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JOE DIMAGGIO AND EVERYTHING AFTER

BY

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2023

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Joe DiMaggio and Everything After

Chairperson: Judy Blunt

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In 2020, Tommaso Davide Guastella Riccio is ninety-two years old in New York City when the global pandemic shuts down the city. Over the course of Tommaso's confinement, he reminisces about a decade of his youth from 1936-46. During this long-ago decade, Tommaso comes of age in the Italian section of East Harlem. At eight years old, he discovers baseball; the Yankees; and his first hero, Joe DiMaggio. Then Tommaso discovers jazz. Along the way, he loses his father, Alfredo, a subway worker, and his older brother, Peter, ships off to Europe to fight in World War II. Tommaso lives alone with his mother, Angela, who sells illicit wine that she bottles in the basement of their apartment building. In the New York City of the thirties and forties, Tommaso falls in love with the drums through the late night jam sessions at Minton's Playhouse where jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker hold court. When Tommaso finally works up the courage to try to sit in on one of these sessions, he discovers Charlie Parker has moved out to California. The eighteen-year-old Tommaso embarks on his own journey to California to fulfill his goal of playing with one of the greats. When Tommaso gets there, he finds that Parker is "relaxing" at Camarillo State Hospital. Tommaso breaks into the Hospital to play in one of the impromptu jam sessions Parker holds inside while a patient. In the present day of 2020, through this retelling and the feelings and memories it resurfaces, elderly Tommaso strengthens his bond with his only child, the sixty-year-old Connie.

SECTION I
1936-1937

Chapter One

April 14, 2020
New York, New York

My name is Tommaso Davide Guastella Riccio and by age eight, in 1936, I dreamed of hitting the spaldeen two sewers on a fly. We'd use a broomstick the width of a baby's thumb and gangly to hold, let alone swing. Sometimes I'd bring my own stick. Sometimes I'd borrow a friend's. The sticks weren't too easy to come by. They'd break. They'd crack. We were all poor, more or less. Mothers would come streaking down 111th Street to break up our ballgame. They'd scream in Italian that they'd found another broomhead hidden in the closet. They'd hold aloft the detached broomhead that looked like some disembodied, bristly mustache. They'd holler, "Come home now, Tommaso, and clean the apartment before you learn what that stick can really do."

I'm sorry. I'm already getting ahead of myself.

I am ninety-two years old. I live alone in a small but comfortable apartment in Manhattan's East Village. I have not left my apartment in one month. Two days ago, I dug into the back of my closet and unearthed this blank journal.

I have a story to tell.

Over the last month, I have done little else but consider the stories that I have to tell. I do not have many, but I do have this one.

This is a story about jazz. About Charlie Parker. About genius. About baseball. About America.

But I'm going to start from the beginning. Because this is also a story about me.

I was born April 8, 1928 in a dingy one-bedroom apartment—located approximately six miles uptown from where I currently live—right on a corner of 120th Street in what's now called East Harlem or Spanish Harlem but back then—if anyone called it anything—was Italian Harlem.

I was born into a family of my father, Alfredo; my mother, Angela; and my brother, Pietro (though if I didn't call him "Peter" he was quick with the back of his hand). I don't remember much from the first few years of my life. Not much of anything until 1936, anyway. I remember my father's lunch pail, black and sooty. He worked the subway lines—underground six days a week—putting down track, taking up track. I remember my mother returning to the apartment every day at noon with her hands stained inky purple from the grapes she crushed in the basement still and the wine she bottled and sold. I remember Peter getting up for school. He was eight years older than me, born in Messina like my parents. We shared the bedroom. My parents slept on the pullout couch. Peter awoke early and threw open the shades. The bright morning sun angled right into my eyes. Every morning that feeling of being dazed by the light out of darkness.

No. I don't remember much of anything until 1936.

Until Joe DiMaggio.

Before the summer of '36, I didn't know a baseball from a bocce ball. I lived only a bridge and a stone's throw from Yankee Stadium, but, still, Murderer's Row was something more likely to evoke vague fear by night than devoted reverence by day.

And then:

Joe.

DiMaggio.

That name! Writ large and bold in the papers. The “Joe.” All-American. No doubt there. But all those vowels! The “Di” the crack of the bat to lead off the inning. “Ma.” So comfortable. So familiar. Those soft “Gs” in the middle – a lilt, a light jog to get under a lazy fly to right-center. Then the end. Io. Io. Io. Just like Riccio. The “io” just like “I.” And in my dreams I was Joe, and Joe was on everyone’s lips.

At the butcher’s Sunday morning with Mom and Peter and Rodolfo, the butcher, leaning over the counter with a slice of salami for me: “Ciao, Tommaso,” the old man would say, “hai visto cosa ha fatto DiMaggio ieri? Tre su quattro con un *homer!*”

Then on the subway. I’d sneak downtown to the movies with a dime found in the couch cushions. I’d duck under the windows if we ever passed workers on the platforms lest Dad be one of them; lest he pick his son out of the train car crowd; lest his eyes bore through the subway steel and throng of suited men, through my pants pocket and see that illicit dime. From my hidden crouch I’d look up at some banker’s neatly folded *Times* and see it there: “DiMaggio Does It Again.”

Then coming out of the midday matinee film, the sun stinging my eyes like Peter throwing open the morning window shades. I’d blink on the sidewalk and get my bearings and not see who said it—some City voice speaking to some City ears: “I think this is our year,” the voice would say. “This DiMaggio kid is the real deal.”

This was the summer of 1936, and my love affair with baseball was quick and complete.

Look, I know I said this would be about Charlie Parker.

But we’ve got New York City.

We’ve got baseball.

I promise we’ll get to the jazz eventually.

This country's three greatest contributions to the world.

The summer of '36 DiMaggio and the Yankees were everywhere except the Riccio apartment.

There was not a specific baseball moratorium in place in my home, so to speak. There was simply a lack of interest. There was my dad, a kind and tired and sickly man with a broken back and broken English who on his one day off was not interested in his son's offer to translate the ballgame's radio broadcast. There was my mom peddling her basement wine for cents on the bottle and cooking and cleaning and gossiping with the neighbors up the fire escape and hurling the occasional slipper at me—Lord, that slipper gave a big league fastball a run for its money.

Then there was Peter. Peter was sixteen and rarely home except for dinner. He had a night job cleaning dishes at a restaurant down the block. He was going with a girl—not that he ever spoke to his eight-year-old brother about that. Peter was careening towards adulthood and in many ways he was already there. He had his eyes on getting out of our apartment, out of Harlem. So did I, even then. My escape would be the ballfield. My escape would allow me both to run away and allow me never to leave. I wouldn't live in East Harlem anymore. At the time I imagined all the Yankees resided at the stadium in shared rooms like me and Peter and that would be my eventual home. Yes, I'd be out of Italian Harlem, but my name would still be whispered in the neighborhood butchers and barber shops just like DiMaggio. I'd be ever-present but never there. Remembered and acclaimed but free. I knew what I was after. I don't think Peter knew yet what his escape would look like. Of course he didn't. How could he? How could any of those boys?

With a stubborn lack of familial interest, I took to the streets in search of the like minded. That's how I found the daily summer stickball games along 111th Street. That's when the

pilfered dimes started going towards replacement brooms, and new spaldeens, and malts and egg creams and sodas and ices with ten other ravenous boys. That was the first time I held a bat and faced down a pitcher. That was when I learned the pure joy of a simple goal: hitting the spaldeen two sewers on the fly for a homerun; rounding the bases: the fire hydrant at first, someone's old boot at second, a double parked car at third; looking up at the stout mothers taking laundry down off the roof lines and imagining them the roaring chanters in the stadium cheap seats, chanting *Tom-Ma-So, Tom-Ma-So, Tom-Ma-So*.

Say what you will about the Italians. Our names are eminently chantable.

A word about the ices. We bought them from one of two men: Raffo or Johnny. Both men pedaled around the neighborhood with an icebox trailing behind them. Both men chimed their bicycle bells and called out, "Ices! Ices Here!" as they rode through East Harlem. Both men hated each other with a resolute and unshakeable passion. This was the Depression, and East Harlem didn't have enough coins to spring loose from under couch cushions to support two ice men. It was not an uncommon sight to see Johnny and Raffo turn down the same street at the same time from opposite directions and ride toward each other like in some Old West standoff. When they met in the middle, they barked at each other for dominion over that block until us boys all backed away slowly, afraid to get between them, and headed to the deli for a soda instead.

This being a record, though, let me state that it was the decided consensus amongst us stickball boys that Johnny was the far superior ice man. He was a short and round man with thinning, greasy hair who perched precariously atop a bicycle seat that seemed too narrow for his frame. Johnny had been in the First World War. He moved much slower than the lithe Raffo, which perhaps accounted for Johnny's territoriality.

On the occasions when I caught Johnny alone, and he handed me a lemon ice, I asked him, “Where can we find you tomorrow, Johnny?”

He always responded, “Oh, wherever these legs can take me, that’s where I’ll be.”

Then we’d exchange a few words about how good the Yankees looked, and I’d sprint back to the stickball field, or, if the sun was getting too low in the sky, I’d go home and scarf down a dinner with my family.

And so then that’s how the summer passed.

When I returned to school in the fall, the Yankees had the pennant well in hand and were destined for the World Series. Kids and teachers alike clamored for the latest box scores. Moreover, what I knew in theory over the summer on 111th Street became a stark reality in the schoolyard: the Yankees weren’t the only team in town. My neighborhood was a Yankee redoubt, but at school battle lines were drawn with sidewalk chalk. Boys and girls from all over upper Manhattan pledged their allegiance not to the Yankees but to the New York Giants (I will not here nor anywhere be speaking of the Brooklyn Dodgers unless absolutely necessary). Despite my total and blind antipathy to the Giants, I secretly rooted for them as the regular season came to a close in hopes of a crosstown World Series, and my hopes were realized.

For one blissful week in October, we raced from school to the nearest radio. The Giants fans bolted one direction; the Yankees fans went another. I ended up at Roger Furo’s place. Roger was a couple years older than me. He was a standout pitcher on the 111th Street stickball scene. Roger’s father worked long hours downtown. Roger’s mother was likely aware of the sanctity of those games, and she left the apartment when we arrived to let us fret alone. Most importantly, Roger lived about twenty blocks closer to the school than me, so when we crashed

into his apartment and strewed bookbags and sweaters across the ground, we missed far fewer pitches than we would have had we trekked all the way back to my place.

I think my whole life I've chased the happiness of that week. Those weekdays after school spent sprawled out on Roger's carpet. I laid on my back and let the announcers' voices wash over me. The announcers had a rhythm all their own. The whole game had a rhythm. I've heard it said that each game of baseball is a novel unto itself: each pitch a sentence, each inning a chapter. But for me listening to that World Series, the games pulsed out of the speakers as music. Rhythm! That's what I heard in the crowd cheers and crowd jeers and balls and strikes and hits and outs. It was always about the rhythm.

Sometimes at Roger's I listened to a whole inning of the World Series while staring out his sixth floor window. His apartment had expansive views that looked north towards the Bronx and Yankee Stadium. I didn't need to turn my head far and then there to the west—right across the narrow scar of the Harlem River—was Coogan's Bluff and the Polo Grounds. Two palaces. Two fortresses. And unfolding between me and there: the City. The churn of life. How many other boys and girls and women and men with ears also pressed to radios? The taxis and buses. At that time, age eight, I had not yet ever driven over the 59th Street Bridge. But now, age ninety-two, and for the last several decades of my life, when I do have occasion to go over that bridge, it is perhaps the only experience that can return me to what I felt those afternoons in Roger's home—the skyline unfolding, the boxy windows of each apartment coalescing to create their own constellations, an untold drama playing out behind each door. The life. The rhythm.

And beneath it all a parallel subterranean world that hummed along at its own rhythm. Beneath it all, also, my dad, a man who worked the subway lines to keep the City's beat—its

drumbeat, its heartbeat—a man who didn't know all that time that the hauling and hammering and dank stagnancy of the tunnels were taxing his own heart and within a year he would be dead.

I think he would have liked baseball had he given it a chance.

The weekday games Roger and I listened to alone. We were devoted and prayerful. The Yankees were the best team in baseball. They had DiMaggio. They had Gehrig. But they lost Game One and lost it bad. Though never voiced aloud, we admitted into our hearts a first sliver of doubt. Game Two allayed some of those fears as the Yankees delivered upon the Giants the drubbing of a lifetime. Eighteen to Four! Lazzeri hit a grand slam. And DiMaggio's catch to end it! He ran for miles to get to that ball. He tracked it down into the deep tomb of the Polo Grounds' centerfield. President Roosevelt was at that game, and the word out everywhere the next day was that the President tipped his cap to Joe after that catch.

Man, that's what I wanted.

The President.

Over the weekend, Roger's father, Lou, joined us. Lou was as fanatical a Yankees fan as Roger and me. Lou was Italian, too, but he was born in East Harlem. He delivered expletive-ridden tirades that were possessed of a certain poetic elegance. The Giants' Mel Ott was a "shit-maggot weaselly pup who couldn't hit a ball if he swung at his own crotch." When the Yankees' manager, Joe McCarthy, made a pitching change Lou didn't agree with, McCarthy was "so dumb he'd need directions to his own damned funeral." And DiMaggio. For DiMaggio, Lou reserved his best material. He entered into another register: "I tell you, boys, you're witnessing the second God-damned coming of God-damned God here. You check this DiMaggio's birth certificate and you'll find no father listed there but God. A player this perfect—this immaculate—must need be conceived immaculately."

Mrs. Furo looked on in horror.

I was in heaven.

Between innings Lou expounded upon the history of the Yankees. I was inducted into a lifelong fraternity. Lou instilled in me a proper respect for those that came before, namely Babe Ruth, who, upon his arrival to the Yankees in 1920 stirred in a young Lou Furo the same feelings DiMaggio now stirred in me.

Mr. Furo worked somewhere in Midtown. He worked in a tall building. He had an office and a desk and a secretary. Above ground. He didn't hack or wheeze when he climbed the six flights of stairs to his apartment. He ruffled Roger's hair as he told for the third time that weekend the story of Lou pitching to Babe Ruth, himself.

Yes, perhaps I buried the lede. For two winters in his teens, Lou traveled south to join up with friends who barnstormed across small towns. Normally these games were played between amateurs, but once, in 1924, Babe Ruth blew through town like a beer-soaked tornado.

I looked up at Mr. Furo in awe. He might have had the mouth of a ballplayer, but he didn't have the look. He was bookish with glasses. He was short and spindly. He gave me hope that even if I stayed small and slim like my dad and Peter that I could still make it.

I heard the story so many times over the years that I can still retell it verbatim.

I don't know if I'll get all the swear words correct, but Lou spoke in a high nasally voice and told it this way: "I was nineteen and rambling through some hick-shit town in Arkansas with the other boys. We were in our hotel. We had the map out in front of us trying to find our next stop—hopefully some place with more people than cows because cows weren't buying tickets nor betting, mind you. Our manager came pounding on our door. We opened up thinking the whole damned building was on fire. He was standing there panting and soaking wet—down South you'll

get thunderstorms like nothing you'll ever see in New York. 'Put that map away,' our manager said to us. 'We're staying. The Babe is coming to town.'

"Well, we didn't believe him at first, but he was so damned excited that eventually we were convinced he wasn't lying, and we got to preparing. I was our best pitcher. Now, I know I don't look like much but hang me if I didn't have the best curveball in New York at the time. And that's counting the men on the Yankees and Giants. This was the secret, but don't go sharing this." Here, Mr. Furo picked up a baseball—there was always a baseball within arm's reach at the Furo's—and showed us exactly where on the ball's seam he applied pressure with his index and middle fingers. "When I was on my game, that ball crashed down like the stock market. For those years I was barnstorming, I thought I could make it as a professional, but I never had a fastball. I only had that curve, and you can't make it big time with only one pitch. That didn't matter much then, though.

"The next day the storm blew out and the sky was clear and there he was stumbling off the chartered bus at one in the afternoon: Babe Ruth, already drunk as damned sin. We got to playing and like out of some childhood fevered dream I was facing down the Babe. It was the first inning and I had gotten two groundouts. I was feeling pretty good. If I didn't look like a ballplayer, the Babe didn't either. His belly covered the inside corner of the plate. He had these tiny little wrists. I didn't know how he held up the bat. And I think he was even drunker then at the plate than when he got off the bus. He dug in. I threw him my first curveball. Swing and a miss. Strike one. 'Not bad, kid,' the Babe said. To me! Babe Ruth spoke to me. I wound up and threw him another curve. Swing and a miss. Strike two. 'You got anything else?' he said. 'Or you a one-trick pony? Why don't you blow a fastball right by me? Show me what you got.' I was shaking. I was a cocky kid, but this was Babe-fucking-Ruth. I tried to calm my voice but I still

stammered when I said, ‘Alright. I’ll blow one right by you, Babe.’ He stepped back into the box and winked at me. That fucker winked at me! I went back to the mound and threw him my third pitch: a perfect, breaking, deadly *curveball*. No man alive could ever have touched that ball. The Babe turned on it and crushed it to right field. It went six hundred feet if it went one. If I had thrown him that pitch in Yankee Stadium, it would have ended up in the bleachers in the Polo Grounds. The Babe watched the ball sail away. He winked at me again as he dropped his bat to trot the bases. ‘Not bad, kid,’ he said. ‘But you need a fastball.’ I checked myself out of the game after that inning. The next day I was on a bus back to New York. The next year I finished school and married Marie and the year after that Roger was born. The Babe set me straight.”

I wanted to inhabit that world. I was going to put in whatever work was needed to break into that world. Everything sounded perfect.

After the Yankees won Game Three and Lou told me his Babe Ruth story for the first time, I asked him, “How did you get so good, Mr. Furo?”

He said, “I was never good. Never good enough for baseball, at least. It was a fine way to spend some lazy summers. Baseball was my first love. But it was never going to sustain me, let alone pay the bills.” He tossed me the baseball he was holding, and he stood up. He said, “It wasn’t going to sustain me, Tom. Find something that will.”

Lou walked over to Mrs. Furo and put a hand around her waist and held her there. He squeezed her tighter, just slightly tighter. He kissed her shoulder. She smiled.

When Mr. Furo came back over to his chair and the game was long over and the radio now played some Jimmy Dorsey number or something like that, I asked Mr. Furo to show me one more time where on the seams he pushed down for the perfect curveball. I tossed that ball up

and down and up and down and up and down until the sun was getting precariously low and the risk of me missing dinner became very real unless I sprinted back just then.

I said goodbye to Roger and made it to the family table as the pasta hit the plate.

Chapter Two

April 16, 2020
New York, New York

There is still so much to cover. I read back over what I wrote, and I realized I didn't even get to who won the '36 World Series, and my story doesn't end until 1946, if it ever ends. A whole decade to cover, and I'm wasting time talking about which ice man was superior. As if that still matters.

I should have written yesterday, but when I sat down and set everything out and was about to begin, my daughter called me. Oh, she's so worried about me with this pandemic and everything, and we got to arguing. I told her, "No, I'm not moving out there to the sticks, and there's no need for you to come in to the City and check on me. The nurse is still coming by every day. I'm doing fine." That's how I put it, but she's worried. So what if my diner's closed, I said. And my bagel shop too? I get food delivered. I can fry an egg. I'm doing fine. She's sixty. Constance is her name. Connie. She's old, too. How about that? She's a widow. Me a widower, my daughter a widow. What does she want me to do? Move out there? Live with her in that big two-story suburban house? I have a ground floor apartment here. I'm happy. I've had it for years. We'd be two old folks living together, alone—making it up the stairs, slowly—slowly, if at all—yes, not making it up at all in my case, anymore, I suppose.

There's no one to run up the stairs anymore.

This is not what I set out to discuss, of course. I only mean to say, for my own benefit, that if I intend to get through this story then I need to focus and commit to writing every day as much as my health and old bones allow.

Now, there's a World Series to get to.

After Sunday's Game Four, the Yankees led three to one, and their victory seemed at this point inevitable. They just needed one more win. Roger and I and the other Yankee fans at school became possessed of a certain brashness that, let's face it, was completely annoying and completely warranted.

What I remember of that school day happened in Mr. Glokowski's third grade classroom.

Mr. Glokowski was an ancient man (I recognize the irony of my calling anyone ancient). He was grizzled and wrinkled, white-bearded but bald. He was liver-spotted and wore each day the same cuffed and collared blue-checked shirt. Layers of chalk dust covered his pants at all times so that if he wanted to he could run a finger along his thigh and drum up enough chalk to use that finger to teach the day's lesson. He spoke gruffly and without humor. He had taught my brother eight years earlier, and in one of Peter's rare exchanges with me in late 1936, he told me that Mr. Glokowski slept in a coffin like a vampire in the school's basement.

PS 24 was diverse. It wasn't idyllic. Us Italian kids—even at eight years old—inherited some of the prejudices our parents possessed and parroted some of the stereotypes we heard walking down the block in our whiter neighborhood. In Mr. Glokowski's classroom we sat amongst each other—Black, White, Catholic, Jew, what have you—but when we left we returned to our own spheres. There was not often open animosity. There were certain things—sports, for example, and later music—that sometimes bridged the divide of race or religion amongst boys and girls on the playground. We grew up more together than apart. But even years later, when I counted among my friends folks of all backgrounds, I balked at bringing anyone who didn't look and sound like me to meet my mom.

As I said, Roger was a couple years older than me, and I didn't have any close friends in my own grade. I was sometimes mocked. I had big crooked teeth that pushed my already big lips

out further from my face. I had big ears and a big nose. Everything on my face was big when I was a kid. I was a Mr. Potato Head. Once, the year before, in second grade, I arrived late to the classroom on a day we had a substitute teacher. When I walked in, the boys seated at their desks looked at me and stretched their own ears out from their head and juttred out their own lips and made monkey noises while I walked, head down, to my chair.

I suppose that's another thing that could unite the boys of PS 24: bullying.

I wasn't getting it as bad at all from the other kids that year in third grade. Probably because I palled around with the likes of Roger and some of the other older stickball boys.

But so I was in Mr. Glokowski's classroom. We sat in desks in rows in formation like a phalanx. I sat near the center, three rows deep. In the front row to my left a boy named Pulito had a rosary in his lap.

I watched Pulito for minutes. I don't remember what the lesson was on. Math of sorts. Division, I think. Mr. Glokowski went on in his vaguely European accent, and Pulito counted his beads.

Now, as far as Italians in Harlem went, the Riccios were not a religious bunch. I was baptized, of course. I knew the prayers and the manners and had a healthy respect for the clergy. Mom liked to remind us that somewhere in her family back in Sicily there was a monsignor. But we didn't attend mass too frequently, and I definitely didn't pull out prayer beads in grammar school.

Pulito's mouth moved minutely as Mr. Glokowski lectured with his back to us. Then without turning his head, as he continued to write on the blackboard, Mr. Glokowski said, "Mr. Pulito, what exactly are you doing there?"

Pulito's head snapped to attention in horror. "What, Mr. Glokowski?"

Mr. Glokowski turned to face the class and said, “It appears you’re praying, Mr. Pulito. Are you praying?”

“Yes.”

“And what are you praying for, Mr. Pulito?”

Pulito’s face went apple-red, and he whispered, “The Giants.”

The class tittered, and Mr. Glokowski said, “Mr. Pulito, it is going to take much more than God to save that team.”

He turned back to the blackboard and continued his lesson, and I sat stunned and smiling.

When the final school bell rang, Roger and I met at our usual sidewalk spot and commenced our dash to his apartment. Mrs. Furo greeted us and laid out crackers and water glasses and kissed Roger’s head and then, for the first time, kissed mine, and said, “You boys enjoy yourself.”

And she left.

When she left we were kings of our own castle. Co-equal monarchs. We ate the crackers but ignored the water. We took chilled milk from Roger’s icebox and poured it into tall glasses with a scoop of Bosco.

I did not look out the window much that afternoon. I lay on my back and listened to the game. I rolled my pant legs up to the knee. I lay with my pants like that and lay in my shirt sleeves and made snow angels out of the Furo’s luxurious carpet. The game was close and tense, but I do not remember being stressed then. I’m certain I was stressed. I’m certain I paced the carpet as much or more than I let it tickle my skin. But even as the game entered extra innings, I felt such ease, at least concerning the game’s result.

“Hey,” I said somewhere around the sixth inning. “What are we going to do when this is all over?”

“I’ll show you the basement here,” Roger said. “It’s huge. We can pitch and catch and work on our swing all winter. Even when it’s snowing.”

It occurs to me now that I may have felt so calm that afternoon because there was no possible bad outcome. The Yankees led the series three to one in a race to four. If they won, they would be champions, and I would hoot and yelp and celebrate the perfect end to my first perfect season of baseball. If they lost, then I got to do it all again the next day.

Mrs. Furo returned to the apartment with the score knotted at four in the eighth inning. She took stock of the scene and proceeded into the kitchen to start dinner.

During advertisements between innings, Mrs. Furo poked her head into the living room and said, “Tom, you know you can always stay for dinner.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Furo,” I said.

In truth, I kept an eye on the living room’s large grandfather clock. Though unspoken in my family, it was understood that we met around our table for dinner at six. My dad returned home from work around five. Peter left to wash dishes at Rao’s at seven. We occupied that daily hour not happily, not unhappily, but ritualistically. The meals passed mostly in silence and when not in silence then in short, clipped bursts of rough Italian.

But baseball always carries with it the prospect, however vague, of interminability. Back in those days, before the stadiums all had lights, a game might get called for darkness but if there were daylight, the innings could stretch on as long as needed to break the tie. I knew I could not well arrive home and say, “Sorry I’m late, Ma. The game went on to fifteen innings. But, boy, was it exciting.” I knew, at least, that I could not arrive home and say this and escape unscathed.

So as the score remained tied going into the tenth inning, I didn't fear the Yankees losing the game. I feared no one ever winning.

My fears amounted to nothing, though. The Giants scored in the tenth. The Yankees did not and lost. I lingered a while longer with Roger and Mrs. Furo then said goodbye and put on my sweater and plodded down the stairs. I would make it home for dinner—if I hurried—and be back at the Furo's the next day for Game Six.

I entered my apartment a few minutes before six-thirty.

Dad sat at the small wooden kitchen table with an empty, waiting bowl in front of him. He had, as usual when eating, a blue table napkin tucked into his collar as a bib. He was a dark, compact man. He was sharp angles all through his face and bulging knuckles that he cracked constantly. Mom flitted about the stove and sink. She wore a sauce-splattered apron. She had curled red hair then and was stocky and stout. She moved with stark efficiency in the kitchen. She moved with that same efficiency everywhere, actually—when she was bottling wine, or taking down clothes, or striking a match to light a cigarette, or striking then another match to light another cigarette, like the one she had dangling from her lips at that moment when I entered the kitchen.

I greeted them and went into the bedroom to deposit my bookbag and hang my sweater in the quarter of the closet I had managed to commandeer from Peter. Peter was not in the bedroom, and he was not in the kitchen or living room, either. I sat down at the table in my seat, and, for the first time I could remember, I sat across from an empty chair.

Mom spooned dinner onto our plates. She stubbed out her cigarette and poured her basement wine into her and my dad's glasses. She sat and my parents ate wordlessly until Dad

turned to me between bites and said, “You’ve been spending a lot of time over at that Roger boy’s place?”

I was, I’m sure, still pondering Peter’s unspoken absence, and I didn’t process my dad’s comment.

“What, Dad?”

“Roger, right? That’s the boy’s name?” He spoke through a mouthful of dinner—polenta or the like—and he chewed loudly. “Roger Furo, right? Your mama told me that you’ve been going there each day after school for the *baseball*.” *Baseball*. That English word sounded inelegant and alien at the end of his Italian sentences. It didn’t fit, like some hand-me-down pair of sneakers that pinched your toes. I had only heard him say that word a handful of times before, often in the early days of the summer when he sat after work with fleeting attention as I tried to capture his interest with stories of DiMaggio and my newfound passion.

“Oh, yeah, Dad,” I said. “Yeah, that’s where I’ve been, but it won’t be for much longer. Only two more games. Maybe only one.”

He washed down a large bite with the remainder of his wine. He said, “Is he nice?”

“What? Who? Roger? Yeah, Dad. He’s great.”

“I told you, Alfi,” Mom said. “I’m sure this boy is very nice.”

“What does his father do?” Dad asked. “He has a fancy job?”

“He’s a ...” I searched for the word in Italian and realized I didn’t know it, so I said, “He’s an *accountant*.”

Dad looked from me to Mom and squinted at her and then turned back to me and nodded. He refilled his glass halfway with more wine. He said to me, “You should invite him over here for dinner.”

I didn't respond. Maybe I nodded.

Dad mopped up sauce with bread and finished off his plate. Mom scraped up the last of her dinner with her fork. She always scratched the bottom of the plate, which caused loud screeches that shot through me like cannonfire. To this day when I hear a fork tine scrape across a plate, I shoot up four inches out of my seat and cover my ears. When I eat, I run my fork under the food with obsessive gentility. I strive for silence. I lift the fork so gently from the plate to my mouth, like I'm removing some highly fragile seashell from the sandbed.

But back then, growing up, dinner was a cacophonous affair with Dad's open-mouth chewing and Mom's scraping. It was quieter, I think, when we were all talking.

I looked at Mom and Dad as they finished their wine, and I looked at the empty chair.

"Where's Peter?" I asked.

Dad undid the napkin from his collar and stood.

"Out," he said. "I'm going to lay down. Goodnight, Tommaso."

Mom stood and helped Dad with the pullout couch. "Do the dishes, please, Tommaso," she said.

When I awoke the next morning, I experienced yet another first: my brother was not there to throw open the window shades.

I planned to tell more today, but I'm getting tired.

At this rate, I'll never finish

Chapter Three

April 17, 2020
New York, New York

The world is stopped.

I have been telling this story about baseball, and here we are at the bright start of spring and there is no baseball. There is only memory—whether it's the memory of 1936 or 2019. Eighty-three years of baseball. Eighty-three years since that first summer when I heard Joe DiMaggio's name crackling through the boxy radios of East Harlem. Eighty-three years, and through it all there was baseball. And now baseball is a memory. Like what's left when someone lets go of your wrist.

The season should have started three weeks ago. For the Yankees' opening day, I would have been down at the corner diner, The Empress. I watch every Yankees game there. I have been going to this diner for thirty years. They serve coffee you're better off cleaning your drain with. The food tastes fine if you apply an entire shaker of salt. The owner is Stavi, a big Greek guy with a sandpaper voice and a chewed up cigar in his shirt pocket. He came to America as a kid in the seventies and fell in love with the Yankees, too. He started at the Empress as a dishwasher—like Peter at Rao's—and worked his way up to buying the place from the family that owned it before him. Every Yankees game he saves me a small booth with a clear view of the biggest screen where he plays the game at a low volume only I can hear. When I walk in, there is a tented gold placard on the table of the booth that has "RESERVED" etched in black. One of the nice girls at the front takes the crook of my arm and says, "Good evening, Mr. Riccio" and walks me to the table. She goes slow. I have my cane in my hand. She helps me into the booth and brings me two pieces of rye toast and a glass of Chianti.

It all makes you feel like a million bucks.

The last time I caught a game in The Empress was the last time the Yankees played. They were against the Houston Astros in the playoffs in October of last year. The American League Championship. The winner moved on to the World Series. The Yankees knotted the score at four in the top of the ninth. Stavi came over and sat with me, and we waited for the bottom of the inning together. He took his cigar from his pocket and clamped it between his molars. Stavi quit smoking after a heart scare sent him to the hospital a few years ago on the morning of his fifty-second birthday. Stavi is a heavy drinker of whiskey and that acidic coffee he serves. He seems to eat only plump pink steaks. Stavi is expansive. Stavi takes up the whole of the booth opposite me when he stops in to chat. He exercises only by yelling at whichever poor, young line cook is making the steaks that day. Putting that cigar in his pocket and never lighting it again is the only nod Stavi has ever made to his mortality.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Stavi said as the Yankees took the field and the Astros came up to bat. We had long ago done away with hellos when the ballgame was on. Our conversation simply ebbed and flowed like the season itself. He twisted in his seat and spoke up towards the screen. “I don’t think it’s our year.”

“It could be,” I said. “It always could be until it can’t.”

“My kid,” he said. “My oldest. Gregory. He started college last month.”

“You’d mentioned.”

“Dartmouth. Can you imagine? Ivy league.”

The Yankees got two quick outs.

“He’s a bright kid,” I said. “Get comfortable. We could be getting extra innings.”

“He loved meeting you. You remember meeting him?”

“I remember.”

“Six, seven years ago. He was a little runt. He hates this diner, but he was in here that day because we were short a dishwasher. The game was on.”

“I remember.”

“He came over to your booth. You had a baseball in your hand. He was obsessed then. Still is. He came over to you while I was busy.”

The Yankees’ closer walked a batter. The game was still tied at four.

“Watch the game,” I said. “You’ve told me this story before.”

Stavi continued, “Next time we were playing catch in the park, Gregory says to me, ‘Watch this.’ He goes into some windup and throws a ball that curves and dips and drops like nothing I’d ever seen him throw. I go, ‘Where’d you learn that?’ He says, ‘That old guy at the diner.’”

The Yankees closer got behind on the count. He grooved a pitch high and outside. The Astros batter turned on it and crushed it over the left-center fence. Homerun.

Houston was going to the World Series. New York was going home.

Stavi cursed and turned away from the screen to face me. “Wasn’t our year,” he said.

I put cash on the table and stood. “No,” I said. “But there’s always next year.”

Stavi took my elbow and helped me to the door. “Keep coming in this winter.” I shook his hand, and he held mine tight. He held me there. I could smell the sweet tobacco of his unsmoked, moist cigar. “You know Gregory made the team at Dartmouth. Not a pitcher but a catcher. He’s got a hell of a swing.”

I gave his palm a light squeeze and said, “Give him my best.”

Why am I talking about this?

The Empress is closed. The season is not starting.

And I haven't even gotten to the end of the '36 World Series.

Besides Peter not being there when I awoke in the morning, there was nothing else momentous or notable about that October Tuesday morning in 1936. I tried to sleep later—to take advantage of the absence of my early-rising brother—but every part of me felt lumped and twisted, like I'd slept on a stack of bricks.

I got dressed, made an unsuccessful attempt at matting my hair down into anything resembling a style, and slouched into the kitchen. Mom was there but Dad had already left for the tracks. She snatched hot toast from the stove with her bare fingers and carried it to the table and placed it on a plate for me. Her fingers were cool unfeeling stones.

Those fingers were something else. A year before, when I first marveled at her ability to touch anything of any temperature and emerge unburned, she told me her own mama—my grandmother back in Italy who I never met—took my mom's hands when she was a little girl and held them to scald in steaming water once a week for a few seconds at a time. Mom said by the time she turned thirteen she never felt the heat again. Mom said if I were born a girl, she would have done the same to me.

In one swift movement Mom put my plate down on the table and then turned back to the stove. "No butter today," she said. She poured coffee to the brim of a small teacup. She moved so fast, and I feared a spill that never came. I made my way to the table, and she whisked past me to the front door. "Don't be late. I'll be in the basement all day."

I hadn't sat down before she poked her head back through the door and said, "Your father wants me to remind you to invite that Roger boy over for dinner." Then she darted away.

I would be late to school, no doubt, but questions swirled in me. I remained at the table and fidgeted with the fraying threads of my sweater, one that Peter had outgrown. I remember that sweater like it could still be in my closet. It was my main warmth in the fall months for years. It was red and darned so many times that Mom might have saved a few bucks knitting a new one from scratch. With my nerves as frayed as the sweater, I pulled on a thread and pulled and pulled and it kept coming and coming and coming like a magician pulling scarves from his cuffs.

I ate my toast crumb by crumb. Where was Peter? Why were Mom and Dad so set on having Roger over? I don't think I'd ever had a friend over at that point. Who was starting Game Six for the Yankees? Twenty minutes into my day—the biggest day of my life since the day before—and I had devoted only fleeting attention to the fate of the Yankees that afternoon.

As I contemplated all this, the clock ticked ever closer to first bell. I finished my toast and considered leaving the plate on the table for my mother to clean whenever she emerged from bottling wine or rinsing clothes or whatever was doing in the basement. I imagined her scorn, though, upon returning from a morning of chores and seeing a dirty plate, and I wanted all the goodwill I could muster if the game that afternoon—or the celebration afterwards—went long. I shook the scramble of thoughts from my head and rose from my seat with my plate in hand. I was at the sink when I heard the clink of metal on the linoleum. A quarter rolled on its edge and spun to a stop under the table. I dropped the dish in the sink. Under where the plate was, there were three more quarters. I picked up the one from under the table. I put it with the rest and took a step back. Four quarters. A whole dollar. I arranged them into a diamond—the bases surrounding the infield.

I was flush. I was giddy. I pocketed the four coins and scrubbed down the dish and sprinted out the door and down the stairs into the brisk fall morning. The coins jangled. They weighed down one side of me like a gun in a holster, loaded with possibility. I was undoubtedly late for school, but on the thirty minute trip, each corner store I ran past beckoned, as did each newsstand, each bakery busy with the morning bustle. I had never held so much money before, at least not without the hawkish supervision of my parents. I resisted as best I could each temptation I encountered on my way to school. I wanted to earn a morning's worth of interest on the anticipation of spending my newfound bounty.

My parents were never much for spontaneous gifts. They weren't much for gifts of any sort, truth be told. There were requisite boxes checked—and opened—at Christmas and on birthdays. A bar of good chocolate. A comic book. A new pair of socks. Always a pair of socks. Through to the day Mom passed, there were always socks for Christmas. But this one occasion is the only memory I have of some unexpected boon.

And one delivered so slyly.

If I hadn't cleaned that plate!

Four blocks from school, Gargiulo's Bakery was the last test of my will.

There is something about having a little spending money that heightens the senses. A boy in 1936 with four quarters burning through his trousers was a wolf on the hunt, an eagle in flight. A cannoli has never smelled as sweet, as scandalous, as seductive, as what wafted onto the sidewalk from Gargiulo's that morning.

Normally, in the hours before school, the line at Gargiulo's stretched from the bakery counter out the door and snaked past the barbershop next door. The men entering the barbershop for a morning shave parted the sea of waiting ladies in greatcoats. Some men tipped their caps.

Some men covered. Men left the barbershop, rubbing their freshly exposed jaw and flooded through with the confidence of a new haircut, and they flirted with anything that moved. They hoped to raise a blush from the ladies in line but more often settled for a cold smile and the back of a shoulder as the women closed ranks.

But that day? That fated day, there was no line.

I stood paralyzed outside the shop and stared in through the window at the one or two women buying bread and the bakers behind the counter covered in flour. I don't remember for how long I deliberated. I must have been an awful roadblock on the sidewalk—stopped there as I was in the middle of the morning commute.

A young lady jostled me from my indecision. She collided with me. Her heel spun out from under her, and she stumbled and dropped her handbag. I picked it up and handed it to her as she straightened the buttons on her jacket.

She was beautiful.

Years later, when I was in high school and I thought maybe I'd give writing stories a try, a teacher read one in which I used that word a few too many times for her liking. She underlined each one in red and told me, "Tom, you only get one 'beautiful.'"

Well, Mrs. McCoy. Here it is. She was beautiful.

I was eight. When this wondrous image took back her handbag and said, "Thank you, child," and I couldn't stammer out a response, there wasn't anything of the sexual or romantic. I was faced with the heaven-sent, and in her presence, words failed. She wore all green, from shoe to hat. She had a light emerald jacket, too thin for the chilly morning. Her dress—a lighter shade of green—reached her ankle. She took one of those ankles into her hand and inspected her heel for damage. Satisfied with her stability, she walked into Gargiulo's.

Did I follow? Of course, I did.

I'll take this moment to note that, almost certainly, this lady—who entered and exited my life all in a span of about three minutes one morning eighty-three years ago—this lady did not say to me, “Thank you, child.” No lady on any street anywhere has ever taken her purse back from the outstretched hand of a helpful kid and said, “Thank you, child.” But in her sainted perfection, I can remember no other response.

Regardless, I entered Gargiulo's in a daze. The lady in green placed her order before me, and, admittedly, I imagined her saying to the baker, “One moment,” and then turning and laying a hand on my shoulder and pronouncing to the whole store: “And for this young hero, whatever he desires. On me.”

But she collected her loaf of bread, paid, and left without as much as a glance back in my direction.

A small line had formed behind me, and I stepped forward to the counter and ordered one cannoli. I handed over my quarter and got back four nickels. The woman behind me was already ordering over my head, and I ran a high risk of being trampled, so I escaped back to the sidewalk with my pocket both heavier and not.

Some spell had been lifted. The quarters, broken up, no longer possessed sheer potential.

I ate the cannoli in the last minutes of my walk.

Mr. Glokowski's class was in full swing. His back was turned as he wrote math equations on the blackboard. I sidled to my seat, fearing the whole time that the loose coins in my pocket would betray me, but if Mr. Glokowski noticed, he never said anything.

I sat and didn't hear a word. My tongue moved around my mouth, uncovering new places that the sickly sweet of the cannoli still lingered.

That could have been the day Mr. Glokowski taught us the meaning of life, and it all would have been lost on me. I took several trips to the bathroom. I looked for Roger. I wanted to hear someone talking about the game, but the halls were oddly desolate. Back in the classroom, I waited for lunch.

At lunch, in the yard, I found Roger. He stood on the asphalt with a couple of the other 111th Street stickball boys. Roger spoke animatedly with his hands proscribing wild loops in the air in front of his face.

I jogged towards them. "Hey, Roger," I said.

"Hey, Tommaso," he said. "Guess what."

I entered into the circle with the taller boys. "The Yankees are gonna win the World Series?" I said.

"Damn right," he said. "And I'm gonna be there."

"What?"

"My dad got us tickets."

"Us?"

"Yup. Through his firm. Me and him. He's picking me up in a half hour and we're riding up to the Polo Grounds."

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

"The bleachers in right field," he said and looked up and over the boys' shoulders and up and over the school building as if locating his seats somewhere in the sky. "Dad said to bring my glove. Might catch a homerun ball."

I left. For the second time that day, I couldn't find the words.

Chapter Four

April 18, 2020
New York, New York

Something about old wounds running deep. I wrote that last line yesterday, and I closed my journal and sat on the couch. I sat still. I thought. I'm not sure what about. I sat but could not write any more. Then I laid on the couch and fell asleep until my nurse buzzed the apartment hours later at six in the evening. She only checks in to make sure I've had my pills, and ate my dinner, and remembered to turn the gas off on the stove. Satisfied that I was likely to make it through the night, she left. She left, and I slept.

Now I'm sitting in this predawn hour with nothing to distract me from the rest of that day—that day in 1936. That day when everything changed, not for the first time nor the last. That day that flowed from everything before. From Mom and Dad and Peter boarding a ship in a Messina dock and sailing west. From my birth in dusty East Harlem. From Joe DiMaggio's dad boarding a similar Sicilian ship and making his own journey to Ellis Island. From Joe's dad moving west and settling near San Francisco and working the shore and the sea and fishing until he amassed enough dollars to send for his wife. From Joe being born there in California, across the world from the Bronx. From Joe making his way to New York and the Yankees and into the imagination of every boy who heard his name that first summer.

After I bolted from Roger and the other boys, I hid in a bathroom stall and cried. I sat on the lid of a toilet seat and tucked my knees into my chest so no one passing by would see my ankles. I wanted to disappear.

Mostly I wanted never to see Roger again.

Or, if I did see him again, I imagined all sorts of various violence I might deliver upon him. Broomsticks figured prominently in my vengeful fantasies. He was older and bigger, but my fury surged. If it came to blows—and I had no doubt that it would since my only other outlet was sobbing and damned if I was going to let the school boys see me cry once I left that stall—if it came to blows, I had faith that my indignation would carry me to victory.

How could Roger do this to me? How could he abandon me on this day? We were new friends, but we were fast friends. We had listened to each World Series game together. We sprawled on his carpet, mostly content to listen to the broadcast in reverent silence. Occasionally, we punctuated the commercial breaks between innings with our dreams for the future: Roger a pitcher for the Yankees and me starting at third base. Or we spoke of more immediate aspirations. Only the day before, during Game Five, Roger told me he had learned of a summer baseball league for boys that he planned to join the following year. He had a glove, and Mr. Furo would buy him a bat.

“A real Louisville Slugger,” Roger said. “Just like the Babe used. You might be too young, but maybe you can join, too.”

That jerk invited me to join him when it was convenient but abandoned me at the first opportunity.

And how could Mr. Furo do this to me? Surely whatever deep-pocketed work connection oh his that provided him with two tickets could have provided him with one more.

Ten minutes after I locked myself in the stall, the bell rang and lunch was over. I swiped at the roll of toilet paper, and sheets billowed to the hard tile floor. I unspooled it faster and faster until there was none left, until there was only a mound of white streamers built up at my feet like an anthill. I picked up the whole bundle and buried my face in it. I dried my eyes and wiped my

snot on my second-hand sweater. I spit in the toilet. I could still taste the cannoli on my tongue. I left the stall and inspected my face in the mirror. My eyes were puffy. They were as red as my sweater.

I splashed my face with water from the tap and took a step back and stared deep into my own eyes. They remained bloodshot. I used the smaller sink, the one lower to the ground for the younger kids, and my cheeks reddened to match my eyes. Shame and embarrassment mixed with my anger. I shifted down to the taller sink and ran the water and reached my hands straight out in front of me at shoulder height and turned the hot water tap and let the water run over my hands. The water ran from cold to cool to warm and then to hot and blistering. I held my hands there and imagined my mom doing the same as a child. “Brava,” I heard my grandma say to my mom. “Brava, cara mia.” I held my hands there and imagined Roger at the ballgame with Cracker Jacks in his lap and his father’s arm around his shoulders. I held my hands there until they were red like my eyes—a screaming red—but I did not scream. I did not make a noise. I held my hands there until the bathroom door flung open and two older boys, probably fifth graders, entered.

They laughed together as they went to the urinals.

“Nah,” one said, a tall, lanky white boy with sandy hair. “I’m not gonna fight him. Not worth the time.”

“You’re scared,” the other replied. He was small and spindly, a black kid with caterpillar eyebrows.

I jumped back and gathered my bag from the ground. I left the steaming water running and fled out the door to the sound of them still laughing, and I knew they were laughing at me.

Again, I arrived to Mr. Glokowski’s classroom late and took my seat.

A large clock ticked away the afternoon. The second hand moved in spasms. I'd look away from the clock face and then snap my head back to it, and the second hand would seem frozen there for longer than a second. The second hand would hang there for long enough to make you think that time had stopped. Oh, how I wanted time to stop that afternoon. But then the hand would start back up again.

I still play at this foolishness now. I still get that feeling when I catch a second hand ticking. That first glance—that first consideration of time—is always the longest. That initial second lasts long enough to fill you with anticipation or with dread. That second fills you with nervousness that the clock has stopped working. But then time continues on its steady march and each second is equally apportioned.

And so I watched the clock in Mr. Glokowski's classroom and tried all these tricks in an attempt to stave off the afternoon's arrival when Roger would be at the Polo Grounds and I would have no one next to me when the Yankees potentially won the World Series.

At twelve-thirty Mr. Glokowski wrote sentences on the board so we could learn about verbs. Tick is a verb. As in: the clock ticks on and on and on and on. *Tick tick tick*. I stared at the clock. The game started at one-thirty. *Tick tick tick*. I thumbed at the change in my pocket. My hand still stung and ached from the hot water, and the coins' cool metal soothed my hands like a balm. *Tick tick tick*. Pulito worked the rosary, hidden more carefully now in his lap. *Tick tick tick*. Twelve-forty-five and Mr. Furo surely had already come by the school and swept up Roger. How would they get uptown to the stadium? Would Mr. Furo splurge for a taxi? Did he own a car? *Tick tick tick*. Intransitive verbs are verbs that do not need an object. They're all action. He stays. She goes. He cries. She cheers. *Tick tick tick*. Would Mr. Furo and Roger cram onto the subway? My father had told me about the alcoves carved into the wall for the underground

workers. These cutouts were less than one foot deep. When the men fixing the track needed to get out of the way of the train, they pushed back into the alcove and stood ramrod straight until the train passed. Would my dad be down there while Mr. Furo and Roger zipped up to the Polo Grounds? Would my dad fold into the alcove to make way for their subway car like he was avoiding a royal procession? *Tick tick tick*. Transitive verbs require an object to receive the action. They cannot stand alone. By themselves, they are incomplete. Beat is transitive. The Yankees beat the Giants. The Yankees need an object to beat. Miss is transitive, too. Something must be missed. *Tick tick tick*. By one o'clock I was certain Mr. Furo and Roger had taken the subway, and the train left the station in my imagination and trundled towards the promise of a ballgame. *Tick tick tick*. I looked out the window. I prayed for rain. I prayed for a storm to wash out the game. But the sun was out. I didn't see a cloud in the sky and no act of God could postpone the inevitable. *Tick tick tick*. Passive verbs allow the subject to receive the action rather than do the action. This city was built by brave men. *Tick tick tick*.

I took a quarter from my pocket and held it between my knuckles. I tapped it on my thigh in rhythm with the beat of the second hand.

Tick tick tick.

One-thirty. The game was beginning, and I still had twenty minutes of the school day left.

Tick tick tick.

I turned the quarter over and over in my fingers. Well, I thought, if Roger had a game to attend with his father, I would enjoy what he couldn't. Ninety-five cents and the freedom to spend it however I wanted..

I contemplated how I should spend that afternoon since I was not sprinting straight to the Furo carpet. I considered buying every baked good known to man and boy and gorging myself. I

considered finding Johnny, the ice man. Maybe he wanted company. Any number of shops and barrooms and soda counters and restaurants dotted East Harlem. I was certain each would readily welcome a boy with my sort of coffers. The butcher, Rodolfo, no doubt, would welcome me with open arms, a cleaver at the end of one and thin slices of prosciutto at the end of the other. Home beckoned. Perhaps Peter had returned. Or perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps I could crawl back into a mercifully dark and empty bedroom and shut out the remainder of the day. I considered the possibility that I, too, might make the trip to the Polo Grounds and buy a ticket with my money. I didn't know how much a ticket cost, but I couldn't conceive of much of anything I couldn't purchase with the great horde I had squirreled away.

Then a voice broke me from my daydream.

"Tommaso, are you with us?" Mr. Glokowski eyed me from the front of the classroom. Sentences upon sentences covered the blackboard behind him, each written in his barely legible scrawl. I had not noticed him write a single one.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Glokowski," I said. "Did you ask me a question?"

The other students chuckled.

Mr. Glokowski picked up a yardstick from his desk.

PS 24's dilapidated brick building stood across the street from Bishop McTavish Secondary School, a Catholic school that served a mostly red-haired and freckled Irish population. Us public school kids lusted over the pristine condition of the schoolhouse and the sharp black and white uniforms the boys wore. But we cowered in fear at the sight of any of the stern-faced, ancient nuns who taught at the school. Often boys—young men, sixteen, seventeen years old—walked down Bishop McTavish's impressive stone steps at the end of the day and clutched swollen knuckles. The Catholic kids at PS 24 had all encountered our own share of

cruel nuns, but rumors swirled about the unique depravity of Bishop McTavish's sisters, said to be sent straight from Dublin after extensive training in myriad and unorthodox torture methods.

When Mr. Glokowski picked up that yardstick, I thought immediately of those nuns and figured he had already decided on a physical punishment for my insolence. Instead he tapped on each word of a sentence he had written out in chalk.

"I did ask you a question," he said, his voice raspy. His slight accent made him sound even more imposing. "The sentence is 'The mother cooks dinner for her family and friends.' Is the verb in this sentence transitive or intransitive?"

Twenty other heads swiveled in my direction.

I blinked at Mr. Glokowski. I fruitlessly scanned the blackboard for a hint. "I ... transitive?"

"Very good," he said. "And why?"

I began to sweat.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sorry."

Mr. Glokowski let his chin fall to his chest. He sighed long and deep and put the yardstick back down on his desk. "May I ask you to inform us of something you do know, then, Tommaso? What were you thinking about this whole time?" I stammered but offered no coherent response. Mr. Glokowski said, "Ah, perhaps it was baseball?"

The whole class erupted in laughter. Pulito turned around in his seat and looked at me with a grin so wide it threatened to consume him whole.

Mr. Glokowski took the chalk eraser into his hand. He looked up at the clock, which showed we had ten minutes left of class. "It seems," he said as he erased sentence after sentence from the blackboard, "that today's class has reached the limit of its utility. I understand that there

is a baseball game this afternoon—a big one, I must admit. I believe it may have already started. I am not what you call a devotee of the sport, but even I will leave school and put on the radio and follow the action. I suspect many of you will do the same. Go. Go home. If you don't care a lick about baseball, probably all the better. Then there is a chance you will actually enjoy your afternoon and not simply sit a miserable vigil at the foot of a speaker. But go. And when this madness is over, perhaps tomorrow, there will be a test on verbs, an impossible test that you will all fail." We sat stunned. "But for now ... Go!"

Cindy Brown moved first. The star student, she packed her pencils neatly into a case. She placed her books in her bag. She stood and smoothed her long, gray skirt. "Have a good day, Mr. Glokowski," she said. She turned and skipped towards the door.

The dam broke. Student after student raced out to enjoy their extended afternoons. I remained after them all.

Mr. Glokowski displayed no surprise at finding himself alone in the classroom with me. "Won't you be leaving?" he said.

I did not respond.

"I figured you of everyone would be halfway to the stadium by now."

"I'll leave," I said.

"By all means, please do." I rose and took a few steps towards the exit. Mr. Glokowski busied himself with bundling papers on his desk. "Tommaso," Mr. Glokowski said when I was almost to the hallway, "you were barely here today to begin with." I stopped mid-stride like I'd stumbled upon a sleeping dog I was scared of waking. I did not turn around. "You were late this morning and after lunch. I don't think you heard a single word of a lesson when you were in this

room. You are a promising student. If the Yankees win today—and I think they will—meet with me during lunch tomorrow.”

I remained like a statue.

“Now go,” he said. “You’ll miss the whole game.”

I ran.

I ran from school and out onto the sidewalk and weaved in and out of the foot traffic.

I picked a direction at random. I ran uptown. Without realizing, I ran towards the Polo Grounds. When I got my bearings and saw the street numbers growing higher and higher, a sense of despair flooded me. The Polo Grounds—three miles north—seemed an impossible distance. An impassable chasm had opened between the game and me. I gave no thought to going underground and taking a train. I ran for five more minutes and stopped and panted outside a corner store where the shopkeep sat out front smoking a cigarette amongst the daily newspapers.

I was on the threshold of Harlem. From inside the store, the ballgame announcer’s voice crackled through the tubes of a radio. “Here at the start of the bottom of the third, and the Yankees are up three to two.”

They don’t make voices like that radio announcer’s anymore. Implacable. Timeless. Authoritative. Voices suited for the solemnity of an occasion. Voices fit for Game Six of the World Series or the approach of a hurricane. Voices that can declare war or surrender. I stood and listened.

The shopkeep sat on a squat stool and puffed at his cigarette. He wore a fedora, and the smoke curled around the brim like rising fog. His pant legs were rolled halfway up his calves. He adjusted red-stripped socks and had rings on almost all his fingers. He took me in as I breathed hard.

“Been runnin’,” he said to me. I had no idea if it was a question or an observation. He shook loose another cigarette from a pack in his breast pocket and lit it with the burning end of his first, and I thought of my mom. She wouldn’t like me talking to this man. “Been runnin’,” he said again, “and you stop here for something.”

I looked over his shoulder and through the smoke haze. In the shop there were two children, a boy and a girl, neither older than five or six. The boy perched on the check-out counter. The girl sat on the floor directly beneath him, straight-backed against the candy display case. She swatted at the boy’s bare feet. They both gazed at the radio atop a shelf on the wall opposite them. They watched it so intently. They looked like they were watching a movie screen. The girl sucked her thumb.

They looked so young.

“They’re mine,” the shopkeep said and jabbed with his cigarette back over his shoulder. “They love a ballgame. And you? Where are your parents?”

The Yankees closed out the bottom of the third and held on to the one run lead. The radio broadcast went to advertisements. The boy flicked at the girl’s pigtails with his feet.

I took a couple steps towards the store to get off the busy sidewalk. The smoke around the shopkeep’s face cleared. His skin was well-worn under his eyes.

I wanted to move on. I wanted to continue my journey, but I didn’t know where I wanted to end up. I knew only that I was abandoned. I was unmoored. And I wanted to be alone. I met the shopkeep’s eyes and said, “I don’t have any parents.”

A slight smile creased his face. “Don’t say. When I was about your age, I didn’t have any myself.” The advertisements ended, and the fourth inning started. The Yankees came up to bat. “You got a team?” the shopkeep said.

Without hesitation, I answered, "The Giants." And in that moment, I meant it. I pictured Roger at that game on the radio, and my rooting interest became only anything diametrically opposed to his.

"Us too," the shopkeep said and broadened his smile. "But this store isn't a public accommodation, so I have to say it again. You stop here for something, go on in and grab it and bring it out here and pay. If you're not buying anything, then get on your way."

I gripped the coins in my pocket. The shopkeep's eyes followed my hand. His smile quivered and reformed wider than ever. I entered the store and stepped over the girl's outstretched legs. I wandered the aisles. I passed the candy and snacks and sodas. I walked to the back of the store. On a high shelf sat a display of tall green bottles of Ballantine's beer. I dragged a milk carton under the shelf and climbed on. I grabbed two bottles and carried them out of the store, one in each hand. I stood before the shopkeep and held the bottles out like an offering.

"You a little young for that," he said.

"Can you tell me how much, please, sir?" I said.

The announcer came back on the radio. The Yankees had men on base. Single after single after single. They scored. They were up two runs and threatening more.

"Please," I said. "I'm in a rush."

"I'm sure you are," the shopkeep said. He looked over his shoulder at his kids. He looked back at me and shook his head. "Fifty cents."

I cradled one of the bottles in the crook of my elbow and freed my hand to extract two quarters. I pulled them out and held them in my upturn palm. The shopkeep took them, one at a time, delicately between his thumb and forefinger. He dropped them into his breast pocket with the cigarette pack.

“Get out of here,” he said.

I spun on my heel to sprint off. Only two steps later, the shopkeep called out, “Hey! Come back here.” Just like in Mr. Glokowski’s classroom, I froze. “Come here,” he said again, slower and softer, a whisper-hiss across the sidewalk. Head down, I padded back to where he sat. “Lemme see them bottles.”

One dangled heavy and awkward from each of my hands. I don’t know if I held a bottle out to him, or if he grabbed it from me unbidden. I don’t know if I yelped or screamed or protested or accepted this as the cost of doing business I shouldn’t have been wrapped up in. But before I even registered the loss, he held one of the glass bottles in his hand. His fingers, impossibly long, coiled around the neck and held it tight.

“First time,” he said, and, again, I did not know if he was asking a question or telling me. From his pants pocket he pulled out what looked like a metallic talon. He fitted it under the cap and yanked. Foam ran down the glass. The cap clanked on the pavement, and I remembered the change in my pocket, now half gone.

“Liable to bust your hand wide open,” the shopkeep said. He reached behind his chair and from between a stack of newspapers, he removed a thin, brown bag and nestled the bottle inside and then dropped in the talon. He handed the bag back to me.

“Git,” he said.

And I did. I left. I put the unopened bottle into my bag and held my thumb over the fresh opening of the one I carried, and I stepped back out into the sidewalk rush. I jogged down the street, and the beer sloshed against my finger with each step.

Tomorrow, I promise. Tomorrow this series will end.

Chapter Five

April 19, 2020
New York, New York

The average eight-year-old weighs about fifty-five pounds. I looked that up fifteen minutes ago. With no grandkids, I haven't been too close to an eight-year-old in quite some time, let alone do I remember the heft of one in my arms. So I looked that up. When I was eight—even when I was eight and wore a heavy sweater and carried one big beer bottle in my knapsack and another in my hand—I wasn't a pound over forty-five.

I was a small boy. I was still under four feet tall and skinny, and that large bag on my back dwarfed me and slowed me. A turtle shell that offered no protection.

When I stepped out from the newsstand and onto the street, I still had no plan. As I said, The shop where I bought the beer was on the threshold of Harlem.

Harlem and East Harlem have always stood as abutting neighbors—the delineations here and there breaking down along the sometimes amorphous borders. Of course, so much of my later life—my post-baseball awakening—would take place within the clear four asphalt corners of Harlem. But at that time—at that age—I had barely ever set foot properly in the neighborhood. PS 24 sat on 102nd on the westside of Central Park, but when I walked the thirty-or-so minutes from my eastside apartment, I always took the same route. I headed first downtown and then crossed into the Park at its northside boundary at 110th—the unofficial start of Harlem. At Mom's insistence, I never ventured farther uptown than that.

That afternoon I careened north past 110th and then past 115th and on. I did not go along a straight line. I veered west to Manhattan Avenue and east to Seventh. Innings passed without my knowledge. If anyone thought it odd to walk past an aimless eight-year-old with a thumb-stoppered bottle of Ballantine's the size of his thigh, no one said anything.

It's one of those things. Not believing these days in much else—fate, destiny, what have you—and not possessing much in the way of a spiritual vocabulary, I guess I'd call them coincidences. Maybe Mom'd call them miracles, but a miracle is irrefutably positive, beneficial. A miracle is good. A miracle is consequential and important. I'm talking about coincidences. The small things that might not reveal themselves for years. The sort of things when they dawn on you down the road make you go, "Huh, what are the chances?" Then, when you've put together the two plus two of it, you go to tell your best friend, or your wife. You start, "Hey, honey, get a load of this." And on you go with your story, wrapped up in the telling, until you're only a couple sentences in and you realize you're caught out in it—none of this is adding up to anything, let alone four. Like a dream you had the night before that felt for all the world so important—like that dream unlocked all life's mysteries—until you think back on it ten minutes after waking, and it all meant nothing, nothing at all.

Doing what I'm doing—thinking back, recollecting, adding up—I'm coming across a couple of them, coincidences. How couldn't I? Laws of large numbers. Sheer probabilities. None of it is particularly compelling on a cosmic level, on a human-scale level. In a town like New York City, there are undoubtedly hundreds of such events everyday, and you'd be hard pressed to convince anyone else that your coincidence is the most improbable. But you can't deny it's interesting—at least personally—when it happens to you, when you're sitting all alone, when there's no face to stare blankly back into your own and say (not unkindly, not impatiently), "Oh, yes, darling, that's fascinating. Now excuse me, sorry, I have to check the pot roast."

For probably forty-five minutes, I meandered through Harlem. Waiting for the walk sign at a stoplight, I took my thumb off the bottle for the first time since I left the newsstand. My finger pad pruned like I had been in the bath. I brought the dampened finger to my nose and

sniffed and recoiled at the stale and putrid smell. I looked down into the bottle with one eye closed like I was scanning the horizon through a telescope. I thought of urine. I did not yet take a sip.

My stomach clamored for food. At that hour of the afternoon, I should have been gorged on cookies and chocolate milk at Roger's apartment. Instead, I was nowhere in Harlem with nothing but the memory of toast and cannoli to sustain me.

I headed east down 118th and recrossed St. Nicholas Avenue.

New York City (or at least the uptown Manhattan neighborhoods where I spent the majority of my years) is a city of quadrants—straight lines and boxes and right angles. When you come across a street like St. Nick that dares to slice across the grid—teetering and askance—you get a queer feeling that something is amiss. Whether amiss with the city's layout or with your own sense of bearing, who can say. North of 14th Street, there aren't too many of these anomalies. Sure, Broadway rambles here and there, marching to its own drum. But no street is as brazen as that stretch of St. Nick from the Park to 125th. And no corner is as arresting as 118th and St. Nick.

Here is the coincidence.

The street hummed that afternoon. The bustle was probably no different than any other day. 118th was probably no different than any other street. But a certain energy shook me from my sleepwalk. I became aware of my surroundings. Boys and girls no older nor bigger than I skipped rope on the sidewalk and hopscotched through chalk squares. Men sat on stoops, some alone and some in animated conversation. I remember the men were largely in their shirt sleeves, and maybe that's what brought me from my reverie. I repossessed my own body and shivered against the nip in the October air on their behalf.

At 118th and St. Nick there was—is—a triangular intersection caused by St. Nick’s odd course through Harlem. A world away, on 23rd Street downtown, where that wandering Broadway creates a similarly shaped plot, the Flatiron Building cuts a knife edge swatch through the City skyline that has landed it on innumerable postcards. Up there on the corner of 118th—feeling further from home than I would have felt downtown or in Brooklyn or in St. Louis—I came across the Cecil Hotel, which jutted out in its own blunt, squat, ignoble approximation of the Flatiron’s majesty. I came across the blue sign that clung vertically to the side of the building and advertised the hotel’s name in then unilluminated neon. If that sign was unlit because of the afternoon daylight or the Depression, I don’t know. I would not see that sign again for seven years and then after I would see it almost weekly, bright-lit against the endless post-midnight possibilities of a New York City at war. When I saw the Cecil sign next, all those years later, I sought it out—a Mecca.

In 1943, when I returned, I came hopeful and daunted to Minton’s, the jazz capital of Harlem housed in the Cecil’s ground floor. I came for Dizzy and Bird. I came to try to belong.

But we’re not there yet.

In 1936, Minton’s didn’t yet exist, and the Cecil presented solely a sturdy facade with tall windows cut into the brick. The Cecil was then only a wall against which a lost boy could rest his back and maybe drink a beer.

So I stopped, but it wasn’t to rest, at least not at first. I stopped because the game was on. Somewhere two stories above me a room had its window open, and I made out the crackle of a radio set somewhere close enough to the sill and turned loud enough to carry the announcer’s voice down there to the sidewalk. The top of the eighth and the Yankees were at bat and up one run.

When you're a kid, you're used to the world coming at you from above. There's maybe even a certain comfort to a voice speaking down to you, a certain inherent, unquestioning trust, or at least an acceptance of that voice's authority.

I nestled up against the brick and brought my knees into my chest and let the broadcast lilt down to me from on high.

Why did I have that bottle of beer in my hand? Why did I have another in my bag? I've reckoned with that question ever since, and I'm not sure I've settled on a sufficient answer.

I never had a strong curiosity or penchant for alcohol. I was never overly compelled by the allure of a drink. I like the Chianti at the Empress. I like the ritual of a glass of dinner wine. I watched my parents drink at dinner, and then I watched Mom drink more and more at dinner, at least for a while. I saw the illicit bottles Mom brought up from the basement, but I never yearned for them. I never saw Peter drink a drop of anything except water at room temperature.

With the brick jabbing into my back, I took my thumb off the bottle. I did not deliberate this time. I did not inspect or sniff or run the potential consequences through my mind. With a Yankee walk and a man on first, I took a sip that turned into a gulp and a glug.

I can't say if I choked or spat or winced. I can't say if I enjoyed that first taste or steeled myself and counted my losses and threw back a quarter of the bottle in one go as acceptance of the lot I had cast for myself—a sort of “let's get this over with.” I don't remember the taste. I don't remember if I felt older and wiser and more mature as I drank what I knew I shouldn't have in my hands or whether that bottle made me seem younger and more foolish than even my eight years afforded.

I can say that since October 6, 1936, I have avoided beer religiously. If I was at some event even decades later—some university work function with other professors or anything

similar—and someone returned to the table with a pitcher, I would have to choose between being rude and holding my nose while I downed the stuff. Whiskey, wine, gin, sure. Not often to excess, but, generally, always with pleasure. I'll never drink beer again.

A couple singles later, the Yankees were up two in the eighth, and my bottle was down a third.

The inning ended, and the invisible man in the hotel room switched the station to something saccharine, something like Guy Lombardo—all big swelling brass and major keys—and I thought of the Furo living room, and the Jimmy Dorsey-like tunes Mr. Furo put on after the games while Roger and I sprawled on the carpet and Mrs. Furo put out plates for dinner I always skipped. I swilled more beer through my mouth. I never heard my dad put on the radio. Couldn't remember him letting out so much as a hummed bar—not from an opera or a folk tune from the old country. Did they let radios down into the subway tunnels? Did he pick up snatches of the popular songs they played down there to pass the time while they laid the track? Did he keep those melodies in his head but never sing a single note? Would the transmission even penetrate the earth and stone and whatever else separated me on that sidewalk from the churn of steel down below? Did he think? Did he care? Was he capable of anything except going to work six days a week and lifting a fork to his mouth and collapsing on the pullout couch and asking after Roger-fucking-Furo of all people and inviting *him* into our home?

“Fuck you,” I said to no one in particular.

I took another plug.

The man upstairs switched the radio back to the game, and the Giants had already scored in the bottom of the eighth. A home run from what I pieced together in the aftermath as the Yankees recorded two quick outs to send it to the ninth and take the plate with a one run lead.

This time, he kept the radio tuned to the game.

Hard to say if that's what I wanted, if I wanted to hear the last inning or I wanted to root myself to the cement accompanied by nothing else but some easy-listening big band and the city noises. But I didn't move an inch.

Of course, all this time the city never stopped churning around me. I pulled my knees even tighter against my chest lest I trip a walker scurrying past. No one paid me any mind, a roadside ornament, a stone gargoyle etched into the side of the Cecil Hotel.

Then somebody did notice me. A middle-aged lady took three steps past me and stopped and turned around. She looked at me and looked up at the window from which the broadcast rang down. Her eyes were wide as she took me in. She had her hair pinned up under a broad white hat. She smiled and a crease formed along the corner of each lip in a way that immediately aged her but also eased me.

"What'cha doing out here?" she said.

My head swam, and I clocked for the first time what must have been at least the beginnings of drunkenness. Looking up at her, my tongue couldn't do as much as order a cup of coffee from my brain. They didn't speak the same language. What was I doing out there? I knew Mom would lose it if she found me talking to this person—this black woman. If Mom knew where I was, she'd lock me in my bedroom, throw away the key, and break the doorknob into smithereens.

The lady stared back up to the window with the radio, and the announcer introduced the top of the ninth. "Funny place to take in a ballgame," she said as she opened her purse. "But probably better than missing it. I was rushing home to catch the end myself, but no way I'm going to make it. Mind if I take a seat?" She was beside me before I could nod. Her long skirt

billowed around her ankle, and she, too, brought her knees to her chest. She pulled a Tootsie Pop from her bag and pulled off the wrapper and handed it to me. Then she took one out for herself.

“Ain’t a ballgame without a snack.”

In a ridiculous display, I put the lollipop into my mouth and held it there between my lips like a pacifier while I still gripped a beer bottle.

The announcer’s voice rang clear through the sidewalk scrum. The Giants made a pitching change, and then, for the first time all afternoon, I heard that name: “Joe DiMaggio.”

He came up to bat to lead off the inning.

The absurdity of my situation continued to weigh upon me. Despite all these misguided plans, despite when I told the shopkeep I was a Giants’ fan and I had no parents ... despite not knowing which of those lies was the bigger sin ... despite this stranger sitting next to me and the beer coursing in my bloodstream ... despite Roger probably screaming his lungs out that very moment ... despite and Dad, and despite Peter ... despite stickball and verbs and railroad tracks and whatever accountants did ... despite the rough brick of the Cecil Hotel lodged in my back ... my heart went out to Joe. I wanted him to succeed because I wanted to succeed. I had hitched my wagon, and Joe was pulling the cart.

DiMaggio fouled off a pitch, and I made out the sucking noises coming from next to me. The lady stared down at me, a white stick protruding from her mouth and her cheeks puffing in and out around it like gills.

“How’s the pop?” she asked.

I nodded.

“You OK?”

I nodded.

“Yankees fan?”

I sat still and did not respond. I sensed the tears welling behind my eyes.

DiMaggio grounded a single between the shortstop and third baseman, and Lou Gehrig came to the plate. The lady stood and adjusted the hem of her dress. She brushed sidewalk dust and grime off her jacket and pulled on a pair of maroon gloves. She unclasped her bag and removed another Tootsie Pop and handed it to me.

“For later,” she said. After two quick balls, Gehrig singled and DiMaggio reached third with no outs. “Find yourself home. Someone your size shouldn’t be out here alone.”

She walked off and disappeared past the oddly shaped corner and was lost in the thrum. Someone my size.

The floodgates broke. Both on the field and in me.

Single after single and walks and Giants’ errors. DiMaggio crossed home first. The Yankees did not relent. They batted through the order. Nine men up, and the Giants still couldn’t get three outs. I cried through the whole thing, and watched without feeling as the level of the beer bottle continued to drop. DiMaggio came back up to bat, and he singled again. He hit the ball right between the shortstop and third basemen. I wondered if somehow I got stuck in time, if we were doing it all again. This was the Hell they warned against in Sunday school, doomed to sit alone—drunk—on the streets of Harlem while the world celebrated around you and left you in the lurch. An impenetrable glass between you and where you wish to be. The sun glared into my face as the afternoon crept closer to evening. I blinked and held my eyes closed as even, somehow, the darkness spun behind my eyelids.

Time, it turned out, was working just fine.

The inning came to a close. The Yankees had scored seven runs. They were up thirteen to five. They were going to win the World Series.

A performance for the ages.

Upstairs, the man with the radio decided he didn't want to hear the formalities of the Giants coming to bat in the bottom of the ninth. Maybe he was a disgusted Giants fan. Maybe he only had the broadcast on to pass time, and there's nothing more uninteresting to a non-partisan than a late-inning rout. Maybe that hidden man was up there whistling to himself without a care in the world. Maybe he had any of the other countless stresses on his mind that might consume a man alone in a hotel room: a big date that night, family trouble, work deadlines. Whatever the reason, the big band came back.

A few minutes later, off from the east, or coming down from the Bronx, I swore I heard car horns and whoops and hollers. The celebration was under way. I finished my beer.

And that's how the season ended. From the moment I heard DiMaggio's name all those months earlier, I hung on every pitch. Now I had not even heard the final out.

Chapter Six

April 20, 2020
New York, New York

Right after I finished writing yesterday, Connie called me. She's still worried. She said she's going to come into the City to check on me if I don't move out to Long Island to stay with her. I told her she's no safer to travel than I am. I said, "This disease will kill a sixty-something-year-old as readily as a ninety-two-year-old." And that giant empty house. I said, "That house is a tomb of its own." I told her I'm not built for the suburbs.

She wasn't having it.

When Mira was still alive—so when Connie couldn't have been older than twelve—we lost her. I'm sure it's the kind of thing that happens to all parents at least once. The three of us were at the Museum of Natural History. School was out for the summer, and the late morning was scorching, so we took refuge amongst the bones and grandeur of the museum, a personal favorite of us all, but a particular love of Connie's, who was then going through her dinosaur phase. She had figurines and posters all over her bedroom. She peppered us with facts at breakfast. Heights and diets and geological ages. Names so foreign and scientific they sounded almost obscene coming from a small child's mouth.

The year of her dinosaur obsession, she brought books with her everywhere. Her favorite was a small hardcover on the archaeopteryx. To keep from panicking, she brought that book to the doctor and read it while he injected her with some sort of immunization. Connie hated needles. The pages had full color drawings of a feathered bird-dinosaur in flight, high in the sky over the more recognizable terrestrial forms of Brontosaurus and Tyrannosaurus. The angles of the illustrations made the archaeopteryx look like an enormous, flying monstrosity with

brilliant green and red plumage, a swooping menace. Turned out the thing was no bigger than a pigeon.

This was 1969. My mom died that year a few months after this trip to the museum. And my strongest memory of her funeral is not of crying mourners, or of throwing dirt down into the grave, or of catching up with Roger and some of the other stickball boys I had not spoken to in decades. My strongest memory is of looking back during the wake and seeing Connie, all ten years of her tucked into a corner of the funeral parlor in East Harlem where she sat beneath freshly delivered wreaths and monkishly read her archaeopteryx book.

That day in the museum, Mira and I had been on the precipice of a fight all morning. The previous evening—July 20, 1969—I was wrapping up work on campus and watching the clock move closer towards the moment when a couple men would set the first steps on the moon. I finished filing away something-or-other—the sort of task you’ll never remember fifty years later and you’ll wonder why you almost let it stop you from witnessing something monumental. I locked up and left my office and jogged through the near-empty summer college hallways. For all the world (and the moon beyond it), I again felt like a schoolboy during the World Series as I sprinted down the subway steps to get home in time to catch a can’t-be-missed broadcast. When I opened our apartment door, I found Connie and Mira on the loveseat and the television on. Connie scooted to the floor and backed herself up against my shins. I put my arm around Mira and pulled her close and kissed her eyebrow.

“Glad you could join us,” she said and smiled. “We thought maybe you had decided to catch a later showing.”

From there, we were largely silent and reverent. Connie had the crumbs of a bowl of popcorn in her lap that she had finished long before I got home.

Then, slightly before eleven o'clock, Neil Armstrong emerged and said what he said:
"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

I was transfixed. I'd come a long way from Harlem street corners and scrounging pennies and nickels from under cushions. I had a job and a wife and a daughter and an apartment big enough that no one had to sleep on a pullout couch. I had a television, and on that television was evidence that a lot of people had come along even a good deal further than I had. They'd come and gone all the way to the moon and somehow sent back words and pictures and video for us to watch while we ate popcorn in our living rooms.

But, it wasn't all that that got to me. It was that voice—Armstrong's voice—crackly and distant and broken up somewhere in the transmittal over vast, unfathomable space.

I began to cry.

Then Mira cried too, but I knew not for the same reasons.

"It's amazing," she said.

"Yeah, Mom," Connie said. "Amazing."

And it was. Amazing. Sometimes there is nothing but the simplest words for the most extraordinary circumstances.

I nodded. An hour or so later, Mira patted Connie on her head. She ruffled Connie's soft blonde hair that matched Mira's own and said, "Alright, Bucko. Time for bed."

When Mira returned, and we sat alone on the loveseat, she rested her head on my shoulder and said, "You've been awful quiet."

I imagined a celebratory energy on the streets. We put a man on the moon. I sat still, so as to listen and to not disturb Mira's position. I heard cars honk. Voices shouted up through our apartment windows, unintelligible voices barking like foreign commandants. But cars always

honked in New York City. Voices always barked. Who could say any of this cacophony meant to mark this historic occasion?

“What’s wrong?” Mira said.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Come on. I know you. I know when something is wrong.”

Mira had turned off the television. The black screen reflected us back onto ourselves, cuddled up as we were on the loveseat.

There is something that’s always struck me about that day and the moon landing. Something that hit me that night, or maybe the next day, or the next week. Struck me and stuck with me for the rest of my life. How it is so odd to me that there is a moon out there simply existing right now and forever. There might even still be that American flag planted into the surface. How for me, the moon exists in the sky, undeniable. Or, in another way, how for me the peak of Mt. Everest exists in my mind on faith since I’ve never seen it with my own eyes, and I have to imagine the wind whipping up there—at the very top of the world—just blowing all over. Right now. But I know that mountain exists. And I know that wind blows up there as I sit here and write. That mountain peak. That moon. They have been touched. But for me, they might as well be Eden. I’ll never touch them.

“Is it work?” Mira asked. She extended her fingers over my knee like a flower unfolding its petals in fast forward. I shivered. “History professor not doing it for you anymore? Want to become an astronaut? Maybe you and Connie, both. Did you see her slack-jawed this whole time? I wouldn’t be surprised if by next month, the dinosaurs are off the walls and men in spacesuits are up in their place.”

My tears started again, and I did my best to hide them and stay silent.

“Real big technological leap forward all at once for her, though,” Mira said. “Glossing over a lot of history, don’t you think, professor? Going straight from dinosaurs to the moon. Someone needs to sit her down and instill in her a good healthy appreciation for the great swell of human achievement that came between then and now. The wheel. The printing press. Electricity.”

She turned to me fast and nibbled my ear hard, and I winced, not unpleasantly.

“The pill,” she said.

Then she saw my wet cheeks and asked again, “Tom, what’s wrong? I’m starting to think you aren’t only overwhelmed by the events of the evening. Is it about your mom?”

“Nothing,” I said again. “I think I need a minute. Maybe some fresh air. I’m going to go for a walk.”

And I left. Mira protested and asked where I was going. But where I went isn’t important. Or maybe it is. I went to a jazz club downtown. Sometime around one in the morning, I boarded the C train and rumbled down to the Village. I don’t know which one I ended up at. I don’t remember if I left our apartment knowing what direction I was headed, or to what end. But after a long wait on a train platform, I boarded the rickety ride on which anyone who had someone to speak to—and many people who did not—spoke only of the moon and what we had all witnessed that evening. I exited onto the always-crowded streets surrounding West 4th. I walked to a basement club, anonymous amongst so many identical establishments, and I found myself alone at a table with a glass of wine in front of me.

A singer in a long purple dress, gauzy and shimmering like freshly-spun spider web sang in a molasses-rich tone. She perched upon a stool and hunched forward to croon into the

microphone. Smoke swirled through the room. She was backed by a trio: drums, guitar, and bass. Before long, I had another glass of wine in front of me.

I did not speak a word but to order more wine, and no one spoke to me despite the buzz in the air. I tried to concentrate on the music over the muffled conversations. The swapping of astronomical notes. The flirting. I tried to connect to the music. I tried to feel. I probably succeeded.

The drummer only played with brushes so as not to overwhelm the singer. He was capable, workmanlike. He had a simple kit: bass drum, snare, tom, cymbal, high hat. He kept the beat with an easy nonchalance. I prayed for a livelier tune that never came. I wanted to grab the sticks he kept unused by the bass drum and sit at the kit myself and pound something out. Instead, I drummed my index fingers on the table until four in the morning when they closed out the last song of their set: “Fly Me to the Moon.”

At five-thirty, I eased shut our apartment door. I brushed my teeth and slid into bed next to Mira.

“You’re home,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Sometime far too soon thereafter, Mira and Connie were dressed and standing over me as I lay in bed.

“Daddy,” Connie said, “Mommy said we could go see the dinosaurs. Can we?”

Minutes later, I was back in the bathroom to shower and get ready. My toothbrush was still wet.

Connie loved the dinosaurs at the museum. Mira and I loved the Hall of Gems. But that year we had had a hard time diverting Connie long enough from her fossil-centric vigils for the

three of us to explore the diamonds and rubies and meteorites. After a rather quiet walk from our apartment to the museum (or at least quiet by the standards of traveling with a ten-year-old), we arrived at the museum. Mira and I clutched steaming cups of coffee cart coffee that baked us further in the hot sun. Connie licked the sticky-sugary remnants of a jelly doughnut from her fingers.

A subtle truce seemed to have been reached between me and Mira. Perhaps she considered my hangdog state and pounding headache punishment enough for my reticence and late-night disappearance.

I put on a smile and ventured a couple short sips of the still too hot coffee. My eyes felt like they wanted to leap out of my skull. Nothing to do, I thought, but wait.

“I was thinking,” I said.

“Haven’t I told you to cut that out?” Mira said.

“I was thinking, what if we start today up in the rocks and jewels?”

Connie snapped her head around and up in my direction. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth as she still sought last holdouts of sweetness on her fingers.

“Daddy,” Connie said, “I want to see the dinosaurs.”

“We will, sweetheart,” I said. “A short trip through the gems. You know they have rocks up there that have fallen all the way from space? Maybe even some like they’ll bring back from the moon.”

Connie pondered this for a moment with her finger on her bottom lip, like she was priming to turn a page in the archaeopteryx book she held tucked between her rib and elbow.

“OK, Daddy,” she said.

We passed into the cool interior. Mira took my hand. Connie skipped ahead a few paces. The shade and caffeine mingled to relieve some of the throbbing pressure I felt everywhere from the neck up.

Things were improving.

“How do you feel?” Mira asked as we traversed the lobby. We weaved in and out of other families with similar midday intentions.

“Like death incarnate,” I said.

“Late night?” she said and winked and squeezed my hand tighter. “Where did you go?”

Connie continued to skip towards the exhibit.

After a minute of silence, Mira said, “OK, well in other news, I think I’m going to go back to full time when the semester starts back up. I already spoke to Joan and Rich at the law library, and the hours are mine if I want them.” Before entering the gem hall, we stopped briefly amidst the crowd. Standing there, Mira continued, “And I want them. Obviously we’d need to figure out Connie. Or maybe not. She’ll be eleven, and Mrs. Fishhaber next door could at least check in on her after school if we’re not home until five, five-thirty.”

I heard her, and I didn’t. I made no move to respond, to offer the support I should have in that moment, or to apologize for absconding the night before. Over her shoulder and several paces away, my eyes fixed on a glass case at the entrance of Mineral Hall—a case either new or that I never before had noticed. Inside the case sat a rather unremarkable red-brown rock with black streaks across the multi-faceted surface that caught the light and looked like deep scratches. Why put such a specimen, not much bigger than a grown man’s fist, in such a position of prominence?

Connie stood nearby that glassed-in stone. She took no interest in it. She peered deeper into the exhibit and said in a voice loud enough to cover the distance between us, “Mommy. Daddy. Can we go in already? If we’re not going to the dinosaurs, I want to see something from space.”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Mira said. “Coming. But we want to see some pretty things, too—sapphires and emeralds—not just brown space slabs.”

Mira took me by the forearm as we walked towards Connie and said, “Love, remember when we came here the first time? What? Thirteen years ago, now?” I nodded as we approached the rock in the case with Connie waiting impatiently to delve deeper into the museum. “You said you were going to steal a diamond for me. You said I deserved the best.” She held out her free left hand, the hand not holding onto me, and twiddled her fingers like a saxophonist pressing her keys. The diamond on her finger caught the dim light—a small diamond bought from Macy’s by a poor graduate student and certainly not destined for any grand exhibitions. “I’m glad you went the more traditional route. I don’t think I have what it takes to spring you loose from prison, and I sure wouldn’t have the patience to wait for you to get out. But let’s see what they have in there now. Maybe I’ll change my mind.”

She kissed my cheek as we reached that display case outside the entrance, and I could, for the first time, read the informational placard: “The Subway Garnet.” Recently acquired by the American Museum of Natural History from the New York Mineralogical Club. Originally discovered eight feet below the Earth during underground excavation of New York City streets (35th Street between Seventh Avenue and Broadway) in 1885. Though known as “The Subway Garnet,” found by an unknown laborer while digging sewers and not subway track. Estimated to

be over 430 million years old. One of the largest and best preserved garnets ever found. A piece of New York City history.

Mira slipped her hand from my arm and continued into the exhibit after a bounding Connie while I stood and stared at the garnet.

“Love, let’s go,” Mira said. “You have precious jewels to steal for me.”

Still, I didn’t move.

“OK, Connie,” Mira said. “I’m coming.” And then to me, “She’s not going to stand still. Whatever is going on with you, catch up to us.”

Five minutes later, I did find them. Mira pointed to various gemstones that sparkled under the display lights. Connie listened and looked begrudgingly interested. I sidled in next to Mira.

Mira said, “Nice of you to join us again. I’m starting to think you might have better places to be. Please don’t let us hold you back.”

“It’s not ...” I began, but trailed off.

“Look,” Mira said as she turned away from the pearls or emeralds to face me, and for the first time that day I heard the sharp edge in her voice that I am sure was long threatening to pierce the veil of her quietude. We were about the same height—I was short and she was tall—and she looked directly into my eyes. “I have been giving you as much space as I can these past twelve hours, if not these past twelve years. I know you’re under stress at work with tenure coming up next semester. I know your mom isn’t doing well. But you can’t do this. You can’t wall me off like this. What’s going on?”

“It’s not that ...”

“It’s not that. It’s not this. It’s not anything, ever. Now’s your chance, Tom. I’m sick of feeling like I have no idea what’s going on up there, and I’m sick even more of having no idea how to help. I love you. Let me love you.”

I swiveled my head around the room to check if we were making a scene. I can’t say I was checking on the whereabouts of our child.

I cycled through my options. What sounded the least ridiculous? Tenure? The ultimate academic goal, the ultimate comfort. The path I had put myself on for almost a quarter-century. Mom? She was sick and wheezing alone in that same East Harlem apartment I grew up in but at least she now had a real bed of her own. Or what? Neil Armstrong? That voice from last night? That crackly voice that instantly sent me back to 1936, drunk on a Harlem street at eight-years-old, listening to a World Series broadcast descend from the heavens to the pavement. That day, the last day the four of us—Mom, Dad, Peter, and I—ever occupied a room together. The Subway Garnet? A nondescript chunk of New York City? Who would understand that one?

“It’s ...”

“Nothing?” Mira said. “Nothing, nothing, nothing. You’re carrying around the biggest sack of nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s weighing you down. It’s weighing us down.”

“Darling, stop,” I said. “I don’t know. I’ve had a lot on my mind. Last night, the moon, this morning. I miss ...”

At once, Mira spun quick and fast and took in all directions of the exhibit hall.

“Connie,” she said. And then, louder, “Connie, where are you? Connie? God, Connie.”

Now we were making a scene, but an understandable one. I stood stunned for several seconds, the words of my sentence stuck in my throat, words I’m not sure I meant to vocalize,

and words that, jarred from my rumination by Connie's disappearance, seemed never to be what I meant to say in the first place: the words "Peter" and "my dad." I joined in the search.

Like I said, this probably happens to every parent at least once. It's not a rare sight to see a parent in public desperately calling out for a lost child. Even having gone through the experience myself, though, I must admit that I'm never possessed of much sympathy when I encounter such a panicked mother or father. What were you thinking, I want to ask them, though maybe only after they have found their child safe and sound. No, quite literally, what were you thinking? What is the last thought you had in your head before you remembered to check for the little boy or girl you brought into this world? What was the last image to pass across your mind before everything could have changed forever? Did you remember to unplug the iron? Did you deserve to get chewed out by your boss for someone else's mistake? Were you thinking about two long-dead men? Was this preoccupation worth it?

Once we were confident Connie wasn't in that room, Mira and I ran into the corridors jammed with countless Connie-aged children safely holding adults' hands. Mira drew jagged breaths and my heart raced. I felt each set of eyes that followed us out of Mineral Hall bore into me, and with a lost daughter I still managed to spare a few moments to feel the public shame and judgment of this crowd. These people who probably simultaneously despised us for ruining the peacefulness of their afternoon and appreciated us for giving them a not unearned sense of superiority.

"Tom," Mira said and grabbed my upper arm. "Christ, Tom, let's go. Let's check the dinosaurs."

"OK," I said. "No, OK. You go. I'll go to security."

We parted ways. I didn't know where I was going or exactly where security could be found, but I pushed my way back to the main entrance and spoke to a museum employee, meekly telling her, "Please, I think I, we, my wife and I, I think we lost our daughter."

A couple more questions later, she pressed a button on her desk and spoke into a thin metal microphone and throughout the whole museum, I heard, "Constance Riccio, please come to the main lobby. If you cannot find the main lobby, find a museum employee to guide you." She took her finger off the button and said to me, "I'm sure she'll be all right."

"Yes," I said with no conviction. "I'm sure."

What is there to say or do at such a time? I craned my neck around the room, but my eyes were too restless to fix upon anything in particular. At least we were on the case. At least we were worried about her. At least, at least, at least. Bring her back, and we won't let her out of our sight again.

Then Mira appeared, and, of course, Connie was behind her as Mira near-dragged her by the wrist towards me.

"Constance," I said. She was crying. "What did you do? Did you go to the dinosaurs?"

Mira spoke first. "She found a display of birds somewhere. I don't know."

"Daddy," Connie said. She was crying. "You two were busy and I was bored. It wasn't my fault."

"You can't do that, Connie."

"I tried to get your attention, Daddy. I tried to tell Mommy. I was fine. You were busy. I was going to the dinosaurs, but I saw these birds, and I was only around the corner from you. I didn't go far. It's not fair. Daddy, I was just reading my book in there. I didn't go far."

"Let's go," Mira said.

“But the dinosaurs,” Connie said. “You promised.”

“Let’s go,” Mira said again. “I’m not mad, but we need to go.”

“You can’t do that, Connie,” I said. “You can’t do that. We always need to know where you are. We can’t keep you safe if we don’t know where you are.”

“It’s not fair,” she said.

“We’ll come back tomorrow,” Mira said.

And we left and each of us was crying.

Chapter Seven

April 21, 2020
New York, New York

Talk about a detour. 1969? The moon landing? A lost little girl? Good thing I stopped myself before I started talking about the Mets that year.

There are more immediate concerns, of course, than 1969. More immediate concerns that reach further into the past, I suppose, if that makes sense. I'm not possessed of an infinitude of time. I have the opposite of an infinity, in fact, the opposite of time that stretches in all directions at once. I have mortality, ever approaching mortality. I am headed in solely one direction, headed solely to one end. We all are, I suppose. But this is one foot race I can still win even in my hobbled and stooped state. If I don't focus, I'll get to the end before my story does.

So there I was, folded up and seated on the sidewalk as I clutched my knees. I was beginning to feel drunk for the first time in my life, and I was shattered. I questioned why I was there, and I wondered what I should do next.

I know I meant to focus on telling this story, but I want to make clear that I recognize how absurd my position was that day. How did I end up on that street corner? How did I let something as inconsequential as not being invited to a baseball game drive me to such a state? Why wasn't I home and listening to the game myself? Or, at least, why didn't I try to find a storefront with a radio broadcasting to flocks of fans with nowhere else to take in the action? Why was I being so dramatic? Why did I seek out beer of all things? Was this only some sort of rebellion, some sort of scream into a childhood void? Did I think holding that bottle made me more mature or gave me more power to influence the world? To these questions, I don't necessarily have any satisfying answers. I was eight. When you're eight, every day risks devastation. Every slight can feel like the end of the world. I loved baseball. I'm not sure, at that

moment, I loved anything else. I didn't have a ticket to the game, and I figured I never would possess anything as magical as that, or experience anything as meaningful as being swept up from the mundanity of another day at PS 24 by my father and whisked uptown to a World Series game. I still had change in my pocket, that unexpected gift from my mother, more monetary charity than I had ever before received, but that wasn't the balm I sought. What I was after couldn't be bought. I think even if a ticket to the Polo Grounds that afternoon had dropped through the ceiling of Mr. Glokowski's classroom, I would not have believed my station improved. I would still have felt as slighted as I did, and as alone.

Yes, every day risks devastation when you're eight. Though it's rare that you can trace the ripple effects of the outsized reactions of an eight-year-old to greater consequences. Usually some kid just pretends to run away and is back by dinner and maybe the only result is he doesn't get dessert for his insolence.

I had to decide then what to do and in what direction to head. The sun was sinking but not yet set. The Yankees had made a production of the ninth inning, which drove the game on later into the afternoon, but a street corner clock read only five. If I made my way back then, right after the game ended, I could easily be at the dinner table in time for six o'clock supper. There was the issue of the beer bottle clanking around in my knapsack, but I could leave that on a street corner for a lucky passerby. But I didn't think I could hide the tottering steps I took as I stood up off the pavement. Nor could I hide my breath, stale and acrid with beer stench and guilt.

And Peter. He had missed dinner the night before, right—the first time in my memory he missed dinner at all, let alone without explanation—and my parents' tight-lipped secrecy surrounding his absence indicated that they either did not know where he was, or, more likely, they knew, and they didn't like the reality of the situation. If he could skip out on this family

tradition, I reckoned, so could I. He was the one who broke precedent, after all. I was only following in his footsteps.

I unsteadily walked my empty bottle to an overfilled trash can on the corner. The whoosh of returning into the sidewalk foot traffic overcame me. For an hour or so, I had sat apart and but for a lone woman who descended upon me like a lollipop toting phantasm, I had been largely invisible. Now, I was all too aware of the space I occupied and how my dawdling there on the corner near the trash can interfered with the city's flow.

And the city's flow was in high gear. The Cecil Hotel appeared to be doing more of a fair trade as the day pushed into evening. Men, almost solely black men in long coats and wide brimmed fedoras, swung open the doors of the hotel's main entrance. Some walked in alone but most entered in groups of two or three or more and appeared in high spirits. I meandered back to the hotel's outer wall and stood tip-toed to peer into a room with a long wood paneled bar. Men sat on stools at the bar and their attention shot from man to man and conversation to conversation. They had in front of them tall mugs with beer the color of mine or short glasses with whiskey, and the men clinked their glasses together. They clinked their glasses over and over and over—indiscriminate clinking—and from outside on the sidewalk I couldn't hear what they were saying or what they were celebrating or toasting. Only a barreling swell of laughter and shouts made it through the wall and to my ears. They kept clinking their glasses together in that way that I now recognize to be how men interact when they don't have much else better to do than to share a drink with near-strangers after work, or instead of work. These men drink, sure, but they also console and boast and slap backs and fight and laugh, and at the end of the night half the words that escape their mouths will be different iterations of "I'll drink to that."

Maybe they weren't even there because they had nothing better to do. Maybe they were there because they could imagine a whole lot worse they could have been doing instead.

Whatever was happening inside the Cecil that early evening looked much different than what I had experienced curled up on the sidewalk an hour before. I circled the block for no reason in particular or perhaps just to prove to my addled brain that my feet could manage on their own. I was ravenous, but I don't think I ever thought of stopping to eat. Probably, I was shy as pertained to the remaining change in my pocket. Can't say any of my spending decisions so far that day turned out in my benefit.

After a few more circuits, the clock outside the Cecil approached six. For some reason, my ramblings had become gravitationally linked to that oddly shaped corner, and that nondescript hotel. And my ramblings brought me past the point of no return, past the point where if I spent some of those coins in my pocket to hail a taxi, I still wouldn't make it home in time for dinner. The die was cast.

My mind began to clear. I must not have liked that. With a last glance into the Cecil barroom where the scene appeared unchanged if more crammed and with the sun lower in the autumn sky, I faced east and put the sun and barroom and hotel and Harlem at my back and walked in the direction of home. Steps after I started my journey, before I had Lenox Ave in my sight, I had the shopkeep's talon out of the brown bag and in my hand. I fiddled with the contraption, clumsy with my small hands. I studied the grooves and teeth. I nudged the neck of the second beer bottle out of the brown bag. I called back to the image of the shopkeep lodging the hooked edge under the cap and yanking to loose the suds inside. I paused in front of a brick rowhouse to focus all my attention on the task. A couple apartment buildings down, two men, or maybe boys about Peter's age, sat on a stoop. One elbowed the other and nodded in my direction

with a get-a-load-of-this-kid gesture. Get a load of this drunk boy. My face reddened, but I committed to springing open the bottle where I had stopped. When I did succeed, I fitted the bottle back into the bag and brought a sip to my lips as I walked. I crossed the street so I didn't have to pass directly by the two boys who watched me traverse the block. They lost interest before I was out of sight.

Harlem threatened to turn back into East Harlem. The second beer mingled inside my gut with the remnants of the first.

I headed towards my brother, or where I thought my brother might be if he hadn't made the mistake of returning to the apartment and was subsequently chained to the dinner table by my parents to stop him from ever again missing a meal. I headed towards Rao's, the restaurant where he washed dishes.

First, I had to decide whether this newfound Tommaso—this boy who drank and ate lollipops in forbidden neighborhoods—was brave enough to traverse his home turf with a beer squirreled away in the measly disguise of a brown paper bag. I decided he was not.

New York City is immense. New York City is home to countless stories of victories and tragedies every day. Men and women and children conduct affairs and suffer heartbreaks every day that no one is privy to. A single soul can get lost in New York City more easily than in the vast reaches of deep space.

But cram a bunch of Italians into a fifteen block radius and suddenly everyone is being watched like the Inquisition, and everyone is ready to spill your secrets, particularly if doing so meant a slightly better price on your mother's wine, the best basement-bottled wine in the neighborhood. I could feel the index fingers of legions of ancient grandmothers hook into the blinds and pull down hard enough to let one peering eye see all the happenings on the block.

They were women so old and shriveled and almost blind they could no longer be trusted with the Sunday sauce. But put them at the window sill and they could read “Ballantines” right through the bag. Then, somehow, in an instant afterward, your mom would know every last movement you made in the last twenty-four hours.

So before I crossed Fifth Avenue, the boundary line between west and east in New York City, I held my nose and downed a bottle of beer.

Predictably, I got drunk quick. As the East Harlem buildings and surroundings and storefronts became familiar, my mind swam further out to sea.

That’s why, halfway to Rao’s, in the dimming city twilight, already irrevocably late to dinner, drunk, I was struck by overwhelming horror when I reached Madison Avenue and spied the pedaling form of Johnny the ice man as he turned down 116th Street. He rode his bike straight towards me. He rang his bell like a madman. He veered down the street side of the parked cars that lined the road, and he appeared at any time as though he would clip a side mirror. He yelled the customary, “Ices! Ices Here!” but there was a lilt in his voice that sang the words more than advertised them.

I was ten or fifteen minutes from Rao’s. I wanted to turn off the block, but I was caught in the middle, and my only escape would have been to turn on my heels and head back west the way I came and find another route. Johnny wasn’t agile. He overwhelmed the bicycle. He wasn’t primed to enter the Tour de France anytime soon, but even toting the ices box behind him, he moved at a pace where he would at least get close enough to notice me before I could duck out of sight, if he hadn’t already noticed me. I walked forward and hoped to present as poised as possible. I could maybe escape after a nod and a wave.

No such luck.

“Hey,” Johnny called out from a quarter block away. “Hey, Tomasso. Ciao, Tomasso.” He rang his bell louder, a clarion designed to cut straight into my heart and soul and bare my fears and anxieties. He pedaled faster. When he was a few paces away, and I heard the rattle of the ices box as it clanged down the pavement, he said, softer but still exuberant, “We did it.”

“We did,” I managed as we employed that tendency of the fanatic to subsume his identity into that of his team, to speak as one entity, to internalize others’ successes as much as one’s own failures. Truth was, though, that I didn’t feel like I had done much of anything, and definitely not anything worth celebrating in Johnny’s jubilant tone of accomplishment.

“Did you hear that ninth inning?” Johnny said as he pulled to a stop and dismounted his bicycle.

“I heard.”

“Seven runs.”

“Seven.”

“You, OK, Tomasso?”

“I’m OK. I think I’m OK.”

Johnny opened the ices box and lifted off the scooper he kept in his belt loop. “Ice?” he said. The scooper hovered over his rainbow array of treats in the cooler.

“No thank you, Johnny.” My stomach ached from a day of cannoli and beer and little else to sustain me.

“Come on. Lemon?”

“Thank you,” I said. “No thank you.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Lemon,” Johnny said.

He balled a scoop into the small white receptacle. He jabbed the tongue depressor-like serving stick into the ice and handed it to me. “On me,” he said, and then he repeated the process and served himself. He extended his ice cup out towards me to cheers me. I weakly returned the gesture. There was no clink. A world away, the men in the Cecil continued their reverie. Johnny smiled wide.

“We did it,” Johnny said again. “What a season. I always knew this team was special. What did I tell you during, what, the first week of the season? The first week of the season I told you, ‘This team is special. This DiMaggio kid is special.’”

I nodded. I brought a heap of ice to my mouth to give myself something to do that wasn’t speaking. I knew if I started to attempt to string together sentences, my drunkenness would betray me. The first bite of ice hit my tongue and melted there, and then I replaced that bite with another, and then another. The cold first numbed my teeth. Then it stung my brain like an angry wasp. I kept eating and nodding, and I licked the wooden stick so indulgently after each bite that I’m surprised it didn’t splinter onto my tongue.

Johnny looked down at me. “Where’re the other boys?” he said. “You all must want to celebrate something fierce. Where’s Roger?”

The cold front of the lemon ice continued to move across the plains of my brain and frosted the insides of my skull. The freeze radiated down from my head through the tendons of my neck until it seized my chest. My heart thumped hard against the chill, and then the chill moved further down through my body until it seized my knees and locked them where I stood on the sidewalk. The only parts of me that seemed to function in that moment were my arms, which mechanically fed the remnants of the ice into my mouth. The sky had darkened considerably

since I entered East Harlem, and that darkness flooded my vision as the black engulfed Johnny's silhouette and entered me directly through my tear ducts.

"Tomasso?" Johnny said.

And the darkness overwhelmed my frozen brain and frozen joints and filled my empty stomach, and I first dropped the ice container, also empty, and the wooden stick fell, too, and I followed. I crumpled, and the blackness became complete.

"Tomasso?"

Chapter Eight

April 21, 2020 (Later)
New York, New York

I needed a break.

I can blame my lack of writing stamina on the natural condition of my advanced age. Or I can say that the present day is displaying unfortunate parallels to this old story I'm telling. As soon as I wrote about collapsing eighty-four years ago, a great drowsiness overcame me, and I closed my eyes where I sat on my couch, journal in hand, and collapsed anew. I awoke hours later in the same spot. Oftentimes, these days, when I come to like that, I feel a grip of panic. The panic usually subsides quickly, a fluttering half-dream somewhere between unconsciousness and reality. The feeling starts in my throat but dissolves after a few deep breaths. That's about the only time I think about it, when I think about death. Right when I wake up from an unexpected nap. I'm not sure when it started—years ago, but everything is years ago at this point. Yes, the feeling can be overwhelming, waking up alone in this apartment, on this couch or in my bed or in my arm chair or in my desk chair (the places a man falls asleep grow exponentially with his years), and when I wake up I'm shot through with the fear of death for mere seconds—long, long seconds—until it's gone. Then I'm up and fixing myself a sandwich or limping to the toilet to take an extravagant piss.

But the sun has set for tonight. That particular panic has passed.

When I awoke to Johnny gently slapping my cheek and saying my name over and over, the sensation was startling and terrifying for all together different reasons than I experienced moments ago tonight. I came to on the sidewalk with my back up against a brick wall, exactly as I had been hours earlier propped against the Cecil Hotel. The sky did not show any darker than when I had fainted, so I must not have been out for too long. A pit had developed in my stomach,

a black hole of a pit that ate at everything in its ambit and needed to be expelled. I expelled. With my stomach so empty, I vomited mostly bile and a not insignificant amount landed on Johnny's brown loafer.

"There you are," Johnny said as I coughed and wheezed. He was crouching to be at eye level with me. He balanced on his toes in a catcher's squat. He slapped my back a touch too hard, and I spit up the last of what was left in my gut.

"There you are," he said again. He curled his index finger and placed it under my chin and slowly raised my watery eyes to meet his. "Wish there were a little less of you, actually. These are new shoes."

That gesture, by the way. The finger hooked below the chin to prop up the whole weight of a downcast head. There is a certain power in that gesture. The first time I remember employing that move was with Connie. Mira had died two or three weeks prior, when Connie was twelve, in the autumn of 1971. The illness that took Mira allowed for neither long enough goodbyes nor for the catharsis of a sudden shock of loss and grief. Eleven months. Eleven months from diagnosis to funeral. Nine or so months of treatment and pain and false hopes and the endless sameness of hospital hallways. Then two months at home after the professional hope extinguishers did their jobs thoroughly and told us the best thing to do was "be comfortable."

Connie didn't cry during those last two months. She sat vigil by Mira's bedside. Connie read books, whole, long books to Mira during those months. Books that Connie neither loved or hated or commented upon afterwards. Books, perhaps, that Connie didn't understand. Jane Austen, easy enough. But also books of poetry. Love poetry. Death poetry. Life poetry. Poetry about trees and the migration of birds. Histories and biographies and science articles. I brought

home the books, borrowed from the campus library or bought for cents from the book sellers who lined the sidewalks of Central Park.

Connie read and read and read to Mira. She read daily for the month of September, and into early October when Mira barely held onto consciousness. Connie raced home after school to sit on a small footstool by the bed and start from where she left off the day prior. Mira told me Connie read aloud with the passion of a young girl reciting the Chinese menu to an old blind woman. Connie acted dutifully and dispassionately and stumbled over words but plowed ahead with determined dedication, generally until Mira fell asleep in the middle of a chapter or verse.

Mira had to tell me this because if I entered the room while Connie read, Connie instantly clammed up and stopped mid-sentence.

“She wants the reading to be our thing,” Mira told me in the ragged voice of her last months when I (admittedly selfishly) lay beside her one night and expressed my fears that I was losing Connie, that I couldn’t do this myself without Mira, that the glue would become undone when Mira died, and we would never reassemble the sticks. “She loves you so much,” Mira said. “Trust me, darling.”

I tried to. As always, Mira turned out to be correct.

I never saw Connie cry those last two months of Mira’s life or for the first weeks after the funeral. I did not see her cry until the day of her thirteenth birthday, in early November. The parents from her school had helped me arrange a play party for Connie and her class. A couple dozen kids braced against a Saturday chill to tag each other and throw balls on Central Park’s Great Lawn. Then, incongruously in that weather, freezingly, we went to eat scoops of ice cream from a local parlor.

Connie laughed and played along with everyone else. But when we got home she was silent through dinner (hamburgers and fries from the local diner) and the cake (more ice cream) stayed in the refrigerator.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she said. “We can have cake later.”

She left the table towards her room. Fifteen minutes later, I still had not heard any water running. I found her on the footstool, *Pride and Prejudice* open three-quarters through with a tasseled bookmark still in the spine. On the bed I had left the wrapped present I planned to give her with the cake—a new record player she could call her own—but she showed no interest in that. Her eyes did not appear to scan the pages in her lap. She stared, unmoving except for the tears that fell from her cheek to the page like raindrops off shingles. She did not acknowledge me as I stopped in the doorway to watch for a minute nor when I walked forward and bent to one knee. She only threw her arms around me when I said, “Connie, I love you,” and put my index finger beneath her chin and met her weeping eyes with my own.

That gesture that day with Connie united us. Parent and child, and, also, simply two heartbroken souls.

Strange where you learn such things from. I learned that from an ice man who fought in World War One and who I spoke to only about baseball and sweets and whose last name I never knew.

“Sorry, Johnny,” I said as my eyes refocused.

“Try to get up,” he said. He stood and extended his hand. He grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me to my feet. My legs jellied, but Johnny put a palm on the small of my back to steady me. My head was clearer, but I was hollowed out.

“Thanks, Johnny.”

“Now, I’m not going to ask where you were or who you were with,” Johnny said. “But let’s get you home, and I’ll keep an eye out for any of you other boys sprawled drunk in a ditch.”

“Johnny ...”

“I’m not going to tell anyone. Let’s walk.”

He pushed the bicycle and ices box, and I followed a few paces behind like a chastened puppy. He didn’t call out “Ices!” He didn’t ring the bell.

“Heckuva inning,” Johnny said, and he didn’t say much of anything else until we had traversed the ten or so blocks to my apartment building. “Go on up,” he said when we stopped at my stoop. “Wouldn’t wanna be you right now, that’s for sure. But you won’t get anything you won’t recover from.”

Johnny didn’t say goodbye. He resaddled his bicycle and set off back in the direction we had come from. In a moment, he again clanged his bell and hawked his ices.

The return trip always feels shorter than the original journey out. I’m not sure why that is, but it’s undoubtedly true even if you take the same route both ways. Maybe it’s knowing what you’re coming back to—the lack of surprise, the lack of anticipation, the mind no longer prone to wander over the possibilities of adventure. I was home all too soon, even if I was all too late.

The city neared full night at eight o’clock. What harm would another hour’s lateness cause? With Johnny safely on another block, I descended the stoop and redirected myself towards Rao’s.

Like I’ve said, Peter was eight years older than me. My eight to his sixteen at the time. There are certain limitations on the closeness two brothers can feel with that intervening age gap. He always lived a life apart from mine, with concerns more adult and mature—girls, and jobs, and the weight of responsibility and figuring out his place in the world. But when he did make time

for me, he did so with at least blushes of fraternal tenderness. I knew I was up the creek. I thought Peter was my best hope at a paddle.

They didn't let me within shouting reach of the dinner tables. The maître d' was out the door in his maroon jacket and heading me off before my raggedy appearance could besmirch the elegant environs.

"Full up," he said. He spoke clear, unaccented English, but he looked right off the boat from Naples. He sported a bristly, pencil-thin mustache, and he appeared to glide more than walk as he rounded on me to lead me off the premises with a hand on my shoulder.

Through the restaurant's glass doors, the patrons twirled their forks into heaps of spaghetti. My hunger morphed to pain.

"Is Peter here?" I said at once as I feared the maître d' might deliver upon me one decisive final shove back into the night. "Peter. Peter Riccio. He's my brother. He washes dishes here. It's important."

The maître d' stopped walking me out to the street and his fingers gripped into me. "Peter?" he said. "Yeah, I know him." Then his voice softened, and his body exhaled. "Look, kid. Just scram. You're better off."

"Please, sir. Is he in here?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"We fired him."

"What? When? Why?"

"Kid, get out of here. You'll find your brother, I'm sure, but I wouldn't go looking for him."

“Please, tell me where he is if you know” I put my hand into my pocket and pulled out the remaining change. “I have this.”

The maître d' considered and deliberated. This was the Depression. Not a lot of men had the principles to turn down proffered coins. He swiped them from me. At least some men had the principles to fulfill their end of the bargain and not simply steal from a little kid.

“Your brother has been keeping some bad company. Other guys about his age and older. Titsoons and Spanish as well as whites. We fired him three weeks ago when we caught him filching bills from the till. They’ve been keeping to the park here down the road most nights. Don’t go looking for them, kid. It’s not safe for you.”

The maître d' went back inside. What did that guy know? If Peter was a street stiff, he wasn’t a very good one. He had only missed one night in the apartment and otherwise woke up bright and early each morning to throw open the curtains of the bedroom he shared with his little brother. I went to the park.