her childhood in; and as it closed around her for good, as soft and snug as a nervous child’s fist, it was as if all that unexpressed selfish brattiness, all that unrealized girlish mischief that she’d always held in, came pouring out of her.

Rose stared at Sam a minute as he sat on her floor and looked out her window. He was growing up now: his eyebrows, his voice, and the stringy muscles of his arms were all beginning to thicken—she wondered to herself whether or not he was good-looking. Of late, with the sole exception of her dad, she’d found herself having this palpitating compulsion to take the measure of
anyone and everyone's level of attractiveness, and she found almost everyone had some secret, often unexplainable something about them she could arouse herself to, and it didn’t matter so much, in any obvious way, what they looked like. She had only to stare long enough and hard enough (without staring too hard) at someone, until some specialness about them would unfold itself into her awareness, almost like those optical illusory pictures in her school-books, where a repugnant and misshapen old hag metamorphoses into a comely young beauty once you start seeing the haired wart on one’s chin as a jeweled chain set upon the other’s young throat. Young or old didn’t always matter that much and boy or girl, surprisingly, didn’t matter at all; Rose held the glossed lips and softening curves and savory fragrances of every girl in her class incubating in her private thoughts as much as any boy did; not that she wanted to be with them like that—she wasn’t one of those girls—but they were more fun, actually, to just look at.

There was also her father, whom by then she loved and resented equally. Joe had fathered her so completely and with such a warm abandon as a little girl that throughout her life Rose never would, not once, fully doubt herself; I don’t mean that she’s been completely contented or that her life has been without the heartaches and natural shocks all our flesh is heir to, but for Rose problems were only problems; she never identified with or internalized them, they never pierced through, took root, and grew into the kinds of neurotic recurring thoughts that course through most of our minds for most of our lives—and what a great difference there is in keeping life’s struggles on one side of your eyeballs and not
the other. So though she wanted to please him, Rose never saw Joe’s failings as her own and in time the father he used to be, the man she’d worship as she would no other, only served to harshly backlight the father he’d become, a man unable to accept her growing up and whose petty obsession with her chastity she sensed accurately as a perverse attempt to recreate and this time finally fix the faults of her mother, which Rose knew nothing of, but of course understood completely.

Rose had, though, until that summer, given dutiful obedience to her father’s demands—she’d stayed away from boys. But she knew she was changing. So much feeling had flooded into her in the last year, feeling that was neither good nor bad per se—she seemed to be happy or sad or mad in her usual proportions, but something, in a way she never could have explained to anyone, invigorated it all now; it wasn’t any particular feeling, what it felt like was feeling itself—sort of like paint before you stir in the pigment.

It was her complete inability to control herself inside that was really different. She’d had crushes on boys before, but nothing like this. The smallest noticed thing might set a storm going: the sudden deep timbre to one of their voices, a twitch of muscle as one scratched himself, even the moistened hair on the nape of a neck might move entire tides around inside her. She found it frightening at first, that she couldn’t keep it from happening or stop it once it started but, day by day, the shock ebbed away and she just saw it as the natural
way of things and soon found herself enjoying, even sometimes luxuriating
herself in this rich and thrilling new inner life.

It felt good to be taken like that, to completely surrender to these private
gushing daydreams where she would see and say and feel things she was
becoming less and less embarrassed about or, more often, be looked at or
spoken to or touched by whatever interchangeable classmate caught her
attention at the time, all of whom seemed like nothing more than a mask or
costume hung over this shadowy someone she sensed and even half-
consciously hoped was the real one beneath it all, someone she had the uncanny
sense had always been there, standing on a sidewalk with his hands in his
pockets and staring into some window in her mind, waiting for her to finally walk
by, look out, and take notice.

She imagined this must be what Sam had always felt like, not that he was
having exactly these kind of thoughts, though she figured, as a boy, he must
have those too. Sam was so full of inner turmoil that he became a natural ally for
her as she began to avoid her father and that undercurrent of sorrow that ran
beneath all her thoughts, innocent or otherwise, as their estrangement solidified.
So she drew that much closer to Sam: she kept cooking things for him, calling
him into her room, even lying around in his—she just felt better when he was
nearby. She liked doing things for him and really, he’d been a good brother to
her, he never asked for much and never said no to anything she’d ever asked of
him. Sometimes she caught herself daydreaming that Myrtle would finally just
die, because how could any mother treat her own son like that? And so what that she was only two years older than him, she was the one he always came to, the one he always relied on. He was hers, hers more than anyone’s. She sighed and watched him sweep his long hair out of his face. Was he good-looking now? Damn right he was.

Sam looked up at her. “You’re always wearing my shirts,” he said. “All my good concert shirts are in your drawer.”

“I like wearing them to bed, they’re comfortable,” she said. “You know where they are—consider it rent for always being in here.”

Sam looked around her room. “It’s so nice in here.”

“I told you I’d help you fix up your room.”

Sam shrugged and went back to his guitar. “The way we have it is fine.”

Someone knocked on the front door and Rose pulled her jeans back on and bounced down the stairs to answer it. Sam heard her step onto the porch, but couldn’t pull any words out of the muffled conversation. He looked up when Rose came back into the room, leaving it alone when she avoided looking at him at first, though eventually he stopped playing, folded his arms in front of himself, and stared at her. Rose grabbed her baseball mitt and sat cross-legged on the bed, firing a ball into it as he hunched back over his guitar and peeked at her through his bangs.

Rose bounced off the bed. “Let’s have a catch,” she said. “What’s wrong with us? When’s the last time we had a catch?”
“Maybe a week ago.”

“Seems like forever,” she said, tying her sneaker. “Come on, it’ll be dark soon.”

Sam put his guitar down. “Who was at the door?”

“I’ll make cookies after.” She fired the ball into her mitt and the answer not given was not offered with a kind of brimming ferocity Sam recognized, and so he went to get his glove.

The two kids paced off their distance to begin their catch in the backyard with the gloaming thickening darker around them and the cicadas rattling insanely in the grass. Rose whipped the ball into Sam’s glove with a healthy pop and lunged after his unpredictable return throws. Joe had taught Rose to pitch when she reached about three feet high and she spent her entire girlhood besting all the boys, Sam being the only one who didn’t care she was so good—he hated the kids who played sports and thought it was hilarious she was better than them.

“That was aunt Lois,” Rose said. “My mom’s gone.”

“She’s run off before.” Sam, being further from the house, was more in the dark and flinched as her throws came in.

“Three weeks she’s been gone. I told you something happened. I mean I knew it.”

“Wow,” Sam said. “She really did it,” he giggled and shook his head some.
Rose stopped and stared at him a second. “Can you believe they waited three weeks to tell me? I’ve been calling. Who knows where she is by now.”

“Yeah but,” Sam said. “She finally did it. Who knew she had it in her.”

She short hopped one hard off his shins. “She’s sick and now she’s God knows where and I can’t even look in on her.”

“She’s not so sick. Maybe she’s fine. Maybe she’s going to call you with some sort of big news any minute.”

“She’s bi-polar. You don’t think she’s sick because you’ve always loved her manic moods and then aren’t around so much when it all goes dark.”

“Yeah, but she always gets sunny again—wasn’t there was some huge opportunity she was all excited about the last time we visited.”

“I lost track, years ago, of all her can’t miss opportunities. She couldn’t even run her Amway business.” She short-hopped another one off him and he yelped. “You always fed those dumb ideas of hers: the mail-in real-estate course, the imposter perfume business, that illegal cassette-tape business you two started.”

Mary Daigle, Rose’s mother, was a woman of great highs and lows, and one of the reason’s she’d always taken such a shine to Sam was the way he’d always leaped, like a loyal dog, right into her most excited moods. Sam was the one who never tired of listening to her plans. Their eventual, and short-lived, business partnership was, in hindsight, inevitable. Sam had, for her birthday, given her ten hours of music spread across multiple mixed-tapes he’d spent
several nights planning and then recording. A week later, she’d had Sam make a complete catalogue of his music in a notebook, then typed it up, made copies and began handing them around town, offering ninety minute tapes for five dollars per. Sam designed anthologies: love songs, dance songs, blues, or country. She made fliers and hung them around town, and soon enough she and Sam were splitting about a hundred dollars a week worth of tapes. Problem was, she received some phone calls telling her, phone calls she ignored to the point where she’d actually been arrested; Sam was even pulled out of school, and then Joe had to pay a twelve-hundred dollar fine and speak on both their behalves before a judge, who let Sam go and made Mary meet with a probation officer once a month for a year.

Sam rubbed his shins. “Maybe you should have been more supportive, like I was, and she wouldn’t have run off.”

Rose noticeably stiffened. It was almost dark when, out of a full wind-up, she whistled her last throw of the night at him. It landed with a dull thwack right off his chest, and Sam tossed his glove in the air and hopped around swearing at her. He found the ball, whirled around and threw it hard enough to knock himself over in the process. Rose watched the ball sail over her head, the deck bannister, and, with a ferocious scream, through one of the kitchen windows.

Rose sent Sam upstairs while she cleaned the glass up and made cookies just like she promised. Sam liked to write upon his bedroom walls: ideas for
songs, partial songs, lyrics, words and phrases he liked; he also drew a lot and so between and around all the scribbled words crawled an ever-evolving menagerie of different images; at least once a week, when Sam was out, everyone in the house (even Myrtle) would loiter about in there as they would a museum or an aquarium and slowly glide along the walls staring into everything. Flakes of aging white paint littered the floor and long scabby curls were peeling right off the walls around his creations. Sam never finished anything he worked on: a month, perhaps a week, sometimes the next morning’s light was enough to burn off the mists of inspiration and then all that was left for him to see was everything he couldn’t get right. Before long, he’d take a putty knife and scrape off all the cracks and peelings, then slap another coat of white paint over everything so he could start all over again once the paint dried.

Waiting for the paint to dry—that’s when Sam was happiest. The best part of any planned thing is the planning itself, for what reality ever lives up to its imagined original? And so a lot of us drink and a lot of us talk about the neighbors and a lot of us watch way too much television. Some of us though, keep starting over, though if we’re not careful, starting over, in our work or in our lives, becomes not a means to an end, but an eternally recurring, unreachable end in itself. Sam, of course, hadn’t figured this all out yet.

Still uncomfortable with the sound of his own voice, Sam strummed away and sort of hummed a chorus to himself, crossing a couple of words off the wall and scribbling new ones over them. Then he crossed those off too. He paced his
room for a few minutes, trying to talk and sound it all out in his mind and then got frustrated and went to smoke a cigarette out Rose’s window. Rose had the one nice room in the house. Sam let her have the bigger of the two bedrooms upstairs and her father installed a plush, wine colored carpet and bought her drapes to match. She’d done everything else herself, sponging on three different layers of yellow and gold paint so the walls looked like glowing amber, and she’d stained the window frames and her door the same chestnut brown as the bedroom set—it’d taken her months to do it all. As Sam flicked a butt out her window, Rose walked in and pulled out a shoebox from deep in her closet, dropped the piece of glass in and stuffed it back.

“Why do you keep these bizarre mementos?” Sam tried to sound annoyed.

“Something to remember you by when you finally run off,” she pulled a photo-album out of the closet and sat on her bed. “I wish I had something my mom broke.”

“You are what your mom broke,” Sam plucked a string and put his ear to it. She stared at him, not moving a second and then turned a big, laminated page of pictures. “You’ll miss all of this when you leave.”

“Seems to me you already miss what you’re doing even as you’re doing it,” Sam said. “You’re your father’s daughter—at least you know you won’t go crazy, you’ll just stay in this town and, day by day, bore yourselves to death.”

“Oh please,” she said. “You’ve been running away since you were six.”
Sam sighed. “I wish it was my mother instead,” he said. “If that makes you feel any better.”

Rose laughed through her nose as she looked into her photo-album. “She wants you to fight back.”

“You mom or mine?”

“Who do you think?”

“Let her think I’m weak.” Sam rolled onto his back on the floor, put his legs up on Rose’s bed and smiled at the ceiling. “I’ll leave before she gets too sick,” he said. “I just want her to die wondering where I am.”

She let out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “You know what—just get out! You’re always in my room.”

Sam snatched her photo-album on his way out and sent it tumbling into her closet. He was back in his room when he realized he’d forgotten his guitar, which was sitting against her closed door when he went back for it. He lifted the guitar, held it behind him and put his ear to the door until she snapped it back with a punch to the other side of it.

Sam took a match from his room, striking a flame right off her door, waiting for her to yell at him for not smoking out a window. When she didn’t appear, he got on his hands and knees, lowered his cheek to the floor, and blew some smoke under her door, hovering about between his room and hers a few minutes until it was obvious he wasn’t being allowed back in.
Sam strummed his guitar and tried humming that song again, but it didn’t feel right. He didn’t feel right now either and he immediately tried to wrestle his way free from an anxious and jumpy mood before it held onto him long enough to settle into something deeper and darker altogether. He turned his turntable on and then off. He wasn’t supposed to smoke in the house and the breeze tended to blow in his window and out of hers if they kept both their doors open, which was why he always smoked in her room. If he smoked another one out here she’d really get mad. When a stripe of light appeared under her door, he poked his head in, but Rose never lifted her nose from her photo-album—there were a half-dozen now, submerged into the bedding around her feet.

“Go smoke on the porch.”

Sam did, staring at the empty houses across the street as he did so; they made for lonesome silhouettes against the ghostly twilight rising out of the streetlamps on Old Main Street. He covered it all with an exhaled cloud of smoke and walked out to the driveway to look at Rose’s window, which blinked dark as he stared up into it.

Thinking he’d kill a few more minutes before going upstairs, Sam did the dishes. The local station, WSOM, played obscure old songs from the origins of rock-n-roll on Friday nights and Sam scrubbed the dishes and sang along, the odors of Rose’s baking cookies tickling his nostrils. He knew every song they played by no later than the fifth note. Sam knew everything about the whole era: he’d started with Joe’s record collection, listening, to his mother’s severe
consternation, to every record over and over again, drumming every song out on his knees and finding out every last note on his guitar as he enscribed it all into a rich groove inside himself. He added to his collection whenever he could, perusing yard sales and making tapes from the Somerville Library’s collection. His mother loved to make snarky remarks about the silly lyrics and she was often right, some—a wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-wop-bam-booweren’t even words at all, they were more like baby-talk. But there was an excitement in the earlier simpler music of the fifties, as there is in the beginnings of all things, that always spoke to him, even more so, somehow, than the more accomplished music that followed in the coming decades.

Some of Joe’s friends had also loaned Sam records and had given him piles of old magazines, dusty boxes stuffed with pins and concert-posters and yellowing ticket-stubs. He’d also read every book he could get his hands on, paying special attention to his hero’s childhoods and to all those stories of their time on the road—he often fantasized their lives as his own: crisscrossing all those streets, filling all those halls in all those towns with music that had never filled them before; and then, tearing off in the night, grit spraying off his tires and the wind whining through his pompadour, as he endlessly headed for the next new town.

When Sam went upstairs to ask Rose if he should take the cookies out, Rose was twisted in her sheets and appeared to be asleep. When he turned her lights on, her flipped switch, like a snapped finger, bloodied everything. Blood
mottled the bedding around her, was smeared across her face and was spreading into a deep, dark stain from her left wrist into her nightshirt. The piece of glass from the window he’d broken sat upon her other pillow like a big pulled tooth, and a dark gash in her wrist spilled blood when he grabbed it. He snatched her phone off her nightstand and dialed—it didn’t work. His innards icing over, Sam tried to hug himself calm as he walked around her bed. “You didn’t,” he said to the room. “You wouldn’t.”

“Rose,” he said, without looking at her. “Rose, just get up. Just get up, Rose.” He knelt next to her bed, taking her hand in his as more blood soaked into her sheets. “Rose, it’s time to go, okay Rose, Rose!” The waters boiled up out of his eye sockets and he tried to catch his breath. He punched her in the arm once, and then again harder. “You think you’re funny? You’re not funny, Rose.” He ran out of the room, “Ma!” he screamed. They should be home now. She’d know what to do. He hated himself the second he’d cried out for her, but he knew she could handle this and that Rose would be okay. “Ma!” Sam kept screaming down the stairs and on out to the porch.

He got Rose a glass of water. The fumes of the burning cookies were starting to cloud around the house and as he ran back upstairs, he reminded himself to turn the oven off.

“Here, Rose, some water,” he thought she’d need water.

He climbed onto her bed and rocked back and forth on her bloody sheets, saying things to her to try and make her mad—get her energy up. “Get out of my
bed,” she croaked out at last, but then crumbled with a sigh back into a sleep he couldn’t seem to wake her up from. He looked from her to the window, hoping those lights out at Old Main would go off and listening for their parents at the door. “She won’t wake up,” he said. He tried to calm himself enough to think. He’d spent the first couple of years they all lived together going to boy scouts with Joe and, remembering his first aid merit badge, tore one of his t-shirts and made a tourniquet, tying an overhand knot around a pen just below Rose’s elbow. He wrapped the bloody sheet around her and picked her up—she was heavier the last time he’d tried and he found himself attempting to remember exactly when that was as he headed down the stairs and out the front door—was he stronger, or had she lost that much blood? Sam set Rose down on the porch and ran up and down the sidewalks of Mayberry Lane, screaming for his mother one last time, hoping, by then, for any grown-up to answer him—anyone old enough to tell him what to do. At last he sat, panting on the porch and holding Rose on his lap, who was drifting in and out of consciousness.

“It’s time to go, Rose—I need to get you out of here.”

She shook her head. “I’m staying.”

Sam tucked the sheet up under her chin and then stood and carried her down the stairs, across the front path and exited their front yard through the dark gap in the picket fence. Rose moaned a little in protest, but as he crossed the street, Mayberry Lane had gone so quiet that Sam swore he could hear the blood-drops from her wrist ticking off the asphalt beneath him like the red
second-hand on some clock. He headed with her into the darkened, vacated yards.

Two of the houses were set back further than the others and bulldozers had already stampeded them and piled their remains into twin pyramids of rubble. Sam passed between them and toward the soft, foggy light over Old Main Street, attentively avoiding the piping and concrete and wires that stuck out and coughing some as the disinterred vapors of the pulverized houses crowded into the back of his throat. He was almost to the bowling alley now, and there was just light enough that he could see the outlines of the new foundations that had been poured near it. She didn’t even feel that heavy and Sam breathed easier and walked a little taller. He got halfway around one of those new foundations when the lights went out and left him stumbling through the dark. He stopped, hugged her to him, and reassured her by sort of jabbering on as he toed his way, a foot or so at a time, around the last foundation and into the hulking shadow of the bowling alley.

He easily kicked open the back door and looked over the wreckage of Dream Lanes, which was going to be left standing until the very end so it could be used as a storage facility and as the main power source for the construction site. Just enough light was glowing for Sam to get a real feel for how the old place had been transmogrified: the ceiling tiles had all been pulled down and the exposed joists were filled with lumber stock; the front desk was there too, littered with coffee-cups and tool-filled five-gallon buckets; the lanes themselves,
including the booths, hadn’t been touched, though half of them were piled with boxes of wiring and plumbing supplies and light fixtures. Sam searched in vain for a person or a phone, and as he cried out hello, the echoes of his voice swam around in the rafters so that he was now talking and listening to himself at the same time. His arms, at long last, were getting tired and he set Rose, who had seemed to regain a semi-consciousness, down in one of the old booths. A box of old bowling shoes was on the floor and Sam took them out and showed them to her, but she knocked them out of his hand.

“Remember these tacky shoes?” Sam gave them back to her. “We’ll take a pair for that stupid box in your closet,” he looked around. “I’ll be back Rose, okay—I’m just getting some help.”

“Don’t go,” she grabbed onto him.

“I’m coming right back,” he said, prying her fingers out of his shirt.

Sam let himself out the front doors of Dream Lanes and ran out to Old Main Street, shouting for stragglers, looking for that news van, but finding nothing but quiet as he screamed through the emptied downtown. He was bewildered at not finding anyone, his voice was going a bit hoarse, and those last few shouts exhausted the final fumes of his drained adrenal reserves. Disoriented now, he wandered in silence a few seconds through Heritage Park as the oily yellow light from the streetlamps flickered off the copper figurines and set them glowing in a strange sepia-tone all around him.
We all only learn to be human and we all do so by holding some other’s self inside us, that single sturdier someone we tap in our youth to build ourselves off of—the one we always try so hard to be, the one we always try so hard not to be—most of us settle upon a parent for this, but Sam only knew his mother and he’d stood her as adulthood’s obstacle, as the main thing he had to grow strong enough to conquer—all else he’d piled upon Rose, and now she lay half-conscious and possibly bleeding to death about a thousand yards from where he was standing and as he searched through himself for what to do, all he could find to stare into was the opening chasm of what had always been an utterly unconsidered possibility—that Rose might stop being there.

Truly alone, he walked in a circle and then sat down on one of the small concrete benches. He did not sit long, only a minute—probably no more than a few seconds—just long enough to let that undisciplined mind of his take him over, and to catch himself fantasizing about running off there and then and never looking back. He stood back up, shook himself conscious, and stared at his shaking hands. He cried out loud a second. Then all he could think about was that she was really hurt, which he just couldn’t believe, and soon enough he was dizzying himself demanding to know, of all things, why; that he failed to concoct a sensible answer had the unexpected effect of quelling his inflamed mind, not a lot, but enough for the thoughts within it to move and shift around a bit, enough for him to spasmodically conclude this lack of a reason for her suffering was actually a sort of a sign that she could not, in fact, be hurt that bad. Mercifully,
and at last, he stopped thinking at all and ran, full speed, back to the bowling alley.

Sam heard something as he approached the bowling alley and noticed a flicker of light coming from behind it. Seeing what looked like Joe’s red pick-up, Sam screamed “Ma!” again and ran toward the truck. But the truck wasn’t Joe’s and his mother was nowhere to be found. Instead, a large, bearded man stepped out of the truck and shined a flashlight in Sam’s face; Sam cowered a little beneath the sudden flash of light and put his hand up and tried to look around it.

“Please mister,” Sam said to the man holding the light. “I think my sister’s really hurt.”

Sam ran into the bowling alley and, seconds later, came back out carrying Rose through a wobbling beam of light to the opened passenger door of the truck, which the bearded man held for him. She seemed to be bleeding again as Sam held her on his lap. They pulled away and Sam thanked the man several times, humiliated at how grateful he was not to be alone in this anymore. Rose had thrown up in the bowling alley and was still swooning with nausea. Sam, though, was getting his bearings back, and kept whispering into her ear that everything was going to be fine.

**Who Would You Be If You Could Be Anyone?**

The hospital was a rush and swirl of activity; masked strangers rolled Rose off into the hard, shiny halls of the hospital and others asked questions of
Sam and the man who had driven them. A policeman knew the driver by his first name, Earl, and pulled him aside to talk.

“Whose blood is that?” Someone asked Sam, pointing to his shirt.

“It’s hers.” Sam was trying to hear the other conversation.

“You hurt her?”

“No.”

“How did she get hurt?”

“I’m not sure,” he didn’t think she’d want anyone to know.

“How do you know her?”

“I’m her brother.”

“Same blood type? She might need blood.”

“I’m not really her brother,” Sam said. “That shouldn’t matter, should it?”

“You’re not her brother?”

The policeman and Earl stopped talking and looked at him.

“My blood’ll work, though,” Sam said. “She gave me blood once.”

The policeman came over. “If you’re not her brother,” he said. “Then who are you?”

Sam sat, wincing once he’d calmed enough to notice the antiseptic circumambience of the hospital he knew so well. He’d been born with a cleft lip and palate—a bequeathed gene from an uncle buried somewhere back in the old sod. The surgical procedures were still new at the time and he’d had fifteen
different operations by the time he was twelve. Sam and his mother lived in a half-dozen different apartments when he was little, each one close enough to walk here whenever his mouth filled with blood.

The fifth floor, pediatrics, is where he and Rose met—they’d shared a room, for four days and most of a morning when Rose had gotten her tonsils out, and had got on well as roommates. Sam was very small then for his age and both Rose and her mother were intrigued at the way this sad, tiny little boy seemed so at home all alone in this huge hospital—even the nurses, who spoke with a weary condescension toward everyone, seemed to respect him. Myrtle, a waitress in a stale all-night diner at the time, worked doubles most of that week and was hardly around. Rose’s mom, though, spent every allowable minute with her daughter and tried to include Sam in everything; he was aloof at first, refusing any of the homemade treats offered, pointing to his stitched mouth, but Rose’s mother, noticing he kept peeking over at the two of them, kept meeting his gaze, kept smiling at him, kept talking to him, and within a couple of days, the woman had lifted the boy into her daughter’s bed and had him eating dollops of fig pudding right off her fingertips.

Rose, who had plenty of confidence, even then, had none in this place, but the pervasive indifferent coldness that terrified her didn’t seem to bother Sam at all: he never whined or complained and not once (and she’d seen him take six different shots) did he ever cry. He turned seven two days after Rose had been discharged, and she and her mom burst singing back into the room, candles
sprouting asymmetrically out of a small bowl full of strawberry sherbet they’d made themselves that morning.

They were inseparable, making an odd and compulsive pair of playmates thereafter, and it wasn’t long before the two mothers had synchronized their work schedules so that the free one could watch the children. Once Sam’s mouth healed, Rose’s mother took them to the movies, getting the two kids a big bucket of popcorn to share and they were soon attending every Saturday matinee. Myrtle, not one to leave anyone’s kindness unaccounted for, was always sure to stick enough money in Sam’s trouser pocket to pay for all three tickets, as her son scampered off several days a week to immerse himself in a much softer and different family narrative.

Joe stormed into the emergency room, and when he spotted Sam, he lifted him off the chair by his shirt. “Not a mark on you,” he said. “You’re her brother—why didn’t you do anything?”

“No one attacked us,” Sam twisted himself free.

Joe was still staring at Sam as Myrtle came up beside him, narrowing her eyes carefully as she stared out the window at Earl, who stared back a second and laughed as he got into his truck. “What were you doing with him?” She asked her son.

“I was looking for you,” Sam said.

“Isn’t that interesting,” she watched Earl drive off.
“What the hell happened?” Joe asked. “There was blood everywhere.”

“Smoke too,” Myrtle lit a cigarette and blew out some of her own.

“That’s right,” Joe said. “You’re lucky you didn’t burn the goddamned house down.”

“Rose cut herself.” He had forgotten, after all, about the cookies. “I couldn’t call an ambulance—the phone didn’t work.”

“Goddamned phone company,” Joe paced the room, his racing mind searching for a sturdy enough surface to park his blame on, so he could calm himself down a bit.

“How did she cut herself Sam?” His mother stared at him.

“I don’t know.”

“Of course not,” his mother sounded bored. “What’s your best guess?”

Sam looked at the floor. “Her mother ran away. Aunt Lois came by and told her.”

Joe leaned in, lowering his voice. “She ran off?”

Sam nodded his head.

“So how’d she cut herself?” His mother stared hard at him.

“I think she just punched a window.”

The three of them sat after, not speaking, in the waiting area. The same fake palm plants since Sam was a kid came out of a wooden planter in the center of the room and their vinyl fronds, beneath the fluorescent light, glowed a radioactive, metallurgical green. Sam smacked them and they sprayed the room
with dust. He heard the strange strains of his own voice, which he still cringed to listen to, and when he looked up, there he was on the television, standing in front of the statues, squinting into the camera lights and praising the old man.

“I don’t get it,” Joe said, not noticing Sam on television.

“Her mother ran away and she punched a window,” Myrtle said as she stared at the television. “That’s not so irrational, Joe. You know how she gets sometimes.”

“You’re her mother now,” Joe said. “We’re married.”

Myrtle rolled her eyes. “She’ll be fine, Joe. There wasn’t that much blood—I’ve seem someone bleed to death.”

“What?” Joe asked. Sam turned to her too.

“My father did it, okay. And I woke up that morning to a much bigger puddle of blood than Rose left us tonight.”

“But we’re not in some slum in that backward bog of a country,” Joe said. “This is America.”

“Yet here we sit,” Myrtle said.

“We’re not even really a family,” Sam said—his mother saying that made him feel brave.

“Stop saying that,” Joe stood, then sat back down and rubbed his eyes. “I don’t get it, I don’t get any of this.”

Sam looked at his mother. He tried to imagine her his own age (which he could never do anyway) and finding her father like that. It was the first time he’d
ever heard her speak of it and she'd only bought it up at all to calm Joe down; she spoke of it with the same annoyed nonchalance she used to communicate all the gravest details of her own life, in that same flattened voice she used to let Sam know he’d forgotten, again, to take the garbage out; it was a drained voice: all the music of her brogue almost gone, a voice with no key left in it for surprise or even hurt (especially that), but a voice with real strength in it too, a voice more than capable of smothering her excitable husbands hottest shouting, because there was such a tired, knowing intelligence in it. She’d used that voice on plenty of doctors—Sam was always afraid of them as a child, but his mother had this way of piercing right through their Latinate lexicon with an unwavering stare, and direct and unanswerable questions she repeated with an intractable steadiness and that relentless voice which in the end, forced most of them to sag their shoulders and admit out loud, “I don’t know.” Myrtle’s was a voice that bowed before no one and Sam, however much he tried not to, would always wish his own a little more like it.

A doctor came into the waiting room and, with Joe listening and Myrtle and Sam staring, told them Rose was stitched and stable, but that they were keeping her overnight. Joe shook the doctor’s hand and the three of them took an elevator to the fifth floor in silence. When they got to her room, Rose pulled her father to her by his sleeve and hugged him as Sam backed into the far wall and watched. She was still young enough that they put her in pediatrics and so every few minutes a child’s cry would peal through the stilted air and nurses’ footsteps
would echo through the hard bright hallways in such a way that it seemed there was an army of them out there marching around. Rose was thirsty and Joe brushed past Sam to fetch her some water. Myrtle walked over to the bed and gave Rose’s arm a tender squeeze over the sheet. Rose yelped.

“Oh,” Myrtle said. “Sorry.” She walked out into the hall after Joe.

“Come here, Sam.” Rose said.

Sam pushed himself off the wall and crept toward her. His head down, he gripped the cold chrome rail of the bed as Rose smiled up at him in the half dark.

“The doctor said you might have saved my life,” she said.

When she reached up to stroke his cheek, Sam snatched her bandaged wrist and squeezed.

“Oh, stop. Ow!”

Rose whimpered and squirmed beneath her sheets as Sam fastened his grip. He grabbed her hair with his other hand to keep her steady as she squealed, her kicking legs drumming a quiet racket beneath the starched hospital sheets.

“This hurts, Sam. Stop it! Please stop.”

A lot of blood had seeped through the bandage by the time Joe came charging in, and Rose sobbed, holding her wrist and staring at the soaked red dressing as Joe scooped Sam right off the floor, carried him out the doorway and slammed him down hard into the bright tiled hallway. Sam scrambled to his feet and tried to get back in the room, but Joe threw him down again as two nurses
tiptoed between them into the room. When Sam staggered back up yet again, it was his mother who met him, her eyes, widened in shock, staring straight at him; Sam froze, trying to catch his breath to say something as Myrtle, without breaking her stare, reached behind her to nudge Joe back through the doorway. She gave her son another second to say something, but when he couldn’t, she regained her usual composure, her stare its usual contempt, and then she backed into the room herself and closed the door. Sam stood and paced around. He punched the door a couple of times. Once he’d calmed a little, he put his ear to the door, listening to the commotion inside until it all quieted down, and then he walked off.

He went toward the train station. The hospital was in Capital City, fifteen miles from Somerville and a world away. Sam and his mother had lived there right up until moving in with Joe and Rose when Sam was nine. It was an ubiquitous American inner city neighborhood: a cauldron of ethnicities and languages and everything was always at a simmer in its crowded streets; the apartments were too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer; their walls were also way too thin and, day by day, the forced sharing of one another’s private odors and noises filed the trappings of normal social manners down into a restive, menacing silence—at some point, with enough time in the right circumstance, we’ll all just inhabit our own dirty skins as they are. Sam saw a fight once, from his bedroom window, where one man stomped another’s head
with his boot until all four of the victim’s limbs froze stiff, about six inches off the road. Sam heard that man died later.

The neighborhood was turning, as Sam and his mother lived there, from a wild but somewhat cohesive European immigrant neighborhood to a more black and Latino one, and these new and different groups only added more voltage to the charged current that already ran through the place. But his mother was so different then, and all those people in the streets he was so afraid of liked her—she made them laugh. Myrtle had only begun to get sick and was young enough then to still think she was going to be just fine. For a while, this one summer in particular, Myrtle loved that neighborhood.

Sam used to sit on the porch on hot summer days and listen to it all: the black kids making fun of each other across the street, the Italians next door arguing over Pinochle, and his mother on the other side talking to the Caribbean women over the fence; and it was, of course, that voice he’d remember most—back when her brogue was still alive, in its full music, and trickling like a strong lone flute through the remarkable orchestra of noise and language outside their apartment that whole summer. But it was a neighborhood in flux and Myrtle’s rich and interesting coterie of friends began dwindling away, each one following family or love or work to some other neighborhood. Sam followed each and every good-bye she made all the way, watching as she would calmly march down their front stairs, hand off a fresh-baked loaf of soda-bread wrapped in tin foil, offer a quick joke and a perfunctory hug, and then turn right back around and march, a
little slower, straight back into their house to disappear, without ever looking at him, behind her bedroom door.

Sam stared at their old house—it hadn’t even been painted since they left and the missing slats from the rails around its porch made it resemble a sore mouth trying to smile while feeling for its missing teeth. He climbed up and smoked a cigarette, pulling on the wobbly banister as a group of black kids stirred in the shadows across the street and stared at him. The hospital, with its sirens and its housed pain and those pale windows, rose high into the sky above the street. Sam’s mother’s car, Joe driving, cruised slowly past; it stopped a hundred yards off, its taillights went a bright red, and then the car whined backwards down the road toward him. A few more kids joined the others to watch the car idling in a pool of exhaust as Sam got in with a slam of the door.

“Lose your way home?” Sam’s mother adjusted the rearview mirror to look back at the house and then at him.

Joe adjusted the mirror back, glancing around him as he put the car in gear. “You’re lucky I didn’t leave you here.”

Sam spent the night fully clothed, never even taking his boots off as he lay atop his covers, getting up to smoke out Rose’s window every hour or so, trying to ignore her bloody sheets. Around four, he went into the downstairs bathroom, sneaking a bottle of his mother’s pain pills into his jacket pocket as Joe snored away in the next room. He went out the front door, without closing it, and walked
alone down the cool dark sidewalks of Mayberry Lane and then up Elm Street, crossing the river as he headed to the train station.

It was still dark when Sam got to the hospital and he slipped in a side door, unnoticed, behind an orderly. It wasn’t visiting hours yet and, surprised at how well he still knew his way around, he tip-toed up a staircase and ducked quietly into Rose’s room, his hand in his jacket pocket to keep his mother’s pills from rattling.

Her face was a little pale but she seemed fine to him as he sat and watched her sleep. He was surprised a little, to find her sleeping so soundly—he never could in this place. Within minutes of closing her door, he couldn’t even smell the hospital anymore. She pulled her covers down and a few minutes later back up again. Rose did this all night; she had a fast metabolism and would quietly bake beneath whatever covers she slept under, pulling them down to cool off and then back up again; she would repeat this, without waking herself, throughout the night as regular as a coming tide, creating and giving off enough heat that any room Rose slept in smelled just like her; her aroma was a warm one—the humid vapors of a young girl’s breathing skin tinctured with talcum-powder and whatever flavors she’d most recently been cooking with. Even a hospital room, with Rose sleeping in it, smelled like home.

It was starting to get light out, and Sam pulled a chair next to her bed as the room brightened around them. Rose stirred a little, then stirred a little more, then she stretched and yawned and blinked a few times as her eyes cleared
themselves conscious. She grabbed about and grasped the big button to raise
her bed to be near him.

“I knew it’d be you that would be here when I woke up.”

Then she reared back and punched him in the mouth.

Sam groaned but didn’t cover up, not even when she hit him a second and
third time. He sat back in the chair, breathing heavy, clearing his throat, a little
nauseated at the taste of his own blood, some of which he spit onto her starched
white sheet. Rose fell back on the pillow. She started to cry but stopped herself.

“You popped three of my stitches.”

“Good.”

She tried to hit him again, but felt lightheaded. “How could you?”

“How could I?” Sam stood and kicked the gate of her bed over and over as
she winced and covered herself up. “How could you,” he said. “All that big sister
bullshit, fighting with my mother. Trying to get me to eat right, stay in school—
what do you even care?”

“Sam, wait.”

“And you were going to leave like that? Without anything, without telling
me—you were going to leave me all alone in that house with them,” he said. “Say
what you want about my mother—she wouldn’t do what you did.”

“She’s done worse.”

He kicked her bed a few more times. “She’d never do what you did.”
“I didn’t though,” she said. “Not really.” She got hold of his shirt and sat him down.

She shushed him quiet a minute and laid his head on her bed.

He sniffled and cleared his throat. “I’m not crying.”

“I know.”

His breathing evened out. “I’ve thought about doing that too, you know,” he said. “I’ve thought about it a lot.”

“I know.”

He raised his head, stared at her a second.

“I just know,” she said.

Sam took the pills out of his pocket. “If you really want to,” he said. “I will.”

Rose covered her mouth, staring from him to the pills a second and then snatched the bottle from his hand and put it in her nightstand drawer, slamming it shut as the pills rattled around.

“I don’t mean here,” Sam said. He took her hand and whispered to her now. “We’ll plan it. Maybe out at the river.”

“Stop it.” She said.

Sam stood up and dropped himself into a chair by the window. He blew a cloud of breath onto the glass and drew a bird flying into it with his pinky. Rose undid the latch to her bed’s gate and let herself down, walking her I.V. pole over to him. She sat in his lap.
She sighed and looked him over. “You’re getting so big,” she said. “Even last summer I bet I could have sat you on my knee.”

“I know you think I’m too much sometimes, that you want your own life—a hundred boyfriends or whatever. I’ll do better giving you space, stop hanging around in your room so much if that’s what you want,” Sam looked at her. “Is that what you want?”

Rose stared out the window. “No,” she said. “I guess I don’t.”

“I will if that’s what you want.”

“Listen,” she said, sitting across his lap and putting her arm around him. “Promise me you’ll never really do that.”

“Stay out of your room?”

“And the other thing. I wasn’t really trying to kill myself. You were checking in on me every fifteen minutes and I went crossways, look.” She pulled her bandage down to show him.

The sutured wound was still swollen and made the thick black stitches look like some insect was burrowing its way into her skin. Sam winced and turned away. “Your wrist is going to look like hers.”

“I wasn’t trying to die, it’s just that my mom’s gone, you’re leaving... I don’t know—I just wanted to mark myself. I thought it would hurt less if I went fast, but then I went too fast, I guess, or pressed too hard. But I’m sorry I scared you. I’m sorry, okay. Say we’ll go back to how we were.”
Sam tried to talk, stopped. Then he touched her hair and she cried hard for a good minute or so, then stopped and with conscious deliberation, evened out her breathing and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her hospital gown.

“You can’t go, okay? Not yet.” she said. “It’s so not fair, Sam—you’re only sixteen, I should get to hold on to you a little longer. Just stay for the summer. Please? One last summer. If you still want to go after that I promise I won’t try to make you stay.”

“What difference can a summer make?”

“Exactly.”

“The way we are together,” he took a breath. “Everyone used to get such a kick out of it, but now they just think we’re weird. It definitely bothers your dad. We’re not kids anymore, Rose.”

She looked about the room and kicked her feet. “According to this place I am—all these years later and here we are, back in pediatrics.”

“Things are getting different,” Sam said. “Besides, what about your big new breasts and all their plans?”

“Stop!” She crossed her arms and giggled. “No boyfriend could ever replace you. Let’s have one last summer together.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“Okay.”

“Really?” Sam looked at her.
“Not to that. But no boyfriends until September. I waited this long, what’s a few more months? It’s the least I could do—the doctor really did say you might have saved my life.”

She cupped her hand around his head and turned his face to her. “We have a deal?”

He nodded yes.

She kissed him on the lips.

Sam fingered the bandage on her wrist. “You really weren’t trying to do that?”

“I wasn’t.”

“You’re sure.”

“I’ll never leave you,” she said and kissed his face. “I’m the one who will always be here—I’m your family.”

“We’re not really family,” she still felt warm from the bed.

“Oh stop it, you dumb bastard,” she said and hugged him. “No one will ever love you like I do.”

Rose’s weepiness dissolved into a self-consciously vulnerable, giggling delirium then and Sam leaned into her, hoping she’d kiss him again. The phone rang and he jumped. Rose padded over to it, saying hello to her dad and assuring him she was fine as she sat back in Sam’s lap to talk to him.

“I can leave after the doctor sees me,” she twisted the cord around her finger and turned to make a face at Sam. “I’m not waiting till you get done with
work. . . Fine—go quarantine the trees. I'll just go home with Sam. . . yeah, well, I really scared him, dad—you know how he gets, we had a talk and everything's fine with us now. . . he's not in his room, he's here, he's been here. . . I don't know—I woke up at dawn and there he was," . . . she turned in his lap and peered into his face. “Trust me dad, he's right here. . . and leave him alone when we get home—he probably saved my life. . . I am not exaggerating. . . listen, everything'll be fine, okay, I promise. Come home good and hungry—I'm going to make a huge stew for all of us. . . well, I want to come home and he's here and you're not,” she said. “What else is new.”

Rose was too tired to walk, so they took a bus from the train station to Town Hall, where she pulled Sam by the sleeve into Heritage Park. The statues looked a little better in the sunlight, but caterpillars had gotten up into those trees too, and some even crawled about the statues. Rose had to stop every few minutes on the way home to catch her breath. The old man was trimming his bushes out in his front yard and Rose smiled and said hello, but the old man turned and walked into his house as if he never heard her.

“Do you think he knows?”

“Knows what? You said you weren't.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Only I know,” Sam said. “Everyone else thinks you just punched a window.”
“The doctors and nurses knew,” she said. “I could tell by the way they looked at me.”

“Do any of them live here? It is a small town.”

“So what am I now?” Rose asked. “Some sort of outcast.”

“Welcome to my world.”

The windows were open but the house still smelled like burnt cookies whose mummified remains sat shriveled onto a pan atop the stove. Rose took money out of a jar in her room, sent Sam to the store, and when he returned the two of them spent the better part of that afternoon at the kitchen table. Sam peeled carrots and potatoes and turnips and parsnips for her as she sat in a chair with her knife, chopping the vegetables and then sweeping them into a big pot of broth every few minutes.

The vapors from Rose’s stew had rinsed the smell of burnt cookies right out of the house by the time they all sat down to eat that evening. The night before still sat there, right at the table with them, but everyone lost themselves in the exquisite pleasures of Rose’s beef stew, refusing to speak to it and by the end of dinner, it had silently pushed itself back from the table and quietly excused itself. Just as she was handing the finished plates off to Sam at the sink, Rose mentioned the caterpillars in Heritage Park to her father, who rushed, cursing, out of the house. Sam and Rose went up to her room after and she read while he played his guitar. The phone was working again and Joe got home just in time to answer it, covering the mouthpiece as he asked Myrtle if she’d left a bottle of her
pills at the hospital. Rose drifted off to sleep. Sam smoked out the window and looked over her.

He strummed his guitar quietly and Rose smiled and squirmed deeper into her bedding. Sam kept strumming away, playing until his mind gathered the long couple of days inside him and began crafting it all into a narrative sense. He really had saved her life. Perhaps she’d done it in the first place just so he’d find her—not consciously, but still. She could have. And people might just shun her, even her, with these new scars on her wrist. More and more, Sam thought, it was going to be just the two of them and when he ran off, she really would come. He didn’t have to be rock star, not if she didn’t want him to. They could go to a big city somewhere, or some other small town far away where they could find some little place where he could play every night and she could cook.

Sam peered out the window and there was the old man, walking off their front porch and wandering around their yard as Rose’s breathing ebbed into a deeper sleepier flow. The old man was going senile and Sam stood in front of the window watching as he methodically searched his way around the Merigana’s entire front yard, pulling the branches back to look behind every shrub Joe had, and even shaking the old picket fence in a couple of places, as if it might come up and there might be something under it. Sam found himself wondering what it was the old man even thought he had lost—was it a lot of things, or one big one? When he did, at last, wander off, Sam looked the other way, toward the woods behind their house, half a mile through them was the river, and once you crossed
that it was only another mile north to the train station and from there you could get anywhere. He looked back over Rose, who had curled herself into a slumber in the crumpled sheets.

        He played and spoke over her as she slept. “You know,” he said. “In any other place but this place—you’re not even my sister. When the summer’s over, we’re gone—both of us. We’ll go anywhere, Rose. We can start all over—be whoever we want.”
**Figurines, Large Machines, A Vast Current Of Routine**

The Americana Figurine Company once put food upon more than half the tables in Somerville and some say it saved this town back when the old mill shut down. The factory produced hand-size ceramic figurines based upon a dozen of the old man’s most famous painted characters. These figurines were not absolute replicas, but rather inexact approximations that could themselves be exactly reproduced by the astounding machines that begot several hundred thousand kiln-hardened miniatures a year, each one an identical pseudo-likeness of the old man’s perfect neighbor.

The factory itself was one gargantuan room: thirty feet high, three hundred feet long, the workers’ stations all facing the north wall, upon which hung a framed twelve by sixteen foot American flag. A huge bank of opaque windows ran along one side so that several generations of faceless white workers, in blue smocks and red hardhats, had all bowed to their work beneath that giant flag in the same powdery light one tends to dream or remember in.

One in five Somervillians still worked there as Sam began his one and, far as I know, only summer job: for three hours a day, five days a week, Sam was one of two boys responsible for sweeping the shop floors and taking out the trash. He didn’t hate the job—the labor wasn’t hard on him and he was allowed to listen to music while he worked.
The afternoon Sam finally met the man who had hired him was a typical one and found him sweeping the floors and dumping one small trash can after another into a large rubber barrel he wheeled around with him; he kept his eyes to his work and his earphones clamped to his head, trying his best, as he scuttled through it all, to ignore and be ignored by the machinery and the ominously harmonized human activity around him. But something boomed, something always boomed in that place and it always jerked Sam into a frazzled attention, sending entire rows of his co-workers chuckling on their little metal stools a few seconds before receding back into the communal murmur of their routine. One of the factory’s figurines was of Sam crying over that trumpet and the workers took a sad, greedy delight in what they perceived as Sam’s sensitivity, as if it somehow authenticated the old man’s vision and therefore their entire working lives. Though Sam was still young enough that you could tell he was the boy from the painting, his face, by then, was freckled in acne and a last growth spurt had left him in a phase of such gangliness that he didn’t much resemble the boy crying in the painting at all, but looked more like a defect model out of some fairy-tale that had been brought to life and forced to be the houseboy for the cuter, shinier version of his and other younger selves.

Someone, off at the edge of his peripheral vision, began waving for his attention, but then another great noise rang out. Sam often wondered, when he first moved to Somerville, what it would be like in there. It wasn’t what he thought: air pockets gathered in the hydraulics, forklifts dropped things, kilns overheated
on occasion, and this inconstant cannonade of blasts and booms and reverberations left Sam so disoriented at times that his only desire was to flow, unnoticed, right into the vast current of routine that was the lifeblood of the plant itself. The sheer size of it all stupefied him. He’d watched the men repair the larger machines and knew every last churning piston within them outsized him and it was their noise that got to him most of all—a sublime collective drone that pulsed the air and ran through the concrete floor beneath him like living nerves, occasionally tingling right up his legs as if he were but a firing synapse inside the brain of some colossal being—just another fleeting thought of a mind-full.

Someone, suddenly, was tapping Sam hard on the shoulder and he tore his headphones off and spun around. Salar, the other shop-boy, was waving a tape around as he lightly punched Sam all over his torso. A skinny, kinetic kid with long dark hair, Salar popped up often in random spots of Sam’s garbage route, riddling him with soft slaps or punches, blurt ing out a dozen incomprehensible things, and then, just as abruptly, disappearing back into the droning noise of the factory.

“What’s the matter with you?” Salar was always emphatically amused with Sam’s never noticing him. “I’ve been trying to get your attention forever.”

Every day Salar asked him to start a band and every day Sam said no. The boys had always gotten along in school and had fallen into an easy friendship exchanging tapes halfway through their detail and passing the end of their days hiding from the foreman on the back loading dock. Salar mouthed out
the first few chords of a song, grabbing Sam’s shirt and gyrating obscenely against him until Sam laughed and shrugged him off. Before leaving, Salar snatched Sam’s Walkman and snapped his tape in.

“We should play stuff just like this,” he said. “Only new.” Going back to his own garbage route, he shouted over his shoulder. “We’ll be bigger than anything man. We’ll have this place pressing records.”

Salar, noticing the plant manager, who was also his father, ducked back into a row of machines.

Another hand slapped down hard on Sam’s shoulder and this time it was the foreman. “The boss wants you in his office.” The foreman, who didn’t much like either of the boys, smiled.

Sam looked toward Salar’s father, whom he had never met. The man didn’t look back. Ahman, his name was, and he was a nimble, studious looking man with a fastidious little mustache, and small round bifocals that reflected the plant’s light in such a way as to seem to be ridiculing anyone trying to look him in the eye. Sam followed after the man, who had still not broken stride. Ahman walked at the speed of a slow trot, his arms seemingly asleep at his sides, as if he couldn’t be bothered to waste more movement than necessary; and while his brisk strolls to and from his office were a common sight to the workers, he was never known to mingle with them or even roam about the shop floor—he was always only passing through. Sam looked around for Salar as he trailed his father, who ascended the stairs with the same quick yet unrushed locomotion.
Hard-hat in hand, Sam entered the boss’s office, wondering what he’d done wrong.

Even the shop boys were paid union wages, and so each summer brought plenty of eager young applicants. Sam was hired because of his mother—Ahman had prostate cancer and he and Myrtle had developed a cynical camaraderie sharing rides to and from the hospital together. Ahman came from a privileged, educated family in Iran and Somerville had been his second American home. He’d earned degrees in civil and electrical engineering from Berkeley; while there, he’d been introduced to computers by a pair of classmates, one of whom was, by that summer, already on his way to becoming one of the future cyber-masters of the universe, and the other of whom he’d stayed in touch with, and who had helped him find the job at the Americana Figurine Factory after he’d had to flee his teaching post in Tehran after the revolution. Truth was, his friend had promised him something better—he’d accomplished what he was brought to the plant to do within three years, and what he really wanted to be doing was designing city infrastructure when he finally got back home. But thanks to his college roommates, Salar understood computers when few did, and so he was brought in to make the plant more efficient. He did so. His hiring, however, coming only a few years after the Iranian hostage crisis, and had caused quite a rumbling through the dinner table conversations around Somerville.

Ahman acknowledged Sam as he continued a curt and proficient phone conversation concerning supplies the shop needed. Sam stared around the office
as he waited; not a thing was out of place: the supply catalogs, except the one he was now ordering out of, were all bookended in the upper right corner of his desk; the beige metal file cabinets were dust-free and each drawer had its contents alphabetically marked to the second letter; even the unattended papers in his in-box were as squared off as a bound book. Ahman was sitting in the only chair in the room and when Sam noticed this, he sort of smiled to himself. When his gaze wandered back to his boss, the man let out an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes at whoever was on the other end of the phone. Sam could see, now, that he wasn’t in trouble and he also sensed he liked this man. For all his neatness, Ahman did not seem to be uptight or obsessive at all—a fertile mind flickered through his tired brown eyes and there was nothing fussy or tedious in his neatness, but rather an unforced rigor and an able and well-honed discipline.

Ahman hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Sam. How do you like the job?”

“I’m trying to save money, sir.”

Ahman smiled and looked down at the pad he was working in. “What are you saving for?”

“A new guitar, sir.”

“My son tells me you’re a talented musician. I thought you played the violin?”

“I can play a lot.”
“That’s impressive,” Ahman smiled and then leaned toward him a little. “He also says you quit the school band.”

The man seemed impressed with this. Sam took a breath and smiled. “I just feel I’m good enough now to play what I want.”

Ahman laughed and sprang from his chair. He spoke to Sam’s reflection as he approached the large window that overlooked the shop floor. “You’re your mother’s son.” He nodded for Sam to come over next to him. “I hear you’re also the inspiration for our most popular model.” He picked Sam’s statuette off the windowsill.

Sam looked at the model and then went to the window. It was three hundred feet straight across from that giant flag, and from it you could see the entire length of the shop floor, every last man and machine. Sam sighed looking down at it all—it was like peering into the working insides of a humongous clock.

“How are they treating you? Ahman was already back behind his desk, pointing to the window Sam was still staring out of.

“I like looking at them from up here.”

“Listen,” Ahman said. “The two of you have jobs to do and I expect you both to do them well. I’ve also allotted three hours for you to get those jobs done and, as far as I’m concerned, you owe the company nothing else. But your boss is really the foreman. I’m his boss. He has at least fifty things a day he wants to ask me about, but I only let him ask me ten. So, if you two finish early and want to get lost somewhere, just make sure you don’t do anything that’s going to get
you onto his top-ten list. Understand?” Ahman tented his fingers as he and Sam looked at one another’s reflections in the window.

Sam smiled and Ahman chuckled. “Go on,” he said. “Scram.”

When Sam descended the steep metal stairs back to the shop floor, Salar was waiting for him. “Did he ask about me? What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Sam laughed. “I’ll meet you out at the dock in half an hour.”

“Really? Nothing at all?” Salar drifted back to work, staring up into the windows of his father’s office.

How To Win Friends And Influence People

Growing up in Somerville had, at first, been hard on Salar—where his father had a prearranged authority and an office to hide in, the boy was dropped, powerless, behind a small desk in an open classroom full of kids who thought him a son of their country’s enemy. Salar dressed differently, ate different foods for lunch, spoke deliberately and with that choppy accent—he wasn’t just a new kid from another school, he was from another world, something his classmates at Sunnyside Elementary weren’t used to. This utter absence of referentiality created a vacuum within which Salar’s classmates were able, for a time, to make

5 The title of Dale Carnegie’s 1936 self-help book, a publishing phenomenon that, along with Napolean Hill’s “Think And Grow Rich” released a year later (with the encouragement of Carnegie himself), launched what continues to be among the largest selling genre among book publishing, the self-help book. Mr. Carnegie, who can often be accused of peddling common sense—smiling more, and really listening to people are among his suggestions—does belong to an earlier, more Victorian style of self-improvement, based upon a disciplined code of conduct, and upon the belief that you can change other people’s behavior toward you by changing your reaction to it.
him be whoever they wanted, and since moderation, in the collective imagination of a group of unchecked children, is a useless absurdity, they assembled their own explanatory narrative about Salar and his father out of the most salient parts of their parent’s gossip—the basest ignorances and most salacious details: that he and his father didn’t believe in God or bathing, that they dined on stray dogs they set traps for, that they hated America and held secret meetings in their basement for those who thought likewise.

The kids had others in Somerville they told ghoulish stories about to frighten one another: old lady Wilkins, who walked all over Somerville talking loudly to herself, or the Halloween tales about the cannibalistic hobo who lived in the woods between the train station and the Toquam River. The hobo story, I believe, originated during the depression and served the obvious purpose of reifying their childhood fears, and of making the over-domesticated world they lived in, appear more fantastical and alive. Old lady Wilkins was the fear they could taunt on the sidewalk and easily escape from. But to shrink all they were afraid of down into this one smiling, harmless boy they could watch get beat up on a daily basis—this they found intoxicating.

He didn’t get picked on immediately. At first, they drifted about his desk, surrounding him, looking through his notebooks, his lunch, even flipping through his math book, though it was the exact same one each of them had. They would ask him questions: about his country, about his father, about himself; and some kid behind him always answered whatever the kids in front of him were asking.
Sometimes they touched his hair or poked at him. Ultimately, an indifferent cruelty began to rise out of what began as a genuine, if inconsiderate, curiosity, and before long it was the cruelty itself they were drawn to and there was no longer anything indifferent about it—they called him worse and worse names, played tricks on him, threw things at him. The teacher, when she caught one of them, never punished anyone, choosing instead to only lecture them as a group—the same bland admonitory speech about the golden rule they’d been hearing their entire lives—even the teacher was obviously bored with it. And it was this practically getting away with it that really brought his classmate’s blood to a simmer and Salar was left alone to face the meanness that began radiating out from the collective gaze he was always surrounded by.

Through everything, Salar kept his grades up—his father, who would always be able to melt the boy’s resolve with a single, clear-eyed stare, insisted on it. Salar lacked his father’s impenetrable discipline but did, in his own way, have that same sturdy bedrock of selfhood, a confident sense of his place in a group and that place wasn’t to be picked on or off in a corner; so he never looked upon his problems as permanent, and continually told himself that it was something new kids just had to go through—he remembered new kids at home getting picked on too. And so, unwavering in his determination to be liked, but acknowledging his hapless position, Salar decided to smother their hostility with an indefatigable cheeriness. A prodigious talker since he could string words together, Salar wouldn’t be silenced and there seemed little his classmates could
do about it. He merrily blurted out one wrong answer after another to the teacher and volunteered to be the leader of any group he was put into—some of them, at least, were forced to talk to him, and those that did found it difficult to keep hating him.

Salar had always been good at being funny. His entire childhood in Iran he’d shared a bedroom with his grandfather, a bald, slender, swarthy man who had a horse laugh, a white cottony beard, and a pebbled brown cranium that seemed to have had his entire sad life story brailed upon it. Salar loved making that old man laugh. Their home was only a few dusty streets from a theater that sometimes played American movies, and the grandfather, over the protests of his more traditionalist son, loved to take him there; for weeks afterword, Salar would play out the scenes in their bedroom and set the old man roaring.

His father, knowing the transition was rough on the boy and quickly realizing that it wasn’t fair to expect him to live a traditional Iranian life (a life, post-revolution, he was somewhat disillusioned with himself) in this new world, let him walk to The Rialto Movie Palace every Saturday afternoon, where he’d sit entranced in those creaking seats beneath that huge glimmering screen. Goldie, the man who owned and ran the theater, let him, if he picked up the soda cups and spilled popcorn in between, stay for a second or even a third feature. Salar saw everything and some films (Star Wars, Rocky) as many as ten times. He’d see the other kids from school there sometimes, but Goldie was no teacher and he made rather loud examples out of several of Salar’s tormentors—stopping the
movie, turning the lights up, dragging them out of their seats and then slamming them, face first, out the side door for everyone to see. At least at the movies, everyone soon enough left Salar alone.

The aging proprietor and the young boy took such a liking to one another that Goldie paid a visit to Ahman at work, offering to be the boy’s sitter after school, pointing out that he had chores Salar could do to pay for it. Having an urgent need to instill a manful industriousness into his only son, this last point appealed to Ahman immensely. So Salar dusted, vacuumed, cleaned the glass doors out front, and squiggled a wet mop along the rows of upturned seats. Whenever a new movie came, that Friday afternoon right after school, Goldie took his box of red glass letters, an extension pole, and let Salar change the names on the marquee.

“No movie starts until you sign off on it.” Goldie would say as he handed him the letters. “You are officially in show business.”

Goldie was strict about Salar’s doing his homework right away and then whatever work he had set aside, but Salar didn’t mind—he was used to his father’s discipline, and he always had plenty to look forward to. Goldie’s apartment was right above the theater lobby and he’d had a door installed so that he could walk from projector room right into his living room after each evening’s final screening. Goldie also had a vault full of old movies and, a couple of times a week, they would put one on, make themselves a big bucket of popcorn and sit in the balcony with their feet up watching it. After Salar performed a few of his
impersonations for Goldie up in his living room, his boss took him downstairs to the big stage and even set him up with a microphone. Goldie dimmed the lights and a movie played hugely on the screen behind him; the first reel was an old John Wayne movie, which should have made it easy, but it wasn’t, it was discombobulating—the heavy rumbling of the Duke’s slow drawl and crashing cymbals of his jangling spurs filled the room, but the images were almost indecipherable from that close, it was more like staring up into a sky with a huge cloud in it that sort of looked like a cowboy. After about ten minutes though, his clenched mind softened and began to acclimate all that huge sound and towering imagery into a sensible living existence, and he fell right into step with the enormous vapory hero behind him; and as he spoke the lines into the microphone, he let his own voice sort of surf out over the ongoing echo of the Duke’s. It was some rush. It didn’t seem like he was merely mimicking anything anymore, but more like he was speaking that huge waterfall of picture behind him right into existence, and as if all that voice was now his own.

Goldie recorded him with an eight-millimeter camera one day and they went up to his apartment to watch it. Once he’d heard himself, Salar was stunned at how much higher and more nasal his voice sounded outside his own head than inside it. When he told Goldie this, the old man reminded him of a film they had watched together—the film was about a boy Salar’s own age stranded on a deserted island by a shipwreck. In order to survive, the boy must teach himself to fish, and with great effort, he makes himself a spear out of a broken oar, a piece
of flint, and some twine; then, on one long painstaking montage, the boy plunges the spear, time and again, seemingly right through one fish after another in the shallow waters off the island, only to pull a dripping, fish-less spear from the water every time. Finally, the boy, noticing the way a thrust spear seemed to bend just beneath the surface of the water, puts his foot upon a rock beneath it and pokes deliberately around until he touches himself with it. In slow motion and to the dramatic rising crescendo of an invisible string and wind orchestra, the boy spears an even dozen fish, several of which are smoking over a fire he’s squatting by as the scene fades out. His voice was fine, Goldie assured him—he just needed to learn how to really throw it.

That night at home, Ahman, knowing it had nothing to do with schoolwork but unable to see any real harm to come from it, let his son have one of the micro-cassette recorders he sometimes dictated messages to himself on for work. Salar began taking the recorder to the movies and before long had amassed a small library of micro-recordings of all his favorites and, night after night, would record himself and then play both back. Salar would perform the voice, listen to the original, compare, make adjustments, and then start the process all over again; within a few months, he had retuned his own hearing to the point that he didn’t even need the recorder anymore.

His developing protean vocal abilities tickled his father, thrilled Goldie, and dazzled every classmate save one: Butch Fargus. The penultimate child of a baker’s dozen, all but one of them boys, Butch Fargus was a graceless,
oversized kid with rotten posture and the dumb dark eyes of a rodent; eyes that peered anxiously out at the world from deep within his bloated, splotchy face, where one could (if one bothered) already see lurking, the besotted sodden remorse of his waiting adult alcoholism. Butch’s clothes weren’t just hand-me-downs, they were the hand-me-downs of whichever thuggish sibling had handed them down to him; all the blue had long since been worn out of his blue-jeans and every shirt was as frayed as an old pajama-top; his shoes all had holes blown through them or their tongues torn out—everything the boy had ever put on himself was the surviving amputee of too many rough childhoods. Butch Fargus looked about exactly as you would expect a grade-school bully named Butch Fargus to look like—a wonder really that no painting or model was ever made of him. And though he’d proved himself tough, he really wanted to think of himself as funny; because no matter how much stronger he was than any of them, what he really wanted was their approval, and to make them laugh was to be able to make those that had to like him like him anyway, and that, he sensed, just might make up for everything else wrong with him. His classmates, of course, had always laughed when he expected them to, and he reciprocated by becoming a more or less benevolent schoolyard despot. This worked out for every one for years, but the problem was that Butch wasn’t very funny—he was clumsy and awkward and had bad timing. He had though, been getting easy laughs out of his classmates for years, long enough that his desired idea of himself, that of being witty and charming—of being looked-up to—had hardened
over into an entitled and fragile identity. Needless to say, the increasing amount of laughter around Salar never failed to get his attention and it wasn’t long before he assumed that every laugh Salar got was coming at his expense, which, in a sense, it was. At last, during gym, Butch pointed down to one of his muddy sneakers and accused Salar of stepping on his foot; Salar denied this at first, and as soon as he switched strategies to try to apologize, Butch dropped him to the dirt with a hard punch to his chest. Within a week, Butch’s brutal torments were a daily occurrence for Salar and his classmates, once again, turned cold; most of them even laughed along as Butch squeezed Salar’s face into a headlock and then rattled him around in a full-nelson in front of everyone and said things like, “Come on, funny-boy—make me laugh.”

Salar couldn’t concentrate on his schoolwork, pretended to be sick several times, and after a third night in a row where he barely touched his dinner, his father dropped his knife and fork onto his plate, refused to dismiss him, and stared at his son until the boy blurted it all out.

Ahman sighed. “You’ll have to fight this boy,” he leaned over the table and stared into his eyes the way he did to let him know what he was saying was non-negotiable. “Do it at school where a teacher will break it up. Don’t worry about winning—get a good shot or two in and then just hang on. Scream and swear at him the whole time—you have my permission. Just avoid him for a day after that—once he cools down he’ll settle for someone easier to pick on.”
And so, in the nighttime solitude of his room, Salar prepared for his fate. He snapped off one-hundred punches from each fist in front of his mirror, but also, thinking it would make a grand theatrical impression on everyone, practiced Butch’s mannerisms: his ticks, his quirks, and that voice—a hoarse, incurably phlegm-warbled and underdeveloped baritone that always made Butch sound, whatever he acted like, not so much angry as exasperated. Salar accepted his father’s suggestion about losing the fight—he thought that was smart—but, since victory wasn’t an option, he wanted to make himself stand-out somehow, and so he worked out an entire routine where he’d impersonate Butch as he goaded him into the fight.

Imbibing a new persona had become a secret ritual for Salar by then and he never felt alone when he did it. He had also, somewhere amid all the intensity of his practice, crossed over from mimicry to real craft: he felt like his own instrument, as if anyone else’s voice, if he had enough time to work on it, could also be his.

He’d start by pulling his shirt off and leave it waiting for him, in a soft crumpled pile, on his bed; then he’d stand, bare-chested, about fifteen feet from his mirror and purposely un-focus his eyes, not enough to see double, just enough to thaw off any specific features, enough that he could no longer tell who it was that was staring back at him; he’d move his arms and legs around a little, observing his bleary double moving right along with him in the mirror, and then he’d practice the mannerisms and voices and, as he closed in on who he was
after, would project the image of who he was trying to be right on through his mind and into the mirror. This wasn’t fun so much as completely absorbing—he found every little part of the process fascinating. Anything Salar didn’t like about himself seemed to lift like wings off his back when he practiced like this, and everything felt new again and alive. He worried, sometimes, about permanently blurring his vision, and so he would close his eyes a while and try and practice it all in his mind. Once finished, he’d dress and lie atop his bed in a balming calm of earned exhaustion. He never quite figured out what it was he was doing and I don’t think he really wanted to. His mom would usually call curing dinner-time, and the family would try and catch up with one another’s lives; if he seemed unhappy to her his father got mad at him, but if he seemed too happy, his mother would start sobbing. He loved each of his parents, but hated them together, and after these calls he’d always run right up to his room and join what was becoming a much more meaningful and nourishing gathering, the one between the self he was and the many possible selves he could be.

In a couple of weeks, after Salar had Butch’s menacing threats down pat, he took a deep breath during recess one day, walked right over to his nemesis and went, with great flair, into his routine. Butch, his beady eyes widening, stepped toward him. The other kids went silent, compressed around them and then spread out into a semi-permeable membrane within which the two boys wheeled, like energized particles, around one another. They each sneered and spit in the dirt simultaneously, and when the bigger boy went to proclaim to the
others what he was going to do, Salar, in the boy’s own voice, finished Butch’s sentence for him. Salar even hitched his pants at the same time and when the first fist flew, Salar was out of its way as if he’d been told it was coming and had soon landed several of his own. The adrenalin of the fight and of a tantalizing possible victory rinsed his father’s conservative plan right out of his young mind, and it was immediately replaced by a film with a much happier ending. Noticeably frightened as Salar barked his own taunts at him and backed him right into the brick wall of the school, Butch’s lip started quivering as he looked wildly around at the throng cheering on the dark skinned kid they all used to hate together, and who could suddenly talk and even fight, just like him. Finally, with nothing making sense, Butch just lost himself, the one thing no plan could have accounted for. Salar ended the fight on his back in the dirt, reaching to grasp onto anything, his face turning frighteningly numb beneath the stronger boy’s punches. But when a teacher finally pulled the two boys up, it was the tougher one who sobbed into her shirt and she had to hold a stunned and wobbly Salar upright by his arm in such a way that it seemed she was declaring him victorious.

Salar was told by the nurse to sit on the bed until he calmed himself down. For a while, he couldn’t feel parts of his face and he looked into the mirror on the wall and tenderly touched it to make sure it was all still there. He looked so different. His face was swollen, already discoloring in places and his upper lip looked like it was growing into something else altogether. The nurse came in and
laid him down, putting a bag of ice in his hands and instructing the boy to hold it to his swelling face.

“Butch Fargus?” She shook her head and whistled. “Good for you.”

Then she turned out the lights and told him to lie back, keep the ice on his face and relax. The boy sat back up after she left and kept trying to stare at himself in the dark room—the nurse, for some reason, had made him take his sneakers and socks off and now he could only find himself in her mirror by wiggling his bare feet. The paper on the bed crinkled beneath him and as his eyes adjusted to the dark and his profile came back into the mirror, he looked to himself as if he were dangling his legs off a bridge somewhere. Slowly, steadily, he could feel the blood running beneath his face again and he was no longer numb, but very sore. He leaped onto the floor and vomited into the sink in the corner. He tried to lie back down on the bed but couldn’t, and so he sat up again; his face was really starting to sting and, as all those burst capillaries pooled into shadows beneath his skin, Salar burst into a long, loud cry.

But when he arrived back at the classroom, everything had changed. The kids who had so loved to see him suffer all rushed over to make sure he was okay and even the teacher smiled at him, and not with pity. Butch was suspended and once he returned, it was to a slightly reconfigured classroom stratum and one, now, he wasn’t willing to fight to rearrange. To make sure, Salar began impersonating the teachers and staging phony fights where he’d let Butch pretend to beat them up. His impressions, at this point, had become uncannily
accurate, and while his classmates, for the longest time, only accepted him as an oddity, he was their oddity and they even began to feel possessive and prideful of him.

So while Salar never did get a seat at the cool kids table, he did work his way to a sort of freelanced popularity—making them laugh would have to be good enough. When the phone in their house began ringing with calls about his behavior, Ahman asked curtly about the boy’s grades, which were still fine and the father was good to his word and seemed to admire his son’s pluck, laughing as Salar acted out his teachers in the kitchen and warning him not to go too far.

Ahman’s American journey was a different one. He was brought over to make the plant more efficient, because he understood computer systems, but also because he was an outsider. His plan was to stay in Somerville, in America, for exactly three years; he wanted only to save as much money as possible and go back home, and so he unabashedly scorned the acceptance he assumed his co-workers would likely never offer him anyway. He reacted with a cold logic to their powerless intolerance: without explanation, he streamlined every department in the factory, rudely upending traditional routines, and installed computerized machinery that eliminated the need for some of their labor altogether, hardening what had been a loose and lazy animosity into a full and focused hatred, and making the plant more profitable than it had ever been.

The son built a community and the father a wall. Whenever the phone rang in their house, Ahman never even lifted his head from his crossword, only
glancing, sometimes, at his son’s bare feet as he danced over to answer it. By that last summer his son, at sixteen, had almost lived in this country as long as he had in Iran; every conversation with his wife, who had always resented being left behind, was a chilling rebuke of his failure to make it back home, and his daughter, thirteen herself now, hardly responded to him. Once he’d fallen ill, Ahman’s exile hardened like drying mortar around him—having collected most of the bonuses the plant was ever going to give him, and his medical bills soaking up much of what he was supposed to be sending home, Ahman’s fate would be to live out the immigrant’s nightmare of running breathless down an ever lengthening hallway and never quite reaching the doorknob at the end of it. Take a long enough swim back through our bloodlines and Ahman is where nearly all of us in this country come from, someone who died on our soil homesick for their own, someone who, until their dying breath, kept on believing they really were going to find their way back home. So the father’s personality, with all its pride and competence and potential power, calcified into a brittle sort of lonesomeness; while the son, who was, purposely and otherwise, so much like him, and who had been thumbed down all alone into the wild muck of the American schoolyard, somehow germinated, took root and flourished into what was a full and thriving life—a life full of laughter, full of friends, full of music.
Let’s Make Some Music

Sam gave a quick nod to Salar and banged his last big barrel of trash through the swinging doors to the back loading dock, where he rocked and heaved a dozen tied-off garbage bags off the dock and into the opened mouth of the huge metal dumpster. Between the loading dock and the factory was a large room of inventory and Sam wandered among the ratcheted shelving full of figurines waiting to be boxed; his own model took up a full row of shelves and several hundred identical little idols of his crying ten year old self were lined ten deep for twenty feet—it was like staring into some secret chamber of his unconscious mind devoted to one moment of lived humiliation, a chamber housing an entire standing army of frozen weeping soldiers, waiting only for the thawing warmth of his conscious attention to leap out into the battlefield of his mind to try and do him in before he did them. He couldn’t keep himself away from them. He’d been told the plant had, over the years, sold over a million of his figurines. While his family and even his classmates saw him more or less as he was or at least as they themselves thought him to be, all the world beyond that, the world he wanted so badly to leave his mark on, didn’t know him at all, but they did know that painting and these statues, as if he were not the boy the old man had made a statue off, but that it was somehow the other way around.

Sam spiked a figurine to the concrete floor, then another; within a minute he’d crushed a dozen, enjoying the soft concussion and listening to the tiny pieces as they danced around his feet. He held a last one aloft and turned it in the light, it was a muted three-dimensional likeness of the more detailed painting;
the painting itself was even losing its resemblance; it had been almost six years since he’d sat for it—he’d turned sixteen that spring and someday soon no one would be able to tell it was him at all.

Salar banged his way in through the flapping doors behind him and, after a brief contest, full of taunts, to see who could throw the bags the highest, the two boys sat down, smoked cigarettes and dangled their legs off the back loading dock.

“Is this really you?” Salar held up a fragment of his figurine.

“It’s only a rumor.”

Salar laughed. “You know, they sell these things in Iran—even you. At least they used to.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? My dad says it’s because all poor people dream of becoming wealthy and happy enough to cry over trivial things.”

Sam smiled and repeated this phrase to himself.

“Summer’s not even really here, yet. We should start a band now.”

“My stepdad thinks you’re both communists.”

“Of course he does,” Salar said. “You really write your own songs? A songwriter needs a band, man.”

“Do we have to talk about this every day?”

“Yes.”
Sam took a last drag and flicked his butt away. “If you want,” he said.

“Come over Saturday. We can jam a little.”

“Really?”

“I’m not saying we’re starting a band.”

“Of course not. We’ll just jam a little.” Salar leaped up and began pacing around.

“I’m serious, man.” Sam said this slowly and pointed his finger to him.

Salar grabbed the old baseball bat the night-watchman kept handy and handed it to Sam. Then he grabbed an armful of Sam’s statues off the shelf, strapped on some safety-goggles and made some warm-up throwing motions.

“Dig in,” Salar said smiling. “I’ll give you ten swings.”

Sam got into a hitting stance, waggling the bat. “Come on, you Commie bastard,” he said. “Let’s make some music.”

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Not Your Father’s Mrs. Jones

Walking home later that week, Sam came across Rose arguing with Mrs. Jones outside her front door. By Mrs. Jones, I mean the new one, not any of the multiple generations of Jones’s that had lived right across from the Merigana’s all those years, for the old Jones’s were one of the families that had cashed in and moved out earlier that spring; but it really is the new Mrs. Jones who serves the
purposes of our story and so from here on out, I'll simply refer to the new Mrs. Jones as Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. Jones was a consultant for a reinsurance corporation, I think—who could remember such a thing? I don't think anyone around here ever really came to know her—this woman was not much for mingling. She'd buzz from her back door straight to her destinations and back again in a small car with an unpronounceable name, shut up so tight behind her tinted windows that it looked a little like the car was driving itself. Hyper-organized, yet always behind schedule, this new Mrs. Jones was forever rushing to or from something—you know that silly game you play as a kid where you race each other by trying to go as fast as you can without actually running? Well, that's the way this woman walked all the time.

Mrs. Jones wore prescription wraparound sunglasses, even on cloudy days, even inside her house. At her screen door that afternoon she looked, to Sam, like something out of an old science fiction film, and her son, as he pressed his face into the screen, looked as if he was trying to escape her clutches to get back into Somerville from some other dimension. Upon seeing Sam, the woman said something. Rose turned to wave him away and went back to the screen.

“It's Sam? I won't let him come over if you don't want him here.”

She leaned in to hear what the woman was saying, and whatever it was stood Rose right up. “I cook, I clean, sometimes I even do your laundry and I've always done it for a very reasonable price, Mrs. Jones. How many times have I
stayed without charging you to keep the children from crying all night after I leave? And by the way,” Rose stepped right up to the screen. “I’ve noticed the kids never get as upset when it’s you going out the door and me coming in.”

Sam laughed out loud. Mrs. Jones froze a moment and then the mother and son dematerialized back into the shadow of their home until they disappeared altogether and were replaced by a closed wooden door. Rose grabbed a foil-covered tray from the floor of the woman’s porch and headed down the walk. Sam, silently, fell into step.

Rose walked fast, the glass tray of lasagna out in front of her and a plastic bag dangling from her wrist. “Everyone thinks I tried to kill myself.”

“She said that?” Sam looked back at the house.

“No one actually says it,” Rose pulled ahead of him.

“Were you really going to banish me from their house?” Sam shoved her in the back. “What else would you do to me if that woman asked you to?”

“My kids come first,” she said. “Don’t screw with me right now.” She turned and shoved the tray of lasagna into Sam’s chest to make him carry it as they approached the driveway.

So now what was she to do with her summer? It wasn’t the money, though that too, was unfair; but to be lied to like that, to be told they didn’t need a sitter anymore when she knew damn well otherwise; and it wasn’t even the lie itself so much as the unconsidered hasty laziness of it, as if, though they lived less than a
thousand feet apart, to get her off her front porch for that moment was the same as getting rid of her forever.

Rose sat by the window, unwrapped her bandage, and stared at her wrist; her skin had healed and the stitches had come as loose as stray hairs. She scratched her arm as Sam un-foiled her lasagna and ran his nose over the tray.

“Remember when you had me take the stitches out of your lip?”

Sam smiled at her. “If you warm me some of this, I’ll get the scissors.”

Rose cut four squares of lasagna, leaving two cellophaned on a single plate for their parents and sliding two into the oven. Sam waited at the kitchen table with the scissors, a pair of tweezers, and an empty chair he’d pulled right up to his own. She sat down, gingerly, in the empty chair and bared the underside of her arm to him.

“It’s not just her, either,” she said. “I can feel everyone staring at me all the time.”

“You sliced your wrist.” Sam snipped and pulled out the first stitch.

She winced. “I didn’t really.”

“You did really.” Sam tugged one of the stitches.


“I do. They don’t. It’s not as bad as you think,” he said. “When people make up their minds about you it’s like having a permanent Halloween costume—you can do anything you want and no one ever figures out it’s really you that’s doing it.” Sam snipped the next stitch and pulled.
“Your philosophizing never makes more than half-sense,” she said. “And unlike you—I like myself.”

“Everyone else used to too,” Sam smiled, pulled the last stitch and sang out in a nasally tone. “The times they are a’ changin’.”

She took the lasagna out, put a piece on each plate and they sat down to eat. “So, how is the elf factory—I can’t believe I forgot to ask.”

“A real dream.”

“You’re gainfully employed and I’m out of work.” She kept turning her arm about as she opened and closed her fist. “It’s like the whole world’s gone inside out.”

Sam smiled. “Welcome to the other side of everything.”

Rose smirked, shook her head and picked her fork up. “Are you this clever at work or do you save it all up for me when you get home.”

Sam moaned as he chewed and pointed his fork to his plate to let her know he liked the lasagna. “I have a friend,” he said after he swallowed. “He wants to start a band—he’s coming over tomorrow to jam in my room.”

“Really?” Rose straightened in her chair. “That won’t do—we’ll clear out a space in the garage.”

“The garage smells like oil.”

“It’ll do for now,” she stood and looked out the window at it. “I’ll help you fix it up a bit.”

“Want to be our drummer?”
“No.”

“You know you do,” Sam said. “You just want me to ask like ten times.”

“I said no.”

“It’s not like you have to babysit.”

She stared at him. “Making me mad’s not going to work.”

“You’re a born drummer, Rose.”

“You’ll find a drummer.”

“Not by tomorrow.”

“Do without one tomorrow.”

“You keep saying I need friends.”

“You do,” she said. “I can’t believe you found one.”

“I promised Salar I’d have a drummer.”

“Salar?” she smiled. “He’s so funny.”

“You really want to cost me my only friend, and a funny one at that.”

She stared at him and swallowed some food. “If I do it tomorrow. . . “

“We’ll be bigger than Jesus!” Sam said. “I always said you’d be my beat.”

“Later on,” she said. “When I make you find your own beat. At least try to remember that it isn’t really my fault.”

When they finished eating, Rose and Sam descended the cellar stairs to forage around in Joe’s cornucopia of collected cultural artifacts. Joe’s basement was Somerville’s forgotten attic. It was amazing what he fit down there: he had
crates filled with old soda and beer cans, old milk bottles; he had old coca-cola ads, movie posters rolled like scrolls, and those advertisements that used to make vacuums and detergents seem like futuristic things of wonder; Joe was mortified when they’d shut the old drive-in down and took a box full of window-speakers, thinking, at the time, that just maybe he’d open up one of his own someday; he had the chrome panels from a diner counter, labeled and numbered, and even the old soda-fountain that had sat behind it, which he swore he could get to work again; he had a shoeshine box, an old shaving kit, a boxful of pocket watches, paper bags stuffed full of bygone political buttons, comic books, old department store catalogs, dog-eared baseball cards, old Salvation Army tins; Joe had a dozen old radios down there, the original figurines from the figurine factory and the original weathervane off the old library; he even had the original blueprints for Main Street and Town Hall. If Somerville were ever to be misplaced, to disappear somehow, so long as that basement stayed intact, the right person (let’s say Joe) just might be able to reasonably reassemble it, at least the parts we most remembered.

Rose plucked things out of her father’s catalogue of stuff and the two of them, their arms full, went out to the garage. Rose lifted the door open and walked in; she stood, hands on her hips, looked around a few seconds, and then got right to work. That girl was the living embodiment on how to get things done—Rose tried something and if that something didn’t work, would immediately go off that to the next most reasonable something to try and so on,
until she’d completed whatever task it was she’d taken on—she never tried to think her way completely through a problem—she did by doing. She also never worried, her father and her experience had taught her that things would turn out well enough so long as she started at step one, and so she always did. Sam, on the other hand, sat there in the middle of the garage in a bit of a trance as she worked, looking from her to the rest of the place and trying to imagine how it might all look if they did it just right. Rose stopped, finally, her moistened bangs glued to her forehead, and snapped her fingers in front of his face, shaking her head as she went back to work. “I’d swear sometimes I’m nothing more than a busy figment of your imagination.”

Joe’s Garage

It was the first hot day of summer and the sky that day was forever itself, a pure and mindless cerulean eternity—not a single thought clouding it; one of those skies that seem everywhere and that dropped down around us in such a way as to make all of Somerville seem but a branched wren’s nest; it was a forever-after unknowable blue; the kind of sky that once stared into had you

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6 The title track of Frank Zappa’s 1979 concept album, a rock-opera with a protagonist he names the “Central Scrutinizer” who is a government employee narrating the life of Joe, who starts a band in his garage as an adolescent, but ends up in a dystopian society that has outlawed all music. Zappa released the record after the new Iranian regime had made rock & roll illegal within its borders. The record received positive reviews for Mr. Zappa’s renowned musical innovations, and criticism for his just as renowned scatological humor. The title track, though, is a real marvel, a funny, poignant homage to the excitement in youthful discovery, and Mr. Zappa even plays that what was, for many of us, our first childhood instrument: the kazoo.
wondering who you were and if you were anyone; listening itself, at least for something beyond approaching footsteps, must have begun beneath a sky just like that one.

Rose woke up with a few fresh ideas and finished off the garage that morning. She set up an area rug and a coffee table just inside the opened bay of the garage, splaying herself, once she finished, across the arms of one of the chairs; from where Sam stood near the kitchen window, she looked a little like a doll waiting to be plucked out of a giant cut-away dollhouse. She pulled herself up to look over the back of the chair and searched in vain to find him in the kitchen window, which was too full of reflected sunlight for her to see through. He laughed a little when she plopped back into the chair, aggravated. She let out a long sigh and dangled her bare legs over the arm of the couch; she twirled her drumsticks a minute, and when she started to drum an imaginary beat against her thighs, Sam began to tune his guitar.

But way back in the Merigana’s yard, a small figure wrestled its way in from the edge of Sam’s attention and when he looked up, Salar—bass guitar, dark sunglasses, black leather pants and all—was tumbling out of the woods over the Merigana’s back fence. Salar too, saw Rose before she did him and tiptoed around the back of her chair to get a better look. When she noticed his shadow and whirled around, Salar immediately took her hand and kissed it, then put his hand over his heart and said something that made her smile at first and
then laugh. Sam banged through the screen door and drummed down the stairs toward them.

Salar spoke to Sam with a British accent. “What’s up gov’nor, quite a pretty lil’ drummer you’ve found me.”

Sam looked at Rose when she laughed. “She’s not yours.”

“What do you say, love? Salar said to Rose. “If you ain’t me drummer, who are ya?”

“Mine,” Sam said, getting a raised eyebrow out of Rose. “And lose the accent it’s annoying.”

“You can keep talking to me like that if you want,” Rose said. “You’ve really got it down.”

“I will dear, I will indeed.” Salar followed Sam into the garage. “You don’t notice, I understand, being she’s your sister and all—but my God, she’s smashing.”

Once inside the garage, Salar stopped talking and the two boys walked around in a hushed silence. Rose had, even with a car and several toolboxes still in there, transformed Joe’s garage into a very passable facsimile of an old time juke joint. She’d hung several neon beer signs, draped packing blankets over most of Joe’s tools and littered them with old pins and album covers; she set that small lounge up by the door with old furniture, and spread sawdust all over the stained concrete floor. She’d put her drums in the corner by Joe’s old ’64 Ford, and wedged an amp into its missing door. Rose had an instinctive, simple-
hearted way of domesticating all space she spent time in: she kept them clean but never sterile, organized but adaptable—there was easygoing, lived-in asymmetry to her order, a cozy frumpiness in the way she arranged things. Salar smiled and whistled at it all as Sam stood pondering it—it looked like the kind of place he’d always imagined rock-n-roll had come from and he felt his future, suddenly, rising like a sun inside himself.

Sam and Salar each plugged into their amps and began drifting about, plucking unconnected sounds out of their instruments. Rose banged away a little, trying to make eye contact with Sam to get things going, but Sam was having none of it. She could tell he was nervous now. Sam’s amp was the one stuffed into the missing door of Joe’s old car and he fiddled with it a little and ran a silent groove with his finger through the dust along the fender. He had started to help Joe restore it, and for years, Sam imagined this was the car he would be in when he left Somerville forever.

When they’d all first moved in together, Sam was enthralled with Joe’s ability to make things, that he could, in a single afternoon, turn a pile of cut lumber into a wall or a window-jam or a staircase, and so he was mesmerized by Joe’s grand plans that first summer for his old house, and Sam’s new one. Day after day, Joe jabbered on wildly about it to everyone in the house, but especially to his attentive stepson.
“Can you really do all that?” Sam finally asked him as he followed him around the yard one day.

“Sammy,” Joe said as he pointed skyward. “Find me a tall enough ladder and the right tools—and I’ll take those clouds right out of the sky.”

Sam found an empty, leather-bound journal in a closet when they’d first moved in and followed Joe all over the property with it, his thoughtful blue eyes widening and trying to see everything Joe’s did as he transcribed, piece by piece and room by room, Joe’s entire dream house with a sharpened pencil into its blank pages. Sam drew well, his penmanship was outstanding, and soon Joe was as taken with the book he was building as the boy was his house. And Joe wasn’t the only one; Rose curled up on the couch with it at night—even Myrtle thumbed through it on the kitchen counter as she waited for the tea-kettle to go off and spent a full half-hour one evening, penning, in green ink, a shamrock door-knocker upon the front door of the drawn house. Upon Rose’s suggestion, Sam made a narrative cartoon in the lower corner of each page: it began as an empty ramshackle, but as you flipped through it, the house came to life until at the end, in colored ink, cartoon versions of all four of them relaxed together on the restored front porch. Sam’s imagined future became, somehow, their missing family history, the scrapbook of memories they didn’t really have; it became that single simple thing which had a true meaning only one of them could ever explain to anyone else; they passed it around at the dinner table at night and each of them, at some point, looked over Sam’s shoulder as he worked on it; somehow,
around the drawings in that book, an invisible pool of shared selfhood began to spread and thicken between them, soaking right into the stained walls and the warped floorboards; and images of possibility swelled in their minds until breaking, finally, like a warm wave right over the backs of their eyes so that the dingy house they were actually living in was washed right into the warm gorgeousness of what was to come; that book became, for the smallest little while, where they told things to each other, where they listened to one another; but most of all, they experienced the book together in silence, and it was within all this shared privacy, as the routines and habits in the house began to settle down around everyone like slumbering pets, and as they tried to compile the requisite hours of wordless just being together, where it almost did happen for them—when they almost forged that undeniable, that unseeable, that inexpressible something, that makes a family a family, and a home a home.

Sam was also fascinated by the endless gallery of craftsman that Joe counted among his friends: plumbers, electricians, roofers, glazers, stone masons, tile men; together these men formed a benevolent, charmingly grumpy squadron of helpers, casually swearing and whistling over Sam’s shoulder as they began to actualize the book he’d filled in. Joe had loaned every one of them a tool, solved a problem they couldn’t, or given them countless Saturday afternoons of his life and it was his time, now, to cash in that bulging account of goodwill and owed labor he’d saved up. For a good long while, the way we did things around here really worked: no one lived in a mansion, but within reason
and a with a willingness to work a little, you helped a few people who helped you back and soon you had what seemed to be a world of craft and skill at your disposal; and those Somerville bungalows had a remarkable regenerative capacity: they took on additions, expansions, bayed windows, rear decks, front porches; with the right tenants they did, over time, go from the house you settled for, to something close to the home you’d always dreamed about.

It was after that first Fourth of July, after their new kitchen was finished, after the dining room had been wall-papered and the living room painted, after Joe had already called to order what would be their new Oak floor, it was after all that that Myrtle came back from the doctor one day, parked the car and went, with her head down and speaking to no one, straight to her room, and the work stopped.

Over the next several years Myrtle’s health mopped up most of Joe’s time and money. But he needed something to busy his hands with and so Joe decided to restore the old car in his garage, taking the boy with him. Sam would sit on a fender, handing Joe wrenches, somewhat awestruck at how comfortably his stepfather navigated through what seemed to Sam a universe of pistons and pumps. Maybe, Sam would think to himself on occasion, he really could take the sky apart.

On Saturday nights, they listened to *The Roots of Rock-n-Roll Diner* on WSOM, and the music, especially when combined with a couple of cans of beer, would charm all kinds of stories out of Joe about when he used to race the very
car they were working on. He also made Sam a little stepstool to stand on and began handing him tools to try and take things apart himself. Joe’s initial instructions were encouraging and gentle enough, talking Sam, a step at a time and in a calm voice, through each individual action. But the work itself made Sam jumpy and anxious—he just couldn’t connect the parts to the whole; every time his stepfather popped the hood and Sam pushed his face into the gaseous breath of the opened mouth of that car, he saw nothing but complexity itself. Sam didn’t progress and handed Joe the tools and offered to work the radio every chance he got. Sam loved watching Joe up to his elbows in this world of wires and sprockets and gears and gaskets, and it made him proud he was so good at it, but what Sam really liked was to watch and to find songs Joe liked on the radio and to listen to him swear a lot and song off-key. Joe, like a lot of us, was not a patient teacher of what he himself was best at and considered Sam’s struggles to be coming from a weak and lazy mind. But he stayed at him that whole winter in the garage and kept a kerosene-stove burning to keep them warm. But Sam, even months later, couldn’t always keep clockwise and counter-clockwise straight and one night, humming along to one of Joe’s old songs, Sam dropped a small nut down the carburetor. Joe slammed his tools down and walked about the garage a few minutes, his eyes squeezed shut and lightly beating his own head with his fists; then he turned off the heater, the lights in the garage, and left Sam sitting there in the dark as he went back inside. A few days later, feeling bad and noticing the boy had been taking his albums upstairs to listen to at night, Joe,
over his wife’s objections (she wanted the boy to stick with his violin) bought Sam a guitar he found and a couple of songbooks of the songs they’d listened to, telling Sam they’d get back to the car some other time.

“Hey Spacebrain!”

“What?” Sam turned to look at Salar.

“What are we going to play?”

“I have songs.”

“Good,” Salar said. “Let’s hear one.”

Sam walked with his head down, making and unmaking an invisible circle, his lips moving soundlessly over some private conversation between himself and his unplayed music. He stopped to retune his guitar and then looked to Rose, who widened her eyes at him to get moving. He ducked his head back down and strode back into his solitary orbit, muttering to himself aloud this time—you couldn’t decipher any words, but his voice was audible enough that it sent tiny echoes scampering into the shadows of the garage like a nest of exposed insects. Salar began to loudly crack his knuckles. Sam turned his back to them and hunched over his guitar. Another pause. Then eight staccato notes, none of whom seemed to know one another, wandered tremulously about the garage. He pulled those same notes out of the guitar over and over again, leaning way back as he did so, trying to get them under control and wincing as they jumped around him. He stopped and seemed to have nothing more, even shaking his hands out,
as if they could be the problem. He looked again to Rose, who now sat staring into her drums, refusing to look back. He stomped over to his amp and turned it way up, literally electrifying what had already become a tense atmosphere and now his two band-mates winced a little. Fanning his cord out like a bullwhip behind himself, he wandered right out into he middle of everything and stooped down into what looked like a prayer. What the boy played when he stood up out of it was a wild, booming stampede of sounds that filled that garage in a way nothing ever had before—a couple of coffee cans filled with nails and screws nearly tossed themselves right off of a high shelf, and Rose stuffed her fingers into the sides of her head and tried to scream at him through it all; Salar, to his great credit, enthusiastically tried to find Sam’s song in the noise, and bounced himself around in it with the submissive lunacy of a dangling marionette. Sam kept all that sound beneath him, stalking around the garage until, at last, he broke it all and trotted it around, first one way then the other, with a repeatable twelve chord set he played over and over again. Satisfied with himself, he adjusted his amp and sauntered, as he played, over to Rose, tapping out a schematic of the beat he was looking for with his foot upon the concrete floor and gesturing her in; with a nod or a shake of his head, he would increase or lower her tempo and within a few minutes the two of them had what would be their first song going. Salar, whose excitement had been building watching them, came in as well, but played too fast and too loud, ripping them from their reverie.

Sam stopped and turned to him. “What’s the matter with you?”
Rose spoke up before Salar had a chance to reply. “Come in slower, Salar, you'll get it.” She shot Sam a look. “Give him a few minutes.”

They began again. Sam first, then Rose, then Salar, who again stopped things by coming in too loud and too fast; this time however, the two boys played back and forth to one another and soon enough, the three of them settled into the beginning of a song they played over and over and over again. Rose’s excitement colored her cheeks and Salar was bouncing all over the place—Sam even tried singing a verse, though it came out gibberish. Then Sam played what he was thinking would be the end of the song; this they picked up faster and could soon enough, with a nod of Sam’s head, go from one to the other. Sam had only played his own songs alone in his room, never plugged in like this and never with accompaniment, and so as the music, which had until right then only existed in his mind, ignited into the atmosphere around him, he played and wandered through it all in a stupefied amazement.

“What’s the rest of it sound like?” Salar shouted and everyone stopped.

“What?” Sam looked confused.

“We have a start and a finish,” Rose said. “Play us the rest of it.”

“Oh,” Sam went quiet and started wandering around again.

“Is that all you have?” Rose, holding either end of her drumsticks, stretched both arms over her head.

Salar, pretending to tune his bass, peeked over at her. “It’s a great start,” he said, wanting to say something when he saw Sam noticing.
Sam shook his head hard, like he was trying to get water out of his ears.

“There’s more,” he said. “Of course there’s more.”

Rose squinted at him. “Let’s just bang away a little, you know, and we’ll start filling it in.”

Sam pulled the garage door down and paced about, playing the beginning and end a few times each and then a few times together, wondering, as he did so, where was the end of it. He closed his eyes and tried imagining himself back alone in his room. When that too, didn’t work, he went pacing back through his circle, strumming away, his lips now quivering a little as he screamed and searched through the vast wilderness of his mind.

A few minutes passed and then a few minutes more. By then he’d turned away from Salar and even Rose when she tried to speak to him. That old radio still sat on the roof of the dead car and Sam found a snowy jazz station he thought might help him think. Salar, who didn’t want to play jazz, made a face behind him. A great noise washed up against the other side of the closed garage door and all three kids turned to stare toward it. The last of the empty houses were coming down across the street and doing so in apparent excruciating pain. The houses when they were demolished collapsed slowly, a single broken bone at a time, each window shrieking alone out of its jam, and all of it sinking, at last, into the snoring boredom of the coming bulldozers.

Not that we spoke of such things, but I dare say we all thought of Somerville as the top of something—one of the great things history’s greatest
republic ever created—not its grandest dream, but perhaps its noblest.
Somerville was the freedom from want, a hardworking and unassuming
brotherhood of front porches. And I really do understand, considering the
fraternal nature I’ve been crowing about, that it could and should have been more
inclusive, but it would seem to me we could and should have evolved beyond all
that. I think, more than anything, we all thought we were the start of something,
not the end of it. But time never passes the way we think it will and you can never
see where you’ll be from where you are. The noise on the east side of Mayberry
Lane never did stop that summer, it just kept grinding away, its echoes swimming
in through our screen doors and out our opened windows like schools of fish
through a shipwreck. We were, decidedly, no longer at the top of anything, but
had somehow sunk to the bottom of God knew where.

Sam, his back to his band-mates, let his forehead drop against the closed
garage door. Rose, embarrassed for him, smiled at Salar and asked to hear his
British accent again. Bars of light beamed in through the row of windows,
accentuating his now unsettling stillness and backlighting the mass of dust-motes
that were swirling into a tiny galaxy over Sam’s bowed head. He set his palms
too, against the door, and after a long, audible exhalation, he became as still as a
molting insect, his guitar an enfolded wing across his back as he listened to all
that sound still lapping up against the other side of the door.

Then suddenly, Sam turned and held a palm up to still their talk as he
closed his eyes and felt his way blindly about the garage, trying to outline or
finish off some pattern in his head. When he pulled his guitar back around himself, Rose picked up her sticks, eased into a beat, and the two soon had the beginning of the song going again; Salar wandered up and down the length of the car, watching, as they nosed another few notes in front, and then a few more, the new sound wavering and unsure of itself as it came out of Sam’s guitar. They did this a few times and then a few more times still. But Sam couldn’t quite find it and began stomping on the floor, imploring himself or something else. Salar bounced in wildly, energizing things, and began jumping around in such a way that Sam even opened his eyes and laughed a little; this didn’t help their progress, but did settle Sam down some, getting him to enjoy, for a moment, where he was, and siphoning his mind back down from where he couldn’t get to. But then the boys got their cords entangled and Sam toppled over. He rose to his knees, his eyes squeezed shut, looking for a second like he might burst out crying; he hoisted his guitar over his head as if to destroy it but instead hugged it to his chest and let out a sick laugh and then a venomous stream of curses. He refused to let Saar help him off the floor, choosing instead to kneel there, sawdust clinging to his jeans like unshed scales, and the vapors of fifty years worth of spilled gas and oil leaks wafting up around him.

“It’s not your guy’s fault,” Sam said, his head down. “You played well.” He unstrapped his guitar and slid it across the floor where it banged still beneath one of the chairs.
“Sam,” Rose said. “It’s only our first day. We’ll work on it upstairs later, okay.”

Salar looked worried. “Let’s just have some fun and make a little noise, man.”

The garage door rudely opened and the three kids all squinted against the light and noise pouring in. Myrtle, on a search for tools at Joe’s request, stepped in and looked around. Rose, without a word, pointed with a drumstick to the toolbox atop the car’s roof. Myrtle foraged around, spilling a few more nuts and bolts down into the smattering of unused sockets and unattached parts that sat about the floor beneath the car like knocked-out teeth. An old cement bucket was on its side on the car’s roof and a fossilized tear rolled from it over the rear windshield.

An exceptionally loud boom came out of the site across the street and Rose walked up next to Salar in the open bay of the garage and stared toward it. Sam, still on his knees, cupped a hand over his eyes and craned his neck to look between them. Myrtle, as she left, looked toward it and then glanced sideways at her son. “I can’t tell who sounds worse,” she said. “Or who’s influencing whom.” She walked past the other two and up the driveway.

“No wonder my dad likes her so much.” Salar chuckled as he watched her walk away. “Does that ever explain a lot about you.”

Sam stood and brushed himself off. “If I ever finish it I’ll play it at her funeral.”
Rose snorted in laughter as Salar winced and whistled. “You should hear my dad talk about her,” he said. “She might be the only person in this whole country he likes. I’ll tell you what: if he didn’t already have a wife in Iran and she wasn’t already married to your dad,” he pointed at Rose. “We might all be family.”

Rose covered her face and cackled. Sam walked back into the garage.

Sam slapped a cymbal and then turned and smirked at him. “He’s dying too, right? The song after this one’s for his funeral.”

Salar’s face tightened. “That’s not funny.”

“We won’t play it for laughs,” Sam said. “We’ll play a song of hope, something life-affirming.”

“Stop it, man,” Salar walked toward him. “I’m not kidding.”

“Sam, stop!” Rose tried to jump between the two.

Sam dodged her and circled Salar. “Oh my, oh man,” he sang. “We’ll float him back to Iran.”

Someone shoved, someone shoved back, and then the two of them toppled right over Rose’s drum set, landing, with great percussive accompaniment, upon the greasy concrete floor below. As fights go, theirs wasn’t much. Neither boy threw a real punch, they just wrestled, grunting and cursing, pushing and pulling, until their fists became so entangled in one another’s shirts, that together they slid around the floor looking a little like two flies trying to fly off flypaper. The undependable timbre of their coming adult voices, beneath the strain of it all, crumbled back down into their squeakier childish tones, and soon,
neither sounded angry at the other so much as upset that they found themselves in this fight at all. Rose, who’d been standing with folded arms like a patient referee, pulled them up as a single heaving mass before she jabbed the tiring boys apart with her drumsticks and walked Sam out of the garage.

“. . . A Transitory Enchanted Moment”

Sam slammed the kitchen door behind him and, when he noticed his mother, an open book across her chest and already quietly snoring in a small swath of sunlight by the front window, he went back and slammed it a second time, before thundering up the stairs. The fight still splashing around inside him, Sam paced around his room and took a few slow, deliberate breaths. His eyes began crawling the walls, searching for any evidence of the rest of his song. Random ideas and notes were splattered everywhere—it almost looked now as if someone had sneezed it all out; some things he couldn’t even remember writing, and other things he could no longer read. The paint cracked and blistered beneath it all and in some places was coming right off the walls in ever lengthening curls, one of which Sam now peeled completely off and dropped out his window, watching it tumble in silence into the shrubbery below.

Had he really not completed a single song? He had once, though. He did it that one time and he had still not gotten over it. It was this full, beautiful song that

7 A phrase lifted from perhaps the most stunning sentence on the stunning final page of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby”. The sentence is imagining what the green shores of the still unborn America must have looked like to Dutch sailors as they approached it.
had tumbled, somehow, right out of his just fooling around—he completed the entire thing in under an hour. His hands even shook a little as he played it to himself. Then he smiled, and then he believed. He was thirteen and a half years old and had just written his own song. He sat on his bed that night, rocking back and forth, playing it over and over to himself, his wet eyes blinking in the dark as he contemplated his achievement. “Wow,” he said to himself. “I really can do it.”

Sam always had drive. Desire smoldered in that boy, had always risen through him like the exhumed vapors of his uncountable and faceless Irish ancestors, all their thwarted ambitions, all that smothered potential, thickening in his blood and coagulating, as he grew up, into what was simply a great throbbing want to be someone, someone who, as his mother put it, all persons of sense could agree upon as being important; and as he strummed and sang out his song that night, a song with a beginning, middle and end to it, he realized he actually had made something, and so all his wanting was given a shape, a mold it could pour itself into and he knew now, knew exactly who he wanted to be, and right then and there it was as if all those supposed dead souls sat up inside him and opened their eyes at once. He walked into Rose’s room and stood with his guitar, while she slept, in front of her mirror; he stayed like that a while, until he could clearly make out the dark profile of himself with his instrument among the rest of the dark room. For the first time in Sam’s young life, who he really was and who he wanted to be met in perfect harmony. The feeling was unexplainable, it felt
like giving everything you had and getting all you ever wanted simultaneously; it felt like bleeding would feel like if bleeding felt good.

The next day he played the song for Rose, who immediately produced a tape-recorder from a closet somewhere and made him a tape of it he played over and over to himself. Rose made a second copy to send to WSOM to see if they would put it on the air, and Sam was soon imagining how every DJ on the station might introduce his song. Afraid he’d tire of it, Sam wouldn’t let himself listen to it for a couple of days, and then one morning, after sleeping more than usual, Sam woke up and heard his taped song with different ears. He was struck dumb. It wasn’t terrible, far worse—it was mediocre, just some average something any kid could have come up with. He quickly erased the tape, and then screamed loud enough and long enough that Rose finally threw the copy she was going to send to the radio station at him, which he then erased. He shuddered thinking he’d almost sent it, that this whole world he planned on conquering would have proof of his mediocrity it could cue up and play for him whenever it wanted. And he could not stop thinking about it: he couldn’t stop thinking about how sure he’d felt, and he couldn’t stop thinking about how wrong he’d been.

After that, of course, the imperfections of anything he came up with were quick to drag themselves like fingernails across some blackboard in his mind, and a fidgety diffidence settled into his enervating expectations. That good feeling came back a few times, but never again with such an overwhelming fervor, and never without an undertow of dread that would soon suck him right
out into he darkest moods he’d had yet, powerful, frightening moods that stretched, like a cold hand, right up through him to work his brain like a sock-puppet. He would just go numb, all the color and heat draining right out of the fantasy he’d always chosen to believe was his future, and the rest of his life now seeming like something someone else had already chewed all the flavor out of. It was hard to shake these moods once they started and it often took the contemplation of utter violence, upon himself or others, to bring him back to the world of the living.

But Sam’s mind, without his permission, figured out something of a solution. While he couldn’t get a full song out, he could get pieces of them—a few licks here, sometimes a bar or two, and there was so much music in that room, so many records spinning, so much tinkering and practicing, such a huge catalogue of memorized songs he played out anyway, that to stir his own little half-glassfuls of melody into it all, allowed our young friend the needed illusion he was creating far more than he really was. And he was good at coming up with these little ditties, these little bits of music, these clustered notes he could let roam free around the dark of his room at night; and because they were liberated from the burden of having to conform to the rest of a song, Sam was free to imagine them being anything and so what he imagined, of course, was an already achieved greatness, that they were part of a song he’d be playing at a concert someday, and it was this concert, which he assumed to be one of thousands, into which he poured his psychic energy. He could see the crowd, the
girls eying him, he could see his feet at the front of the stage, feel the heat of the lights and the vibrations of his own sound returning to him, over and over again, from the back wall. Though lacking the profound depth of feeling he’d had looking into Rose’s mirror that night, these nightly fantasies were, nonetheless, as easy as turning a faucet and submerging himself in a full bath of warm mood. It was a passive, yet reliably experienced sense of pure possibility. It was also an easy pleasure, one that was not grounded in work or effort and, as easy pleasures often do, it developed into a secret indulgence—a reliable solace, a relief from himself, an imagined better life that became, for a while, his reason for living at all. It also, in creeping, undetectable increments, eroded his perspective of consequence and his will. So much so that the struggle of creating itself, that long, excruciating step from nothing to something, every last one of all those wrong notes the right ones are made from, became unbearable for him, every small failure absolute proof of a life he refused to even look at, and so Sam, who had always over-invested in his imagined life, went all in.

But now he stood there alone in his room on a very hot day, having a moment of clarity about all he’d been doing (or not doing) that almost set him shivering. He pictured Rose and Salar, still in the garage, probably wondering could he even write a song. Then he stopped a second, realizing he wasn’t wondering that himself—he still assumed he could. He closed his eyes and screamed. He went to the bathroom: he washed his hands, his face, snatched a tape measure and chalk-line Joe had left atop the toilet tank and went back to his
bedroom. He marked off the measurements and, with a snap of the string, chalked off two straight edges he turned into a long rectangle on the wall. Pulling every song he could out of all that mess, he gave each a name and made a numbered list of them inside it. He pulled some paint and a roller out of his closet and covered up everything on that one wall except his rectangled list. When it dried he’d go right across the wall making a column for each song and just jot down every stupid thing he could remember about each one in order. Looking around his room he realized he’d made a lot of music, actually, he just needed to start organizing it all. He finished, sat down, and stared into the wet paint on the new blank wall and nodded to himself. He’d use this one wall, for now, to get things into definite shape, and leave the rest of the room wild. He slowly sounded out a lot of what was in his head and felt that familiar chill in realizing it was not nearly as great as his greedy mind had led him to believe. He lied back on his bed, taking a long breath and letting himself decompress as he steeled himself to working with what he had, not what he wished he had. He felt relieved now, but also felt a deep grief he couldn’t understand. Truth was, nothing in Sam’s life was going to be as great as he’d lazily allowed himself to think it was going to be, and never again would his mind be able to frolic around his ugly little room like a god’s romping through the universe.

He headed back down the stairs a few minutes later, annoyed with Rose that she hadn’t come up to check on him yet. When he got back to the driveway, she was sitting in the chair still talking to Salar, her bare feet hung off the arm of
the chair and when Salar made her laugh, a small gold chain shimmered in the sun as it dangled off her bare ankle. They both looked surprised to see him.

“Let’s try something,” Sam said.

Sam began the very recognizable introduction to an old rock-n-roll standard, one of those songs that gets remade every few years and that had been a hit in three different decades; a song that had soundtracked movie scenes and been appropriated for commercial jingles; one of those songs that has soaked into our atmosphere and into ourselves to the point that we hum it to ourselves without even knowing it—smartly, Sam had them play one of those. Within twenty minutes, they had a badly timed, but reasonable facsimile of it going in the garage and within an hour they had tried a couple of others, too.

“Our first day wasn’t what I wanted,” Sam said. “I’ll keep working on my songs, okay. But first let’s get ten songs we all know down.”

Salar smiled and bumped him. “So this is going to happen?”

Sam looked at his feet and smiled. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s try that last one again.”

C’mon People Now...  

For those of us across the street, the afterimages of the homes that had been torn down seemed to linger for weeks in our front windows—we all noticed,

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8 Originally published as “Lets Get Together” by singer/songwriter Chet Powers and performed by The Kingston Trio, the version we all remember is the 1967 release “Get Together” by the Youngbloods, a song that has appeared in several sixties flashbacks in films, such as “Forrest Gump” and that seems to soundtrack the wistful ending montages of about every sixties documentary this writer has ever seen.
even those of us who never noticed we noticed—and the lifeless void they left
behind became its own unacknowledged presence in our lives, knuckling around
in the shadows of every conversation we had, even in our seemingly
meaningless phatic greetings and salutations and musings about the weather.

It was a little before this, after the homes had been emptied but were still
standing, that we learned the true size and scope of the complex underway and
the exact number of condominiums being built. We were outraged, of course,
though I don’t know that we were lied to exactly—none of us, once we’d learned
the real number, seemed able to recall the figure we’d held in our heads or how it
got there, only that it was much smaller. Rose decided we should stage an official
protest against it all. In spite her prodigious natural endowment of common
sense, and the obvious depth of Rose’s reasonableness may have been her
defining attribute even as a teenager; she was still young and naive enough to
think that someone had to be responsible for all that was happening—someone
with a face she could look into and a stomach she could feed. She badgered her
father until he really did try to hunt this someone down: Joe talked to the
foreman, who gave him a number to the office, that phone call led to more phone
numbers, each one of which led to unreturned future calls and, eventually, to
what seemed to Joe to be the beating heart of all that was coming, which was an
incestuous and inescapable labyrinth of supposed connected phone numbers
manned by robotic operators that sounded like gods or ghosts or zombies.
Problem was, we were still used to dealing with companies back then, but what
we were dealing with was a corporation, and the stomachs within a corporation are about as feedable as the oxygen molecules in a pool of water are breathable.

Rose’s best friend Suzanne, though, was Mayor Wilson’s daughter, and Joe soon found himself, hat in his hands and his shirt tucked in, with the two girls in the mayor’s office. After trying for half an hour to talk them out of it, the mayor excused himself, made a phone-call, and then granted them a permit to protest the construction. The two girls made signs and planted them in the grass around a group of picnic benches they’d set up in a long rectangle of grass between the curb and sidewalk right in front of the site. Suzanne’s father didn’t desire her official participation in any protest and so her contributions ended there. Rose, with the guile of a wise grandmother, went door to door around Mayberry Lane, asking only of her neighbors that they come to sign a petition that evening.

Joe was uncomfortable with it all now; a protest, any protest, seemed more like something her mother would have done; rebelliousness was not in Joe’s nature—he always longed for things to be for, not against. Joe’s protest had always been against everything outside Somerville and he did that by giving himself so completely to his own neighborhood; and so, to walk up and down the sidewalk right across the street with picket-signs, a sidewalk, by the way, he’d set and poured himself just ten years prior, grated his nerves raw. But Rose wasn’t letting it go and she stalked him through the house, haranguing him, forcing eye-contact, wagging a finger at him and finally yelling at him, over and over: “you
better get those goddamned tables out there." Seeing that she wouldn’t leave well enough alone, he relented beneath her willful threats and did his part.

Sam helped too, putting things in and pulling them out of the oven all that afternoon and by the time a dusk had settled, Rose had the protest area ready and waiting: the picnic tables were draped with checkered cloths and upon them sat containers full of seasoned meats, a stacked pile of paper plates, a soft, leaning tower of napkins, and all known colors of condiments; red, white, and blue plastic cups stood stuffed with every needed plastic utensil; quartered lemons floated below ice cubes in tart, cloudy pitchers of fresh lemonade; pies steamed, and aromatic piles of just-baked salted pretzels and brownies and chocolate-chip cookies sat as soft on their plates as piles of warm laundry. Joe, growing remorseful watching his daughter’s accruing hard work, had thrown an old metal drum from behind the factory into the back of his pick-up, cleaned it up, halved it with the sharp blue flame from his acetylene torch, and then welded it into a huge charcoal grill whose throaty fire roared at the head of it all.

The first few neighbors either crossed the street, waving as they passed, or stayed only long enough to sign their names before moving on. But Barbara and Ellen Gibbs showed up with lawn chairs, a bottle of red wine and a deck of cards. The Gibbs sisters, each widowed, lived together by then at 122 Mayberry, a white bungalow with pastel-pink shutters. They owned house 120 as well, which they filled each summer and every holiday season with their many familial visitors: they had ten grown children between them, a few of whom were raising
families in Somerville themselves, and the rest of whom had sprinkled litters of
grandchildren from New York to California. Colorful cement fixtures made their
twin lawns look like the opened page of an illustrated children’s book: a couple-
dozen bearded gnomes peopled their gardens and a small forest worth of baby
animals—rabbits and foxes and spotted fawns—were scattered around each
front porch. They also kept a big vegetable garden in back every summer,
growing squash and cucumbers, three kinds of lettuce and four kinds of
tomatoes. Behind it all stood a humungous Oak Tree that, every time a breeze
blew in, drizzled acorns across the garage roof and into the backyard grass like a
huge chef adding the last pinch of flavor to his soup.

Though there was five years difference between them, they’d shared that
home and its meals for so long together by then that it was hard to tell the two old
girls apart. They were expansive, corpulent, fleshly women whose every
conversation ended in wheezing bursts of laughter, and whose matching
mountainous bosoms had laughs all their own. They spent several days a week
cleaning St. Cecilia’s Church at the top of Elm Street, and were omnipresent
municipal volunteers—it was hard to remember a single public event without
them. They were also insatiable gossips, though they never really spread secrets
so much as collected them, and they conversed with everyone, always being
careful to listen more than speak. They weren’t shrewish about it, they weren’t
out looking for shoveled evidence to fuel illusions of moral superiority, they were
just simple girls who never quite outgrew that ticklish thrill to be found in peeking at people.

The two sisters anchored themselves in the grass on a couple of lawn chairs, filled their plastic cups with wine and had soon, by pushing food on everyone they pulled into a conversation, gathered quite a little crowd. By the time Joe’s bowling team showed up the grill was full, a radio was playing, and everyone had settled in. I set down my carving knife and walked across the street, looking back once at Sam, who was on the porch listening to everything as he tuned his guitar. Joe had taken Barbara Gibbs’s youngest daughter to his prom and she circulated several pictures of him in an oversized tuxedo to his enthusiastic teammates. As it got later, you could barely make out the shapes of the empty houses in the dark, and the construction site, which was still a little way down the street, wound its workday down like a loud broken clock. I didn’t stay too long that first night and watched most of it from my front porch. It was still springtime, but our springs were a little warmer then, and a few of Joe’s teammates, filled with all that good food, and perhaps a cup or two of the good sisters’ wine, started dancing with their shirts off, the firelight rippling off their bare torsos as if they were the first or the last of us humans that would ever inhabit that little patch of dirt and grass.

A house Sam and Rose had played in when they were young children was among those being torn down, and Rose grabbed a small hand-saw, a chisel,
and two flashlights, dragging Sam over one night to help her find an attic rafter they had once carved their initials into. They each crawled along the apposing outer edges of the attic where the roof came down almost to the floor, the beams from their flashlights bouncing around them like tossed rubber balls. Sam found the initials in the furthest corner, covered in a thick shroud of cobweb that took them several minutes to clear from the beams and several more to brush out of their clothes. They’d carved it before their parents had married one another and Sam pondered his old initials as Rose began sawing one side with the small handsaw.

“Look,” Sam tapped the O after the S. “I still had my maiden name.”

Rose laughed and poked him in the ribs with the saw.

“Why do you need this?” Sam asked.

“A memento—it’s going in your box. Half our childhood’s about to be ripped right out of the world—doesn’t that make you sad?”

“Your childhood,” Sam said. “A lot of mine was on the other side of the tracks.”

“I’ll give it to you on your wedding day, just before you finally lose your virginity.” Rose laughed and clapped at herself.

Sam shined the flashlight in her face like a cop. “Are you not a virgin anymore?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you thought it was funny I might be.”
“Might be?” She rolled her eyes. “Now that’s funny.”

“Wow,” Sam said, unfazed. “Who was the lucky guy? Can I tell Joe? I think he should hear it from me.”

Sam tapped her in the head with the flashlight and the two kicked and shoved each other a minute and then lay, their flashlights on the floor between them, staring up into their own wildly exaggerated shadows in the low pitched ceiling.

“Is there some point I’m not getting with these boxes of yours?”

Rose sighed as a moth tumbled around in their cloud of light. “My grandmother made me that little box of knick-knacks and recipes and her wooden spoon just before she died—whenever I think about her it’s cool to be able to run my hands over all that stuff. We’ve had this whole life together, Sam, the two of us. It’s almost over if you’re really running off at the end of the summer.”

“Alright, Rose,” Sam said. “Okay.” Then he reached up and tapped their initials. “But in case you’ve forgotten—that was our wedding day.”

She started laughing. “I was trying not to remember.” She handed him the saw and he started on the other side.

“It was your idea,” Sam said. “You were bigger than me then, remember? Bossy too—you made all the decisions.”

“I just wanted to be blood brothers,” she said, and then stopped to correct herself. “Blood brother and sister.”

“No,” Sam said. “That was my idea—you wouldn’t cut your hand.”
“I was stronger, but you were always tougher,” she said. “Even though you were amazingly small. Tiny.”

“That was because of my cleft-palate—I couldn’t eat right.” He was annoyed now.

She started laughing. “I’m not making fun of you. You really were tough. I wish you could’ve seen yourself—you hardly winced when they stuck those huge needles into your teensy little arms. Mom used to talk about it all the time—I think that’s the first thing made her love you so much.”

“Your mom?” Sam smirked. “It wasn’t her I married up here.”

Rose laughed and set the hammer and chisel down. “What if she could have kept herself together?”

“I’d still be living out near the hospital.”

“Maybe we could have adopted you—it’s not like your mother would care.”

“She would care,” Sam said. “She’s just not the sort to let others solve her problems.”

“No,” Rose said and shook her head. “She’s just the sort to consider her one and only child, first and foremost, a problem.” She picked some cobweb, real or imagined, out of her hair. “The way my mom is,” she said. “It isn’t her fault. She never meant to hurt you.”

“She hurt you. She’s your mother.”

Rose turned on her side and stared at him until he looked back.

“Whenever you talk about her,” She said. “You’re whole face changes.”
Rose picked the tools back up, rolled over onto her back and, with a last tap of the hammer, popped an imperfect square of wood off, a trail of splinters coming off its back like the dried out roots of a pulled dead plant. They both looked at their old initials in the light. Rose smiled, tracing the O in his last name with her ring finger. “We had a lot of fun in this attic.”

“The good old days,” Sam said. “Things were so much simpler then—I was still just your husband.”

How does that old joke go? People love a crowd—the bigger the crowd, the more people show up for it. For several weeks, that’s sort of what happened. It wasn’t just those of us living on Mayberry Lane, family and friends from neighboring streets drifted over into our nightly gatherings as well; fifty, sometimes a hundred of us would congregate: little league teams came by in full uniform; the priest and the deacon from St. Cecilia’s, both fully frocked, walked down after afternoon mass; there was a giddy sense of shared mischief to it all—entire tabled families sat in their colorful summer brights, mom and dad kissing each other on the mouth as their kids flicked forkfuls of food at them. We ended one sunny afternoon after another out there together, all of us greedily investing in what was a general and unexpected need for reacquaintance—it was as if every one of us, once we’d started eating, realized just how hungry we were. New friendships formed too, and a few new nicknames were broken in. People began settling into unofficial seating arrangements and a seamless and organic
division of labor rose up whereby all the charcoal and plates and food arrived with the crowd and were cleaned up as they left. We never did get much protesting done—we planted small torches, played cards, we sang songs too, though increasingly, they became more celebratory than songs of protest as the initial fires of righteous indignation that had started it all sort of stilled and settled after a while, eventually trickling, like rainwater, down into this reservoir of camaraderie rising around us.

The old man, too, joined us every evening, and the presence in the group of this man, who had made life in Somerville seem sacred, consecrated what was already a growing, if undefined, sense of significance among those of us gathering; we even suggested he make paintings of us, which he refused to do, though all children willing to stand close enough to him were drawn immediate cartoon versions of themselves. It did seem though, that the old man’s sun had come back up and his cloudy eyes glowed with the thoughtless illumination of a saint’s. When Channel 76 News showed up one evening, he even managed, without answering a single question, to give a thoughtful sermon on what life in Somerville always had and always should be like.

The construction never did stop and not one person from any company ever came to see us. I’m not sure any of us noticed. I think we all sensed that the construction itself, for all its ungodly bellowing, was only the seeable surface of some unrecognizable and undeniably advancing dread, and it was this, looking back on it, that we were really trying to ward off. Those nightly picnics lasted
almost a full month and I’ve never stopped thinking of them since. I think for
those weeks things, for all of us, just got so simple again: we knew we were right
and that they were wrong, and for a while we huddled together and helped one
another into this collective regression into a lost childhood creed that being right
was all it took to prevail. It was silly, even frivolous, and it certainly didn’t solve a
thing. Still, I bet we all still think about our time together during those late spring
evenings—maybe it just always feels good to feel young again.

As for Sam, he couldn’t stop thinking about the acoustics of that house or
the way he and Rose sounded together in it, and so he began roaming through it
at night while our picnics went on outside. Enough streetlight filtered in through
its windows that he could, after a few minutes, see his way around its shadows
as he wandered through it strumming along to our nightly gatherings. The picnics
usually ended in an hour’s worth of chanted songs from those that stayed latest. I
sometimes lasted to the end, but usually watched and listened to it from my front
porch. One evening, humming along as I raised my last glass of wine, I noticed
Sam, in an open window of the empty house, hovering there like a ghost a few
minutes and then—Poof!—he he was gone.

One particular evening, the old man, who had a real habit by then of
wandering off, ambled right across the overgrown front lawn, up the stairs,
through the front door and right into Sam’s hiding spot for what would turn out to
be their final game of hide-n-seek. Once inside, the old man could hear Sam
playing and slowly ascended the stairs, creeping right up to the room Sam was playing in without his even noticing.

“Come out, come out!” The old man shrieked.

Sam jumped and then crouched down again as if he could make himself smaller and harder to see in the dark, staring toward the origin of the voice that was now bouncing its way around the room, blinking his eyes just clear enough that he could see the figure taking shape in the doorway. The old man’s shock of white hair absorbed the streetlight coming in and fluttered in the dark like a pale flame. He let a few moments pass then stepped toward Sam and materialized fully into the dim light, cackling away. The old man, who had emceed all those hide-n-seek tournaments, had been randomly running after Sam for weeks, remembering, for some reason, that he never had caught and tagged him it. Sam slid off to the side of the window and crept quietly in a half-circle until it was he in the doorway and the old man in front of the window. The window slammed shut and Sam crept forward to see if anyone outside noticed. Another song went up outside but it was muted now against the closed window. The old man stared out at the singing, a wrinkled hand flowing over the glass in graceful movements, as if he was imagining himself conducting the song just outside it; Sam realized, after a minute, that what the old man was really pretending to do was paint, and he wondered whether his imagined subjects were the people outside or whether he was tracing their own pale reflections in the glass. The old man stopped,
seeming to know Sam hadn’t gone anywhere, and went back to watching the crowd.

“Why do you watch them from up here?”

Sam left the room, but the old man, energized again, yelled something and followed after him. And so they went, room to room, through the upstairs of that empty house, the old man not cackling, but laughing softly now and laughing, it seemed, only to himself; it was a weary, knowing sound that bubbled up out of his tired throat as he lurched after Sam’s song through the dark, a laughter full of scorn and pity. When he got too close Sam would stamp a foot and bang away hard enough to startle him and then go silent and slide away, walking toe-heel, tow-heel, like an Indian scout, watching the old man, an assured smile on his face, feel around in the dark for him. But when Sam left him in a few seconds of silence, the old man quickly grew frightened, shrieking and grasping about for anything he could hold onto, until Sam, from across the room, would start playing and begin the chase again. The old man stopped at one point to snap his fingers and tap his foot and for a few seconds the two of them, Sam smiling himself a little now, made music together. But then Sam stopped playing entirely and went back to stare, once again, out the front room window: his mother was off to the side in a lawn-chair, sipping wine and smiling her thin smile as Joe wildly reenacted some game from long ago with his friends; Rose, shaking a full pan of shrimp over the flames of the grill, said something over her shoulder to make fun of him and everyone laughed as he stomped around, taking exaggerated offense.
“Can’t stay where you are forever!” The old man was back in the room, feeling blindly about for him.

A lot of things had been left behind and the air in that house, if you stayed still long enough, had the shocked feeling of violation in it: forgotten silverware was scattered everywhere, glinting like shards of broken glass in the dark, and old clothing huddled into silent piles tall enough for a small child to still be hiding under; abandoned toys littered the front room, including an old play-kitchen, its plastic food and cookware scattered around the prone body of a headless naked doll; and nearby sat an old jack-in-the-box, the music long sprung out of it and its clown lying face down over the side—his red hair, black in the dark, brushed the floor, and a broken spring stuck, like a knife, out of his back. A fleet of small trucks were parked beneath the window and Sam kicked a little bulldozer toward the old man, who shrieked and hopped around when it hit his foot. Sam laughed, began playing again, and the old man followed him out of the room. Sam could see he’d scared him a little and smiled as he led him to the stairs. Descending backwards down several steps, Sam let the old man wander almost to the top stair before tapping on the banister; but the old man, for some reason, had gathered a bunch of the toys in his arms and stepped with them right over the threshold. With a loud shriek, he was on his way down.

Sam rushed up from beneath to halt his fall, but the old man, possessed of a sudden nihilistic willingness to let his gravitational fate be what it may, did nothing to slow his gathering momentum and almost tumbled right on over Sam,
who shrieked himself now and staggered backwards down the staircase, bouncing from one wall to the other as the spilled toys cartwheeled down the stairs ahead of them; all together, they made enough racket that you would have thought every child who had ever lived in that house had come running back home at once. Sam steadied himself just before they got to the bottom and then the old man, sensing he was safe, laughed uproariously for the rest of the ride down. He tried to get a good close look at Sam’s face by the time they’d reached the floor, entwining his bony knuckles into Sam’s shirt as the buttons from his own caught on the strings of the guitar and pulled discordant sounds out of it. They did something of a mad dance, the two of them, among the toys at the bottom of the stairs until Sam sat him down on a step and yanked free. Sam backed off, breathing heavy and staring at him.

“IT IS YOU!” The old man screamed. “I got him!” He jumped up and went to open a window.

But Sam snuck out the front door and down the steps of the empty house, putting a rock through the window before it was ever opened. We heard the window break and a few of us rushed over toward all the yelling and laughing going in in the dark. Joe, after inspecting the broken window and wandering the perimeter for perpetrators, threw an arm around the old man’s shoulders and walked him home, ignoring him as he jabbered on about Sam.

No one gathered outside the next evening and that window I’d seen Sam standing in flickered with a dim orange light. When the boy snuck in, he heard
footsteps creaking across the ceiling and the muffled voices of a conversation taking place above him. Sam quietly scaled the stairs and slipped over to peek into the lighted bedroom. Joe stood inside with two other neighbors, sipping coffee and talking among themselves in very low voices as the old man, his brushes and paints all laid out on a table they’d moved in, was painting a huge mural on one of the walls.

“You could rig more light in here, couldn’t you, Joe?”

“Of course I could, but we don’t want to be obvious.”

“Just cover the window.”

“He keeps looking out of it.”

The old man walked over to the window and did just that, staring a full minute before going back to his painting.

“With those eyes—I’m surprised he can see at all.”

“I think he’s just doing it all from memory.”

“So, cover the window.”

“He keeps going over and touching the glass.”

Sam watched a few minutes, alone, before walking back down the stairs and out into the dark. The men in the room were hoping they could get the house declared an historical landmark. Within days, however, the contractor’s men, carrying what looked like large handheld jigsaws, were crawling that place, inside and out, like tics; before lunch they’d brought a crane in to daintily lift an entire section of the roof off and then, using a dozen men and some straps and belts,
plucked the painted second floor wall right out of the house and set it down onto the bed of that truck as soft and gentle as ambulatory workers settling in a gurneyed patient. Hard to stop the world’s spinning and progress, like nature, will eventually take its course.

Everything accelerated after that. Gigantic dump-trucks arrived, fifteen feet high, some of them, if they were an inch, and the way they staggered down Mayberry Lane, it was as if they were not really being driven at all, but were instead being sucked right into some gravitational vortex on the lifeless, vacated side of the street. The noise splashed the soup right out of our soup-bowls and we all ended up on our porches, squinting into it all and wincing beneath the racket. The dust was everywhere: coating our windshields, clogging the screens in our screen-doors, if you spent the day working in your yard it ran off you in the shower and swirled like a liquefying shadow down the drain; even the posters of the missing child stapled to the telephone poles, blurry to begin with, were getting harder to see each day.

Within the site, earth-movers and bulldozers were unchained and let to crawl down off huge flatbeds to prowl about the emptied yards, tearing lawns, uprooting trees and flattening the abandoned bushes until finally, they crept right up to the vacated homes, their appendages feeling for the soft spots with the chilling deliberation of an insect’s antennae. For ten days straight, you could stand in any spot in Somerville and listen to those homes being torn down—it sounded like the earth itself trying to cough something up. What was left after
was a homeless, treeless moonscape pounded so flat that I could see clear out
to Old Main Street from my porch as it tried to refurbish itself that summer.

Dream Lanes, the old bowling alley, still stood. The S had fallen off the
end of its sign and it wavered in the late afternoon haze like a sought after
signpost out of some apocalyptic fairy-tale. It stood proudly against it all and
seemed to be the one recognizable thing that kept the rest of the road from being
sucked into a gaping infinity. On our side of the street, we all ended our days out
on our front porches, no one speaking, no one waving, everyone just standing,
our arms folded and staring straight ahead, alone with our thoughts as the sun
set down into it all, our faces as null and pale as a row of late afternoon moons.

All the long days, fattening men sat inside these blind leviathans, moving
them about with the lethargic fingers of overtired children bored with their toys but
unable to stop playing with them. The demolition, as I said, took little more than a
week, but it turned out those old homes, once torn open and laid bare, actually
poisoned the atmosphere and needed to be buried in a special landfill. A wave of
workers arrived in shiny suits and masks, and with the thoughtless communal
efficiency of an ant colony they had, within days, picked the rubble clean and
trundled off with the toxic crumbs from the machine’s picnic.

The houses were left for another week or so in several pyramids of rubble
and when Sam spotted the old man wandering among the ruins one night, he fell
in behind him, taking a loose pipe from the rubble and drumming an ominous
beat against the pile of debris. When the old man peered around to see who was
following him, Sam played louder and faster. He could see the old man, but the old man couldn’t see him and there was no guitar to put him at ease this time. Around and around they went, Sam banging and the old man shrieking, from one pyramid of rubble to the next. Then the old man started making frightened little noises with this throat and hyperventilating and so Sam stopped chasing him and beat a more soothing melody for a while. When Sam tapped out *shave and a haircut*—dun-dun-da-dun-dun—the old man smiled and answered back—ding-ding. Sam smiled too, shook his head, and slunk away, leaving the old man wondering and wandering again in the dark.

Over several weeks, the workers in the site multiplied; they’d been hired, cheaply, from tiny towns ensconced in huge, geometric southern states and resided in motels and affordable housing a few towns over. They seemed identical to me the way groups of people you don’t know tend to, and people crossed the site in front of my place and the Meriganas to avoid what was now a giant hive of incomprehensible activity. A leader did rise from it all, a foreman noticeably muscled and with a brylcreamed hairline that came almost down to the lenses of his mirrored sunglasses. His men seemed to like him and he was right at home among the tumult of that place, talking a million miles an hour on one of those huge, prehistoric, handheld cellphones, and constantly breaking out into these incantatory homilies he wove out of pure profanity, as if he were a high priest overseeing a very loud mass.
The old man wanted to paint the workers the way he’d painted so many others, and so he tossed his paints into his satchel, put an easel under his arm and walked on over. The men all stopped to stare, though no one approached him for several days. But he kept leaping into uninvited conversations, asking complete strangers about wives and children that weren’t really theirs and inquiring the status of ballplayers most hadn’t heard of. The old man, though he never did seem to doubt his own temporal illusions, and why would he, it was the way he perceived things that everyone had always liked about him, did sense the men’s discomfort, a general sense of being unwelcome and, by the end of the week, was becoming increasingly cantankerous. After he’d screamed and hurled rocks at a delivery truck that had nearly run him over, the foreman, after a very loud phone-call as he followed him around, decided to cage him in. He found a spot for him and had his men build an immediate fifteen-foot square pen for him to set up his easel and paints. The old man’s art had always sprung from two things: a palpably felt, if sometimes mawkishly expressed, affection for his subjects, and his exquisitely developed eye for detail. But by that summer he could see little without walking right up to it, breaking open his one good eye and then running it, like a magnifying glass, over whatever it was he was trying to see. Up in that quiet room he could paint from memory, but out in all that noise, he was unable to do that. Alone in that pen, he couldn’t see any details, but only a maelstrom of indecipherable toil, heard only scraps of conversation that drifted like torn bits of paper among the cacophonous winds of all that rabble. And so he
spent most of his time rubbing his stinging eyes and trying to slap the dust out of his clothes.

The earthmovers and bulldozers had moved on by then, and the endless sound filling the air was no longer destruction but construction: boots and hammers and falling wood and several dozen different kinds of saws came together in a plodding noise that just kept coming. And it was that sun-up to sun-down rumbling that got to you, that tired your mind and blistered your nerves; the deep guttural growling coming out from the belly of it all, a sound that seemed to have a horrifying potential in it, as if some great beast had crept right up and was waiting for us around the next corner of our lives, its teeth bared and reared back on its haunches, somewhere just beyond our comprehension. For several days the old man flittered about that jerrybuilt pen as nervous as a cricket in a terrarium and, far as I could tell, he never did paint anything.

**Pictures Came And Broke Your Heart**

I kept whittling away those summer nights on my front porch. I’d spent much of my childhood helping my father, who was major figure in the model

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9 From the song “Video Killed The Radio Star”, the one and, far as I know, only hit of the eighties British pop band The Buggles. The song, actually recorded in 1979, became a quintessential eighties classic when MTV played the song’s its inaugural video as it went on the air on the first of August, 1981. Group member Trevor Horn would claim the song to be inspired by the J.G. Ballard short story “The Sound Sweeper” in which a mute boy in the future, who vacuums up stray music he finds in a world without it, comes across an opera singer in a sewer. Horn also claims that he felt an era was about to pass and that music was becoming too technological. He was talking about the sixties and seventies. No matter, every generation thinks the world ends with them and for them, of course, it always does.
railroad world. His specialty had become my own, which was hand crafting entire towns and cities for the model trains to run through: we constructed a bustling nineteenth century Hannibal, Missouri one time, complete with a flowing Mississippi River powered by pumps he’d bolted beneath the table; we made cow towns, old mining camps, we even made an exact replica of the original Levittown once, and it all came alive with the flick of a switch. My dad sometimes worked to spec, but mostly he just built whatever little bygone world had struck his fancy; then he’d make a few phone calls to hobby shops and, soon enough, people I’d never meet again would enter our home and drift quietly to the observatory that was our basement. They took months to build and never more than two weeks to sell. We would then label everything, disassemble it piece by piece, pack it in boxes, and then reassemble it all in someone else’s spare room or basement. When he died earlier that year, I just sort of inherited his little hobby and business, I guess. It’s become my living since—you’d be surprised what people pay for them.

The evolution of Sam’s musical vision poured from his open bedroom windows and was my soundtrack once the noise settled down enough at night in the site across the street. It wasn’t easy on him, and I laughed more than hummed along at first. However traumatic Sam’s initial songwriting attempt was for him, he never did waver, after that, on who he wanted to be and who he wanted to be was someone great.
To be truly great at anything is to enter, as subject, into a lonesome lifetime pact with your own unreachable ideal. Because a celestial and unpolluted perfection illuminates all initial inspiration, and it was up to Sam to find a way to pull what threads he could into a corporeal reality and begin his weaving. It's the million plodding steps that get most people. You do, you observe, you augment, you do again; and you repeat this pattern in perpetuum, continually finding tiny little things to work on, and finding some way of turning mundane repetition into meaningful ritual and to turn exertion itself into the end your after rather than the means to get there. Those of us who grow ourselves large grow ourselves like seedlings: by thinking and willing and churning atoms into existence, by splitting molecules, by slowly, doggedly spreading one layer of cells over another, by forcing our roots down and ourselves up through the dirt until breaking, at last, into a sky we'll only ever climb high enough into to feel the fleeting warmth of its closest sun.

Sam could only handle a few minutes per night at first, and he built slowly from there. I'd chuckle over my work, listening to a chord here, a few more there, and then I'd hear him kick things and curse until Rose came in to calm him down. Sometimes they yelled at each other. But Sam, who was a walking talking encyclopedia of fifty years of American pop music, would spend hours after, playing his way through them.

It wasn't so hard for him to avoid the typical distractions of a boy his age. He took his social cues from only two people: his mother, whose militant
antipathy toward anyone else’s opinions on anything, but especially toward herself, was the defining characteristic of her personality; and Rose, who had always been over-occupied not with friends but with family, and who, as some girls do who’ve never had to try hard to be popular, saw little value in it. Sam had no girlfriends, no friends, he never had anywhere to go. He was that rare teenager who didn’t really care much about what others his age thought of things, and was almost untouched by the dramatically important rises and falls in rank that absorb most teen-age lives.

And though Sam did, after his initial crushing failure, run back home to take refuge beneath his heroes and their songs, he had done so with a much different sort of attitudinal focus; his boyish reverence for them had mostly burned off, and the idea that had always lurked in the depths of his consciousness—that he was their someday equal—was setting now inside himself like a newly poured floor. He was no longer just trying to play their music exactly as they did, learning each song with the timidity of someone seeking approval; but he was, instead, trying to internalize their language completely, seeing their rhythms and their tone-colors and their voices as something more like raw ore for his own furnace.

One thing Sam had always managed to do plenty of was play. The kid was a worker. He played early in the morning before school, sometimes he skipped school and played by himself out by the river; he played when he got home; he played in Rose’s room at night; he played through his chronic insomnia,
sometimes breaking right through the dawn. He spent almost every cent Joe gave him for an allowance on records and had amassed well over five-hundred of them by the time he was fifteen. By then he could teach himself, by ear, to play any song he wanted, and had even, as an exercise, literally learned to play a lot of them backwards; he’d taken both his acoustic and electric guitars apart and put them back together himself numerous times—Joe even helped him make a homemade one in the garage; he taught himself to tune them with either hand, he even routinely brushed his teeth and tried to write with his left hand after he’d read somewhere that it built dexterity. Sam clocked a good fifty hours a week in on that guitar—more during school breaks—and much of it, as it turned out, in a constant daily grind of an unplanned and yet, in the end, exquisitely designed constant practice that was always pushing his playing to its limits, stretching it in tiny unnoticeable increments that, over time, were adding up. What that boy did, all by himself and without anyone noticing, was to get good, real good. In fact, his playing alone—his technique, his sheer ability, his sound—may have already been great.

And though his songwriting skills were nowhere near as developed, he had sworn off the easy relief of his fantasies and had acclimatized himself to, had even begun to harmonize himself with, the cold, spartan silence of his unadorned bedroom. He developed for himself a daily regimen: every single day, for a least a little while, would now pluck note after note from that instrument until the notes became chords, the chords sections, and those sections eventually songs; he let
himself go slow, a single step at a time, really pouring, as best he could, his complete attention into every last footfall of his journey, stopping, looking back, seeing what was wrong and then fixing it, and every little thing fixed meant he had to alter something else too; this all happened at a glacial pace, through serious mental exertion and in a constant state of dissatisfaction he found exhausted him. To really make things better is to constantly and consciously focus on what is wrong and for Sam, this part was especially painful, for this was the one area of his life where he never did that; music had, for too long, been a warm fantasy, the always possible something someday that he lived for. Music had always been about possibility and so to now purposely focus on the blemishes and pockmarks in the developing skins of his creations felt a little like having his own peeled off. So for a while he screamed and swore and broke things up there. But still, he made himself do it.

But back in Joe’s garage our young Somerville trio had been practicing daily and, with Sam driving them, had begun to sound like a real band. Only thing was, Sam wasn’t letting his songs out of his room yet and so they were playing the oldies Sam grew up with on WSOM. They could almost get through a ten-song set. Salar, though his impatience set the boys bickering at times, also had talent and a work-ethic Sam respected and those thousand voices of his to break the tension; an unspoken agreement grew between them wherein Sam controlled the music, but Salar’s extroverted personality was allowed to publicly dominate the rest of their friendship.
Because a fourth member now, had completed what would be the very inner circle of kids that would constellate out from Joe’s garage that summer: Rose’s best friend Suzanne, the granddaughter of our famous painter and the daughter of our longtime mayor. Suzanne was a tall, willowy girl with pale green eyes most people thought were blue; she had calmative, amiable good looks; one of those girls with a nebulous prettiness depending, more than most, upon the fickle eyes of her beholders. She showed up every practice in denim cut-offs and a bikini-top, slathered herself in oils designed to brown the alabaster skin of her mother’s Scandinavian heritage, and sat on a beach-chair in the driveway filling out mailing lists for her father’s upcoming campaign. Intermittently, she’d close her eyes, recline all the way back, and surrender to the music and to the hot sun, stretching out those long gleaming limbs and then absentmindedly tapping her fingers around her glistening navel. A natural organizer, Suzanne lacked Rose’s physicality but shared her can-do nature; it wasn’t long before she’d hung a clipboarded list of songs from a nail in the garage along with a permit she wanted them to sign to play in the upcoming Fourth of July Parade, much to Salar’s delight and Sam’s mumbled consternation.

Suzanne’s arrival upended the group’s dynamics at first: Salar was so thrilled to have a girl to flirt with who wasn’t worried about tipping Sam over into one of his moods that his focus, with his body following, often wandered right out of the garage and into the driveway, especially during any of his solos. She tried ignoring him, but he made that impossible, and before she knew it, Suzanne was
taking his side in things almost by default. Any time Suzanne said something, Salar would spread his arms and scream “exactly,” or “that’s what I’m talking about,” whether what she’d said was at all exact or whether it had anything to do with what he or anyone else had been talking about. She liked him. She loved the way he threw his arms around everyone and his constant pouring fountain of silly compliments. He liked her too, for sure. Fifty times an afternoon he’d try to make her, just her, laugh; and at least once per practice, he’d tiptoe, winking at her, up to Sam when Sam was lost in thought and kiss him loudly on the cheek just to watch him freak out. He also thought to include everyone; it was hard to be funny without making fun of people, but Salar was. Okay, he made fun of Sam a little, but he was even gentle about that, and Sam deserved it—acting like he was some sort of genius. But Sam liked him too, a lot, and the only person in the world she’d ever seen Sam like was Rose. She might be his girlfriend if he really wanted her to be. Her dad, though, would not like this, not one bit. Salar’s father was the Iranian who had laid off dozens of his most loyal constituents, several of whom were campaign volunteers. Still, her dad would have to accept him—there was no good reason not to.

A gridlock had arisen between the two boys. Salar swore that the song of Sam’s they’d begun that first day could be great if Sam would just let them all finish it, and was somewhat bored of the oldies Sam kept wanting to play; usually, as the afternoons wore on, Salar would start joking more and working less. On this particular afternoon, he was driving Sam crazier than usual,
continually falling to his knees in front of Suzanne, gyrating to a bass line he’d been working on all night as Sam paced behind him, shaking his head.

“Can we stick to our songs,” Sam said.

“Where are our songs?” Salar stood back up and faced him. “These sound so familiar, like they might be someone else’s.”

“When we get fifteen songs down,” Sam said. “Really nail them. Then we can move on to our own stuff.”

“First it was five, then it was ten,” Salar said.

“It was always fifteen,” Rose chimed in.

“Oh, here we go.” Salar walked over to Suzanne. “You hear from one, you hear from both. Do these two ever have differing opinions?”

“Not true,” Rose said. “Sam goes whole days without saying a word to anyone.”

“I mean on his talking days,” Salar said. “Let’s ask the person who’s known you two the longest.”

They all looked at Suzanne, who put her head down and laughed. “It’s always been that way.”

“That’s so untrue,” Rose stood behind her drum set and folded her arms in front of her. “We don’t do that. We don’t,” she looked to Sam. “Do we?”

Sam shrugged his shoulders.

“Did you know there’s no real blood between them?” Salar said. “Isn’t that just amazing? To me they seem like twins.”
“Always have,” Suzanne was laughing and hiding behind her papers to avoid eye-contact with Rose, who was incredulous, if a little amused, she was taking sides against her.

Salar was excited now. “If I pinch him,” he said, walking towards Sam. “I bet she’ll say ouch.” Sam waved him away when he tried.

Within a few minutes, everyone had calmed enough for Sam to say “a one—a two—a one, two, three, four. . . “ They really were getting the songs down and Sam was still getting a huge kick out of hearing the music he’d grown up with flame right up around him. And in spite of their daily squabbling, he loved playing with Salar, appreciating that he really did go home and work on his bass lines at night; they worked well together and, once they’d each acclimated to the distraction of Suzanne’s presence, even their little spats became sort of timing mechanisms for needed breaks.

Rose was a competent but insecure drummer and her sudden constant need for Sam’s approval, when it had always been the other way around, was a main thrust behind the tectonic shifts that had been rumbling, unacknowledged, within the dynamics of their own relationship—something she tried to ignore and look away from, and something he couldn’t help wondering about and staring into.

Ever since Rose cut herself, things had just been different. She spent her entire first night home in his bed. Usually, when she fell asleep in his room, she’d wake after a few hours and walk back to her own, but that morning, Sam woke up
in his chair by the window, his head wedged against the wall. He stood and
groaned, rubbing himself, cranking his neck around, and then he noticed Rose
yawning and stretching herself out in his doorway; at first, his eyes went to her
bandaged wrist, but the morning sun was flooding the room, and its light
dissolved her sheer nightshirt into a glowing mist around her as it warmed itself
all over her young body. He saw everything and this time, he didn’t look away. He
should have, he was going to, but, sleeping only four hours over two days, and
after all that had just happened, it was a profound relief to just let himself look. It
didn’t feel wrong. In fact, it felt so good, and in such obvious contrast to the
overwhelming deluge of guilt he’d been expecting, that he experienced it as
something of an absolution—as if all that time he’d spent thinking it was wrong to
look at her like that, or to feel about her that way—as if all that had been what
was really wrong, and that he had now, at long last, seen the light.

Once he’d started though, he couldn’t stop. Right alongside his guitar, just
looking at her became a tireless obsession. Out of habit, perhaps, he did keep
trying not to for a while, but attempts to reconstruct his earlier piety were feeble
and failed, and soon enough the trying itself just sort of dissolved into the
undulating pendulous weight of her breasts beneath her shirts, or the soft globes
of her rear-end as she pulled her jeans on in the morning—he’d even catch
himself thinking about the plump muscles of her bare legs an hour before she
would put her nightshirt on. He was, in secret, getting to know this new body she
was so proud of as completely, as relentlessly, and as slowly, as he was getting
to know the sound of his own music. And all this unallowable staring perforated a
seal, turned a valve, and tapped right into a huge reservoir of unexpressed
feeling toward her that had been rising steadily inside him for years, and now he
couldn’t stop the flow. The more he looked, the more he had to look, and as
thrilling as this new ardor was as it streamed through him, beneath it flowed a
muted undertow of remorse and grief, some unrecognized realization that the
uncorroded way he’d always loved her was already gone.

As to his music, Sam was already adding to the old songs he was playing,
making them more his own. Rock-n-roll is a populist and democratic folk-art that
came rising out of a country that itself seemed to be entering its early years of
physical maturity, was just realizing what it could be, and that seemed to have
everything in front of it. Sam was changing the songs—listening to them was one
thing, but once he’d been running them down through his hands a while, he
couldn’t keep himself from tinkering with them, he kept raising their tempos and
thickening their tone-colors—they were coming out richer in many respects, but
there was also a dark, self-conscious irony to them now; a restless sort anyway,
Sam just couldn’t let them go back to being their old, boisterous, silly selves
anymore.

Rose stood sometimes in amazement watching this other side of him
come out. Even with his fits of temper, even with all his skulking around muttering
to himself, a real confidence was rising in him—his upsets no longer rising out a
strangling self-doubt, but from banging and bruising himself against the hard new
shoots of his own suddenly thriving expectations; a glorious, if often awkward and
ineloquent, frustration had burned the chary shadows of his familiar malaise right
off. Alone at night in his room was where things were toughest for him, and Rose
often heard him coaxing, then pleading and then screaming at the walls; she
could calm him down sometimes, other times not. No matter, he wouldn’t stop
now. Sam had what he’d never had—a full life. He had work he cared about, he
had friends, he felt important and, though she was his drummer, he wasn’t, for
once, dependent upon her for any of it. Only she really knew how hard it had all
been for him and she was so proud of him. She was happy for him too. How
could she not be?

What Salar said sort of bothered her—people had always made fun of how
they were together. Still, she loved this little group they were forming; Salar was
hilarious and he was good with Sam, his compulsive babbling balanced out
Sam’s quietness and she’d seen him, numerous times, lift Sam, laughing, right
out of a thick muck of mood he’d fallen into.

But on this particular day, Salar was more distracted and Sam more
aggravated than usual. They weren’t even halfway through their set when Salar
wandered and fell, once again, at Suzanne’s feet, who, once again, smiled but
refused to look at him. Sam shut his eyes tight and began pacing back and forth
as Rose banged a cymbal to get Salar’s attention.

“Would you quit screwing around,” she said.
But Salar was fixed on Suzanne. “What do you say darlin’.” He’d been watching old Elvis movies and impersonating him all week. “How ‘bout you and I come together at last and bust out of this one horse town.”

Suzanne smiled. “I wouldn’t want to ruin our friendship.”

That she was participating gave him confidence. “Why keep denyin’ it. I think we always knew friendship was never goin’ to be enough.”

“Not just a friend,” Suzanne smiled again. “I’m starting to think of you more like a brother.”

“Nothin’ more than an idea,” Salar kept drawling. “Just another passing cloud in that pretty head of yours.”

“If anyone were to pinch you,” Suzanne looked at him now and smirked. “I might say ouch.”

Salar dropped his bass and headed out toward her as Sam paced behind him, scowling and pulling his own hair. “How ‘bout you hurt me a little for you, an’ I’ll hurt you a little for me.”

Suzanne leapt out of the chair and pretended to run away. Salar turned on Sam before running after her. “No kid our age wants to listen to this old stuff.”

“We’re playing it different,” Sam said. “Can’t you hear that?”

“It’s still someone else’s old songs—I thought you wanted to be original.”

Rose had come out from behind her drums now. “You’re the one keeps pretending to be Elvis.”
“Am I the only one pretending?” Salar threw his hands up as he walked up the driveway after Suzanne.

Sam unstrapped his guitar, lit a cigarette, and lagged behind him toward the din and the dust rising out of the coming condominiums. By now, other teenagers were beginning to mill around in the street near the Merigana’s driveway. Like I said, cable television had only arrived in Somerville early that spring and, nested among the movie channels and the all-news stations and all the inane family programming was this one anarchic music station: it played a frenzied amalgamation of short films set to whatever music the young listened to, and it seemed to be announcing the arrival of a new world order by consistently running these defiant, self-promoting commercials where crude graffiti scrawled itself, as you watched, all over school teachers and police officers and even President Reagan; each hour, on the hour, it thumbed through, at dizzying speed, a montage of world images: Mount Rushmore, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids in Egypt, the Acropolis, the Mona Lisa, even Mr. Shakespeare—all the great humanistic achievers and achievements recreated in an eerily lit, stop-motion animation that looked a lot like the time-lapse film footage used to show a rose budding, blooming, and going to mold all in a few seconds. This all ended seeing the earth from space and then the U.S. astronaut, in his huge, oxygenated white suit, planting a flag showing the station’s cartoon-colored logo superimposed over the stars and stripes. To watch that station for an hour, you
couldn’t help but think that all of America had been overrun by the motherless, fatherless children of God knew what.

Well, about a dozen of these young Turks, who must have had homes and parents nearby, seemed to have tumbled right out of that channel to roam all over the streets of Somerville that entire hot summer. They died their hair primary colors, cropped it into basic geometric shapes, some had cruel pewter jewelry arranged in such a way that it looked like someone had taken their faces off for a while and then bolted them back onto their heads. They wandered our streets like a nomadic colony of failed human experiments. They were quiet kids, really, but it was startling to watch them make their way down Mayberry Lane, half of them walking, half of them slowly rolling along on skateboards. On even the hottest days, and we had some scorchers that summer, they wore jeans and black t-shirts with things printed on them beyond all comprehension. They also had a leader—he had slate-grey eyes and his own hair shorn into loud purple spikes that stood out even among his group and that looked a little like an evolutionary defense mechanism. He and his girlfriend always stood still on their skateboards and rolled in tandem, a dog-chain coiled from one of his back belt-loops to one of hers; for one to get more than five feet from the other would have sent both headlong into the street, but I never saw either of them ever trip or fall, not once—they were damned impressive.

Joe stopped working a second and glared at the kids, who pretended not to notice as they hovered, like horseflies, around the edge of his attention. Joe
had quickly patched his front porch and now had the front two corners of the
house jacked up to remove the sills, which he’d just discovered were infested
with termites; he found a lot of damage, so much, in fact, that the house had to
have been infested when he bought it; he’d been in such a rush to buy it at the
time that he’d barely inspected the place, and he just couldn’t get himself to
imagine there being anything wrong with it.

That his house had been rotting away beneath him all along was
humiliating, and had been eating away at Joe. He was also having trouble
concentrating, which Joe never did. Joe never understood shoddy work—it was
so much easier to just do it right the first time. He had always gone about his own
work with an amazing natural exactitude: use good materials, measure precisely,
fasten everything together correctly—with the right nail or screw, and always use
a little carpenter’s glue to seal it all tight—then just double-check everything. All
good work had method, a set pattern of steps, each step its own set of sequential
actions of procedure; sure, a storm could come or a board might split—it almost
never would though if you just bought wood that had been stored indoors and
inspected each piece of lumber yourself, checking for cracks, knots, or to be sure
they weren’t warped—but so long as you performed each action of each step
with attention and care, then what you thought something would be, was exactly
what it became.

People however, were another matter, and you couldn’t see their knots or,
for the most part, store them indoors. More times then he cared to remember,
Joe had drawn up plans for a customer, they would look them over together, agree on everything, and then Joe would create what was agreed upon exactly, point to the blueprint as documented proof, and still they might have a hundred reasons why what he made wasn’t really what they wanted. Understanding people, Joe thought, was an insurmountable mountain of mystery and if he’d learned anything, he’d learned that sometimes, for whatever reason, it was just impossible for one person to share their mind with another. Even a person’s simplest idea couldn’t always be accurately drawn or even put into words, much less brought into being. Figuring people out was like trying to nail the sunshine down to your front yard.

Joe’s first wife was simply beyond his reach, her happiness and her sadness so absolute and so unexplainably contiguous to one another—bad days, sometimes bad weeks or months, always followed good ones, and it all seemed so arbitrary yet inevitable. Once he’d gotten Myrtle to marry him and gotten back the only house he’d ever wanted to live in, he kept his life as simple as possible. Joe didn’t have any real intimate relationships: Myrtle was, well, Myrtle—she didn’t give much but never asked much of him either; and though his life my have been devoid of great intimacy, it was crammed, both at work and outside of it, with casual friendship; his relations, with new neighbors or with guys he’d known since high school, were the foundational ones of not just Somerville, but civilization itself, beginning, I suppose, when one of our hairier ancestors snapped off a low leafy branch to help another one broom out their cave—Joe’s
life was that of giving and exacting favor, always being sure to give more than he
got, and taking great comfort in the assumption that his abundant nest-egg of
earned gratitude would keep appreciating. Joe also kept his social life well
structured: he had his poker nights, softball once a week, was still on the bowling
team, though they had to go a couple of towns over now and, of course, the
Heritage Renewal Project the mayor had put him in charge of; any arguments or
upsets were compartmentalized and stayed where they were.

Good old Joe: a solid leader, yet a born joiner too. Joe was always happy
to do his part, only wanting from life the expected reciprocal solidarity of being a
good teammate and a good neighbor. Joe set his life’s watch to Somerville’s
communal calendar: the homecoming game, the Christmas tree lighting, the fairs,
the parades, and the backyard barbeques—everything always worked as
expected more because of him than anyone. He just wanted to help. Not a real
curious man, he only wanted to remember where he’d come from and to know
where he was going. Because Joe was—from his white t-shirts to his cheap
haircuts, from his wind-burned face to his calloused hands, from the dependable
common sense of his life philosophy right down to the unseeable circuitry in the
steering mechanisms of his instincts—a man perfectly calibrated to live out his
life among the tides of gentle regimentation he assumed life in Somerville would
always provide.

But now he was several weeks into the summer and his work on the
house had actually gone backwards from the porch to the sills in the foundation,
and he knew he couldn’t put off inspecting the rest of the house for termite
damage much longer, just like he knew for sure he was going to find some. And
exactly who were these eerie kids that kept coming around? He’d heard several
of the boys loudly admiring his daughter and the whole damn bunch of them
looked like they just rolled down off the ramp of a spaceship. Sam was drawing
them in; he needed a hop in the ass himself and was making him sorry he’d ever
bought him that goddamned guitar. What was he doing to those songs? It wasn’t
like he was still learning to play. He knew exactly how those songs were
supposed to go and he was playing them wrong on purpose—it was like he’d
gathered the music Joe had been listening to his whole life, music he had been
the one to share with the boy, and then dragged it out into his own garage to
strangle it all.

When Sam walked down the driveway smoking a cigarette, Joe slammed
his hammer down, lit his own, and walked toward him. “What the hell are you
doing to those songs?”

Sam glanced sideways and then went back to staring across the street,
ignoring the circling kids.

“You know how they’re supposed to go—you’re ruining them on purpose.”

“No one’s ruining anything, dad.” Rose had pulled up to them now.

“Oh, of course!” Joe turned on his daughter. “He’s never at fault for doing
wrong, it’s always me who’s at fault for pointing it out. It’s like a sacrilege what’s
going on in there.”
“I’ll make anything I play mine,” Sam kept staring across the street, his cigarette dancing in his lips as he talked.

Rose got between them and walked toward Joe to shoo him back to his work.

Joe walked off. “They’re not your damn songs,” he said. “There’s only one right way to play them.”

Having watched the family dispute, the group of gypsy kids swirled around the street in silence now, staring at Sam. They had been circling around the Merigana’s driveway for days, staring down at the garage and watching them play. The other three had all wanted to invite them down, but Sam refused until they played better.

Sam’s gaze settled on the kid with the spiked hair. “Who are you supposed to be?”

The kid smirked at him. “We’re your fans.”

Behind him, Salar was chasing Suzanne into the front yard when she slipped and splashed down with a bewildered squeal on her rear-end in some mud. Salar, panting and heaving and suddenly unsure about the implications of what he’d just done, reached timidly toward her. When she burst out laughing as he pulled her to her feet, Salar, feeling brash all over again, went to brush the mud off the seat of her jeans, lunging after it as she turned and squirmed away. Then Salar sank, in slow motion, up to his shins in mud. Suzanne, now trying to
help him, sank back into the corner of the Merigana’s front yard, laughing and wheeling her arms about to keep her balance.

“Great!” Joe tossed his hammer down. “Now the foreigner’s tearing up my front lawn.”

“Would you quit calling him that,” Rose said. “Why all the mud anyway? It hasn’t rained in weeks.”

Rose sank in a little herself, but gripped a hand upon a slat of the picket fence and pulled Suzanne out. Sam had a harder time with Salar, who took enormous delight in pulling Sam down into it by the time he’d pulled himself out. Sam sank in to his thighs as Salar taunted him, extending his hand and then pulling it back.

“Who’s the leader of the band? Say it’s me, man, and I’ll get you out of there. Say we’ll call the band Salar and the Unknowns!”

Sam sank then, with a loud flatulent sound, to his waist. He wrestled with it all, bobbing up and down some, but really only succeeding in completely covering himself in mud. Salar yucked away and clapped his hands.

“You look like some constipated turd your lawn can’t quite squeeze out.”

Sam laughed and thrust his middle finger at him, refusing to reach out any longer. He managed to turn himself enough to lunge out and reach the slat in the fence Rose had used, but it too, refused to help him and snapped off in his hand. Rose, giggling, shoved Salar toward the street where he laughed with those strange kids as he stomped the mud off himself. Joe, silent now, came over and
felt around with his foot, inspecting where the lawn was going soft as he told Rose where to get a two by four to pull Sam out.

I began down my front stairs to see if I could lend a hand. The kids in the road had stopped wheeling around, and the leader and his girlfriend had both bowed their heads to let Salar feel their hair. I stopped a moment, realizing at last where I thought I’d recognized them from: they looked just like some of the pictures I’d seen in a book about the aboriginal Toquam Indian tribe that I’d borrowed from the library. The color scheme wasn’t an exact match, but the hair spikes and even some of the facial jewelry were damn close. Rose came back with the board to pull Sam out with as Joe now toed about the little patch of grass in front of the street for more soft spots, turning, every few minutes, to look suspiciously at the site across the street. He barely even shot me an aggravated look when I suggested that they might be building it all on an ancient Toquam burial ground.

And then the old man came over. His dementia, by mid-June, had turned one of his blue eyes gray and had settled all the way down into his walking gait, giving it the lubricous balance, and the tottering locomotion of constant inebriation. The kids at the foot of the driveway parted to let him pass.

“Gramps?” Suzanne walked over to him but he went right past her, sniffing the air about him, which smelled like a strong spring thaw.

Joe, myself, and the kids all stopped and stared at him. He breathed heavy and wobbled on his feet a little before gathering himself, stooping down,
and wrapping his hands around two slats of the picket fence; he peered through it at Sam stuck in the dirt as if he was staring into a crib or a small cage. “I wonder what he’ll grow into,” the old man roared that hoarse laugh of his and stood back up to look around at every one, though he didn’t seem to see any of us.

Crouching back down then, he reached a thin arm through the empty space where Sam had broken the slat off, stopping a second to study the sunken, muddy boy before touching his long, bony index finger to Sam’s chest. “Gotcha,” he said and laughed again. “Gotcha at last.”

**Introducing. . . The Milk Carton Kids**

It was her third trip into his room to try and talk with him and Rose was getting annoyed. Sam was lying on his bed, a felt marker sticking straight up from his mouth and still not acknowledging her presence. She put her hand on her hips and was about to engage when something caught her attention in the corner of his room. Sam had cut out a couple dozen different pictures of the missing kids off the sides of milk cartons, and had taken some fishing line and made a huge diorama out of them that was now twirling itself the corner of his room. He had glued each granulated black and white photo back to back with another so that as they twirled, one missing child was always disappearing and another reappearing. Rose stood, stared, and walked around it in complete silence for a good five minutes.
"For someone who never seems to be doing anything," She finally said.

"I'm amazed, sometimes, how much you get done."

"I'm thinking."

"I'll leave you alone in a minute," she said, still staring. "If you got this in the right art show I bet you'd get a million dollars for it."

"It's my mobile of possibility."

Rose went to his bed, shoved his legs over, and sat cross-legged at the head of it, still peering into the twirling pictures. "The Milk Carton Kids," she said.

"That's what we should call the band."

Sam sat up, took the marker out of his mouth, and stared at her.

Rose smiled. "How mad are you that I thought of it and not you?"

Sam stared out his window and shook his head. "It’s perfect."

Rose, giddy at how impressed he was, bounced off his bed and ran to her room to call Suzanne. Sam could tell by Rose’s voice that Suzanne liked it, but he let Rose tell him anyway. He went to a blank spot on his wall and sketched out several outlines of milk cartons, and then scrawled out the name itself side by side, top over bottom, and in every color and script imaginable. Usually, he liked to do his work alone, with the door closed, but when Rose brought in an armful of votive candles from her closet, flicked his naked light bulb off and planted ten little hatchlings of light around his room, he let her stay. She stretched out in his bed, chatting away to him as he paced around her, muttering to himself and jotting down whatever he was saying every so often upon his walls. The
construction company, which was now moving all their equipment onto the lots directly across the street, was, even for them, making an exceptional racket about it. Rose poked her head out the window and back in again several times.

“They’re not supposed to be working this late,” she told Sam. “We should call on them.”

I was on my porch, whittling out a small, barking dog and getting good and aggravated with the noise myself. I heard Sam’s window open and assumed, at first, the boy was just having a cigarette.

“Say man,” he called down to me in a sort of muffled shout. “Aren’t you going to do anything about that?”

Now I had him to be annoyed at. I stood and turned toward his window. His face flickered in the candlelight and I thought I could see what looked like a girl next to him.

“What’s that you’re saying?” I asked.

“The workers over there—they’re supposed to stop at dark. Haven’t we surrendered enough of our peace and quiet?” The girl snickered and shoved him.

“You want me to stop all this noise? I asked, laughing a little. “If you want a quiet, romantic evening with your lady-friend,” I pointed my carving knife up at him. “You better think of a nicer way to ask me for a favor.”

His face disappeared and then reappeared in the wavering light. The girl whispered something to him. “This is just Rose,” he said, tapping her head as she started laughing again.
“Rose?” I asked.

I heard her speak at last. Rose had a unique voice: rich, layered, multi-tonal—it’s baseline running in a lower and more mature key than most girls but, in any given conversation, often feathering out into more whispery and girlish tones as well; it was a voice that resonated, its fluctuating pitch giving it an effusive scratchiness and a knowing warmth that had a way of stirring one’s fondest unremembered memories. Any little thing Rose ever said, it seemed, could only have been said to you.

“Would you mind?” She smiled from the open window.

“For you, Rose,” I said up to the window. “Consider it done.” I walked across the street and, when I got there, a worker put his hand up, both in apology and to let me know they were almost done. For an evening, anyway, our street was quiet again.

The phone rang in Rose’s room and after she walked in to pick it up, she smiled, was silent a few seconds, and then burst out laughing as she walked back into Sam’s room, pulling the curls right out of her phone cord. “Salar says he’s already shaved his sideburns.” Sam laughed, jumped to his feet and was soon pacing around again and repeating the name to himself. After, the two of them sat on his bed brainstorming songs, album titles, even t-shirts; Sam made lists out of some of their ideas on his wall. Rose thought he should just take a picture of his mobile.
When Rose fell asleep, Sam went to the window, uncapped his marker and set down lyrics, in wet ink, upon the glass. He also penned his band’s new name upon each wall and even went across the hall and scribbled it into Rose’s mirror. It was a great name. Everything Sam had been trying to do now seemed existent, taking on an official and verifiable sort of reality, the way thoughts or desires, once given names, always do.

I was turning in for the night. My eyes were tired, I had a head full of wine and so I couldn’t even see the contours of the Merigana’s house when I looked up toward the windows of Sam’s room; I couldn’t see him either, I could only see words I couldn’t quite read and that appeared to be etching themselves into a mysteriously glowing patch of night sky.
III

“Let The Hero, Born Of Woman,
Crush The Serpent With His Heel”\(^1\)

The old man, though he would die in the same house he’d grown up in, was the one Somerville resident ordained in the shimmering glow of true fame. He was the populist hero who, as men who are famous long enough often do, became that acquiescent indulgence sophisticates and tastemakers like too, even maturing, over time, into a hallowed exemplar of the nation itself. He’d received honorary degrees from over fifty universities; both the Grand Ole Opry and the Kennedy Center had held nights in his honor; and he had been referred to, often by name, in speeches by every American president since Dwight Eisenhower.

Destined to be a coalescent figure for a nation, it was fitting, perhaps, that the circumstances surrounding his origins were not those normally associated with the births of human beings, but of empires—that is, his life rose out of a bloodbath. The illegitimate son of a soldier and a nurse who met during the First World War, both parents would die before they could marry, he in his foxhole and she, against orders, bearing supplies to that very trench. He died in his helmet

\(^{1}\) The third line from the third verse of “Battle Hymn Of The Republic”. A song whose origins lay in a campfire and walking song of Union Armies—it was then called “John Brown’s Body”—after the famous vigilante abolitionist. Julia Ward Howe heard the song during a public demonstration by the troops and, as legend has it, woke the next morning and penned, in the half-dark, the more famous Victorian lyrics the song came to be known for.
and with his boots on doing his duty, she in her Red-Cross uniform with the red-lined cape, perhaps being a bit reckless—those that knew them best would later say that he was reliable and that she’d always been a bit wild.

That he arrived in the world at all was due to one lone nurse, his mother’s roommate who, after bullying the Chaplin into delivering her sinful friend’s last rites, took painstaking direction from a nearby busy surgeon to cut him free and lift him, wailing, out of his dying mother’s womb. It was an especially deadly night in Rouen, France and the nurse held him aloft a few seconds beneath that chilly tent as the blood ran steaming off him. His screams would be the most tender of all the screams rising out of those left living that night, and upon hearing them the surgeon cried and the nurse laughed out loud.

She would wet-nurse him for the better part of a month, jostling the telephone switchboard and marshaling enough proper paperwork to assure his future American upbringing. One by one, each of his father’s five brothers cited their innocence of responsibility; but to his mother’s family’s sole survivor, her barren younger sister, he was an unexpected and miraculous discovery, a cooing little tide-pool of bloodline, an assuring (and an approving) whisper from God himself that her family was no longer going to die out and that he was their new destiny. She and her husband agreed to raise the child as their own, and before he was put on his plane, across the mighty Transatlantic Cable, his adopted parents named him Samuel Wilson. His nurse wept. She safety-pinned his name to his swaddling clothes, and tucked his father’s triangulated flag around him,
only its highest stars showing across his chest. He touched down upon American soil with only his name, his fallen father’s flag, and his mother’s piercing blue eyes. He’d be raised in a cozy, off-white bungalow tucked among all the other cozy bungalows in Somerville, on Mayberry Lane. It would be years after his own death, when his grandchildren put his diaries up for auction to bolster what was left of their dwindling inheritance, before anyone learned the true nature of the love that had created him or of the one quiet nurse that saw him home.

The child grew into a dreamy, solitary sort who struggled in every school subject save art, where there had never been another quite like him. By the age of fourteen, he was painting portraits and earning half as much as the town’s tradesmen. His aunt, who he’d always call mom, died when he was twelve. But what he never forgot about their short time together was the way she loved to regale him with the bible stories she’d been teaching on Sunday afternoons for years as a Catechism teacher at St. Cecilia’s; she’d honed these stories into florid, euphemistical little enchantments, and her hushful adopted son never tired of their reliable reassurance: that goodness won, that evil was punished, and that we all existed in the palm of God’s strong and gentle hand.

His own time came during the Second World War and the United States Navy, against his mild protest, decided the best way for him to serve his country was to paint patriotic recruitment posters, something, as it turned out, he had a remarkable talent for. He’d thought of his paintings as stories and never lost his affection for his mother’s simple narrative—he’d always be drawn to winning
heroes and losing villains. He was, to say the least, a man for his time; for this was when American enemies were still something tangible, when they still stood in uniforms and banged tables and thumped their chests, not like today, when they are as diffuse and incomprehensible as life itself. His first assignment was to come up with three different recruitment posters and, after a single viewing by a single general, the war department knew it had its man. Within eighteen months he’d become something of a national figure, appearing on television with both Ed Sullivan and Jackie Gleason, and waving to thundering hordes of American soldiers from those gargantuan stages at USO shows.

Two weeks after VE Day, the magazine he would always be most associated with hired him and it was then he turned his simple eye and his talented hands back upon Somerville, where his artistic vision would become complete. The great death was over, our enemies vanquished, and the future was ours. These were heady times, and in the freshness that came with the dawning of the golden age of capitalism, cars and houses and baby carriages seemed to spring right out of the soil as the Somerville we still think of today as Somerville, popped up like a technicolor bed of crocuses. The old man, still young of course then, wandered the town, soaked it all in, and what came out of his fingertips and onto the canvas was a transubstantiated Somerville, not what it was by any means, but what we then still believed it was coming to be, and as the magazine and his painted covers went national, this ideal Somerville became America and America itself became a place where every boy had worms to fish
with and every girl had dolls to play with; it became a place where men made things, and a place where everyone willing to work got a house and a yard; it became, most of all, a place of plenty, but, more importantly, a place of plenty left. He used his neighbors as models and showed them in their most basic roles, be those roles familial—father, son, mother, daughter—or vocational—butcher, barber, fireman, doctor—but also reimagining them as a new pantheon of saints peopling the secular Eden he presented as the still rising American norm. The painter, always aware he was an adopted member of Somerville, had the orphan’s tendency to over-sentimentalize his family and his hometown, and the magazine’s advertisers were looking to sell vacuums and wallpaper and televisions to a middle class—still then a working class—just then leaning into its ascent, spending its stipend from the GI Bill, and ready to feel entitled to the sudden blizzard of conveniences and its fast arriving futuristic quality of life.

These were the summers of victory. We had just stamped out the Nazi’s, and it wasn’t just our guns that did it, it was our entire way of life—guns don’t kill people, people do. And all we’d done we’d done together. So we built a lot of houses and made a lot of babies. This was also when Mr. Wilson licensed the rights to some of his paintings to the Americana figurine company, and when it seemed, thanks to the planned visions of Arthur Levitt and others, that the entire country was now really going to be modeled on us, Somerville. Our Somerville was the place to be—it really was a grand time.
Ahman, over the protests of his foreman, allowed the boys to wear headphones as they made their rounds, which turned Sam’s route of dull labor into a seductively pleasurable routine. Usually he liked to listen to jazz, as the feverish spontaneity of the music overlaid the continuous thump and drone of the factory around him in a profound way, and sent what felt like the beginnings of ideas coursing inside himself, ideas that he couldn’t quite charm close enough to the surface yet to scribble into the little notebook he kept in his shirt pocket.

After a month or so, he fell into the flow of the place; the workers teased him less and when they did tease him, did so in a gentler way and with a much more inclusive familiarity. Sam’s arrival announced the final leg of their workday, and so roused many of them, chattering, out of the induced stupor of their long day’s routine. Sam sometimes even liked to click his music off and listen to their profane allegorical bantering about their wives cooking, or the respective pitchers of that night’s ballgame, or the halcyon days of their shared youth. Still, he’d been reminded a time too many, that many of them had started as shopboys as well, and there was a collective condescension in their tone often times that rankled him, as if this life of theirs, a life he had no interest in, was something they just assumed he was apprenticing for.

The foreman, Tuggs, had a youth everyone remembered. His given name was James Johnson but, after he dragged all three opposing linebackers the last three yards into the end-zone for the winning touchdown of the county

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11 1955 hit by The Platters, written by the great Buck Ram.
championship game his junior year, the Somerville Gazette bestowed the nomenclature James “Tugboat” Jonson upon him; it stuck and eventually, as nicknames are wont to, was shortened over time to just Tuggs, which is all I remember anyone calling him. Tuggs’ brief period of local fame may not have been good for him; he was one of only three returning seniors in his disappointing final year and, as a hell-raising, out all night sort, extended an overwrought and overlong adolescence into his late thirties, when he finally got married. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the pocked skin and the fading tattoos of his own misbegotten youth, Tuggs had an intractably punitive attitude toward anyone young, and it wasn’t long before a silent, unacknowledged bit of strategic combat had arisen between he and the two boys whereby he kept trying to catch them shirking their duties after garbage detail, and they kept evading capture. Tuggs became increasingly fixated on seeing they earned their keep—these two didn’t just loaf, they vanished, and he was going to see to it they weren’t going to keep getting away with it.

Tuggs’ daily meeting with Ahman coincided with the boys’ arrival and so they always hustled through the back section and then began back at the front of the factory, creating the illusion, by the time Tuggs made his way back to the shop floor, that they always had more left to do than they really did. Upon reaching those back rows, they would each grab a broom and pretend to sweep until the second Tuggs’ attention was drawn elsewhere, when they would slip quickly through the swinging doors to the inventory room.
Inside, each one scaled the ratcheted shelving to the empty top shelf, nearly twenty feet up, and then did a backflip each, landing, with a percussive thwack into the huge vat of Styrofoam peanuts the factory used to pack the boxes, laughing as the foam rose into a cloud and flurried back down around them. As they lied quiet, waiting for Tuggs to make his search, they stared up into all that shelving full of figurines waiting to be packed, put onto trucks and then rolled, beneath every cloud of the republic, to each of their thousands of destinations. Tuggs, reliably, came in minutes later well announced, slamming through the doors and stomping around looking for them. Grinning, the two boys stared at each other, listening with care as he moved around the room until they heard the doors swing open and shut again.

“Ow!” Sam pulled on of his figurines out from under himself. “My ass!”

“You better stop throwing those everywhere,” Salar said. “My dad brought a few pieces home and started asking me about them.”

“I am the great pre-ee-ee-tender,” Sam sang out. “I snuck in here the other night and played for like an hour.”

“Really?”

“This room, especially this one little spot, has great acoustics—we ever get any decent equipment, we should record something in here.”

“I want to be anywhere near this place as little as possible.”
“It’s not as bad as I thought at first,” Sam said. “Everyone has a place, you know. They’ve all known each other forever—they all love beer and baseball, they all hate their wives’ meatloafs.”

Salar laughed. “I never thought you’d fit in here. You know most of those guys out there started out as summer shop-boys too.”

Sam stared at him.

Salar laughed. “How do you even make meatloaf?”

“Rose won’t make it. I think it’s made out of beef tripe and shredded newspapers.”

“What is it with you white people and food?”

“What is it with you calling me white man? You’re closer to being white than black.”

“Like you’ve lived in my skin in this town. And what does that even mean?”

“Just because you’re not one of us, doesn’t automatically mean you’re someone cooler.”

“Wow,” Salar whistled. “Just look at you. The great rock-n-roll runaway turns out to be the defender of the faith. How long before you’re chasing teenagers around this joint?”

“Never mind,” Sam said.

“What’s that song we’ve been learning? The Great Pretender.”

“That’s enough.” Sam started getting up.

Salar laughed. “Stop getting so mad.”
“I’m not mad—I’m just done with this conversation.”

“How right you are!” It was husky voice and came from just outside the vat they were hiding in.

Sam sat back down and he and Salar stared as a row of thick hairy fingers clasped themselves around the top of the container; the fingers went white with exertion and with a very loud grunt, Tuggs had soon pulled himself right up to his armpits and was staring, wild-eyed, at the two boys inside. He reached and grabbed Sam’s broken statue and held it up before himself a second, staring at it.

“Get out!”

They climbed out and jumped to the floor.

He walked over to them, dragging two mop buckets by their wringer’s handles behind him. “The guys are done in ten minutes. When they are, you two are going punch out and then mop the entire shop floor.”

“Punch out?” Salar asked.

“Goddamned right—your payment is going to be not getting fired.”

“Can you even fire us?” Sam asked. “I bet you can’t him,” he pointed at Salar.

Salar hissed at him. “Shut up, man.”

Tuggs stared down at the skinny quiet one who’d suddenly spoke up. “You better not put me to the test.”

“He isn’t,” Salar said. He grabbed both buckets and started dragging them over to the industrial sink.
Tuggs kept staring at Sam. “You going to join your friend.”

Sam stood still.

“I said,” Tuggs stepped up to him. “Are you going to join your friend?”

“He is, Tuggs.”

“Mr. Johnson,” Tuggs growled.

Sam still hadn’t moved.

Salar came running back over and made an exaggerated fuss. “We’re going, Tuggs, alright. And we won’t hide on you anymore.” He tried to pull Sam with him, but Sam shook him off.

Tuggs smiled at Sam, who stared back at him. “Well, aren’t you man enough,” he said. “You can go grab a mop and join your friend, or you can walk out of here and never come back—make a decision.”

Again, Salar came over to drag him back, and again Sam shook him off. He met Tuggs’s stare for quite a while. Then he spit on the floor, looked at him one last time, and walked right out the back and down the concrete stairs, never once looking back as Salar called to him.
Can’t Find My Way Home

Ahman and Salar lived in a yellow house near the top of Mulberry Street, a house sunned, over the years, into a much paler yellow than it had been painted. Sam rapped on the back door and immediately let himself in, his feet clapping loudly across the tiled kitchen floor until Ahman lowered his paper and snapped at him to take his damn shoes off. Other than Salar’s room, which had a record player, a small television, and its walls smeared in the garish colors of teen-age posters, Ahman’s entire home was like a (husked shell) displaced crawlspace stuffed with relics of his lost homeland’s culture—full of pungent spices, ornate draperies, and real Persian rugs. Ahman even had the wall knocked down between the small kitchen and the living room, an unusual gasp of improvidence in a life of otherwise near seamless frugality, and which left only a simple wooden table with four chairs separating the kitchen space from a living room, which itself was hung with gold-framed reproductions of famous Persian art, and furnished

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A song by the “supergroup” Blind Faith released in 1969. The album’s cover, featuring a nude pubescent girl (supposedly only 11 years old) superimposed against unnaturally green grass and a powder blue sky, was a great controversy at the time and some still see this picture as a watershed moment, after which it became okay to sexualize children. The song itself has been seen as a clarion call to the end of the sixties: we’d elected Nixon and shot Robert Kennedy and the Martin Luther King Jr. the year before, the Tet offensive flickered on everyone’s television screens, the Beatles were about to make their last record, and the rampant drug use (which most think the song is about) wasn’t so enlightening or even cute anymore, the Merry Pranksters were long gone and all that communal energy was about to be funneled into a decade of singles apartment complexes and self-actualization. When the public tide rolled back, and the sixties’ energy failed, some wanting to hold on dropped off the grid and formed communes and a young man named Charles Manson would rise, like a Faulknerian symbol of evil, out of the morass of what was now a rotting peace and love culture and truly end the decade on August 6, 1969, with the macabre murders of actress Sharon Tate and her unborn child; a story, likely apocryphal, circulated for years that this was the song Ms. Tate and her never to be born child were listening to as the Manson family crept into her house.
with just a brown corner sofa, no coffee table. Everything in the house seemed old and worn, but cared for too, and immaculately clean—the house had a good feel to it.

“Is that because you come from such a sandy place?” Sam smiled. “The whole bit about taking your shoes off?”

Ahman set his glass of water down and smiled, a little. “Let’s not strain ourselves trying to understand who I am.”

He stared at Sam, letting him twitch and fidget a few seconds before motioning with his hand for Sam to show him the bottoms of his socks. “I don’t hear anyone apologizing or begging for their job back.”

“No sir,” Sam said. “You don’t.”

“At least I’m not stepping on any more pieces of that damn statue of yours,” Ahman said. “Show me the bottom of your other foot.”

Sam did.

“Go on, he said, picking his newspaper back up. “And don’t play that infidel music of yours too loud.”

Sam laughed and ran upstairs. The walls of Salar’s room were plastered with posters: of sports stars, TV stars, and rock stars—not a single one of which, upon first glance, Sam approved of. That his bed, a simple box-spring and mattress, was always made neat and sat right on the floor, was the one thing that seemed to tie Salar’s room to the rest of the house.
Sam attempted to force eye-contact at first, but after a minute’s worth of Salar’s snubbing, the two boys were gliding tensely about the small bedroom, each now refusing to look at the other. Salar had screamed at him over the phone a few hours after he’d walked out of the plant, accusing him of abandonment and of violating their friendship to a degree that had startled Sam at first, and had angered him after he’d thought about it—who was Salar to demand he work at that stupid job? Salar had then quit the band and the boys hadn’t practiced together, or even spoken, in the several days since. Thing was, Sam didn’t want to let the band go and he also knew he was wrong, he only needed Rose to refuse to play without Salar and then lean on him for a few days to become humble enough to take the walk up the hill to seek forgiveness. Neither spoke to the other for a few minutes before Sam pushed things by making fun of Salar’s posters and then inventing a tall, blond-haired and blue-eyed replacement he may have found for him; Salar laughed once and shook his head, but kept ignoring him. Sam ratcheted it up, started poking him and shoving at him until, at last, Salar let out a scream, punched him in the chest, grabbed him in a headlock, growling for a full minute and squeezing as hard as he could as they both fell back in the bed. Sam didn’t fight back, even after Salar punched him again, hard in the arm and leaned back, heaving and a bit wild-eyed against his wall. Sam, his face flushed, sat right next to him, not saying anything.

“Why are you the way you are?” Salar said, almost crying.

Sam lowered his head and shrugged his shoulders.
“If you want me to come back, I want at least two songs with cool bass solos.”

Sam smirked. “I didn’t actually ask you to come back.”

Salar laughed without smiling. “Man, you’ve got balls. And Rose has called me like three times—I know damn well she won’t play without me.”

Sam smiled. “I promise, okay. I’ll find you a couple bass solos.”

“And we’re inviting those kids down—the one’s with all the weird hair.”

“We’re not ready.”

“A small audience is part of getting ready for a big one.”

Sam got up, agitated and put a record on. He paced the room a minute.

“Okay, fine.”

Salar smiled, relieved now and even noticeably excited that he didn’t have to be mad anymore. He pointed out a long-haired bass player in one of his posters. “I’m going to get my hair cut just like him.”

Sam peered into the picture. “It’ll never work, Salar. Your hair’s too thick.”

“So,” Salar said. “I can’t help that.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “It won’t look right. Rose’ll give you a cool haircut.”

“She’ll give me this one,” Salar said. “I’ll be who I want, you be who you want.”

“Fine,” Sam said and started thumbing through Salar’s records. “You coming to the movies with us, now, tomorrow? Suzanne’s going.”
Salar started combing his hair in his mirror, looking from the poster to himself. “What is this movie?”

“It’s about a guy in a mask chopping up teenagers with an axe.”

Salar shook his head. “The white man’s culture,” he said. “It sure is strange.”

“Your bedroom looks almost exactly like the white girl’s you trying to talk your way into.” Sam laughed out loud and looked around. “I’ve gotta be honest, I can’t completely approve because I can’t stand Suzanne. . .”

“She hates you back,” Salar said. “And no one needs your approval.”

“But I like the idea of my bass player nailing the mayor’s daughter—that’s rock-n-roll, man.”

Salar ignored this comment. “Is the movie as bad as they say. I heard it’s been banned in some states.”

“Suzanne will get good and scared. Maybe she’ll let you hold her hand. Play your cards right and maybe she’ll even let you pinch her little boobs after.”

“They’re not so little,” Salar said. “And that’s not funny, man. Stop talking about her like that. I don’t like you looking at her like that.”

“Yeah well,” Sam said. “Welcome to the white man’s culture.”

Salar winced and turned his back on him and the two were back to walking about the room in a charged silence.

“Okay fine,” Sam said after a minute. “We’ll let those kids come down. But we’re sticking to the songs we already have down.”
Salar smiled, then stopped. “Why do you get to decide, every time, what we’ll play?”

“It’ll be better for all of us.”

Salar laughed. “Of course you’d assume that. And where are all these songs you’re supposed to be working on.”

“We’ll get to them when we’re ready.”

“You mean when you’re ready—as usual. Let’s get going,” he said, pulling his bass over his shoulder. “We talk much longer and I’ll be too exhausted to leave my house.”

The boys raced down the stairs and were about to pull on their sneakers before Ahman called them back. Salar winced and looked at the floor.

“We’re just gonna jam some at Sam’s pop. We can eat there. We have people waiting. We gotta go, pop. We gotta go now.”

“Salar,” Ahman said. “I’m not going to keep telling you to slow down when you talk. I’ve made you two a little something to eat. Sit.”

Ahman instructed Salar to get out the mat, which was just a six foot square piece of clear plastic that Salar set down over the Persian rug in the living room. Somewhat despondent, Salar informed Sam that he was in for a real home-cooked Persian meal. He then laid out three sets of dishes and flatware over the sheet. The boys sat down cross-legged upon it and Ahman brought out some flatbread, and then returned with three plates: upon each sat a healthy piece of grilled lamb over a bed of steamed basmati rice, a little butter melting
into it, and full of raisins and almonds and fresh herbs, and a helping of grilled tomatoes, eggplant, broad beans, dates and apricots, along the side. Sam sat down to his bowl, nervous, at first, he wouldn’t like it, but almost immediately ameliorated by the piquant steam streaming into his nostrils. He scooped a spoonful of the rice and blew on it. Sam was, in Salar’s entire life in America, their first dinner guest, and Sam chewed and smiled watching Salar jabber on through his father’s constant admonishments. Occasionally, the gasping brakes and the growling engine of a truck on its way to the construction site filled the air between them.

Within a minute, Sam had sampled everything on the plate and was visibly excited. He looked at Ahman and pointed his fork down at the food as he chewed. “This is so good,” he said and then turned to Salar. “God I wish Rose was here for this.”

Ahman chuckled. “I’ll make a little container for you to take to her. Authentic Iranian food: it’s called chelow kabob. This is our version of,” he stroked his chin in thought.

“Chicken and rice or meat and potatoes,” Sam said, spearing another piece of lamb with is fork. “I totally get it. Maybe you should start a restaurant. You could teach my sister your recipes—she can really cook.”

Ahman smiled. “She won’t quit a month in?”

Sam laughed, covered his mouth, smiled. “I swear,” he said. “She’s a much better person than I am.”
Ahman smiled. “That’s a nice thing to hear a brother say.”

“If you ever meet her, pop,” Salar said. “You’ll see it’s sort of undeniable.”

Sam swallowed his last mouthful, let his fork clink down into his emptied plate, and let out a long satisfied sigh. “So,” he said. “You guys are going to move back to Iran?”

Salar jerked his head up and even his father looked a bit startled. “Well,” he said. “That’s always been my plan. It’s our home.” He took a slow sip of water and looked at Sam. “I hear you’re leaving too.”

“Um,” Sam looked toward Salar, who stared into his bowl of rice. “At some point.”

“I hope you’ll wait until your mother’s well enough to take it.”

Sam started to speak. Didn’t.

“I do understand that at your age, the thought of leaving home, the whole idea of it, seems grand and romantic, “ he said. “But the actual leaving is harder than you might think, Sam. And then finding your way back home once you’ve really left,” Ahman slipped a piece of apricot into his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. “Well, trust me, that’s the hardest part of all.”

The two boys walked down the hill toward Mayberry Lane. A large dump truck blew its huge horn as the driver, coming closer to them than he needed to, screamed and laughed out the opened windows as the boys leaped out of the truck’s path and pelted the side of it with rocks. Two of the wild-haired skateboard
kids were hitched like ticks to the truck’s rear bumper, and Salar laughed and pointed them out to Sam as the truck, its ticks still attached, turned onto Mayberry.

Salar sighed. “Look,” Salar said. “My father’s just able to get me to tell him things, okay. It’s always just the two of us in that house, and with the occasional exception of your mother, I’m like the only human being he has regular conversations with. But he won’t tell your mother about your plans to run off.”

Sam smirked. “I haven’t said anything.”

“I can feel a mood brewing.”

“She knows,” Sam said. “I just don’t need everyone talking about it.”

“You think no one has anything else to talk about but you?”

“Next time I have something to tell you,” Sam said. “Should I just go straight to him?”

“Look who’s talking—I’ve seen you with your mother?”

“We barely talk—I tell her nothing.”

“I’ve seen you two talk,” Salar said. “And she always gets the better of it.”

As they turned onto Mayberry Lane, they noticed the kids had let go of the truck’s bumper and were swirling aimlessly down the street. Salar waved when they looked and they waved back.

“Aw, damn,” Sam said.

“What?”

“Rose was cooking for us—I forgot. I think she made us some pasta.”
Salar smiled. “You want me to join you,” he said. “And eat even though I’m already full?”

“If you do,” Sam said. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Just one of your secrets?” Salar said. “You may as well have offered me one shiny penny.”

“Hey,” Sam punched Salar lightly in the arm. The two friends stopped walking for a second and stared at each other. Sam smiled and laughed a little. “She likes you,” he said.

Salar perked up. “Suzanne?”

Now Sam laughed. “Who else?”

“Man, if this is a joke. I mean if you’re just getting me back for what my dad said.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“This is serious now,” Salar said. “I mean I don’t think I could ever be friends with you again.”

“You should know,” Sam got mad now. “You’re supposed to know I wouldn’t do that.”

Salar was taken back and a little touched by Sam’s anger. He threw his arm around him as they walked. “Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry. . . but you are sure?”

Sam laughed and even leaned into him. “Yes,” he said. “She’s been talking about it with Rose.”

“Oh, wow. Oh, thanks. I’ll eat plenty, too. Rose’ll never know we forgot.”
“Good—we’re already late.”

“Hot damn! I’ll tell you what though, man, I knew she did. I knew she liked me. Don’t worry, either, I’ll play it cool.”

“Oh, I can tell.”

Those kids on the skateboards eventually turned right into the Merigana’s driveway and, with two synchronized kick-strides, glided out of sight behind the house. Salar looked to Sam, saw he noticed and said nothing. As they turned in the driveway, they noticed that there were perhaps a half-dozen of them clogging the driveway. Salar, sensing Sam’s agitation, jogged ahead to talk to a couple of them and then spun on his heels and came back.

“It’s cool, man. Rose invited them down.”

Sam looked at Salar. “You two better not be doing this together.”

“We’ve been late getting here a few times—she just got mad,” Salar said. “You know how she gets. It’s all cool. You agreed to invite them down anyway.”

“Where is she?”

A big bright salad sat glistening in the sun and a bowl of pasta, tossed with garlic and olive oil and fresh chopped herbs, was piled in a large wooden bowl next to it, and a plate of sliced and buttered Italian bread, of which there were only crumbs left. The kids, Sam now noticed, were all walking about, eyeballing each other and ignoring Sam’s presence with the brazen rudeness of Ithacan suitors as they wiped their mouths on their sleeves, brushed the crumbs from their shirts, and gobbled down Rose’s bread with an almost feral rapacity. He
realized he’d forgotten Rose’s food back at Salar’s house, and so he didn’t even have that to use against her. Salar, his head swiveling nervously about as he hoped to find Rose before Sam did, shook several of their hands and sat right down—his old buddy Butch Fargus was part of the crew, and Salar made a joke and gave him a quick half hug. At last, and with plates and utensils, Rose came down the stairs.

Sam said nothing, just seethed and stared; Rose met his stare a second, and then set out plates upon the picnic table as the other kids began gathering about and Sam stalked the perimeter. Things had been tense between them. Sam was used to a life of self-sequestration, modeling, with a calm yet willful voracity, his mother’s inclement stratagem of pre-rejecting all that might eventually reject him, and having Rose there as the one he could always talk to made this bearable and kept him enough grounded in the physical world and kept his mind from eating its own tail; Rose was different—she had no desire to be alone and rather than think things through, her inclination was to busy herself when things didn’t feel right and so as she lost her mother and drifted from her father, Sam was there for her to busy herself helping, and he responded by becoming her dutiful younger brother and an ever attentive dependent. He’d long since stopped mimicking the way she did things, or parroting her phrases and mannerisms, just as he’d long since stopped tagging along with her to her friends, but they still had an entrenched routine of always spending time together, and she’d loved watching him change and grow over the years—she just loved
watching him evolve. Sam was a listener, listening all the time with great intensity to everything around him and she’d loved just watching him do that—and this, combined with his saying so little made it seem to her like he knew things, things others didn’t, and perhaps couldn’t. He could really be something, and she loved that she could see this, just as she loved that no one else really could. So this sudden new life he had, where he had friends (one, anyway) and where he was taking all that music out of his room and into the world (or at least Joe’s garage), had come crashing like a wrecking ball into a domestic relationship that seemed, to each of them though neither had ever really thought about it, to have stood forever—who they were together was who they were at all—and they didn’t know how to be otherwise. But now there was just no way for Rose to still have quite as central an importance in this life that she’d always wanted to open up for him, for his own emotional hygiene and for what she’d always imagined would feel like a relief in not having to feel so completely responsible for and to him, Rose discovered to her surprise, the surprise itself only amplifying her irritation, that this decrease in his dependence was a caustic one, and her visceral reaction had been to complain at first, and, as Sam, in what was really a typical reaction for him, never fully acknowledged her complaints, they had pooled and risen and simmered between them until she’d begun snapping at him about it. But she’d taken it further now, forcing this on him, and he was fuming and sort of stalking around trying to figure out the best way to go at her.
She got to him first. “Are we playing?” She asked, handing Sam and Salar a couple dollars each. “I figured our music into the price.”

Sam stalked off, and though she knew he meant for her to follow after him, she let Salar go try to calm him down. But Sam refused to talk to him now either, and glared out at the kids every so often as they ate Rose’s food, which the boys, especially, were gobbling down with an almost feral rapacity. Salar shook his head walked up the driveway, and then tried to interest Rose in something but she ignored him too, and stared after Sam. Upon finishing his pasta and a last piece of bread, the kid with the red spikes sucked the butter from his fingers, walked over and strapped Sam’s guitar around himself. Before Rose or Salar could do anything, he had turned Sam’s amp way up and was jumping around the garage pulling out a distorted sound as his friends caterwauled and made lewd gestures—someone threw a piece of bread at him. Salar and Rose glanced at one another and looked to Sam. He was smoking a cigarette down the driveway, but once he heard his guitar, his back stiffened. Then he tossed his cigarette, walked quickly back down the driveway and, without ever really breaking stride, grasped the neck of the guitar in one hand, the strap off the boy’s shoulder in the other, and violently yanked it back over his head, knocking the strange looking interloper to the ground as he did so. Rose jumped into the garage, forcing Sam out of it as Salar helped the kid from the ground, who, as soon as his legs were back under him, shoved Salar hard and backed into his crowd of friends, who had all come forward and fanned out around him. Salar,
who they already liked, stepped up to them, apologizing profusely, but also pointing out that no one should have grabbed his guitar like that. When she saw Salar had halted things enough, Rose walked Sam up the driveway.

Suzanne never even looked at them as she passed them on her way down. Salar quickly pulled her aside, glancing nervously back at the kids, whom he’d only partially succeeded in mollifying.

“Did you see that?”

“I sure did,” she glanced over his shoulder at the others. “They’re still pissed.”

“He better get back here.”

Suzanne looked down the driveway, where Rose was holding Sam by the shirt as he walked in a circle around her. “I’d try talking to them,” she nodded to the kids. “Before I’d try getting between those two.”

Salar looked toward Sam. “What’s wrong with him?”

“About a million things.”

Salar stared at her, hoping she might specify a little further. “His mother’s really sick,” he offered, hoping she might scaffold off that.

Suzanne laughed. “You could say that.”

“Yeah, well,” Salar said. “He’s not going to keep me playing in this garage my whole life.”

“He might try?”
“That’s what I don’t get. We’ve got an audience right here. Real kids who just paid to see us.”

“He probably imagined it would always be cooler kids.”

“He hates the cool kids.”

“His version of the cool kids.”

“What?” He said. The spikey-haired kid walked near them then. “Listen,” Salar said to him. “It’s cool, we’ll play. He’s a little temperamental, that’s all.” The kid nodded, making his placability obvious, but kept on walking back to his friends, who still hadn’t sat back down.

“When he was little,” Suzanne whispered to Salar. “He used to have all these imaginary friends.”

“What?” Salar laughed.

“I’m serious—it wasn’t just one imaginary friend. He made himself the leader of a whole pack of wild orphans who lived in some tree-house in the woods and who used to go around saving kids and having adventures. He filled this whole stack of notebooks with all their names and back-stories. I swear he thought they were real.”

“You read them?”

“Only Rose has,” Suzanne said, turning to look toward her friend. “I think she still has them all in her closet someplace.”

Salar looked toward Sam, laughed and shook his head.
“You don’t get it,” she said. “He was just so obsessive about it—he’d lock himself in his room for hours working on them—Rose would even have trouble getting him to eat sometimes. He spent so much time in his fantasy world it was like the regular world bored him. Except for Rose—she and he were the only ones existed in both worlds. Besides her, you’re like the first real friend I’ve ever seen him have.”

“I’m equal to Rose?” Salar said. “I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “Because you’re not.”

“What does all that have to do with this?” Salar asked. “He’s not a kid anymore.”

“I had it all set up for you guys to play in the park on the day of the parade. You wanted to, Rose wanted to, but who didn’t? And where are these songs he’s supposedly working on—I bet they don’t even exist.”

Salar kept looking toward Sam. “He’s just nervous.”

“I guarantee he has this whole scenario worked out in his head about how he’ll be discovered and the second the real world doesn’t totally comply with exactly how he thinks everything is supposed to go.”

“The real world?”

“The one outside his head,” Suzanne said. “The one we’re standing here talking in.”

Salar laughed out loud, turned around, and wiggled his rear-end at her. “If you’ll stop spouting all this nonsense,” he said. “I’ll let you squeeze my butt.”
She slapped at it once and then spun him back around to face her. “I’m serious about all this—that kid with the spiked hair’s a real good drummer, and he’s looking to start a band too.”

Salar pulled her hands off his shoulders. “C’mon,” he said. “Don’t talk like that.”

“He wants to play at the carnival in August.”

Salar looked at her, his face hardening from suspicion to noticeable irritation. “I bet that one can’t drum,” he said. “The way that one,” he nodded back to Sam. “Can play guitar.”

“He’s not as good as he thinks he is.”

“He is, actually. I bet he can play guitar right now better than any of them,” he nodded toward the kids, “will ever be able to do anything.”

Sam and Rose, at long last, wandered back down the driveway, Rose leading, Sam dragging himself behind in her wake and staring off into the woods in such a way that you could almost see the fantasy playing in his head where he could run off into them and avoid what was coming altogether. But he walked right up the kid with the hair, took a breath, and tapped him on the shoulder.

“I wasn’t trying to start a fight, okay, I just don’t like anyone touching my guitar.”

The kid dropped his eyes and nodded. “Can I try your drums a few minutes?” The boy, still not looking at Sam, looked up at Rose.

Rose said yes before Sam could say no.
The boy went straight to the drum set, an obvious hurry in his calm gate. Salar scampered in after him, picking up his bass and looking to Sam, who dickered around, continually glancing at Rose, who drifted back behind the kids at the table, some of whom had resumed eating her food. He shot Suzanne, who was smirking at him, a little look. Then Salar started lub-dubbing his bass behind him, and the other kid started in on his drums. Sam backed into the garage, never taking his eyes off Rose until, at last, she scampered up the stairs and into the house to retrieve something.

The new kid played how he looked—hard and loud, impressive for sure, but also a little undisciplined, and Sam didn’t waste much time stopping and correcting him. The kids at the table stopped talking and stared. The drummer’s knuckles went white around his drumsticks and his shoulders tensed, but he didn’t say anything. They tried again and again Sam stopped things, casually giving instructions and agitating not just the drummer, but his macabre band of cohorts as well. They went a few more minutes, Sam stopped, a few more and when Sam stopped things again, Salar intervened.

“He’s pretty good and you know it,” Salar said to Sam, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Sam sighed, looked out to find Rose, but she was inside. “I like that you hit hard,” he told the boy. “But you’ve got to do more than just that.”
“How about I won’t tell you how to play guitar, and you don’t tell me how to drum. If we both do that—we’ll get along fine.” A few of his friends nodded and snickered.

Sam stared out at them several seconds as Salar smiled and backed off. Then he turned back to the drummer. “I don’t care about getting along with you. Every band has a leader and in this band I’m it,” he said, getting an annoyed look out of Salar now. “You know what man, you came here to audition and now you’re getting one. When I show up with all my friends in your garage to try to join your band, then I’ll listen to whatever you want to say about my guitar playing.”

“All right, okay,” Salar came in laughing. “He’s not always this grouchy. How about we do a ten minute jam, no interruptions, and just see where it goes.”

They started. Rose had come back down the stairs, the drummer’s girlfriend in tow, who was helping her dole out brownies. Everyone had stopped talking and had sat staring for a while, and a tense and restive vibe had settled down into the group as they’d watched Sam dominate their friend and de-facto leader out in the garage.

Sam and Salar wandered about the garage, playing back and forth to one another. Salar winked out at Suzanne who watching to see what would happen next between Sam and the drummer, and he also stared furtively over at Sam a few times and, picking his spot, went over and bounced off him a few times as Sam, smiling, shoved him off. The other kids relaxed a bit and encouraged Salar to stay at him.
“The kid’s pretty good,” he yelled in Sam’s ear as they played. “You established that you’re the top dog—give him a chance.”

Sam said nothing, and didn’t look at him, but he did nod.

Encouraged, Salar bounced off Sam a couple of more times, and danced around trying to energize the drummer too, who really leaned in and wailed away. Salar was excited; he knew Rose had just quit the band, but she’d done so rightly and of her own volition, so he didn’t have to feel bad about it; now maybe they could be a real band, form their own group, instead of having to always feel like he was some outsider, welcome, but only to a point.

Sam, pretending the kids weren’t even there, nodded occasional instructions to each of them as they went into and out of about five different songs: Sam had really plied and sculpted the oldies he was playing now, into his own and his small audience, absolutely or intuitively, recognized each song he played; they held back, staying reserved, but unable to keep themselves, inside, from reacting to it; he was playing some deep groove from their childhoods, beats they’d seen their father’s smile wistfully at and their mother’s tap their toes to; and yet it was also different and new—he’d made the music and those songs undeniably his, and now, maybe theirs too. The new drummer struggled some but Sam liked the way he hung in, and the boy really did play hard, with a real sonic boom, a raw fury Rose would never have put into it and he knew that he now had a better band. He still kept looking out at Rose, and he still felt betrayed, though he knew that was really untrue, and he was excited, and he could see
and feel the excitement coming from the kids at the table, their reaction to his music. And then Sam did what he was usually too cool and reserved to do, he went off on a wild solo, playing with the pedals, the whammy bar and unleashed a blistering solo that went a full five minutes, fingerling lightning fast scales, then holding note after note seemingly forever, always circling right back to the song they were playing, feeling the tension that had been building slowly release and then lap back at him as elation. When he finished he cooled down a minute and signaling to the other two, they all stopped playing in unison.

Sam walked over to the drummer. “I like you,” he said. “You’re good.”

Panting some, the drummer smiled and nodded.

“We practice six days a week for a good two to three hours a day. I expect to work a little at home too. We are always getting better. Every single day, that’s all we do—get better. Can you handle that?”

The kid nodded.

“I’m Sam. This is Salar.”

“I’m Gary.”

Sam smiled and extended his hand. “Welcome to The Milk Carton Kids.”

They all came over, a few even genuflecting before Sam and his guitar. They showered him in compliments, everyone’s mood now spilling over and pooling together into what they’d all wanted all along. Salar was holding court, his arm around Gary. Sam, after a couple of minutes sort of drifted back to the table, where Rose was beginning to clean up. He stared at her until she felt it and
looked right at him. She smiled, so did he. He kept looking into her eyes and she at him, her eyes telling him, that she was sad, but also telling him that she wasn’t sorry. Soon, the kids were all calling for Sam again, and he let Salar pull him back into the group, as Rose turned and went back into the house. Gary’s girlfriend ran to kiss him. Some of the kids wandered through the now empty garage, looking at, even twirling the fifty fuzzy black and white pictures of missing kids Sam had cut off milk cartons and hung from fishing line—they floated about the space like ghosts among the neon light of the old juke-joint signs. They all stayed a few minutes after in the driveway, no one daring to speak, but everyone holding in them an excitement in what they’d witnessed, which was that all too rare yet always sought after commodity of teenage-hood—something real. They stood together, moving in and out from one another’s proximity, one another’s energies coalescing, acclimating to what was new, but settling down into what was going to be a new little community. They swore, made quiet lusty jokes, shared some more food. Just like that, Rose was back where she wanted to be, Sam was where he needed to be, and the incarnation of the Milk Carton Kids was complete
Here We Are Now, Entertain Us

This section, unfortunately, is still very much under construction and I didn’t want to bother having any of you read it. It will be about a 10 page section, giving some background on the new drummer, as well as some of the other new kids entering the group. It will also detail how this group came together at Somerville High, where they all took the same computer class, and engaged with one another and sort of bonded as a group in an early version of what would later be called chat rooms and later still be called facebook.

Democracy On The March

Two girls primp themselves in front a mirror, each one at either end of the teenage emotional continuum: one so heady with the ambrosial bliss of romantic expectation as to be almost fragrant, the other so furious with her family that she was almost hot to the touch. Suzanne was noticeably flushed, her young pores sighing out a hundredth song for a hundredth boy—this time Salar—aroused in a deep and profound way, not with the boy himself, but with the misty contours of

13 In “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana, this is the second line of the chorus in a rock anthem most rock critics love to say defined the generation still living out their teens in this book. Rock-stars may well be like Gods in this one respect—every generation seems to create the one it needs. Perhaps the singular symbolic figure to rise out of the Generation X, everything about Kurt Cobain embodied what it was to be a latch-key kid from a broken home. He was a living, breathing Samuel Becket character, irreversibly wounded, compulsively dressed in layers of tramp-rags. He was destined to forever hate the fame he couldn’t help himself from desiring, and to forever doubt the self-authenticity that was the very thing that drew huge tides of America’s youth to his music and to himself. He would finally quiet his aching head for good in 1994 with a single gunshot to his head. He died in a mansion in Seattle: alone.
all he was still expected to be; Rose too, was flushed, but with yet another lightning-strike of righteous filial indignation—this time at Sam—angry at being, yet again, let down, angrier still, perhaps, that it seemed she could never again expect not to be. The resentment had been burning in Rose for a while, because the truth was, she was already the wizened witness to her mother’s meltdowns, and, in taking over the household, had long since become her proud father’s equal, and really, by the tender age of sixteen, his domestic superior. The friction between the lofty expectations she’d always had for her family and the continually disappointing reality she kept experiencing created plenty of energy, but the habits and routines of running that house were the valves and piping she forced it all through; in fact, the sheer demand of the domestic responsibilities she’d so capably taken on, became an efficient furnace insulating her and everyone around her from those fires that really rage within all of us (though within Rose they ran especially hot) at that age, when we begin to see clearly the faults and vulnerabilities of our parents, all the sudden white hot tantrums, which are really just flash-fires begun by the tossed embers from the one simple burning fact of teenage life: that our parents are not quite all we thought they were, and that who we thought they were has been lost to us forever.

But now it was Sam letting her down, Sam, who had become her domestic partner—of everyone, he didn’t mind helping her out in the kitchen, cleaning the dishes at night, or running to get whatever ingredients she needed to the store—as long as she kept enough batteries in the house to keep his headphones
working, Sam was happy to help her out. He was not just a fellow draftee into their broken home, he had become the one who most responded to her care, and the confidant she could always—always—know would be waiting at the end of her long days. But since the band started, it seemed he’d left the dishes undone a few times, left her waiting without a phone call several others—there was just an entitled overall nonchalance toward her that hurt and she was starting to want to hurt him back.

“They’re late,” Rose said, peeking at the clock behind them.

She looked Rose over in the mirror, and then reached out and cupped her breasts in her hands. “Your whole body is like the one I’m supposed to have.”

Rose, laughing, peeled her fingers off of her. “Would you stop doing that?”

“You know,” she said, going back to the mirror. “I know about a hundred guys that’ll be here in ten minutes to go the movies with us.”

“I can’t. I told you—I promised Sam.”

“You promised yourself to Sam,” Suzanne shook her head.

“Stop saying it like that.”

“Haven’t you taken care of him long enough.”

“He saved my life.”

“So what if he did. You’ve been saving him his whole life.”

“You’re just being bitchy because you’re nervous about tonight.”
Suzanne looked over in the mirror at her as she penned her eyeliner on.

“I’m not nervous at all. Excited though. When you finally do decide to start dating, you’ll realize that right now is the best part.

“Looking at myself in the mirror?”


“If they ever get here.” Rose squinted her eyes to see the digital clock by her bed.

“Jeez, Rose. You’d think it was you that might be getting stood up.”

“He didn’t used to do things like this to me.”

Suzanne rolled her eyes. “He’s always played you better than that damn guitar.”

Rose whacked her on the shoulder, hard enough for Suzanne to give her an exaggerated wounded look and rub her shoulder. “He better get here soon,” Rose said. “Or I’ll punch him right in the balls.”

They all met out in the driveway as the boys arrived at last, Salar doing a profuse apologetic soft-shoe dance around Suzanne, and Sam smirking back at Rose’s glare until she really did punch him in the balls, not hard, but hard enough for him to take a seat on the picnic bench, and remain there, prone, as Salar pranced around and taunted him in an attempt to get Suzanne to laugh. She didn’t, choosing instead to hold her discipline, figuring if she could keep the upper
hand, good for her, and if he was good enough to wrestle it away from her: all the 
better. Joe, who loved having company, and who had determined to himself a 
while ago already, that the foreign kid was a good egg, came drumming down the 
stairs with a plate full of hot dog links and buns, smiling at the smallness of the 
drama he’d been watching and listening to from the kitchen.

Joe, happy to have company, was in a good mood and soon had the links 
searing on the grill and himself in the middle of a jocular debate with his daughter 
about the virtues, or lack thereof, of the all-American weiner.

“I'll tell you Rosie, I can grill a hot dog with any man in Somerville,” Joe 
said. “I always could.”

“Whatever that means,” Rose said, smirking.

“It means a lot—we're the three-time hot dog capital of the world.”

Suzanne weighed in. “Wasn’t that after my grandfather’s magazine 
covers—that was like twenty years ago.”

“We’re still the once and future hot dog kings.”

“You do know they make hot dogs out of hogs’ anuses.” Rose said.

“Oh stop it,” Joe said. “Hot dogs are as American as baseball or apple 
pie.”

“Even so,” she said.

He made a dismissive face, then he turned and ruffled Sam’s hair. “So,” 
he said. “What did you do to get a punch in the balls?”
Sam dismissed the question with a wave of his hand, but Salar cheerfully chimed in. “If you want future little baseball-players for grandchildren, Mr. Merigana, you should put your hopes in Rose—I think Sam’s are now all going to come out cross-eyed.”

Joe laughed. “She’d never give her dad a crack in the nuts like that,” he said. “Would you honey?”

“You’ve come close,” she said.

Joe finished, piled the hot dogs into twin pyramids atop a pair of wicker-backed paper plates, surrounded with cooled jars of condiments, condensing in the heat, and rang the dinner bell with relish. He’d installed the bell right off the deck near the grill, and rang it whenever they ate outside, in proud defiance to his family’s well-voiced embarrassment. Sam and Rose continued to ignore one another, and though Suzanne’s indignation was an obvious charade, Salar had yet to procure an official pardon for his delinquency and, his nervousness overriding his instincts, he sat himself uneasily across from her. Myrtle, the last to take a seat, sat amid the dour quietude, bemused by the obvious taciturn ambiance and especially of her husband’s loutish obliviousness to it.

“They came out great!” Joe said, his mouth full.

Rose smiled over at him. “How’s work, dad.”

“Those caterpillars are everywhere now—no one wants to take it seriously.”

“I found one in my yard,” Salar said, thinking he was being helpful.
“Up on Hickory Way?”

“My dad finds them on his car at work sometimes.”

“Now they’re hitching rides, dad.”

“Maybe those fuzzy little vermin come from Iran.” Sam offered, and Joe, for a second, seemed willing to contemplate this.

“Didn’t you ask for a special fleet of trucks?”

“I got Stratford County to rent them to us.”

Suzanne broke in. “My dad says the Mayor there wanted favors he didn’t want to give.”

“It’s not your dad’s fault Suzie. Ten years ago, I could have just made a call, set up an appointment, shook a man’s hand and had what I needed. Now, you wouldn’t believe all the forms they require you to fill out—it just seems they keep putting more and more paper between a man and what needs doing. . . “ Joe trailed off. “But if we don’t do something soon, and I don’t think we are, by August, this whole town’s going look like we’re having a very hot winter.”

“We should make a Hawaiian Christmas movie—I’ll be the elven Elvis!” Salar snapped his fingers and went into a drawlish Jingle Bell Rock. Suzanne smiled and looked away from him.

“Do I wear a kick-me sign to dinner,” Joe said to his wife. “Even the little foreigner’s making fun of me.”

“I really wasn’t.” Salar looked uncomfortably around the table.

“His name’s Salar, dad.”
“Are you people communists?” Joe squinted his eyes at Salar.

Salar looked at his friends; Rose looked disgusted on his behalf and mouthed out “I’m sorry,” to him; Sam though, just grinned widely back at him.

Salar cleared his throat. “My family fought the communists, sir.”

“What?”

“I have an uncle in Afghanistan—he killed twelve commies personally.”

“Really?” Rose’s eyes widened as she leaned in to his story.

Sam, smiling, with his arms folded, leaned to the table. “It’s true,” he said.

“He’s even got their pelts on his wall.”

Salar, startled, jerked his head toward Sam. Myrtle laughed a little as she chewed her food. Rose pinched Sam under the table.

Salar though, wasn’t letting Sam get the better of this one, and he swallowed his food, took a sip of lemonade and dabbed his chin with a napkin. When he looked across the table, Suzanne, her well-plucked eyebrows arched, was now looking right back at him. “This is not something I’m supposed to tell anyone, Mr. Merigana,” he lowered his voice to accentuate the depth of the secret he was about to share. “But it’s true—he scalped some of them, and then he had his wife weave little hats out of them, for his three favorite goats?”

Joe noticed the snickering, but he liked the kid and decided to play along.

“Goats?”
Rose had her face in her hands and when Salar looked across the table, Suzanne, shocked at his brazenness, was now smoldering at him. Even Sam was impressed, smiling across the table at him, his jaw hung open.

“He raises goats, Mr. Merigana. My uncle.”

Suppressing a smile, Joe stayed with it. “But why do his goats need hats?”

“Desert living, Mr. Merigana—hot days, cold nights. Anyway, I can assure you we are not communists. In fact, those three goats are like goat-representatives—my uncle’s modeling his entire herd on American democracy.”

Salar gave a military salute at the end.

Everyone laughed, but especially Joe. “Now that’s showing some onions, kid.” Joe laughed again and shook his head. “You’re all right, foreign-boy—I don’t care who your dad is.”

“His father’s a damn good man,” Myrtle snapped, noticeably annoyed. “I keep telling you that, Joe.”

“Sorry, kid—I’ve just got friends at the plant. Myrtle says your mom’s still in Afghanistan.”

“Iran.” Everyone said this in union.

“Of course, sorry. Why doesn’t she come to America, too? Suzanne’s dad’s the mayor—he can probably pull a few strings. Don’t go smooching up his daughter at the movies tonight though, kid.”

Salar and Sam laughed, and Suzanne groaned and covered her face in her hands.
“I’m just saying,” Joe said, mostly to Rose, who was glowering at him. “A family ought to be together and his honor has friends in high places.”

“He doesn’t want to bring her here,” Salar said.

“A family should be together,” Joe said.

“The plan was always for us to go back to Iran.”

“Iran? But he got to America.”

“So did I,” Myrtle said. “It’s not as exclusive a country as you’d like to think it is.”

**Children Of The Corn**

It was the third week of June and, back then anyway, it still got cool at night right through the month. The four kids cut through the construction site on their way to the Rialto. A full row of the condominiums was almost framed out and as they passed through, a few hairy, work-grimed faces poked their heads out of what seemed an endless model of geometry to watch the kids, really the girls, as they passed through. There had been enough tension between the company, its crews and the town by that point that no one, unless they absolutely had to, made any requests of the other side—so the kids were allowed to cut through off hours, and the company was allowed to work through Sundays and a little later at night than they promised, as the small town and the large corporation

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14 An initially intriguing, eventually underwhelming 1984 film, based upon a Steven King short story where a mysterious stranger turns a small town’s children into a senseless cult that believes that all humans over the age of eighteen must die. They are stopped at last, just after they erect a cross in a cornfield, and just before crucifying the obligatorily chaste female lead upon said cross.
continued to warily circle one another. As they approached Dream Lanes, they all climbed up to its wide cement stoop and sat down. A corner of the second step had cracked Sam wriggled it free and reached inside; looking around at all of them, he mumbled words he thought sounded like Latin, rolled his eyes back into his head some, then reached his arm into the hole in the stair and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. When Rose gasped, Salar and Suzanne broke up laughing.

“How did you even know that was in there?” Rose reached for the bottle.

Salar put his hand on Rose’s shoulder. “He’s the one put it there.”

“Rosie,” Suzanne threw an arm around her. “You don’t always have to be the grown-up, relax.”

“A little of the devil’s water before we see the devil’s movie,” Sam took a big swig and everyone laughed at his sour face.

Salar took a pull and so did Suzanne, who gave it to Rose. “Where did you even get this?” She asked.

“I found it out among the rocks under the bridge at the river.”

“My dad and I used to fish there at the end of the summers—I used to go there all the time,” Salar said.

Suzanne took another tiny swig and swallowed. “We used to swim there when we were kids.”

“Everyone used to go there,” Sam said. “These days—it’s all mine.”

“Is that where you go in the morning? You’re not supposed to.”

“Thanks to someone’s dad,” Sam said, poking Suzanne.
“Shut up, Sam,” she said. “It wasn’t his fault. That bridge really is falling apart and he wanted to protect Greg and Marsha’s families.”

Greg and Marsha were the two young lovers that had committed suicide the year before, doing so on a breezy mid-June afternoon, the day after school let out for the summer. Gregg’s family, one of the old Jones’s I referred to earlier, was moving to a distant exurb in, well, let’s just say no one I’ve spoken to remembers the name of the development or even the particular State of the Union it was in—they were to be the third family to move into what was a neighborhood stuffed with oversized pre-fab housing and undersized twelve foot trees, the kind of place inspired by brainless wealth and then continued through false values and easy remortgaging.

But what was perhaps most frightening about the suicides was how nondescript the children involved were: they were both less than popular straight B students. They were the same age and were the twin survivors of Sunnyside Elementary School, where each of them had been picked on. He was tall, but skinny and pigeon-chested, she was the victim of a dental disfigurement that affected her speech until she finally got her braces at thirteen. They were not friends during their time of torment and, in fact, each had, at various times, used the other as a shield for themselves. What they did have in common, besides being picked on, were sad and soft mothers whose devotion and even friendship were the only reliable salvation of their otherwise miserable childhoods, mothers
who were always baking them things and who always listened, but who never forced them to talk. They grew up better than expected, Greg was over six feet tall by the time he was fifteen, and by the time Marsha’s braces came off, she had gotten over her lisping, and had filled out into a noticeably busty girl, even some of the strong facial features that had made her ugly as a child, were attractive as a teenager. But they were still stuck in Somerville, with the same old kids and though those kids no longer picked on them, they never fully accepted them either, but at some point, each one noticed the other.

At first it, was surely just hormones and mathematical realism, but by the end of that first all-night phone call, both Gregg and Marsha found themselves in the middle of what would be the most profound thing either of them were to ever experience. They understood one another in a way no one else ever possibly could, and soon enough they had talked out their painful formative years, each one even willfully reimagining the other as their attempted defender, and seeing what was now happening to them as nothing short of divine fate. As one another’s reliable dates, they could even go to school dances and parties now and once they did, they were now accepted just fine. And so when Mr. Jones, ignoring the protests of his usually submissive wife, took the buyout package for the house and procured his job doing whatever and wherever, he was committing an act of much more violent gravity than he could have ever known.

There were shouts and tears, a last all-night phone-call, and then one last sunny day together. They ordered their favorite pizza from Pazzo’s, ate it out by
the river, swallowed a lot of sleeping tablets, drank some whiskey and just sat back against some rocks under the bridge, watching the water flow out to the waterfall and staring up into a blue sky until their young minds merged with the sky itself. Some people, as some people always will, focused on the hard time they’d each used to have at school, not to blame any emotional trauma, but as the needed proof of some congenital wrong in both of them.

For both family’s sakes, our beloved Mayor Wilson, his protective instincts getting the better of him, officially declared that the kids had slipped through the bridge, and, to give it credence, closed the site down and passed a town ordinance against all swimming and fishing in the area until repairs were done. But a journalist from Capital City slipped into the morgue in the lower tombs of the hospital, slipped an orderly a few bills, and broke the story of the star-crossed young lovers double suicide as a scandal in the big city paper. A week’s worth of articles followed, and it even got some national attention—what was happening, the national article asked, to small town America.

His posture dolorous, his soft face heavy, his sonorous voice craggy with woe, Mayor Wilson issued an immediate mea culpa while squinting into the big city cameras. But, however honorable his intentions, his honor had inadvertently spilled Somervillian blood into the national waters, and the sharks that had long been gliding about showed up. There was talk of official charges of corruption to be levied against him—America loves a comeback, but only after its had its fun knocking you down. It took his crossing legal lines he wouldn’t before to change
the story and get the heat off, it took a building permit for a satellite park above the river and an unfurled welcome mat to the cable company. Perhaps it didn’t make that big a difference, the mayor was likely too protective of our quaintness anyway, and the bigger world had been leaking in for a while anyway—most of us wanted those extra channels. The mayor, though, hadn’t quite bounced back from doing all this; he’d been hurt by the whole affair, he was a man who loved being Mayor of Somerville, who had no further political aspirations, and so was unprepared for rawness of political combat he suddenly found himself in; it wasn’t the humiliation itself so much as the nonchalant nakedness of acrimony he suddenly found himself the recipient of in that had altered him in such a deep way, that had burned the warmth right off his enthusiasm and worn the luster off his verbosity. He still had the charm, a long habit of conduct had assured that, but it had before always seemed so natural with him, had seemed to respire right out of the very pores of his dermis, comforting and cheering all around him; but that was gone now, and had hardened over into what seemed more like a shell covering an increasingly alienated, and even misanthropic creature beneath it.

“Well,” Sam said. “I went right beneath the yellow-tape and found this in the rocks—this was definitely theirs.”

“Whose?” Surprised at herself, Rose took another sip.

“Gregg and Marsha—it was among the rocks maybe ten feet from where they were found.”
Rose handed the bottle back, gave him a hurt stare and backed off some as the other two came forward, each staring into the bottle and letting their fingertips sort of lightly dance their way down its neck. The other three took a last sip as Rose, her back to them, headed down the stairs.

“Do you ever think about them, Rose?” Rose stopped walking away, but didn’t turn around. “I do sometimes.” Suzanne gazed fixedly into the bottle.

“What do you think?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know,” Suzanne was quiet suddenly. “Are they in heaven, are they being held in purgatory? And if they are, can they at least be together like they wanted?”

“I wonder what their last day was like sometimes,” Salar said.

“I only think about what if they just didn’t do it,” Rose said, her voice steady and serious as she finally turned back around. “It’s a year exactly today, you know. If they just figured out a way to not do it, they might be just fine.”

“They did it to stay together,” Suzanne said.

“All we can be is alive,” Sam added, and Rose took a few steps back toward the group.

“You don’t know that,” Suzanne said.

“I’m just saying that if they wanted to stay together, they could have talked on the phone, written letters. If they were meant to be together they would have, otherwise they would have aged, moved on and found other people. Either way, being alive has to be better than being dead.” Rose said.
“You don’t know that,” Suzanne said to her too.

“What were they trying to accomplish?”

“They didn’t want to move on,” Salar said.

“Exactly,” Sam said. “I bet the very idea of ever doing so is what made them do it.”

Sam went back down to the step to put the bottle back in. Before doing so though, he took a last sip and held the bottle to the sun. “In here is all that’s left of them,” he said, letting sunlight filter through the brown liquid. “We’re drinking whiskey laced with the backwash of dead children.”

The Rialto Movie Palace was still open for business that summer, though by then it was showing discount, second-run shows, and a saddening quaintness was already seeping into its ritzy, catchpenny pizazz. The same plush, burgundy roping was posted down the sidewalk in front, though there were rarely crowds big enough, anymore, to warrant it; the brass posts were unpolished, and the roping itself was worn bald in places, especially in the middle where people kept stepping over it instead of walking around. But all the silken neon color in the bullnose marquee was still glorious, and the synchronized blinking in its frame of bare light-bulbs still made it look like as if the place was literally dripping light.

Goldie had died several years before, but his picture still hung in the lobby and much of his memorabilia still served as the theater’s décor. The theater itself felt like being in the inside of a huge jewelry box: thirty foot deep burgundy
draperies crinkled themselves up into the ceiling before the movie started, toward the front, on either side of the screen, small circular staircases wound up to the balcony, sconces, with little lampshades ran down either wall, and a half-dozen sparkling chandeliers, with ornate backings that looked like ancient gold medallions, hung from the ceiling.

The liquor seemed to have affected Salar the most. The potency of his romantic expectations had already pre-intoxicated him, and that bit of liquor had him leaking enough adrenalin that he was plenty vulnerable by the time he walked beneath that marquee and into the Rialto. Though Goldie had died a few years prior, his picture was the first thing you saw upon entering, and his memorabilia still served as much of the theater’s décor. Joe had slipped Sam enough money to pay for everyone’s tickets, and as he and Rose did so, Salar made himself a capable and ebullient docent, pointing everything out to Suzanne, right down to the enormous film reel fashioned into the faux-marble floor, and to the endlessly repeating pattern of armless, white-gloved hands tossing stardust into the midnight blue carpeting that began at the concession stand and continued in twin strips right down to the screen. And as he wandered past the old posters, eventually wading right out into the concession area and into the soft percussion and the pleasant buttery effluvium of pop-corn popping, Salar began yammering away at what was, even for him, a breakneck pace until Suzanne shushed him, and when he turned to her she was smiling at him with such tenderness, that he took a breath and, at last, went quiet. By the time they’d
gotten to their seats, Salar and Suzanne were holding hands and their relationship had begun. It wasn’t long before Salar, flooded now with an unfamiliar happiness, was jabbering wildly on again to the point where Sam got annoyed at him but Rose, who was smiling and egging Salar on, pinched Sam to shut him up. When the lights flickered for the third time, however, Sam loudly shushed him.

Salar, a little hurt by the reproach, raised his arms some in exasperation. “The movie hasn’t started yet.”

“These next few seconds,” Rose whispered, patting Sam on the knee as the lights began to dim. “Have always been Sam’s favorite part.”

The movie was one of those eighties slasher pictures—about a group of teenagers who go to a cabin for a weekend of unsupervised consumption of mood altering substances and unprotected sex, only to be butchered, one by one and just before or after the act, by a mute yet raging, white masked, puritanical bogeyman using various jagged and rusted yard implements.

This particular picture was notable for the actress playing its lone surviving virginal character, who had starred as a twelve-year-old child in what was the crown jewel of an earlier sub-genre of shock-horror movies in the mid-seventies—the evil child movie. In her case, she’d been possessed by Satan himself, and the controversy that came with a child that age spewing ninety minutes worth of prurient blasphemy and carnal perversity was a marketing banana for the film company at the time. The words themselves, though they
appeared to be coming from the possessed young actresses, were actually mouthed by a famously stentorian British actor who’d been paid more for his three days of work for that film than he had in the rest of his illustrious career upon the British stage.

As with most scary movies, this one was more a funhouse burlesque carnival ride for the young and amorous than it was a story. Suzanne had great fun exaggerating her fright and burying her face into Salar’s obliging shoulder. Rose was disgusted at first, but then, to her own surprise, sort of fell in with the excitement from the young crowd, giggling along at the sophomoric creativity as each murder scene became more grisly than the last. She also felt a sudden shuddering lonesomeness, and drew, sitting among the crackling anxiety of that crowd, an osmotic need to join in the ritual and to get close to someone, and she wormed her arm through Sam’s as she surrogated him for the post.

The entire site was dark by the time they arrived back at the bowling alley, Sam lifting the step and pulling the whiskey bottle out as Salar reenacted each bloody murder. They began passing the bottle around again, Rose joining in this time, though she kept trying to slow Sam down. The conversation eventually returned to Lizzie McCluhan, the aforementioned too young veteran horror actress. Coming of age in the public eye had been tough on Lizzie and her drug problems and messy romances had been splattered across the gossip columns and recorded by tabloid television shows and paparazzi cameras.
“She’s like America’s evil little sweetheart,” Salar said.

“Being in that movie would mess anyone up,” Rose said, taking a tepid sip from the bottle. “But I mean—who’s taking care of her? They couldn’t find some other movie for her to be in?”

“She’s not much of an actress,” Suzanne said.

Sam took a swig, his throat having already calloused itself against the violent taste of the whiskey, and his mind’s fingers feeling its way around his very first inebriation like a blind person who’d been suddenly healed and was now teaching himself to see. “Rose has a point,” he said. “They may as well put her in a cage with a bowl of gruel and set her in a traveling caravan with Siamese twins and fetuses in formaldehyde jars.”

Salar and even Suzanne cracked up, while Rose crinkled her brows and shook her head at him. “She probably misses being famous,” Sam said. “And she can’t get other roles—remember she played an evil-teen-age mother, too.”

“She wasn’t evil,” Suzanne said. “Just the baby was.”

“How fast she became the supporting evil rather than the lead,” Salar said.

“Who could have that kind of a childhood and not be on drugs?” Rose asked. “She was only twelve—I’d never let any of my kids do that?”

“What kids?” Salar looked around at everyone.

“I just mean. . .”

“Rose thinks every kid she babysits for is hers,” Sam said, ruffling her hair until she shoved his hand off.
“I repeat,” she said. “No child of mine would get anywhere near that movie. Some things, when they happen to us, change the whole rest of our lives—how could her parents not think of that. She might have been a doctor or the first woman president, instead, she’s like a national joke. Evil children, babies—why would anyone want to even pretend such things.”

Sam took another huge swig and hugged the bottle to his chest. “Are babies really innocent?”

“Of course they are,” Rose said. “They’re the only truly innocent beings.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Remember that time with the baby last winter?” He pointed the bottle at her.

“Little Emily? She’s only nine months old.”

“I’m telling you,” Sam said to the other two. “She had to run to the store for ten minutes.”

“If I sent him he would’ve taken forever.”

“Anyway, I’m telling you. Without its mama. . .”

“She’s a her, not an it.”

“She,” Sam said slow and loud. “Slapped me, she pinched me, she even bit me once.”

“She was just upset I wasn’t there.”

“This little shit would have killed me if she could. She would have telekinetically choked me to death just like the evil little evil girl in what’s her name’s last movie.”
“We just came from her last movie,” Suzanne said.

“The one before that,” Sam said, waving her off.

“She would not,” Rose tried to shush the other two as they laughed.

“We all think babies are so cute,” Sam said. “But that’s really because their helpless. If babies had the power to do whatever they wanted to,” he took another swig and wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. “I bet none of us would find them cute.”

A lull descend on the kids’ conversation—what Sam said was a bit of a faux pas—after all, very few groups of people get more nostalgic for childhood innocence than the newly shorn lambs we call teenagers.

Salar, wanting to alter the sudden grim atmosphere, spoke up. “Where would the devil come from in Somerville?”

“The river,” Suzanne says.

“Why the river? The river’s totally peaceful—at least it was.” Rose said, remembering the previous summer’s suicides.

“Why not right out from under the mayor’s roof?” Salar said, poking Suzanne.

“I think he’d come right out of there,” Sam said, pointing to an empty foundation, barely noticeable, in the construction site. “He’d rise right out of the darkness within the darkness.”

Salar smiled. “What would he look like?”
“He’d just be a man with a gold watch and a suit,” Sam said. “He’d be carrying a guitar case with the greatest guitar there’s ever been and a suitcase carrying a deed with my name on it.”

Salar was laughing, and Rose was even smiling a little at Sam’s sudden uninhibited grandiosity.

“So what would you do?”

“I’d prick my finger, sign my name, take my guitar in one hand, his hand in the other and leap right back into the darkness.”

“Oh please,” Suzanne said, as Rose shushed her.

But Salar was hooked. “And then what?”

Sam blinked a couple of time and looked around. “Well,” he said. “It’s like a portal, and we’d come out at the crossroads—the intersection of highways 61 and 49.”

“He just got that out of one of his blues books he’s always reading,” Suzanne said. Rose, smiling, shushed her again.

Salar was eating it all up. “So then what?”

“I’d turn my back on him, start down the highway and go change the world.”

“What musician changes the world?” Suzanne rolled her eyes.

“Before Martin Luther King, before Jackie Robinson, there was Robert Johnson, Professor Longhair, Little Richard—plenty more too, a million musicians got there first.”
“Is that really true?” Salar asked.

“The radio went right through every wall—the musicians had been talking to each other all along. Rock ‘n roll comes from the black slaves field songs and the poor whites banjos and jug bands.”

“Wow,” Rose said. “I never thought about all that.”

“The musicians were always poor and always nobodies,” Sam said. “That might be the best thing about it—all its greatest musicians come walk out of the fields and the swamps and the woods—they all come out of nowhere.”

“Even Somerville?”

Sam shouldered the back door to the bowling alley open and they all walked inside.

“All we’ve ever had is a painter,” Sam said. “Somerville ought to be due.”

They made their way over to what had been the bowling alley’s bar and lounge, which the workers had set up as a little coffee area.

Suzanne walked with her head on Salar’s shoulder, her arm wound around his waist. “That would be amazing—I mean if you guys ever made it that big.”

Sam went behind the old bar, grabbed four coffee cups, and divided what was left into a lost shot for each of them. They gathered in a circle, raising their paper cups to one another. Salar grabbed a milk carton off the bar and held it up so the picture of the missing child was almost part of the group.

“To The Milk Carton Kids,” Salar said.

“To all the lost children,” Sam added. “To the ones who got away.”
A Kiss To Build A Dream On\textsuperscript{15}

Just enough light was on to feel your way around the place, and Salar and Suzanne bumped and banged their way among the copper piping and the huge boxes of kitchen appliances until they found an old booth in back that sufficed for privacy. Rose’s equilibrium somewhat compromised from the alcohol, she held onto Sam’s shirt as they nosed their way through the other direction, which was darker. The place was even more filled with materials and stacked boxes than the night he’d carried her in there, and a lot of things had moved around.

They found Jimmy’s, the old lounge that had been in that bowling alley for decades, run by its namesake, Jimmy Gleikman, also known as Jimmy the Saint, a nickname bestowed upon him by some local drag-racing buddies, because of a large St. Christopher medallion he always had around his neck, and for sitting every single Sunday in the third row pew with his grey haired ma, who he lived with until she died when he was fifty-two, but perhaps mostly because he retired, according to legend, with an even dozen pink-slips without ever losing a race.

Jimmy was a real character, a burly fat man with a surprisingly keen dress sense, always amply colongned, and with a thick head of salt and pepper hair and a matching full beard, each impeccably groomed. He’d also had a deep, sonorous voice and was something of a rock and roll aficionado, serving as the DJ for

\textsuperscript{15} A song composed by Bert Kalmar, Harry Ruby and Oscar Hammerstein II in 1935; it was most famously recorded in 1951 by the one and only Louis Armstrong, a man who had so internalized his music and his instrument that even his singing sounded like a blown trumpet.
WSOM’s Rock-n-Roll Diner every Saturday night for years. He was seven years older than Joe, and still revered when Joe and his friends raced on that paved strip of fire-road up by the reservoir, though by then, the kids were only racing for fifty dollars, and Jimmy was just a guy who owned the local juke-joint (that he supposedly bought by selling those pink slips), who everyone listened to on the radio Saturday nights, and who showed up, now and again, to tell racing stories. Joe though, was the best of the next and tamer generation of street-racers and Jimmy had taken a shine to him. Joe began bringing Jimmy free meals to eat at the station while he did his radio show from his parents’ restaurant—Amore Meriganas—still, for my money, the best damn Italian restaurant Somerville ever had, and Jimmy would always describe his dinner and give them a free plug on the air. Joe also used to do odds and ends repair work for the owner of the Dream Lanes and, not long after Joe had given Sam his first guitar, which the boy hardly put down, he’d taken his young stepson over the alley with him on a job and introduced the two.

They hit it off. Sam was already showing obvious promise, and Jimmy, a lifelong childless bachelor, loved being an occasional mentor, and especially loved the way this particular quiet boy would sit on a barstool, eating pizza and sipping root-beer, and greedily listen to every story he had. He even took Sam a couple of Saturday nights, to the studio with him and let him help pick out the records. A prodigious smoker, Jimmy died in 1984 at the age of 52 of lung cancer and was buried, in a huge ceremony befitting the man they were burying, right
next to his mother in the All-Saints Cemetary up in the foothills. Joe and Sam were pulled aside at the funeral and attended a smaller gathering around Jimmy’s will the next week. He left most everything he had to his mother’s church, but he did leave Joe his old Ford, and left Sam his record collection.

“Oh wow, look!” Rose said. “The pictures are all still up.”

Two nights after Jimmy died, which was a year before the bowling alley was sold, Jimmy’s friends had one last carousing night together, and then locked the old place up tight, planning to come back before they razed the place to clean it out, except no one ever really did, and so the old bar and lounge area was close to intact, the chairs and tables were all still there, and nearly all of the hundreds of small framed pictures seemed to still be hanging from the walls. Jimmy was standing, his trademark big black shades and his huge white-toothed smile slicing through his beard, with his arm around various people around town, and Rose found one of him with her grandparents when they were catering the Somerville Firehouse’s annual Turkey Bingo that used to be held the second Wednesday of November just beneath where they were standing in the convention hall; Rose lifted the picture off its nail, blew the dust off and stared into it: younger than she’d ever remembered them, they mugged for the camera on either side of Jimmy. Sam found a picture of the Meriganas, as constituted, during the big ice-storm of ‘81, when every street off the right side of Elm Street lost power for three full days; Joe and several others had hooked up generators to the place and about fifty army cots worth of Somervillians formed a temporary
winter commune, sleeping in the bowling lanes, and using the kitchen in Jimmy’s for thrice a day buffets for all the neighborhood refugees. In the picture, all four Meriganas stood smiling together—Sam was still a diminutive freckle-faced child and Rose a gangling, coltish pre-teen, Joe, who’s responsibilities never seemed to end for those three days, looked proud and even Myrtle, who was between periods of illness, was smiling and leaning into her husband’s shoulder.

“Is that five years ago?” Sam asked.

“How small you still are,” she rubbed her thumb over him.

“Your dad was like the town hero—I never saw him happier.”

Rose laughed a little, wrapping her arm around Sam and leaning into his shoulder. “Look at us though—we’re all happy—even you and your mother.”

“Yeah,” Sam hugged her to him. “We all still think everything’s going to be fine.”

They went downstairs to what had been the convention hall, which was still half-filled with cardboard boxes packed with old stuff from the town. Sam found an old bowling shirt with his name embroidered on it, and some old firehouse equipment. The bowling alley used to have huge seasonal flea-markets where every municipal building and department, as well as most of the shopkeepers and townspeople, used to sell their wares. There were always good deals to be had and then, over the years, more and more collectors from out of town began showing up too. A bowling shirt from Somerville, for some reason,
had taken on its own intrinsic value, as if it had been shoved into a Somerville
closet and then reemerged out of some trap door way down some unbeknownst
corridor of the economy. Rose wiped a clean circle into one of the mirrors,
disappeared for a couple of minutes and then came jumping back into the
cleared circle of reflection in a full cheerleader uniform bouncing a pair of pom-
poms. Sam, startled, stared at her, and then noticed her shirt and jeans piled on
a box behind her.

She kept looking at herself in the mirror. “Are you drunk?” She asked. “I
think I’m drunk.”

“I do think you’re drunk.”

She walked to the mirror, sighing. “This town was great once,” she said.
“What if we could have all lived in it then—have you ever wondered how different
our lives would have been?”

“Actually, yes.” Sam said. “I do wonder if the next thirty years will treat
guitar players as good as the last thirty.”

“Everyone always needs music,” she burped and then laughed at herself.
“Oh my God—excuse me.” Then she grabbed a rag and tried to wipe off the
mirror, but it was old style oval mirror, probably off a nineteen fifty-something
bedroom door, and its fogginess wasn’t dust, but age. “What a cool mirror—too
bad it won’t come clear.”

“Maybe it’s just teary-eyed,” Sam said. “It’s probably been a while since it’s
had a chance to reflect on someone wearing that uniform.”
She turned and took his face a second in her hands. “You want to know my favorite thing about you, maybe.”

Sam laughed.

“All these years we’ve been together and still, every single day there’ll be at least one thing you’ll look at,” she said. “Something everyone else is looking at too, but you’ll see something no one else I’ve ever met ever would.” She smiled and then kissed him on the lips and then turned, pulled his arms around her and leaned back into him.

“So?”

“What?”

“Now you have to say your favorite thing about me.”

“Aw come on, Rose.” Sam let go and started walking away.

“Come on, yourself. I deserve it.”

He inhaled and exhaled. “Well,” he said. “You’re the greatest person I’ll ever know, okay. I know I say I’m going to leave. . . and I am. But if the world was ending next week, the only place in the world I’d want to be is wherever you are.”

She kissed his cheek, grabbed his arms and settled back into him again.

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

Sam laughed. “Here,” he said, and pinned a pin onto her cheerleading uniform.
Rose pulled her shirt up to look at it. It was an old Somerville High School pin. “Oh my god—I still have the one my dad gave my mom. Where did you find this?”

Sam hiked his thumb. “Somewhere back behind us.”

“Wow—look at us,” Rose said giggling as she snuggled into him and looked back into the mirror.

“It’s like we’re in our own fading photograph.”

“How young we still were.”

“Those were the days,” Sam said. “No one had much but everyone shared everything and it still seemed like there would always be enough for everybody.”

“Well,” Rose said, raising a now imaginary glass. “To a limitless future.”

Sam laughed. “As we talk about all that could have been.”

Rose sighed. “I think being drunk is a little like having my period—I’m as sad right now as I was happy just a minute ago.” She knocked her head back against him. “What is it?” She asked. “I can hear you thinking.”

“Would we have even known each other?”

“How could we not?”

“No one got divorced back then—your parents would still be together and ours would never have met.”

“That’s what you’re thinking about? I don’t know how you get D’s in math—sometimes your entire mind seems like one never-ending word problem.”

“But think about it Rose?”
She covered her ears. “Please don’t drag me into this. I only meant it as a little thought exercise. You know what, while we’re time traveling anyway, maybe you could just be my mom’s son—she’d love that anyway—and we’ll get rid of your mom.”

Sam laughed. “Is that what you want—official blood kinship?”

“I don’t know,” she let her head drop back on his shoulder. “Actually, I think that we’re not really brother and sister always made it more special somehow, like we try harder or something, that we’re more like family than real family.”

“I think there is no word for what we are,” Sam said. “A family is always stuck just being a family.”

“A family is everything.”

“It isn’t. We’re not just friends, just family—I think what’s special about us is that there is no word for us.”

“So what do you want us to be?”

“Everything,” Sam said.

And that’s when he first tried to really kiss her. He brought his face close enough to hers for them to be able to fully look at one another in the semi-dark, and as soon as she looked back, she knew. Then his face came toward hers, and he got close enough that the gaseous vapors of the whiskey on his breath splashed up against the ten million miniscule nerve endings in her upper lip before she scrambled out from under him. She paced around in front of him a
minute, her hand over her mouth, not looking at him, but giving him plenty of time to say something—to take it back. He didn’t. She ran off without a word, and he could hear her footsteps hurrying away, and could hear her bump into a few things on her way up and out of the bowling alley.

Sam found a little whiskey left in their cups in the bar and drained it. Salar came up to him in the dark and asked if everything was okay. Sam didn’t answer and looked dazed, and so Salar took Sam to one of the old booths, and sat with a few minutes, concerned, but also thinking Sam was just sick from the alcohol and that the two of them had just had another one of their fights. When Sam stood and said he was going home after Rose, Salar looked relieved, wanting to get back to Suzanne before she too, decided it was time to go home.

**Dead End Kids—Meet The Latch-Key Kids**

Sam was right and she knew it. It was impossible to define, to contain what they were to one another. As her parents divorced and her mother’s mental illness reached its full and lasting maturity, Rose lost her best childhood friend. Her mom, though she’d always been manic, during most of Rose’s childhood had better control of things—the ups were dominant over the downs, and especially with this special daughter of hers, she was, most always, her best self. She overindulged though, and was a little too much like a best friend or a sister than a parent—it was always Joe, and not her mother, who was left to discipline her, and as the disciplinarian, it was he who made her feel safe.
When the marriage finally disintegrated, the pressure from it seemed to rub out all that everyone who knew Mary Merigana, formerly Mary Daigle, loved about her; her copious physical beauty, but also her vivacity and her generosity, her ability to make everyone she gave any attention to feel special and her cheery readiness to assure anyone she was with that all was going to be okay. But when her shadow self became her only self, Mary, never being one to lash out at others, just self-immolated, often to a point of great disturbance to anyone around her and no one was around her toward the end more then Rose, who naturally, and frantically, plied her own nurturing instincts, mothering her mom in the same cheery way her mom had always mothered her as she tried to nurse her back to health. But so much bad weather had gathered into her mental skies, and enough volcanic eruptions had occurred in her being that the very surface of her personality had been altered to a point where could no longer go back—it is impossible to unbuild mountain ranges—we cannot unchange any changed thing. Joe, not well equipped for dealing elusive mysteries of emotional difficulty, really did do his best to save his marriage, even after all he could think of was to stay out of the house so as to avoid trying to fix things, which by then always made things worse. So it was Rose who spent the most time with her, and who had to try to make her laugh, and to make her eat, to make her shower, and to make that confidence and self-assurance that Rose, for the rest of her life, would always consider to be the self she really was, come back.
When the marriage finally reached irrevocable dissolution, Rose didn’t descend into any crippling emotional maladjustment, for she had always had her father’s dispositional pragmatism, and she held it like a talisman against her fathomless hurt; she busied herself, keeping house, tidying up, cooking entire meals by herself at twelve years old, putting herself in charge not by demanding it, but by earning it; but the house wasn’t enough, she needed someone to take care of and since she was already drifting from her father, and he from her, she turned her attentions to her complicated new half-brother, who was so smart, so tough in a lot of ways, and yet so vulnerable and alone, and who had so much in him if someone just took the time to look, mom had always said so, and so she made Sam her project, the boy from the hospital, the love starved son of the wicked Irish immigrant, the last best thing her mom and her had ever shared together.

Sam and Rose: together they’d taken all that energy, some of which was theirs and some of which, was beyond them, and filled out the meaning of their shared domestic life the way a psychological patient might fill out a random Rorshadt ink-blot into a butterfly or an angel or a connected pair of swans. They both felt guilt, that their very coming together under the same roof could only have happened at such a cost to the one person each of them would always hold as their Platonic ideal of what a parent should be, and who had always wanted them to be together—had always tickled them with those silly jokes about their shared destiny and of a future marriage to be. And so, even after she stopped
being around, they each still had that need to please or at least not disappoint her, and so they tried to be something special together. Their parent’s marriage had also made them step-siblings, had chalked out an outline for who they were supposed to be to one another that they natural need to fill in; that they weren’t just friends anymore, that they’d moved beyond just that and they’d both, as only children without any experiential reference point, clumsily thrown themselves into it. But what they also carried into it was how everyone else defined them, how they had always struck everyone as being such an odd pair to figure out to begin with and how it was somehow fitting, possibly even fated, that they had come together as siblings; but though a marriage and the world they lived in made them siblings, everything about this was unofficial and unsanctioned, something they chafed and rebelled against by acting more brotherly and sisterly toward one another than any real brothers and sisters they knew.

This last point was important especially for Rose, for Sam hadn’t any such investment in Somerville itself; he had always imagined it was too small for him, and had always fantasized leaving; his mother never viewed living there as a privilege, but as a hurdle she had overcome, something that she, who now had house too in a nice suburb and a hardworking husband, could smirk at the spoiled wives she saw around her about. But Rose was a real Somervillian, whose father wore being from Somerville with such pride—she had inherited certain expectations she believed, willingly and with enthusiasm, ought to be met. But there was this last little dynamic to take into consideration: the two of them
were out into a frontier of sorts, and were trying to work out some language of intimacy proportionate to the relationship they thought they had. Lacking the requisite shared alleles, they had to imaginatively recreate the filamental tethers, all the connectors and receptors that went with real blood kinship. They shared secrets, fine, but as they got older they (Rose, really) needed more, they needed some language between them, an abstract construct to bolster their relationship into something special enough to rival any blood kinship. Rose did what she knew—she made sure it was her hands cooked most of the food he ate, she sewed and patched the clothes he put on his body, made sure to wear his shirts to bed. She also peed and talked to him while he brushed his teeth almost every night until Joe finally screamed at her that she was too old to do so the summer before. Rose was after some tangible evidence of a specialness between them, something that could rival the actual blood kinship they could never have. Sam, of course, was flattered by Rose’s attentions and; there never was an original family for Sam to try and recreate and he didn’t think he had any real desire for one; specialness, for Sam, was his desired goal, not a pathway to get there, he couldn’t help looking upon Rose as special, everyone knew she was, but Sam chose outwardly to collect this as proof of his own significance, though there was also always that something else from him, an unanswerable emotional dependence, coupled with an unwavering and unshakeable allegiance. Rose had a much further developed moral sense—she would do anything for him so long as it was right to do so and when he bumped up against that she had no problem
looking him right in the eye and telling him so; but when it came to who would
what for whom, really it was Sam who had no limits; for him, Rose came before
anything and anyone, she and only she was that something greater than himself
he considered himself to belong to—he’d do anything—anything—for her.

Sam, when Rose and her mother found him, had been starved for physical
affection. Her mom found him out early, tickling him behind the ear, hugging him
constantly, letting him complain about it and never teasing him when he’d find
excuses to climb up into her lap or playing right where he could constantly press
her feet when he had the whole house to play in. Watching her mom touch Sam
was almost like watching her dad scratch a stray dog with fleas. So when her
mom left, Rose tried to fill that void for him. And as they got older, their minds
and their bodies grew right around the strange relational dynamics they’d
established, right into their teenage-hood where, as others surrogated their
friends for their families, and where just hanging became the new place to go to
be private, the new place they trust, when greetings and salutations become
more effusive and tactile, and the boys and girls find excuses for all kinds of
physical affection to share with one another as some way of expressing their
rousing need for physical touch, Sam and Rose, as always, did most of this with
each other.

That attempted kiss wasn’t all Sam’s fault either—it had actually been her
who had first kissed him. It was when Joe, having no defendable reason not to,
after even Myrtle had pulled him aside and asked him to be reasonable, had finally let his daughter go on a date, but had also insisted on Sam chaperoning. Though he could never have dreamed exactly why, Joe certainly sensed Sam being on his side when it came to the dating. The boy’s name was Brad—I think anyone involved has long since forgotten his last name. He was a great ballplayer and had broken several of Joe’s hitting records. He was also had that vicious sense of entitlement particular to star youths, in part fueled a father who had made it his single-minded parental vision to see the boy in the major leagues, who drove him to a batting cage in Capital City all winter, and who had been pumping the boy up like a helium balloon since he was eight years old. His ballpark prowess, of course, was overvalued by his classmates, and he had ascended the alpha male role in his Somerville classrooms at an early age.

Rose, though far less affected by her classmates’ opinions than most teen-agers, was not completely immune to it. If the first ancillary human need is for significance, young Brad was convinced he had this covered: he had his father constantly talking into his ear, his teammates and classmates had always treated him as someone extraordinary, even teachers knew he was the great ballplayer—when Hank Aaron spoke at a local old timers dinner at a nearby town, the Somerville Gazette was sure to have a picture of the Home Run King’s mighty hands sitting on Brad’s shoulder. Rose, wanting a boyfriend at that point, was somewhat smitten at the very idea of being Brad’s. Sam, tuned like a tuning fork to any shift in her mood or perspective went out with her that evening
decidedly unhappy. Rose had used about all of her considerable social intelligence in assuaging Brad as to the unusual structural arrangements of their date, being frightened, as she almost never was, about his saying something about it at school and that she would suddenly lose her standing. When they met out in front of the Rialto, Brad never said a word when Rose cheerfully introduced them, Brad, who was almost a head taller, smirked down at him, took Rose’s hand and turned his back on him.

The movie was forgettable enough, but on the walk home, they all stopped at the Dairy Queen. In the back corner was a booth teen-age couples often used for jerrymandered privacy, and Brad immediately tried to get Rose back there and to send Sam on his way, even shooting Rose a noticeably stern look for her to take care of it. Sam, however, was happy to play dumb, and sat right in the booth with them. Brad had had enough.

“How about I buy you an ice-cream?” Brad said.

Sam sneered. “On a little leaguer’s salary—can I get a sundae, or should I just order a small cone?”

“I made varsity my freshman year.”

“I’m sure you think that’s somehow important.”

“Sam, Come on,” Rose just wanted to figure out a way to like him.

“I’m the only one who ever has. What have you done band geek?”

“You think you’re better than me.”

Brad laughed. “I know I am.”
“I’ll tell you what,” Sam said. “Put the three of us on a train to any big city in this country. We’ll go to any public place and I’ll open my guitar case in front of me and play, and you can bring your glove and mitt. Within a few hours, I’ll at least have enough change to buy her dinner—you’ll be lucky if I give her enough to buy you and ice-cream cone.”

Rose laughed out loud before she caught herself.

Brad glared at her and then back at Sam. “I’m the top dog, and so I’m the one who get’s your sister. You’re just a band geek.”

“I think you already used that. Besides: 1700’s Bach and Mozart, and the 1800’s Beethoven and Mahler—name me the single greatest athlete from back then.”

“What’s your point?”

“What you even claim to be good at doesn’t really matter.”

Rose laughed again and shook her head. When Brad reached across the table she shoved his arm away and smacked him across the head. “You just shut up a second,” she said to Brad. Then she looked at Sam. “And you come with me.”

Sam smirked and got up when she did and the two of them walked out together. But when they got outside, Rose stopped him.

“Look,” she said to him. “I let you have your fun and make a jerk out of him, and I kept him from throttling you. Just take a long walk or something for me,
okay. You know I'd do it for you. I'll meet you in the park in like an hour or so. I owe you one.” Rose kissed his cheek and started back.

“You're staying?” Sam asked. “With him?” He grabbed her shoulder and made her look through the window with him as he pointed Brad out to her, as if it was possible she didn't remember who they were talking about.

“Like I said—you know I'd do it for you.”

“I'd never ask. What do you want to do—go make out with that idiot?”

“Maybe.”

Sam was stunned, somehow, by her obvious reply. “With him?” He pointed through the window again.

“Every girl in school wants to. What do you care anyway? He’s hot as hell—so what if you think he’s dumb.”

“Think it?”

“I'm not marrying him, Sam. I'm not planning on living happily ever after with him.”

Sam was over agitated and his voiced cracked a little. “So then lets just go home, okay. Don’t even go back inside.”

“I said I’m staying with him.”

“You just said you weren’t.”

“I said I wasn’t marrying him—every girl I know has kissed at least ten boys, and none of them are sluts. He,” she pointed through the window. “Is going to be my second.”
“Second? Who was first?”

“Aw, Sam,” she said. “Please just stop.”

“You said yourself you didn’t want to marry him,” Sam said. “So why kiss him?”

“No one marries every guy they kiss—you’re not as smart as you think you are.”

“But I bet as they kiss them, even if it’s just for a second—I bet at least for that second they fool themselves into thinking this one might be the one. You shouldn’t do it otherwise.”

She stared intently at him. “I do a lot for you. More than your mother, more than anyone. I’ll meet you by the swings at the park in an hour—if you go home before that, I’ll never talk to you again.” And then she turned and went back inside.

Sam did as she asked and went to the park. He sat on the swing in a curious state of revulsion and disbelief, his legs just long enough by then to skitch in the worn groove of dirt beneath him as he creaked back and forth. He kept getting images of them together, of Brad’s smirk, or Rose giving herself to him, letting him do things to her, touch her in ways he could brag about to everyone. That she wanted to was what was really bothering him. A grassy hill led up out of Somerville park to Old Main Street and a five foot high stone wall ran along the length of it to separate it from the street; a set of stone steps led up to the hill to the one arched entranceway and exit. At exactly when she said, two figures, a
boy and a girl, appeared in the archway and kissed a last time. Then she made her way down to him.

It was late October, and back then in late October, things started getting chilly around here. Rose hugged her light jacket around herself as she toed her way down to him. Sam eyed her the entire way down, looking at her sideways from the swing. She was timid when she got there, kind of picking her way around him, not saying anything, full of some sort of contrition and trying to make eye-contact. She was also covered in young lust, her face flushed, her lips a little swollen from kissing so much. As she went to touch Sam on the shoulder, he jumped off the swing and stalked off. About halfway home she tried to talk to him, but he ignored her. She tried with a little more urgency as they got closer, getting nervous he’d say something to her father at first. When they got home he went up to his room and slammed the door, never opening it until early in the morning, when he got up, grabbed some food out of the cupboards and left the house. He did this for three full days, never acknowledging her when she tried to talk to him, and staying shut up in his room or out of the house altogether. They had never had a fight like that—their fights were, in ways, constant, but they were also quick to burn themselves out and neither of them had ever stopped speaking to the other for more than a few hours.

But Sam held firm and by the fifth day, Rose was frantic. She’d stopped doing anything around the house by the third day, which, considering how much she did on a daily basis, threw the whole house into turmoil. Clothes weren’t
getting cleaned, food wasn’t being bought, much less cooked. Annoyed initially, Joe quickly became concerned about his daughter. So he went up on that fifth night and sat on her bed. She burst out crying and confessed to her father everything, even about sneaking off with Brad. Joe’s face went ashen a bit, listening to it all, but she was so upset he couldn’t get himself to stay mad at her.

Joe also found himself having the most tender feelings he’d ever had toward Sam, and so he went to his room and sat at the foot of the boy’s bed. He spoke to him seriously, openly, in a way he never had before and the boy, immediately and obviously uncomfortable, started pacing the room. When Joe put his hand on the boy’s shoulder he shrugged it off and left the room, never saying a word as he mechanically descended the stairs and calmly walked right out the back door of the house. Joe watched quietly as he walked right up through the back yard, pulled himself over the fence and into the woods behind them.

Rose stopped eating and locked herself up in her own room. It had gone beyond inconvenience or even concern at this point, Joe and, for that matter, Myrtle too, was in a blue funk. Because Sam and Rose was the real relationship in the house, and that it might be disintegrating caused a deep grief, a sort of mourning of what they should have been together, of the family they were once going to be and that they’d all somehow let get away. Myrtle, at last, paid Sam’s room a visit. She stood in his doorway, staring at her son a while as he read a book, refusing to acknowledge her presence.
“I didn’t raise you a fool and there isn’t a damn thing in the world she could have done that she hasn’t earned forgiveness for a hundred times over.”

She walked off before he could walk out on her. But she got to him, as she always did, and the next day Rose, who had seemed to give up trying by then, stopped just outside his room. It was Halloween and she had offered to help down at the Firehouse, where the firemen had set up a little haunted house for the kids to walk through while they had their candy x-rayed. Sam had promised to help and she quietly reminded him of that before she walked away.

Sam showed up. Rose, using some of her grandmother’s old clothes and spray-painting an old pair of slippers red, dressed up as Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. She was in charge of taking the kid’s candy and putting it on the conveyer belt through the x-ray machine and basically keeping all the young boys from stealing their sister’s candy. She felt something poke her from behind and she turned around. It was Sam, all dressed up himself: he’d smudged his face, put on a pair of Joe’s patched up overall jeans, a oversized grey sweater and an Irish cap.

“Whaddya do, whaddya say.”

She was startled to see him and jumped to hug him before she caught herself and turned away. “Who are you supposed to be?”

“One of the dead-end kids. Don’t you know anything?”

She smiled and flattened a part of his hair that was sticking out.

“Hell’s Kitchen, Angels With Dirty Faces?”
“Oh yeah,” Rose looked him over again. “From those Jimmy Cagney movies you’re always watching with my dad.”

She put him at the other end of the conveyer belt to give the kids back their x-rayed candy. No one knew who he was and Rose kept laughing as he got more and more aggravated about it. Several kids asked him why he was talking like Bugs Bunny.

Everything was fine again and she was so happy. At some point, the lines slowed up, and one of the firemen asked the two of them to man his spot in the haunted house. Rose put her arm around him as they walked in. They were given sheets with eyeholes and wandered through the short, makeshift corridor grabbing screaming kids, and bouncing off one another in the dark. As the night wound down, and the last two kids came through, the two of them pulled their sheets off and stood looking at one another in what was near-darkness. It was hot in there, especially being under a sheet and they each touched one another’s sweaty hair and make disgusted faces. They listened to the last two kids wander right out the door and could only hear firemen, now, beginning to clean up. She looked at him.

“We’re good, right. We’re okay now?”

Sam looked away but nodded his head.

“Don’t worry about boys, okay. What we have is something else entirely.”

That’s when she kissed him, softly, and on the mouth. It was just a kiss, more intimate, perhaps, than she ought to have been, but she just wanted to give
him something, to let him know he was the one who was special. But she didn’t mean it, not like that. But a line had been crossed, it became okay after that, for them to be more physically affectionate, though neither of them ever spoke of it. Those quick easy nods goodbye just died and powdered into lengthening hugs and sometimes their fingers found ways to entangle themselves in one another for up to three seconds at a time, sending baffling spasms between them as they shared confused looks at one another’s shoes. That one kiss ran like a wire through every day they spent together which, of course, was every day. But they didn’t do it out in the open, so it grew quickly into a secret between them, just this little thing they shared with each other that they never would with anyone else. But it brought in too, a momentum toward something, an unacknowledged inevitability that, like the strongest things sometimes do, carried them right along. It was like a live wire in their lives, energizing what was, in spite of their youth, already an old love.

**Come Go With Me**\(^{16}\)

Sam walked a bit unsteady and threw up into one of the foundations from the site; he kept his feet though, all the way home. When he got upstairs he planted himself right outside Rose’s shut door. He talked to her through it without

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\(^{16}\) Released in 1956, this was the biggest hit for the Dell Vikings, peaking at #4 on the Billboard Chart. Over time, the song has taken on connotations to the always present and ever elusive simpler and better time that many people (mostly Caucasian) see as the 1950’s, these connotations coming from it’s nearly perfectly realized doo wop sound, but also from it being sung by Sha Na Na at Woodstock and being prominently featured in a 1973 film—the nostalgic and ethereal dew-eyed marvel “American Graffiti”.

her responding for quite a while. He could hear her sheets rustling once in a while, so he knew she was awake and listening to him.

“I know you can hear me—I can hear you’re not asleep. I wasn’t trying to freak you out, it’s just, I don’t know. . . haven’t you ever wondered. . . I mean what could we be together if we were just us, the same, but everything around us changed? We aren’t the ones married out of convenience, Rose, are we? And who are they to tell us who we can be to each other?”

He stayed at her door, saying something every few minutes low enough not to wake their parents but loud enough for her to hear. Eventually, he told her he was going up to the river with his guitar to have a swim and work on some of his songs. He asked her to bring him breakfast and they’d hang out, just the two of them.

The swimming hole was a nice spot. As fresh and unblemished as when the Toquam tribe used the spot for fishing and fertility rituals before the Meriganas, before the old man, before Captain Somer ever came to its clear cool waters. A lake that naturally pooled in this spot along a long river, it was surrounded by enormous ancient trees, a small sunny patch of water and earth that not one of the many peoples that called its surroundings home had seen any need to try to improve upon.

A small wooden bridge, once the end of a long dirt road that had, decades earlier, been chopped up as part of a development of housing lots, still spanned the near-mouth of the little lake, just before the waterfalls. A lone car, a 54 Chevy
still sat where someone had left it on the far bank, and grass and weeds grew
from and around it now like the gown-out hair of a disinterred skull, its wheelbase
having rotted out unevenly so that it seemed to be a little unsure of itself as it
settled in for its never-ending day at the lake. The two teen suicides from the
summer before had drawn their last breath upon the rocks beneath the bridge
and shards of metallic yellow police tape still snapped about in the wind.

A bright new Lover’s Lane sign dangled just on the other side of the
bridge, a by-product of the Heritage Renewal Project, Joe himself had hung it
when they still thought they would have enough to repair the bridge and to make
a public walkway to it from Hickory Way. This was the spot way back when, for
the steamy adventures of that first generation of unchaperoned dating, and
remained so for a while; at least a few of Sam and Rose’s classmates had likely
been conceived here, very possibly within that old Chevy.

Sam liked going up there and working on his songs, rocking back and
forth, his feet dangling off the bridge as the coming day pulled itself into the
brightening sky above him. He could be alone up here that time of day, most of
the day, really, officially, the place was still off-limits and since the suicide, people
in Somerville, especially the young people, who were the one’s who traditionally
spent the most time there, just seemed to avoid the place.

About an hour after sunrise, Sam crossed the bridge as he usually did,
left his clothes atop bridge and dove in for a swim. He was floating aimlessly
when something whistled past his head and plunked into the water near him and
when he looked back toward the bridge, Rose was standing on the bridge with a basket of food. He turned back to find an apple was spinning and bobbing in the water just behind him. Rose was left a towel and her shirt and jeans upon the rail of the bridge and dropped down into the water in her swimsuit as Sam floated on his back and took a huge bite out of the apple. She came up to him and pulled him, by the back of his hair, under the water. He came up choking as his apple floated away.

“Are you naked?” Rose paddled away from him as he reached for her.

“I always swim naked, so do you.”

“We haven’t swum here in years.”

“You haven’t,” Sam said. “I invite you all the time.”

“Put your suit on,” Rose said. “Or I’m going.”

“I don’t have a suit—my clothes are over there,” he pointed to them. She started swimming away. “Wait,” he said. “Let’s just talk, okay. I’ll keep a safe distance from you.”

“It’s cold,” Rose said. “It’s a bit early to be in here.”

“You’ll be used to it in a few minutes.”

She slapped the water. “I could kill you.”

“You won’t.”

“Things will never be the same—I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for doing that.”

“Doing what?”
“Was it the whiskey? Just say you were drunk, Sam. Say it was just that and maybe we can just forget it, okay.”

“I don’t want to forget it. I want this to happen.”

Rose leaned back in the water and covered her face a second. “I can’t believe this.”

“Think about it, Rose,” he paddled toward her as she backed away.

“You’re always talking about how special we are together. What if it was us that was meant to be together, and not our parents.”

“Oh stop it!” She slapped the water again. “I wanted so bad for you to have just been drunk. You’ve always been too attached to me, and okay, some of that is my fault, spoiling you like I have—but I always just felt responsible for you.”

“You feel it toward me too, I know you do. Tell me what we have isn’t something more, something special.”

“You’re ruining all that right here and now. When you’re wondering later—this is when it happened.”

“The way you’ve always touched me,” Sam continued. “You kiss me on the lips.”

“The way your mother is. . . you always needed things, and I could tell that and so I gave them to you. My mom always kissed us both on the lips, did you think about her like this?”

“That was different.”
“To you!” She was right in front of him now, imploring. “I didn’t mean anything other than I love you by it.”

“Exactly!”

“That’s not how you’re taking it, Sam.”

“You just said you loved me.”

“Not in that way.”

“So define your terms.”

“You’re not dragging me into this.”

“Admitting I’m right, Rose? Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“You don’t have to be right. You’re smarter. We both know it.”

“We know everything about each other—I don’t want to have to love you only this way or that—I want everything!”

“I wish I really had slit my wrists.”

“You really did,” he said. “And I saved you. Was that just a coincidence?”

She said nothing, just put her hands in the air and stared at him, incredulous.

“Okay, but answer this honestly,” Sam said. “If our parents didn’t marry each other, you really don’t think we would be together?”

She sighed and put her head down. Then she sank all the way into the water and came back to the surface, pulling her hair back. “When did you start thinking like this?”

“Last Halloween,” Sam said. “Now answer my question.”
“How could I know a thing like that?”

“How could you not?”

Rose stared into her own reflection in the water. “Yes.”

Rose swam away, almost making it to the shore when she saw her. It was the mother of the girl who had committed suicide. She could only afford to have the girl cremated and so she had thrown her daughter’s ashes into the lake. After it happened, some of the kids’ classmates had turned two trees into small shrines, taping stuffed animals, pictures, and letters around the tree’s trunk. Greg’s family had taken it all down, but Marsha’s mother had been tending to her daughter’s plush memorial for a full year. Rose stopped, paddled in place a minute as the woman stared at her, and then turned and headed back the other way.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “We’re both here all the time. She doesn’t mind.”

“She comes every morning?”

“Every morning I’m here.”

Rose stared off toward her; she was smoothing something back down against the tree’s trunk. “How sad is that?”

“Hard to measure.”

“I guess that puts this problem in perspective.”

“What problem,” Sam said. “I’m out of here at the end of the summer anyway, if you think I’m a problem.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said. “You’re not really going, are you?”
“May as well.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“I did do that with my mother once, remember?”

“So,” Sam said. “Do it with me.”

“There’s not much out there, Sam. I know when I told you about it I made it sound like some grand adventure—but it was really just a lot of seedy motels and bad food. And at least I had my mom.”

“Well,” he said. “I’m going.”

“You’re not.”

“I am,” he said. “And you’re coming, too.”

“I’m really not.”

They both kicked beneath the water, trying to stay warm, each of them shivering a little now.

Sam looked at her. “I bet I can make you go.”

Rose stared a minute at her own reflection upon the surface of the water, and then stirred it into a little whirlpool with her ring finger.

Then she stared back at him, and she stared hard this time. “Bet I can make you stay.”
Myrtle loved music. Her Pa was a musician, and he was better at what he did than she’d ever known anyone else to be at anything. He had the gifts and the natural instinctual disposition of an artist, but had, for various reasons, overlaid that with the tyrannical perfectionist drive of a famous man of industry. His talents and his energies made him something of a local legend in Cork County, and a sometime hero to several generations of young musicians, but he never did find the success he was after and none of his protégés hung around for the duration.

Though she was the one who cleaned it, Myrtle had no memory of the front room of the little house they lived in ever really being clean; always, there drifted the fetid effluvium of leftover tobacco smoke and unfinished steins of ale,
always lurking, the stagnant feeling of paralysis, of work too long in progress and
going stale. But always too, was the next young musician, a bag of her father’s
favorite pipe-tobacco or ale in one hand, and their instruments in the other, ready
to put their time in sitting at pa’s knee. This is when Myrtle would clean the film
from the room’s one window and for a little while, until the fights and the tears
started, a little more light would come in. Anyone who wanted to be someone
sought Pa’s blessing. He was a musician’s musician. He liked to compose on his
piano, could play any pipe, but why everyone knew him was the way he played
that violin. He daughter would always remember him, some red still gristled about
his patchy grey beard, his cap pulled low, a half-drunk pint within reach. He liked
the apartment dark and spent much of his days staring toward the floor, tapping
some pattern on the floor he was hoping to materialize, humming things, a
constant swirl of cigarette smoke pluming out from around the brim of his cap.
He’d gotten a recording contract once, but it had ended badly when he refused to
bend his music enough to satisfy the ears of the man he was under contract to
and he’d nearly lost the humble home they all lived in. After that, Pa refused to
record any of his own songs—music is meant to live and breathe, he used to say,
not to be muted and muffled in wax. So he’d sell songs once in a while, and his
Saturday nights down at Mulgoon’s became legendary and paid enough to keep
milk and bread in the house and for them to have boiled beef and potatoes on
Sunday.
Music, in the O’Grady’s house, was something sacred, an intuitive, loosely formed construct that in some way replaced the huge rigidity of the Catholicism her father had rejected. But while it lacked petty rules and stiff ceremony, Pa’s insistence on proper reverence was something nearly everyone around him found overbearing, even the favored daughter he doted on. So while Myrtle loved music, she would always love it as she loved everything, with a reverential timidity that always made her feel inadequate; she dealt with this the way many frightened zealots do, by finding a way, in her eyes, to never offend the object of her devotion and so she loved it cautiously, with a passion she never chanced giving full throat to—it was something she was always trying to please, and never something she felt comfortable giving anything of herself to. Myrtle’s singing voice had capacity, it was something she could really have developed, but it never stretched or toned it, and her son never once heard that voice do any more than hum along with music in a way that barely hinted at what may have been her full expression, her fingers tapping but never drumming along. But in those years when it was just the two of them in one small apartment after another, she always had something playing. Myrtle didn’t even own a television then, but had records spilling about of stuffed bookcases and so this passion of hers, however much she tried to mute it, was a palpable one nonetheless to her pondering, wet-eyed son who always tottered about the room as all that music played, or lay on the floor with his paper and crayons just outside of it, always listening to what she listened to, always trying to match his listening to hers, always watching her as
she listened, always sensing that behind that dispassionate appreciation she listened with, that there was something so much more and it was this something that he’d spend his life chasing. And he fluttered about this one thing she loved as unnoticed as a moth around a lamppost in the middle of the night, always hovering, always listening with her, always gazing at her. Sam had always thought, even before he realized he was thinking at all, that to understand this one woman would be to understand the world.

It was always she who was most like Pa: in actions, in intellect, in competent responsibility, always Myrtle and neither of her brothers, not the one who died and not the one who was doubtless on a barstool still, trying to regale whoever he might still find to listen to him or fight someone who refused to—still trying, poor pathetic soul, to fashion some burlesque of personal importance. It had never occurred to her, of course, how much easier Pa had been on her, his only girl and his youngest, or that his more patient and nurturing side was the leavening agent and real genesis of her superiority over her brothers. Only fourteen when he died, she would, thereafter, completely internalize his severe drive for perfection, especially when it came to the playing of the only son she had.

Over time, what Myrtle had become was something of a professional appreciator. She’d developed, by age ten, almost perfect pitch—at least that’s what Pa said after he’d tested her at his recording studio. The piano was her instrument and she played everything perfectly. Still, something was always
wrong, or, not wrong, not wrong at all, but missing—usually within three or four takes Myrtle could play anything her father want note perfect, but nothing more; there was no personality; no sense of any conversation between herself and any of the compositions; Myrtle’s playing was a perfect, exquisite mimetic, her father’s presence, though a much gentler one than her brother’s experienced, was still of such intensity, that it had pressurized her well-tuned ears into a glass-hard and unimaginative perfection, no key was ever over-accentuated, nothing she played ever sounded more romantic or flirtatious, nothing dark ever went darker; Myrtle could never handle the messiness of creating, and her well-tuned ears became a prison to her, and that entire living spectrum of sound she’d come to know as few ever do moldered away into only two notes: the right one and the wrong one.

Myrtle, being well aware of her own limitations, and hoping her son had inherited some of his father’s talent, set about cultivating the boy, through unsparing discipline, as the legatee of her father’s musical ideal. Her plan worked for a while, before she was sick, when there was still enough aspiration in her humor to mollify her son and pupil, whose psyche kept being stoked, only to be driven into bunged knots and cramps by his mother’s unrelenting expectations. Many of us, upon experiencing life-threatening illness, choose to live out what’s left of our lives in a more benevolent and graceful way. Not Myrtle—instead, she doubled down on her unpermissive expectations. Sam’s response was to fantasize, and within these fantasies were all the ambition she could have ever
wanted him to have, and it wasn’t her approval he fantasized about attaining, but her admiration—and Sam didn’t just want his mother to like him, he wanted to make her like him.

But the first instrument Myrtle thrust upon Sam was her father’s violin when Sam was still small enough that he had to stand behind it and play it like a standing oboe. He was fascinated from the beginning at the range of sound could come out of it, and loved to hear his mother’s demonstrations before he began his practice. He would also, alone, spend hours plucking at it and running the bow across the strings as it lay on the floor of their shared bedroom, and by the time he was four, with a blend of his own curiosity and his mother’s drive, Sam could, with complete competence, play any number of short compositions. By first grade, he was better than all but a few of the fifth and sixth graders and his music teacher took notice. Myrtle, however, by then had committed any piece he ever played to memory and could, as he got older, pick out any wrong note or tone he’d play out of the entire grade-school orchestra the way some mothers could recognize their own child’s cry out of a nursery.

After Joe and Myrtle were married, Rose was chilled and shocked by how rough Sam’s mother was on him, and the deleterious effect she had on him. Myrtle had tried it with Rose too, but Joe put an abrupt stop to it. He had, at first, tried to step in to help out his step-son too, but when he did, Myrtle would double back on Rose again until a unspoken truce arose between them where each was the sole master of the rearing of their own blood kin.
It was regular as clockwork. Myrtle would keep reminding him of his practice, of the mistakes he’d been making and Sam, after enough hours in his room that he really thought he had his piece down, would then descend the stairs to meet his fate. He’d lean into it, his young eyes closed, bathing himself in song as she hovered nearby, waiting some before giving cool, precise language to his every imperfection, sprinkling those cold words down into her son’s head where they’d seep down through the wrinkled cortex of his fevering brain until, within minutes, he would ice over into a painful headache. His fingers wouldn’t work right, and she would anticipate and ridicule anything he tried to say until he couldn’t understand anything anymore and when he tried to speak himself, he’d find his own tongue no longer understood him. Then she’d pin him, with a loud whisper, right to the nearest wall where he’d shudder, trying to remember himself, straining so hard against his paralysis until, finally, he’d melt right down into some wounded larval creature, moaning incoherently, leaking everything, spittle and mucus as well as tears, rhythmically banging his head off the wall behind him as his mother walked away. A few times Joe picked the boy up and took him out into the yard with him, although eventually, it became Rose’s responsibility, and she’d take him by the wrist to her room and sit him down and turn the radio on.

For a long while, Sam kept these crying fits within the confines of the Merigana home. Sam arrived in Somerville as Rose’s new brother, which was enough to gain him acceptance, if not standing, among the
kids at school. Thing was, Sam excelled in school and the constant positive feedback was a respite from the chilling judgments of his mother. So Sam offered to clean teacher’s blackboards, re-shelve library books, lick envelopes, he joined the math club, history club, and of course, was the star of the band. Sam’s excellence came with the expected resentment from his classmates, but since Sam never tried to assert himself socially, the occasional bouquet of snickering from his peers didn’t bother him much. At home, Rose let him do his homework on her floor and practice in her chair by the window, and Sam walked with her to the grocery store and squatted down with a catcher’s mitt whenever she needed to practice her pitching.

Sam’s imaginative nature was his overwhelming academic strength—he’d won prizes not just in band competitions, but for sculptures in art class and poems as well. It was in the fifth grade when he got Mr. Harris that he first had problems. None of the kids much liked Mr. Harris, though most had no particular dislike of him either. He was a bony, homely man with runny, jaundiced eyes, year round allergies, and a receding, oily hairline that seemed to have been pasted down to his oversized, bulbous skull by a giant thumb every morning. He wore department store suits and never once removed his jacket or tie, not even on the hottest June days in what was still an un-air conditioned grammar school. He was always an awkward, lonesome man, one who took great solace in the unequivocal solidity and the indubitable durability of facts and figures and who grew quickly irritable at Sam’s dreaminess and imagination. Mr. Harris gave
seasonal projects for each student to work on and Sam's winter project was on Revolutionary Somerville. He spent a month perusing the historical society in the basement of the Somerville Library; Mrs. Jones, the antiquarian (by this Mrs. Jones, I do, obviously, mean one of the old Jones's) became fond of the boy and showed up with Sam on the day of his presentation. Sam even convinced her to let him wear Colonel Somer's jacket as he gave his speech, which came down past his knees and flapped behind him like a leaden cape as he walked around. Sam passed out musket balls and, as they were passed around the class in front of him, he explained how these very balls had torn through the bodies of British Soldiers, widening the eyes of excited classmates, who held up the musket-balls and rolled them around in their fingers as Sam gave them the macabre details Mrs. Jones had whispered to him of what the muskets did when they passed through a soldier's body. Old Mrs. Jones, who had only told Sam what musket balls in general were capable of, laughed a little and looked at the floor.

But Sam was rolling—he'd rehearsed this in his head so much, he was able to talk right through his initial nervousness, and a little way in, when his classmates, the same classmates who had always ignored or slightly jeered him, now riveted, he could actually feel the heavy reticence of the disposition he'd always carried around with him dissolve right into this new and animated stage persona he was now performing in. And he swept his classmates right up into his mood; one after another was happy to fall dead, holding a musket against what Sam imagined to be its lethal entryway. Sam also had the flag of Somerville's
original schoolhouse, sewn by Betsy Ross herself, which his new mates unfurled above their heads for him as he went into the final part of his presentation, which was the part Sam was most proud of. Rose had helped him age some paper in tea, and Sam had spent almost a month practicing the distinguished script of Colonel Somer’s letter to General George Washington, written in the spring of 1775, citing the need for men to demand their rights and offering the services of the brave men of the Somer’s Nest Militia. The phrases “right to abolish” and “sufferance of the colonies” both appeared in the letter, as did the words “usurpation” and “tyranny”. Sam then pulled out a poster-board with a copy of the actual Declaration of Independence glue onto it and passed it around the room, with those same phrases and words underlined. Sam stood on a chair in front of the room. Colonel Somers’s had written that letter to Washington a year before the Declaration of Independence and they obviously used his words and ideas and Sam explained that it was a great omission for history to have forgotten about him. In truth, it was Colonel Somers who had likely been the plagiarist and his letter was uneven and its language the overly flowery Victorian prose typical in its day of half-educated men trying to write in a high style; he had also, somewhat clumsily, had a framing metaphor for his letter to Washington and that was of a dream—a dream country where any man could be anything and where citizens would be free from the tyranny (he used this word several times) of foreign government and taxes, a new country where a man was free to dream he could be anything. But at only eleven years old, Sam was quite taken with all of
Somers’s references to dreams, and he raised his arms, punching his small fists out the top of Colonel Somers’s long sleeves, “My original idea,” Sam said. “Is that history has it wrong, and that this whole country we now live in, was originally Colonel Somers’s dream.”

His classmates actually broke out into applause when he finished. Sam couldn’t believe how comfortable he’d felt and how much they’d liked him; he yammered away about it so much about it at home that Rose started walking away from him with her fingers in her ears. For several days, Sam kept replaying his entire performance to himself, unconsciously touching it up here and there to make it even better—he couldn’t believe how much he’d liked doing it, how much he’d liked standing there before them all—it felt better to him than anything had ever felt. But when Sam got his paper back, it was only marked a B-. He shuddered immediately as a cold wind blew from his entrails right up into his frontal cortex, and his mouth went dry as walked up to Mr. Harris’s desk hoping to be told it was a mistake. It wasn’t. Mr. Harris pointed out, one at a time, his factual inaccuracies: he had asked Mrs. Jones and those muskets had never gone through anyone, Betsy Ross had not sewn the flag he’d presented, which had to have been made after 1776 anyway, and Colonel Somers’ letter was a forgery, written by Sam himself. As to the appearance, in both documents, of certain words and phrases, Mr. Harris expounded, for several minutes, how those were common words and phrases at the time and that Colonel Somers’s letter could not possibly have influenced the Declaration of Independence, and that
then General Washington had nothing to do with the actual writing of the document anyway.

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Myrtle loved music. Her Pa was a musician, and he was better at what he did than she’d ever known anyone else to be at anything. He had the gifts and the natural instinctual disposition of an artist, but had, for various reasons, overlaid that with the tyrannical perfectionist drive of a famous man of industry. His talents and his energies made him something of a local legend in Cork County, and a sometime hero to several generations of young musicians, but he never did find the success he was after and none of his protégés hung around for the duration.

Though she was the one who cleaned it, Myrtle had no memory of the front room of the little house they lived in ever really being clean; always, there drifted the fetid effluvium of leftover tobacco smoke and unfinished steins of ale, always lurking, the stagnant feeling of paralysis, of work too long in progress and going stale. But always too, was the next young musician, a bag of her father’s
favorite pipe-tobacco or ale in one hand, and their instruments in the other, ready to put their time in sitting at pa’s knee. This is when Myrtle would clean the film from the room’s one window and for a little while, until the fights and the tears started, a little more light would come in. Anyone who wanted to be someone sought Pa’s blessing. He was a musician’s musician. He liked to compose on his piano, could play any pipe, but why everyone knew him was the way he played that violin. He daughter would always remember him, some red still gristled about his patchy grey beard, his cap pulled low, a half-drunk pint within reach. He liked the apartment dark and spent much of his days staring toward the floor, tapping some pattern on the floor he was hoping to materialize, humming things, a constant swirl of cigarette smoke pluming out from around the brim of his cap.

He’d gotten a recording contract once, but it had ended badly when he refused to bend his music enough to satisfy the ears of the man he was under contract to and he’d nearly lost the humble home they all lived in. After that, Pa refused to record any of his own songs—music is meant to live and breathe, he used to say, not to be muted and muffled in wax. So he’d sell songs once in a while, and his Saturday nights down at Mulgoon’s became legendary and paid enough to keep milk and bread in the house and for them to have boiled beef and potatoes on Sunday.

Music, in the O’Grady’s house, was something sacred, an intuitive, loosely formed construct that in some way replaced the huge rigidity of the Catholicism her father had rejected. But while it lacked petty rules and stiff ceremony, Pa’s
insistence on proper reverence was something nearly everyone around him found overbearing, even the favored daughter he doted on. So while Myrtle loved music, she would always love it as she loved everything, with a reverential timidity that always made her feel inadequate; she dealt with this the way many frightened zealots do, by finding a way, in her eyes, to never offend the object of her devotion and so she loved it cautiously, with a passion she never chanced giving full throat to—it was something she was always trying to please, and never something she felt comfortable giving anything of herself to. Myrtle’s singing voice had capacity, it was something she could really have developed, but it never stretched or toned it, and her son never once heard that voice do any more than hum along with music in a way that barely hinted at what may have been her full expression, her fingers tapping but never drumming along. But in those years when it was just the two of them in one small apartment after another, she always had something playing. Myrtle didn’t even own a television then, but had records spilling about of stuffed bookcases and so this passion of hers, however much she tried to mute it, was a palpable one nonetheless to her pondering, wet-eyed son who always tottered about the room as all that music played, or lay on the floor with his paper and crayons just outside of it, always listening to what she listened to, always trying to match his listening to hers, always watching her as she listened, always sensing that behind that dispassionate appreciation she listened with, that there was something so much more and it was this something that he’d spend his life chasing. And he fluttered about this one thing she loved
as unnoticed as a moth around a lamppost in the middle of the night, always hovering, always listening with her, always gazing at her. Sam had always thought, even before he realized he was thinking at all, that to understand this one woman would be to understand the world.

It was always she who was most like Pa: in actions, in intellect, in competent responsibility, always Myrtle and neither of her brothers, not the one who died and not the one who was doubtless on a barstool still, trying to regale whoever he might still find to listen to him or fight someone who refused to—still trying, poor pathetic soul, to fashion some burlesque of personal importance. It had never occurred to her, of course, how much easier Pa had been on her, his only girl and his youngest, or that his more patient and nurturing side was the leavening agent and real genesis of her superiority over her brothers. Only fourteen when he died, she would, thereafter, completely internalize his severe drive for perfection, especially when it came to the playing of the only son she had.

Over time, what Myrtle had become was something of a professional appreciator. She’d developed, by age ten, almost perfect pitch—at least that’s what Pa said after he’d tested her at his recording studio. The piano was her instrument and she played everything perfectly. Still, something was always wrong, or, not wrong, not wrong at all, but missing—usually within three or four takes Myrtle could play anything her father want note perfect, but nothing more; there was no personality; no sense of any conversation between herself and any
of the compositions; Myrtle’s playing was a perfect, exquisite mimetic, her father’s presence, though a much gentler one than her brother’s experienced, was still of such intensity, that it had pressurized her well-tuned ears into a glass-hard and unimaginative perfection, no key was ever over-accentuated, nothing she played ever sounded more romantic or flirtatious, nothing dark ever went darker; Myrtle could never handle the messiness of creating, and her well-tuned ears became a prison to her, and that entire living spectrum of sound she’d come to know as few ever do moldered away into only two notes: the right one and the wrong one.

Myrtle, being well aware of her own limitations, and hoping her son had inherited some of his father’s talent, set about cultivating the boy, through unsparing discipline, as the legatee of her father’s musical ideal. Her plan worked for a while, before she was sick, when there was still enough aspiration in her humor to mollify her son and pupil, whose psyche kept being stoked, only to be driven into bunged knots and cramps by his mother’s unrelenting expectations. Many of us, upon experiencing life-threatening illness, choose to live out what’s left of our lives in a more benevolent and graceful way. Not Myrtle—instead, she doubled down on her unpermissive expectations. Sam’s response was to fantasize, and within these fantasies were all the ambition she could have ever wanted him to have, and it wasn’t her approval he fantasized about attaining, but her admiration—and Sam didn’t just want his mother to like him, he wanted to make her like him.
But the first instrument Myrtle thrust upon Sam was her father's violin when Sam was still small enough that he had to stand behind it and play it like a standing oboe. He was fascinated from the beginning at the range of sound could come out of it, and loved to hear his mother's demonstrations before he began his practice. He would also, alone, spend hours plucking at it and running the bow across the strings as it lay on the floor of their shared bedroom, and by the time he was four, with a blend of his own curiosity and his mother's drive, Sam could, with complete competence, play any number of short compositions. By first grade, he was better than all but a few of the fifth and sixth graders and his music teacher took notice. Myrtle, however, by then had committed any piece he ever played to memory and could, as he got older, pick out any wrong note or tone he’d play out of the entire grade-school orchestra the way some mothers could recognize their own child’s cry out of a nursery.

After Joe and Myrtle were married, Rose was chilled and shocked by how rough Sam’s mother was on him, and the deleterious effect she had on him. Myrtle had tried it with Rose too, but Joe put an abrupt stop to it. He had, at first, tried to step in to help out his step-son too, but when he did, Myrtle would double back on Rose again until a unspoken truce arose between them where each was the sole master of the rearing of their own blood kin.

It was regular as clockwork. Myrtle would keep reminding him of his practice, of the mistakes he’d been making and Sam, after enough hours in his room that he really thought he had his piece down, would then descend the stairs
to meet his fate. He’d lean into it, his young eyes closed, bathing himself in song as she hovered nearby, waiting some before giving cool, precise language to his every imperfection, sprinkling those cold words down into her son’s head where they’d seep down through the wrinkled cortex of his fevering brain until, within minutes, he would ice over into a painful headache. His fingers wouldn’t work right, and she would anticipate and ridicule anything he tried to say until he couldn’t understand anything anymore and when he tried to speak himself, he’d find his own tongue no longer understood him. Then she’d pin him, with a loud whisper, right to the nearest wall where he’d shudder, trying to remember himself, straining so hard against his paralysis until, finally, he’d melt right down into some wounded larval creature, moaning incoherently, leaking everything, spittle and mucus as well as tears, rhythmically banging his head off the wall behind him as his mother walked away. A few times Joe picked the boy up and took him out into the yard with him, although eventually, it became Rose’s responsibility, and she’d take him by the wrist to her room and sit him down and turn the radio on.

For a long while, Sam kept these crying fits within the confines of the confines of the Merigana home. Sam arrived in Somerville as Rose’s new brother, which was enough to gain him acceptance, if not standing, among the kids at school. Thing was, Sam excelled in school and the constant positive feedback was a respite from the chilling judgments of his mother. So Sam offered to clean teacher’s blackboards, re-shelve library books, lick envelopes, he joined
the math club, history club, and of course, was the star of the band. Sam’s
excellence came with the expected resentment from his classmates, but since
Sam never tried to assert himself socially, the occasional bouquet of snickering
from his peers didn’t bother him much. At home, Rose let him do his homework
on her floor and practice in her chair by the window, and Sam walked with her to
the grocery store and squatted down with a catcher’s mitt whenever she needed
to practice her pitching.

Sam’s imaginative nature was his overwhelming academic strength—he’d
won prizes not just in band competitions, but for sculptures in art class and
poems as well. It was in the fifth grade when he got Mr. Harris that he first had
problems. None of the kids much liked Mr. Harris, though most had no particular
dislike of him either. He was a bony, homely man with runny, jaundiced eyes,
year round allergies, and a receding, oily hairline that seemed to have been
pasted down to his oversized, bulbous skull by a giant thumb every morning. He
wore department store suits and never once removed his jacket or tie, not even
on the hottest June days in what was still an un-air conditioned grammar school.
He was always an awkward, lonesome man, one who took great solace in the
unequivocal solidity and the indubitable durability of facts and figures and who
grew quickly irritable at Sam’s dreaminess and imagination. Mr. Harris gave
seasonal projects for each student to work on and Sam’s winter project was on
Revolutionary Somerville. He spent a month perusing the historical society in the
basement of the Somerville Library; Mrs. Jones, the antiquarian (by this Mrs.
Jones, I do, obviously, mean one of the old Jones’s) became fond of the boy and showed up with Sam on the day of his presentation. Sam even convinced her to let him wear Colonel Somer’s jacket as he gave his speech, which came down past his knees and flapped behind him like a leaden cape as he walked around.

Sam passed out musket balls and, as they were passed around the class in front of him, he explained how these very balls had torn through the bodies of British Soldiers, widening the eyes of excited classmates, who held up the musket-balls and rolled them around in their fingers as Sam gave them the macabre details Mrs. Jones had whispered to him of what the muskets did when they passed through a soldier’s body. Old Mrs. Jones, who had only told Sam what musket balls in general were capable of, laughed a little and looked at the floor.

But Sam was rolling—he’d rehearsed this in his head so much, he was able to talk right through his initial nervousness, and a little way in, when his classmates, the same classmates who had always ignored or slightly jeered him, now riveted, he could actually feel the heavy reticence of the disposition he’d always carried around with him dissolve right into this new and animated stage persona he was now performing in. And he swept his classmates right up into his mood; one after another was happy to fall dead, holding a musket against what Sam imagined to be its lethal entryway. Sam also had the flag of Somerville’s original schoolhouse, sewn by Betsy Ross herself, which his new mates unfurled above their heads for him as he went into the final part of his presentation, which was the part Sam was most proud of. Rose had helped him age some paper in
tea, and Sam had spent almost a month practicing the distinguished script of Colonel Somer’s letter to General George Washington, written in the spring of 1775, citing the need for men to demand their rights and offering the services of the brave men of the Somer’s Nest Militia. The phrases “right to abolish” and “sufferance of the colonies” both appeared in the letter, as did the words “usurpation” and “tyranny”. Sam then pulled out a poster-board with a copy of the actual Declaration of Independence glue onto it and passed it around the room, with those same phrases and words underlined. Sam stood on a chair in front of the room. Colonel Somers’s had written that letter to Washington a year before the Declaration of Independence and they obviously used his words and ideas and Sam explained that it was a great omission for history to have forgotten about him. In truth, it was Colonel Somers who had likely been the plagiarist and his letter was uneven and its language the overly flowery Victorian prose typical in its day of half-educated men trying to write in a high style; he had also, somewhat clumsily, had a framing metaphor for his letter to Washington and that was of a dream—a dream country where any man could be anything and where citizens would be free from the tyranny (he used this word several times) of foreign government and taxes, a new country where a man was free to dream he could be anything. But at only eleven years old, Sam was quite taken with all of Somers’s references to dreams, and he raised his arms, punching his small fists out the top of Colonel Somers’s long sleeves, “My original idea,” Sam said. “Is
that history has it wrong, and that this whole country we now live in, was originally Colonel Somers’s dream.”

His classmates actually broke out into applause when he finished. Sam couldn’t believe how comfortable he’d felt and how much they’d liked him; he yammered away about it so much about it at home that Rose started walking away from him with her fingers in her ears. For several days, Sam kept replaying his entire performance to himself, unconsciously touching it up here and there to make it even better—he couldn’t believe how much he’d liked doing it, how much he’d liked standing there before them all—it felt better to him than anything had ever felt. But when Sam got his paper back, it was only marked a B-. He shuddered immediately as a cold wind blew from his entrails right up into his frontal cortex, and his mouth went dry as walked up to Mr. Harris’s desk hoping to be told it was a mistake. It wasn’t. Mr. Harris pointed out, one at a time, his factual inaccuracies: he had asked Mrs. Jones and those muskets had never gone through anyone, Betsy Ross had not sewn the flag he’d presented, which had to have been made after 1776 anyway, and Colonel Somers’ letter was a forgery, written by Sam himself. As to the appearance, in both documents, of certain words and phrases, Mr. Harris expounded, for several minutes, how those were common words and phrases at the time and that Colonel Somers’s letter could not possibly have influenced the Declaration of Independence, and that then General Washington had nothing to do with the actual writing of the document anyway.
Mr. Harris then stood and announced these facts to the class, thoroughly explaining each, even making a numbered list out of them as he did so. Sam tried to defend himself, and even a couple of classmates agreed he’d never told them the letter was original. But Mr. Harris stood at the blackboard, unmoved, and even transitioned the occasion into an arduous pedantic lecture upon the importance of facts and verification, ending it the way he always did, in his droning, nasally exhortation about the level of scholarship that would be expected of them the following year when they moved on to junior high school. Sam was devastated: he had always been a straight A student—how could the best thing he’d ever done be only a B-? He felt nauseous, as if his blood had gone rancid, he felt wronged, picked-on, but there was also, as there would always be for Sam in such moments, an involuntary anxious cognizance that he was being, at long last, found out. He refused to accept it at first, but whatever he said, Mr. Harris just restated his mistakes. Sam felt it come on then, his mind splitting, a sudden and complete inability to bring his thoughts down to his tongue. School was the last place he ever thought it would happen and yet, as it did, he realized it was the place he’d somehow always knew and dreaded it would happen. He shook and broke down into a crying fit so bad he gave himself a nosebleed and Mr. Harris had to have one of his classmates walk him down to the nurse, where he stayed for the rest of the day until Rose was called out of class early to come and walk him home. He was fun of a little more by his classmates after that, and the incident itself seemed to have wrapped its fingers around his brain and worked it
like an exercise ball to strengthen itself. But there was the other part too, the part where he was performing, where something was completely right, where it felt so good and some part of him knew it couldn’t have all been just fake—so he kept that part of it too, tucked away in a safer and more private part of himself.

just as I whittled away mornings I’d expected to spend lying about, lazy with pleasure and listening to the soft groaning sounds of the glue drying on our coming forever-after

The tough part for Sam was at night, up in his room as he worked on his own songs; with no precepts, no schematic to work off, he was left all alone to try to build the sounds he wanted to make out of the sounds he could. He was trying to find his own voice and though Sam was no ordinary sixteen year old, he was, in this sense, still sixteen years old. He couldn’t really hear the sounds he needed yet—he could still barely feel them. So he wandered around that dark room, jotting things onto the walls, painting over them, strumming away, stopping, thinking. He was still figuring out that the only way to get to the sounds (or the idea of sounds) in his mind, was to keep plucking away until finally butting up against what he would finally realize he was looking for. To his credit, he kept trying and trying and trying and trying. Trying, one note at a time, to will his song out of the tongueless nighttime nothing.
Sam had found a domed antique hanging birdcage somewhere in the basement, and had been creating odd and intricate dioramas in it for over a year: he’d taken a bunch of colored candles and made an entire wax fairy-tale village once; another time he made a little hill full of strange clay figurines, put tiny sunglasses upon each one and had them all staring up into a giant sun he’d made out of white Christmas lights he’d thickly wound around one of Joe’s baseballs and hung from the top of the cage. Now he’d taken down the cage and

I’d come back myself to Somerville early that spring. I’d been teaching a class in American Classics at a university in nearby Capital City and in my early forties was set to marry, at sunset that summer solstice, a former student nearly half my age. It was all rather abrupt. I wanted a family and felt way behind schedule and Doreen, my fiancée, was out of money and out of ex-boyfriends; she was also from a small town down South and saw marriage, I think, as the one unassailable reason to never have to return to her mother and that town. I’m not falsifying the relationship, it’s just that most middle-aged men, and certainly those that eat alone at night, will find a way to make themselves compatible with very young women, and a lot of strong-willed girls, when they think they’re out of options, will take that vague image of dashing handsomeness of the one that was just for them, begin haggling with it, and before they know it they’ve slotted someone like me into it like a jigged key.
But Doreen didn't want to raise children in a city, and I got a good deal on a home in my old hometown, and so the two of us settled into our expected matrimony on Mayberry Lane in Somerville. The house was a three-bedroom ranch: the kitchen-window faced the woods out back; its clapboards were a mustard yellow, its shutters a leathery brown. I was never happier than the day we signed the deed and plunged through the front door of that place, shocked and giggling at how hard it was to untangle ourselves from one another.

In the end, hasty marriages may be a bad idea, but those weeks and months leading up to the public knot-tying are a happiness like no other; that you hardly know one another only gives it all a distilled purity, an all-possessing, weightless rapture because without the length of a relationship, without the weight of an entire history together grounding everything, there is only the bleary, dumbstruck mania of a brand new love providing the prism through which you each view the rest of your lives together. It's an amazing feeling, the way I would imagine it would feel to know the answer to every question you've ever had; and so, though I'm embarrassed to think on it now, and though I was old enough to know better, what if felt like at the time, more than anything, was the truth.

But time owns us all and in the end, finds you both out, doing so with a mundane, commonplace ubiquity that is in such exact proportionate contrast to the wildness and wonderment preceding it, that it really is easy to imagine it being someone or something's purposeful contempt. You begin to notice each another's bad habits, you smell one another's bad breath, notice an ignorance in
some subject or other, poor taste perhaps—just small things you see reasonably, at first, as unimportant, and experience with a benevolent, even bemused silence; but it isn’t long before that silence is given voice, a gentle, teasing one at first, but then the teasing becomes sarcasm and the gentleness, at some point, gets dropped like a silent letter, and before you know it, rips and tears begin to show upon the young membrane of this new life you’re creating and life as you’ve always known it comes pouring back through, gathering itself into an interdependent animosity too thick for either of you to pull yourselves out of. Because in the end, most of us still are who we’ve always been.

Still, to me the fights didn’t seem so bad—just the usual marital (I mean pre-marital) rows, and when she took off after one I really thought nothing of it. So I whittled a lot of time away on my front-porch that summer and I mean that in a literal and not a figurative sense—I had quite a little enterprise hand-carving model railroad kits, not the trains or the tracks, just the little towns they passed through. I’d have time to finish several little towns that summer as I carved away many of my mornings and most of my evenings, evenings I’d expected to spend consecrating my nuptial bed, happily exhausting myself and then collapsing into a deep slumber, blissfully snoring among the soft humid odors of our family’s creation. Instead, I kept mostly to the front porch of that spouseless house, trying as best I could not to think about the whole life I was now never going to live in it as the dust settled over everything behind me. I tried keeping my mind on my work, my eyes on my knife, and to not overreact to every little ripple in my
peripheral vision, expecting for a while, and hoping for longer still, that my blushing young bride to be was coming back home.

HERE WE ARE NOW, ENTERTAIN US:

Gary Meares was the boy’s name, and he was almost as soft-spoken as he was volatile looking. Gary had been an army brat, living on three different continents before his father, under auspicious circumstances, left the service. He was his mother’s son: a sensitive boy, asthmatic and had a sensitive stomach that came with a list of foods it wouldn’t tolerate so long and varied, only his mother could keep it straight. His father terrified him. His father terrified his mother too, though she, at least, fought back. Having avoided ever agreeing in full to her husband’s idea of what a wife should be, she found constant and inventive little ways to defy his oppressive militaristic discipline: she would scrub and clean the house top to bottom as he demanded, but she never neatened or straightened things, often broke lamps and dishware, and always left the vacuum splayed across the entryways of one room or another; dinner was never at the same time, she forgot to refrigerate things; when she shopped, she always overspent just a little and would often forget to bring home the one thing she knew he’d be willing to pull his shoes on and run out into the cold to get. She loved to take innocent notice of every new purchase a neighbor made, every car,
ever sofa combo, every set of diamond earrings, and compare each one aloud to their own inferior possessions. A connubial conscript in a long matrimonial war, she proved herself a more than worthy adversary, loosening her husband’s grip, over time, upon the household and upon herself just enough to file, eventually, for a lucrative divorce. She also saw her husband’s fight for custody of their son for exactly what it was, countervailing negotiating collateral, and so she called his bluff, figuring she would keep what she’d already won and that Gary would be living back with her soon enough anyway—her former husband never having had patience for the selfless dozens of daily responsibilities that came with parenthood, responsibilities he viewed as maddening to keep up with and emasculating to begin with. But, as victors tend to, She misjudged the power of her fallen soldier’s pride. Losing soundly did not just hurt the ex-husband’s financial well being, it upended the entire world-view of a man who had staked everything into the what had always been the predictable scales of give and take for a man who does his institutional duty to both inside and outside of the service. Because that he came up short as a husband, as a father, as a friend, was okay, because in his vocation, he gave what was expected and did so with a unbendable conscientiousness, expecting only that what he’d earned in return would always be his, and when what he thought to be unassailable permanence turned out to be a malleable rule, he lost faith in everything. (settled down into that rigid emotional disposition) And since to take on the institutions he’s put all his faith in was just too frightening, who he blamed for everything, who he put all
his hatred toward, was her, to the extent where he’d crossed right past that intuitive axis of internal pain tolerance most of us hold inside, an axis that, once crossed, is tough to get back on the right side of, when causing someone else’s suffering becomes far more important than avoiding our own. He kept the boy.

Gary’s mother had always been a teasing apparition of a possible perfect mother. As charming and playful as his father was severe, and even his father had once loved her ebullience as much as she had his solidity. She was always sweet and kind and encouraging to Gary, but she was always on the phone, or in a book, or just staring out a window. What he never go from her was her full attention, she never really listened to him, she just didn’t know him the way he thought other mother’s did their children. He would try to get away with things he’d seen other mother’s always catch his playmates doing, and he always got away with them. His was that kind of mother who had always just assumed she loved her child. But she was always distracted by her own desires, and the dramas those desires caused between herself and her husband. What she was most distracted by was the someday perfect life she just knew she was destined to live. Gary’s mother was a huge devotee of the self-help books and cassette-tapes that became so popular in the seventies and eighties, falling so easily for the lazy promises of the good life each one pontificated, believing, with a blank-eyed convert’s fervor, that each dozen steps or principles were the ones to unshakeable happiness. Eventually, she attended a seminar and followed the guru in the Italian shoes and the pinstriped suit delivering it right out to Orange
County California. The man was cut-rate, selling home-made tapes and a self-published book off a table in the back of hotel conference room, but he was an impetus for change for a woman ready and told her all kinds of things she’d always wanted to believe about herself. Because the fact was, she not only misjudged her husband’s bitterness toward her victory, she misjudged her own ability to handle her spoils. She always tried to get Gary back, but her ex-husband was willing to make it just hard enough for her accept it wasn’t her fault, and the further away she was, and the more time passed, the more she got used to her own routines and to a life that was suddenly, completely her own.

Gary’s coping mechanism was to blend seamlessly into the backdrop of any space he shared with anyone: when his mom did call, he’d quickly assure her everything was fine and then listen for fifteen minutes as she rambled on about all the important things she was finally realizing; at home, he gave his father exactly what he wanted, which was to make it as easy as possible to ignore him; at school, it had always been easy for him to be invisible—he was neither a good nor bad student, was lousy at sports, and had exactly zero charisma in any way. His father, who had, for a while, more or less openly despised him and who, as was his wont, compressed the entire elaborate circulatory system of responsibilities that was fatherhood into a single pumping artery: turning his son into a man. But Gary was his mother’s son, and he too found ways to resist his father without ever quite confronting him and by the time he’d reached high school, the two of them cohabitated but otherwise left one
another alone, and his father’s tendency to shun him, rather than scream and yell, had hardened over into an intractable habit.

He would discover punk-rock music when he was fourteen. His obsession was almost immediate, spending hours under the headphones in his room, and staring into the glossy pictures in magazines of his favorite bands, staring at the boys, who had arms as skinny as his own and who yet seemed fearless, adorned in metal and spikes, scowling and pumping their clenched fists. The rage and youthful nihilistic rebellion began to soak through him like nuclear radiation, altering things inside him the fragile and still developing sense of self he had and the already damaged view of who he wanted to be—he wanted to be like them, to live like they did. What was very much within his power was to look like them, and one day, without telling anyone, he took the train to Capital City, and found the very hairdresser one of his heroes had thanked in their liner notes. He arrived, his nerves jangled from the noise of the city and as scared of the stares he was getting from the dingy salon’s patrons as he was of his father’s foulest moods. But he’d made a reservation months in advance and so when the man came over, covered in white make-up, eye-liner, three inch pumps that extended his height to at least 6’6”, and a chain (he kept staring at that chain) for a belt, he put his fingertips, with shocking delicateness, under Gary’s chin and tipped his face up into his own. He first made sure Gary had enough money, counted it and smiled at him. He led him to his chair but before allowing him to sit in it, he made
him look at himself a long time as he stood behind him in the mirror, purring and running his fingers around his chest.

He smiled. “I’m Patrick.”

“Gary.”

“Are you scared?”

Gary stood and stared, his whole being dumbstruck around a shuddering erection. When he realized the man in the mirror was waiting for an answer, he nodded his head.

The man smiled, his wet teeth gleaming white beneath his black lipstick.

“I bet you’ve been at least a little scared your whole life,” the man said. “You can get used to it you know. The only really awful thing about being scared is trying not to be. Get over that one thing and life can be pretty amazing.”

Gary stared wildly around the shop, where people, as crazy and strange as the man behind him, sat about reading, smoking—one was even talking to his mother on the phone. The man asked him where he was from and when he said Somerville, the man made a bemused face.

“You poor thing—my god that place is gauche. Do they still have a huge annual flea market in that old bowling alley?”

Gary laughed out loud and nodded his head. “They’re going to tear it down next year.”

“What a shame. I bought a half dozen bowling shirts there a few years ago and a pair of the kitschiest lamps you’ll ever see.”
Gary stared around the shop. The floor was polished concrete, and the heating ducts and wiring in the ceiling were exposed; someone had taken buckets of paint, of random colors, and splashed them all over the walls. Other men, all of whom looked as garish and strange as his new friend, read magazines and smoked cigarettes—one, he could tell, was talking to him mom on the phone.

His hairdresser noticed him listening into the conversation. “I’m not sure what the squares we occasionally get in here are more shocked about,” he winked at him. “That we have mothers, or that our phones can reach them.”

Gary smiled and looked to the floor. The man put his chin on Gary’s shoulder and Gary looked back into the mirror. “I’m Patrick, by the way,” the man said.

“Gary.”

Patrick patted the chair for Gary to sit on and Gary did. “Somehow, in spite of where you come from—I don’t have you pegged as a square.”

“I’m not.”

Patrick laughed a little. “Well aren’t you ahead of the game.”

“I’m not from Somerville.”

“That’s disappointing.” Patrick threw a smock around him and fastened it.

“I’ve lived all over—I’m not really from anywhere.”

Patrick smiled, lifted his hair into his fingers and then let it drop back down. “Well, my delicate little Gary from nowhere—this is America, honey-love. It’s not
who you were born as, it’s who you become. Question is: who are you ready to be right now?”

By the time they’d finished, Gary’s hair had been shorn into loud purple spikes, Patrick had even given him an old leather jacket, pierced both ears for him, kissed him deftly on the lips and handed him a scrap of paper with his name, in a highly stylized script, and his phone number on it.

“I’m not always home, but I don’t sleep much either—you can call me anytime.”

By the time Gary’s train pulled into Northern Somerville, all the severed nucleotides of Gary’s personality had found that something they’d been reaching for to bind themselves to. Gary arrived home almost paralyzed with fear, but he remembered what Patrick had told him and tried to just let himself not mind being scared. It was only a beating—he’d had plenty. His father’s lower jaw swung open and his eyeballs popped open like a valve when Gary walked through the door. For three days he and his father wandered about and around one another in that house, and Gary never spoke, never made eye-contact, but he never avoided him either, he just went about his daily life as he had been. He steeled himself against the beating he hadn’t received in a while and which he thought, for sure, was coming. His father, at the end of the three days stepped in front to block his path to his room.

This time, Gary made eye contact. “This doesn’t bother me,” his father finally said. “Not one bit. You be whatever freak you want to be. Enjoy the next
year, because the day after your eighteenth birthday—you’re out of here, so you better make arrangements.” He walked off.

Gary closed the door to his room and fell backward onto his bed, still shaking from the beating that never was going to come. He laid there a long time, staring at the ceiling and smiling, just smiling. Then he called Patrick in the city and the two of them talked for hours.

Gary had only spent a year and a half in Somerville High and had made no impression whatsoever, as far as he could tell, on anyone. But he had come back after spring break with that startling appearance and caused a bit of unrest. There was even a meeting in the teacher’s lounge about what to do with him, but it was ultimately decided that the school didn’t have a dress code and that he wasn’t really being disruptive or otherwise causing a problem, so he was allowed to stay as he was. Walking the halls at school was especially frightening to him at first, but he soon realized he was going to survive just fine; his classmates; some snickered as he walked past, but most just stared, transfixed by this strange new oddity among them, and since he was, beyond his startling appearance, the same unassuming presence he’d always been, an unacknowledged but sort of admiring acquiescence even rose up around him, and when that happened, Gary became the first fully mutated cell in Somerville High’s student body.

The first one to come over to him was A.J. Wilson, who had always been kind to him, and who was one of the few to have ever gone out of his way to speak to him before. The mood among the herd was still somewhat menacing at
the time, still unsure whether to allow the new Gary or eradicate him, when A.J. pulled a chair up right across from his before homeroom one day. He wasn’t scared or angered by Gary’s appearance the way others were, he was sort of bemused and kind of curious as he ran his eyes over him, dipping down, at last, to force Gary to look at him. A.J. smiled. “It is you, right?” Gary smiled back. A.J. was one of only a few handfuls of black kids who would graduate from Somerville High back in his class. He lived with only his mother, a veteran of the southern protests and marches as a young woman, which would be the defining experiences of her life; by the time she became pregnant, the father of the child had already proved himself an unworthy fatherhood model in her mind, and so she called in the only favor she ever had in her life and followed Miss Lisa Jones back to Somerville. She lived above the Jones’s garage for ten years until the plant, trying to get with the times, hired twenty women, including one black woman. Mrs. Wilson would prove herself a woman endowed with devout fiscal responsibility, and she’d scrapped and saved and when A.J. was twelve years old, and with Mr. Jones serving as a co-signatory, She bought a small, three bedroom ranch a little ways down Main Street at the edge of Somerville.

Though at least we weren’t institutionally bigoted, the Wilsons would not find Somerville be the most tolerant place either, and had experienced their share of inconsiderate condescension and entitled ignorance. But her time marching down south had been a life-defining one, she even had a picture of herself and some others standing with the great Dr. King himself right in their living room, and
being a person capable of handling the lonesomeness that comes with quiet
moral devotion, her one life’s quest was to magnetize her son with righteousness.
A.J.’s inception, no accident, came days after the shot rang out from James Earl
Ray, his mother purposely picking the most talented and least disciplined man in
her group had been born a year and a day after the shot rang out from James
Earl Ray, his inception no more an accident than his mother’s decision to come
north, all alone, to raise him. A.J. was greatly affected by his mother’s selfless
religiosity, her sacred code of living, that the good life was one seated in service
and duty, that saw quiet moral courage as life’s highest value. He would come to
view his life as something of a moral crusade—even through his teen years, he
had always been serious about being good. He was as together a kid as it was
possible for a teenager to be: a solid B average in school, never missed an
assignment, and an impeccability about him that went from his penmanship to his
book covers to his spotless sneakers, which he washed once a month in the
washing machine. Though a very active member of Somerville’s Baptist church,
his mother considered herself, at heart, to be a non-denominational Christian,
and took wisdom where she could find it; the old Shaker saying—hands to work
and hearts to God—was one his mother’s favorites and how you do anything, she
liked to tell him, is how you do everything. Perhaps because he always had it,
earning his mother’s approval and admiration was the unending quest of his life,
the one temptation that was impossible to resist and that desire to help the less
fortunate, which in his youth had had a deaf and overbearing quality to it, had
matured by his later teen years into a much more thoughtful and subtle inclusiveness to those kids that no one else ever spoke to, and so he was the only one, who no noticed it was Gary beneath the hair and make-up.

Eventually, A.J. called over his friend Lucinda Lupe, a quiet girl known to pump a little volume into her own appearance—she was of mixed Mexican and European descent, olive-skinned, had enormous, watchful brown eyes and was known, more than anything, for her quiet demeanor and, by that summer, for the contrasting flashy loudness of her appearance. Lucy had her mother’s quiet disposition, but also harbored her wilder Tia Marie’s curvature and desired the easy grandeur of her flirtatious confidence. For that woman, every walk across a room was its own dance and Lucinda, as she grew into her own woman’s body, took to heavily applying make-up, wearing tight clothes and bedecking herself in cheap, shiny jewelry, including the enormous hoop earrings she was most known for and which also provided her nickname: Lucy Hoops. Lucy, who’d been staring along with everyone else, was both impressed and fascinated with his hair once she’d seen it was only little Gary Meares sitting beneath it; her mom was a hairdresser and she lightly patted her way around the purple spikes coming out of his head. Lucy and her mom shared a pew with A.J. and his every Sunday at St. Cecilia’s and the two had been good friends for years. As defiant as he wanted to be, and as confident in this new self as he thought he was, Gary swiftly developed and involuntary dependence upon their friendship, and their little alliance in the back corner of homeroom every morning made him strong enough
to walk right through the snarkiness of the others, it became a mitochondrial energy source for this new self he had created, and before long this new Gary Meares had become a surviving cellular mutation drifting among the student body of Somerville High.

Several others, themselves discontented afterthoughts and disconnected malcontents of Somerville’s teenage social strata, would soon cluster around him too, their admiration hydrating his ignored thirst until his confidence rose up through him like a water table, nourishing them too. Of everyone, it was easiest to notice Patty Melfi, who stared at him, in a much more interested way, than the others. The daughter of a hard partying prom queen, a woman who had moved to Somerville alone with her daughter fleeing the latest and most causal of what had been a long chain of combustible romantic troubles, Patty was, by her sophomore year, demurely pretty: dramatically cheekboned, she had the full blooded pout of an old movie starlet, and had dazzling, nervous green eyes dappling out from behind lashes almost thick enough to paint with. But then, in the middle of her sophomore year, just as every boy began staring and every girl began noticing, she summarily rejected the easy life of a pretty girl. She’d shortened her long brown hair, pierced her lower lip, and took to wearing baggy jeans and layers of sweaters, distressing her already high-strung mother, and drawing vicious sneers from her classmates so soon after so many of them wanted her, as a friend or a lover, that she couldn’t help laughing at how right she’d been about the whole world being phony. When Gary walked in to begin
junior year, it was like they were like a pair of dirty angels on some kind of collision course with one another.

The lip piercing had been something Patty had done with her best friend, Lizzy Frank. Lizzy, a long traumatized, almost murderously angry girl who, after her accidental conception would be handed carefully over to parents who had already learned to hate each other in the nine months she’d taken to arrive. Patty’s house openly bore the scars of her family: outside the lack of care showed everywhere, the plastic sheets duct-taped over broken windows, the cinderblocks holding the corners of the porch up—even the weeds in the garden had all the liveliness of the hairs coming out of a mummified skull; inside, of course, was worse, every wall pocked with boot-marks, the linoleum on the kitchen floor was eaten away in the traffic lanes and the ever-present crates of empty beer cans usually sat right on the kitchen table. Her father, by then, lived mostly in the basement, where he’d set up his own makeshift apartment with a hot-plate, an old refrigerator and a pull out couch he’d come home from work with one day tied up in his pick-up. Her father was a welder, her mother a waitress—neither were any good at their jobs. Lizzy would come of age in a household so pressurized with naked carnal hatred and with such vindictive rancor, that after all she’d seen and heard and felt over the years, any thoughts she’d given toward an eventual better self and life had been dying off for years, shriveling up and then fluttering, like flakes of dead algae and plankton to the bottom of her being, where the constant heat and tension of that house had compressed it all deep
inside her, so that what she was left with was her own personal crude reserve
from the desert war-scape of what passed for her family life. Any conversation
with Lizzy could quickly shred into flames, and once it did, it was difficult, even for
Patty, to cap and quell the fire. The constant flow of vile wore Patty out at times,
but Patty was the one outsider who’d had ringside seats to much of the carnage
in that house and she saw how much more Lizzy hated herself than anyone else,
and so, she found that one soft spot about Lizzy to attach herself to and for a
while, just put up with the rest of it. Lizzy repaid this kindness with a fierce and
protective loyalty. Patty found Lizzy’s obsession with piercings a bit disturbing,
but also fascinating, and in a macabre way, she even admired the physical
courage it took to get one ear pierced twelve times, the other one ten, as well as
have her lower lip, left nostril and right eyebrow all done. When it came to pain,
Lizzy was better than anyone else she’d ever known.

Lizzy was also admired, in the same macabre way, by many of the boys,
though most of them liked her because of her sexual reputation, which had clung
to her since junior high, when, before she’d pierced anything, she’d lost her
virginity to a high school junior. It hurt a lot and he wasn’t nice—not before,
during or after, but she wanted to be the first one, welcomed the ostracizing
treatment much in the same way Gary would later, and craved, then and later,
extreme experience—Lizzy’s one goal in life was to learn to be afraid of nothing.
She kind of wished she was a boy, but since she wasn’t, and she couldn’t really
be strong, what she could do was be tough, and tough is what she’d be—Lizzy, anyone would have to agree, could take it.

One boy, though, really did like her—wanted her to mean something to him and he to her: it was our old friend Butch Fargus. Butch stood, by his junior year, at what would be his final height of 5’7”, having only grown three inches since he’d had that fight with Salar when they were both twelve years old, he’d watched plenty of classmates pass him. He no longer bullied anyone. He’d also given up on baseball, as it just pained him way too much to go from the best player to someone in the middle—having a team full of boys reminding you, whether they say anything or not, that you are not what you used to be when you are still supposed to be a growing boy is tough for the toughest minded of kids to bear and as we established earlier, Butch’s intestinal fortitude was not exactly iron-strong. Butch was still trying to be funny, succeeding more than he had, but mostly seeming pathetic, trying a little too hard. He was the first of the group to jump all in, letting Lizzy and Patty shave, cut, and color his hair into a bright red Mohawk, less startling than Gary’s spikes, it looked more like a carpet sample. But it was this one commitment of Butch’s, which was, in reality, nothing more than a desperate ploy to get a girl to like him, that really solidified them as a group. Butch also went to have his eyebrow pierced with Lizzy, hoping some bond would form between them, and between that, his undeniable crush on her, and just his always being around, he did succeed in being the closest thing to her boyfriend, though she never would respect and took to torturing him.
What they would also share was a deep thirst for mood altering substances, and though Butch mostly liked to just drink, Lizzy knew she had at least someone in her back pocket, that would be game for the kind of narcotic daring she was really becoming interested in.

And so these are the kids that coalesced first around Gary, and then bonded themselves the core four: Sam, Rose, Salar, and Suzanne, of the Milk Carton Kids. They’d formed their group in the school year, mostly ignoring what others said, and when they were together, often firing back. They learned to keep their backs to one another and face the world together, and they were more as a group than any of them had ever been alone. By the time they walked, together, out the front door on the last day of school, some subtle tectonic shifting of their teenage world had taken place and everyone knew it. They were the awkward kids, not an athlete (except Rose, who still played softball) among them, they were the misfits who huddled close together, the way kids like that do at that age, and who somehow, became the cool kids, if only for a summer. Gary, by force not so much of his personality as of his desire, pulled a whole clique together around him. They were about to have a memorable summer.