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The Hundredth Confession

Lucas Southworth

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People do not read mystery stories to find whodunit, but to discover why the crime has been committed and then decide whether they are capable of committing that crime themselves. In this film, as in most, we find a motive that is completely unsatisfactory.

—From a movie review by Howard Mullen

Samuel, the youngest

Aunt Nichole took Samuel from our mother’s large, suburban house when he was thirteen, and I have heard he left stolidly and without objection. In the five years that followed this horrible but necessary truncation, our mother haunted her youngest son, stalking him in costumes she stitched and make-up she purchased from a theatre catalogue. Usually, she disguised herself as an elderly woman, and she marveled at how easily she could approach Samuel and his friends when dressed that way. The young people, she said, seemed to look right through her as though she were already a ghost. Thus, she eavesdropped on Samuel’s conversations at the old-fashioned hotdog restaurant near the high school and at the tennis courts where he joked with his teammates and played third singles. During this time, she came to believe that he was a boy who, like many adolescents, seemed uncomfortable and taciturn amongst crowds. A boy who preferred the company of three or four close friends with whom he conversed openly and energetically. He was, she thought, a fairly normal child who could grow up to be an exceptional adult.

On the day after Samuel went downstate to college, just before he turned eighteen, my mother insisted she had stopped spying. I had spoken to her only a few times in the years since I left home, but I was back in the city for a job interview. We met at the small
outdoor patio of a café located near my mother’s suburb, and I told her about my potential employer and how in those years when the stock market was in decline, I had few expectations of finding good work. I had also applied for a graduate position at the university and they had accepted me into their Master’s program in accounting. As we talked, I began to get the impression that my mother was barely listening. She seemed interested only in discussing my brother, and she told me that in the twenty-four hours since he left for school, she had been rifling through her memory, attempting to recall every moment she had ever observed him. Then she declared this: that the Samuel she witnessed bantering with his close friends was the real Samuel.

I remember that my mother’s statement had such conviction that I could not disagree. I was struck by the notion that, contrary to the political rhetoric that thrived in our country in those years, it was possible that a person’s true character was actually shown when he was comfortable and not when he was confronted with adversity. I also realized that when my mother made this claim she had completely forgotten, or decided to overlook, the moment her youngest son saved the life of a drunk woman whose car angled across the sidewalk into an oak tree only yards from where he was walking. My mother had watched from the shadows as Samuel freed the ragged body, found a mouth somewhere on that smashed face, and performed CPR as he had learned in training sessions at the public pool. When I mentioned the incident, my mother waved it off, calling it an anomaly. She seemed to believe that Samuel had only one true personality—that only at certain moments did he broadcast himself in his purest and most simple form, emitting his exact qualities to all viewers, like a television show coming in clear through the static.

Our father, who was taken from us by cancer when I was seventeen, Howard sixteen, and Samuel eleven, had been a professor of literature at a university near our suburb, and although his dissertation examined Whitman’s American romanticism, his true love was Russian literature and Dostoyevsky. A new translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* had just come out in hardback, and the fact that he was too sick to read it seemed to pain him as much as
the knowledge that he was going to die. When our father passed a month later, we buried his ashes in the back yard, and then our mother sat down next to the plot and began reading the translation aloud. It took her a week to finish, and I often watched through the back window with an expression on my face that felt something like a smile, although when I refocused my eyes and studied my reflection in the glass, it appeared to be something else, an expression I do not think anybody has ever had the courage to name.

After *The Brothers Karamazov*, our mother read more Dostoyevsky to the grave—*The Idiot, The Gambler, Crime and Punishment*—and once she completed those, she started novels by other authors. I went downstate to the university soon after, and Howard followed me the next year, leaving Samuel alone in a house that was quickly filling with books and dust. And then, our father’s sister, Nichole, paid an unexpected visit. When she saw how her nephew was living, she led Samuel out by the hand.

According to my aunt, Samuel had been washing his clothes to avoid raising the suspicions of his teachers, and he had also been doing his mother’s laundry and shopping and cooking for her. Nobody ever notified the police, but the incident caused a rift, and our mother’s obsession turned suddenly away from her husband’s death and refocused on her thirteen-year-old son. Five years after Samuel was taken, I spoke with her at the café, and she told me without feeling sorry for herself that she was destined to pursue those things which faded from her. She likened herself to a wanderer straining and straining her eyes to capture a mirage—an image she can never advance upon. I left my mother at the café that afternoon and in the four years that followed I visited her only twice. The first time I went to the suburban house and knocked until she finally let me in. She was skinny and dirty, and even though I planned to stay only a few minutes, I felt so sorry for her I opened all the windows, made some dinner, and forced her to eat. The second time I saw her, when I was twenty-seven, I entered the thick air of the house at night, and this time I came to kill her.

Between the conversation at the café and the murder, I often spoke to Samuel. My youngest brother was completing his Bachelor’s in
computer science, and I was completing my Master's, which allowed me to delay an inevitable move to the city to begin my career as an accountant. I will always remember the time Samuel phoned to ask for a ride to class. While in my old Dodge, which he always claimed smelled like wet newspapers, our conversation led him to tell me with surprise and regret, as if he had only just noticed it, that never in his life had he allowed himself to truly speak his mind. He told me, as we drove past the restaurants and shops on University Avenue, that in high school and now in college he had never been more than an actor. Whenever he encountered a face he did not recognize, he saw an opening behind that face extending outward in the shape of a cylinder, which, like the inside of camera's lens, encircled an impenetrable darkness. Deep in that darkness he could see reflections of himself making motions and saying words that were not his. The fact that he always felt pressured to be what others wanted was not something he could control, and as much as he pushed himself to do otherwise he would always avoid interaction until he had time to gauge his potential audience. Then he did everything he could to sway and manipulate their judgments.

I dropped Samuel at class, found parking, and left the car to walk through campus. From an open bench I watched the students stream by and listened to their chatter without hearing any of the words. It had been two years since the conversation with my mother at the café, but I still thought of it. If it was true that all Samuel's interactions were performances, then our mother had never actually witnessed her son. My youngest brother had been playing to the audience of his peers but it seemed he was also performing for a watcher who lurked outside that circle. Unlike his friends, this watcher observed him secretly, gathering data, forming hypotheses, and then categorizing him. All the information our mother collected was true—what she had seen had happened—but her conclusions, her interpretations, had been based entirely on falsehoods.

Our mother never let Samuel know she was spying on him, and I believe she would never have told me had I not caught her in the act. I was a junior in college then, and Howard had convinced me to drive him to the city so he could attend a party there. He had begun to date a plain, taciturn girl named Anne who rode quietly in
the cramped backseat of the Dodge, and at some point during the boring, two-hour drive, I told Howard that I was thinking of visiting our mother. Anne asked if she was in town from California, and from the dialogue that followed it became clear my brother had lied to his new girlfriend. Instead of confessing, Howard grew angry and he argued that our mother might as well be living in California. I explained that our mother was a recluse with whom we rarely spoke. As far as I knew, of her three sons, I was the only one who tried to contact her and that was merely a few times in the last three years.

I left Howard and Anne at his friend’s apartment in the city and then drove to the suburbs. I stopped at Aunt Nichole’s first, but found nobody home, so I decided to walk the mile to my mother’s. At the park that lay almost halfway between the two houses, I spotted Samuel on a bench at the edge of the flower garden. Next to him sat an elderly woman whose large dog lay at her feet. For a reason I do not remember I thought it would be fun to sneak up on Samuel, so I circled the park and approached from behind. As I neared them, I noticed my brother conversing with the woman and petting her dog, and from the brevity with which they spoke, I knew they had only just met. I crept toward Samuel, passing another bench where a second old woman sat, and when I turned to glance at her, our eyes caught. Although I did not recognize the woman, she jumped and in her surprise she gasped my name. I remember the word, Ivan, slipping out of the woman’s mouth, beginning as an exclamation and ending in the upturned tone of a question. The woman rose and hurried away and I pursued her. Then, after we had left the park, she turned and pulled off the wrinkled mask as though she were shedding her skin. My mother stood there before me and told me simply that she had been watching my youngest brother.

During the conversation at the café, two years later, my mother spoke of that day with sunny affection, and she reported that before I distracted her, she had watched Samuel read for an hour before putting his book aside to say a few kind words to the woman and pet her dog. There was a startling discrepancy, though, between what my mother thought she was seeing and what my brother had actually been thinking. A year after the café, I met with Samuel downstate and mentioned how I had walked through the park on
my way to our mother’s and noticed him. To my surprise, Samuel remembered that moment vividly, and he told me that although he did not recollect his exact words to the woman, he could picture the dog sniffing at his feet and could recall the strong hatred he had felt for it. He spoke slowly as he related the thoughts he had of strangling the dog, and then how he imagined committing suicide in numerous ways, none of which seemed exactly right. A moment of silence followed and then I asked Samuel what he remembered of our mother’s large, suburban house. He answered that he could picture most of the rooms as though he were viewing them from the doorway. But a strange shadow draped itself over these memories, a shadow he could not see but only feel, a familiar yet hurtful sensation hovering just beyond the walls. He attributed it to the death of our father, but I suspect that what Samuel actually sensed was the stifling presence of his mother’s watchful eye.

Howard, the middle

That park where Samuel once read and our mother sat disguised with a paperback lying open across her lap, was only about a half mile from the large, suburban house. On the west side a huge American flag hung in the center of a circular flower garden, and even with very little wind the metal cord that held the flag clicked nervously against the aluminum pole. Near the bench where Samuel had his malicious thoughts about the dog, Howard and I often relaxed together in the weeks after our mother’s murder, facing the other direction and staring out over the two baseball diamonds. One day as we watched the kids practicing, my brother related the story of a homerun he hit on one of those fields. It had been a hard groundball, and because it had not rained in many weeks, the ball bounced past not only the shortstop but also the left fielder, and continued rolling until it struck the base of the fence that marked the park’s perimeter. Howard had been the target of jokes among his teammates, and as he left a footprint in the dust that covered the plate, he was aware this had been the first homerun he had ever hit. The experience filled him with an emotion he had never noticed before. It was an emotion, he told me, that puzzled him because he
felt it only a few other times since, in moments which seemed entirely unconnected. My brother often conceded that he had been too young to marry Anne, but his three years with her had not been a total failure. And he told me how one night toward the end, as he got into bed an hour later than his wife, he noticed she had been naked and waiting for him. Anne, who had not been the type of woman to initiate these kinds of things, had fallen asleep, and when he touched her warm, smooth skin, working his palm from her breast to her stomach to her thigh, all without waking her, he noticed the same feeling he had the day he hit the homerun. The last time he felt it, he confessed sadly, was in the moments after he removed our mother’s ashes from the cardboard box and helped bury her next to our father. While we sat together at the park that day, Howard asked in desperation what I thought the origin of this emotion might be. If he had to describe it, he went on, his eyes seeming to lose focus, he might place it somewhere between happiness and something else, something like recklessness. He suspected an answer might lie in a similarity between the three moments, and he asked if I saw one. The conversation began to stray and I believe we were unable to reach any conclusions, but we did agree that each experience was a unique moment in Howard’s life and each had to do with his relationships with other people. I also remember how the conversation ended. Since childhood my brother’s temper often engulfed him and when he was in this state he had the habit of ribbing people about their weaknesses in an arrogant and satisfied tone, as if he were exposing plot holes in a popular novel. This time as my brother stood to leave, he told me I was still the typical Ivan, leading everyone into personal conversations and then always classifying them, pinning them down and assigning them a number for analysis. Before my brother stomped away, he insisted that whatever I did, however I went about it, I would always get it slightly wrong.

Howard turned twenty-six a few days before I murdered our mother. His marriage to Anne had just ended, and he was employed as a movie critic at one of the free newspapers that circulated the city. The paper provided a forum for liberal perspectives on politics and also included reviews of art, music, and film. Most of its revenue
came from classified and personal ads, and before Howard’s promotion to staff writer, he had been typing up the handwritten ads sent by mail and sending out bills to those who had miscalculated the fifty-cents per word fee. He also spent a large amount of time listening to complaints from customers who had responded to ads and received products other than what was advertised. In a warning at the top of each section, the paper claimed to ban people who would, for example, place an ad for a dishwasher and then answer their doors in the nude. Mostly the behavior was not illegal, just annoying, but according to the editor-in-chief, every false ad hurt the paper’s reputation. To combat this, the classified office kept a file cabinet full of names and addresses to whom the paper refused to sell an advertisement. Howard told me that he never saw anyone open that cabinet, and despite taking hundreds of complaints, he never added a new address. The cabinet remained in the corner, standing as a monument to all the bogus ads the paper knew it was selling, and to all the readers who believed the paper had some responsibility to print only the legitimate ones.

When Howard became a critic, he wrote reviews that were extremely harsh, and whenever I came up to the city during that first year he was writing, I picked up the paper just to read his scathing critiques. It seemed to me that Howard’s writing diverted his antagonistic eye away from the people in front of him and onto something that finally deserved it. But after the death of our mother, Howard’s gaze swung back to his family, and he began to criticize not only me and Samuel, but also both of our deceased parents and the police detective in charge of the case. During that time, I had moved back and Howard had broken the lease on his apartment in the city, so we lived together in our mother’s suburban house. Samuel was finishing his studies at the university, and whenever he came up to the city, he stayed in his room at Aunt Nichole’s.

Until that time, we had never been aware that just before Howard was born our parents hired a financial consultant, and at this man’s prodding, they invested about half their savings and bought two life insurance policies. My brothers and I often wondered how our mother sent us checks to pay for college and kept up with her taxes, and after her death we were astonished to find that our parents
had made a small fortune in the stock market. Our mother had also maximized profits by selling everything after our father died and placing the cash in a long term account where it received good interest. Thus, when the economy suffered and the stock market crumbled, our family lost no money at all. A few days after the murder, the three of us received a bank statement with a number so large it seemed otherworldly and not quite for spending. With the approval of both my brothers, I decided to use a small portion to renovate our parents’ house. Howard promised to help and while professionals restored the rotting foundation, we removed the dilapidated back porch and built a new one, we roofed and painted the house, and we took down the wood fence that surrounded the yard. When we finished for the day, Howard and I ate dinner and then walked to the park.

It still astonishes me to remember that our mother’s body was found only seven hours after I killed her, especially since she had no friends and no one ever entered her house. According to Howard, the young teacher who lived next door had decided to take the day off, and since the summer heat was waning, she headed to the garage with the intention of doing some yard work. Through the slits in our mother’s fence she noticed that the top half of the screen door had broken from its hinges. The neighbor was not surprised, for our mother’s house was in extreme disrepair, but she decided to open the gate and pick her way across the overgrown yard. She discovered the back door smashed open and entered the stale air, calling our mother’s name. The body lay on the bed in the master bedroom, the head propped up, the throat cut, and the knife resting on the pillow.

That afternoon I drove back up from downstate and waited outside as the police completed a forensics inspection. Halfway through they asked me and Howard to come in, hoping we could help them understand some of the strange things they had found. From my first glance at the bedroom I understood our mother had not abandoned her hobby of disguise. Hundreds of long dresses, pairs of slacks, blouses, and shoes, all in different styles, hung from the closet walls and were tossed in piles on the floor. Wigs reposed in round-boxes on the dresser, and next to the sink in our mother’s bathroom were at least thirty different shades of make-up. Around
the toilet lay latex casts of faces, noses, and ears, and in the corner reclining against the bathtub, a bag of powdered plaster spilled its gray contents. Both Howard and I stood in silence, as if we had entered the lair of a perverted killer interested only in preserving and resurrecting the bodies of his victims. I could think only to recall the day in the park when our mother peeled the mask off her face, her fingers stretching the plastic so that the wrinkles, which at first seemed so real, flattened and tore, revealing her actual skin underneath. Like Samuel, Howard had been unaware of our mother's costuming, and as my middle brother stared at the clutter he bowed his head and asked me if this was who our mother really was.

We helped the police where we could, and once they left, I told Howard what I knew. I did so delicately because even then I was afraid of his anger. Surprisingly, he listened without any hint of emotion, but in the weeks following our conversation his movie reviews softened. Sometimes when he was tired of writing, or he hated a film so much it made him nauseous, he even commissioned me to write and barely edited my work before signing his name. It was clear he was not himself, but I could not pinpoint his moods. My brother had also begun to disappear for long stretches during the day and seemed to only want to be alone.

Two months after the murder, a very personal critique on art by Howard Mullen appeared on the cover page of the Movie and Theatre section of his paper. The article began by explaining the situation between our mother and Samuel, and from there Howard began to muse upon America: "Something like this could have only happened in a place," Howard wrote, "where people have amped up their senses of sight and tuned down all others—a place where pornography has turned what was once the quintessential moment of touch into a moment of voyeurism, a place where MTV has made it so our eyes have to be stimulated while we listen, a place where we watch television while we eat." Although my brother's argument was muddy in the way rants can often be, it seemed as though his main claim was that this shift in our senses made us more susceptible to illusion. It was the way we had chosen to live, he argued, and he questioned the motive behind all self-conscious
and reflexive art: *Hamlet’s* play within a play, for example, Jonson’s introduction to *Bartholomew Fair*, and Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*. Terrorism too, Howard pointed out, disrupted illusions by reminding us how our lives could end at any moment. He wrote that “any act of destroying an illusion can only be an act of violence. Since violence in all its forms is wrong, we can only conclude that illusions should never be broken. We should never be reminded that we are viewing a play or watching a movie. We should never be reminded how easily we are killed.”

I knew my brother too well not to recognize the irony and sarcasm behind his words, and as I read the article I realized I had always misunderstood him. It had been clear that Howard detested change and what had shaken him most was not our mother’s death but the discovery of her costumes. I began to wonder whether Howard did not criticize to make himself feel better. Despite what the self-help books told us, people’s flaws cannot be erased so easily, and it comforted Howard to recognize that consistency. It reassured him to know there were things in the world that would not change—that there were things he could always trust.

**Ivan, the oldest**

The southern edge of our suburb bordered the city and it was not uncommon for people to creep over in search of something valuable to steal. Initially, the police believed our mother’s murder was simply a botched robbery and for about two months the case was almost forgotten. But the day after Howard published his article, the detective returned, tapping politely on our door, and again I found myself sitting across from him in his office on Ridge Avenue. Outside, it was the beginning of autumn, and although it was not yet cold, the heat in the station was on. Both he and I were sweating, and he kept blotting his forehead and upper lip with a wadded handkerchief while I wiped my perspiration away with my hand. The detective rubbed his eyes and said he could not fully understand our family. Had we been even slightly normal he would have forgotten the murder long ago, but he was interested in the way each detail seemed to turn back on itself. Trying to comprehend the case
was something like reading a book where all the pages were folded at 
strange angles: even if he slanted the narrative and turned it under 
the light, he could never see more than a few sentences at once. 
Usually, he said, his job was to take witness accounts, elements from 
the crime scene, and the psychology of those involved and generate 
possible scenarios. Then, working backward, he dismissed them one 
by one until he was left with only a few. But our mother’s murder 
incorporated so many mysterious circumstances and strange people 
that his scenarios spun wildly out of control, and he did not have the 
confidence to eliminate any of them.

Both Howard and Samuel found the detective’s interrogations 
insufferable, mostly because he had a habit of speaking to us with 
a kind of smirking condescension as though we were puzzles he 
was preparing to solve. I was well aware of the case’s facts, but the 
detective always reviewed them for me. He listed Howard’s article in 
the free paper, the peculiar clothes and masks found in our mother’s 
bedroom, and the way our Aunt Nichole had taken my brother 
without consent. He also mentioned the unsettling position of my 
mother’s body. Crooks intending only to steal made quite a bit of 
noise, he said, and usually hurt only those who threatened them. 
But in this case our mother had not only neglected to rise from her 
bed, but she had also been awake, watching the murderer as he 
approached. And of course, most disconcerting was the fact that 
nothing was missing from the large, suburban house, that not a single 
item had even been disturbed. During our interviews the detective 
discussed his feelings about my two brothers. He described how 
Samuel had once been distant and unfocused but was now growing 
disturbingly cordial and obsequious. Howard, he said, was quick to 
anger and had begun answering questions in gibberish or something 
akin to abstract poetry.

Each time the detective called me to his office we spoke for 
about an hour and he always asked me to explain how I felt about 
my mother’s death. Without lying I told him I was not sure how to 
describe those emotions. At times I felt sad, or guilty, or even had 
a sense of freedom, and at others I experienced a combination of 
those and other sensations which I could not quite articulate. In 
contrast, I told him, there were moments when I forgot my mother’s
murder entirely. With a smile, the detective explained that to piece together a case, he and other law officials relied on the fact that every crime, especially a murder, had a motive. And he wondered whether I had hated my mother, if I was jealous of her, if I was angry, or if I had been too eager to receive my inheritance. While he spoke, I barely listened, recalling instead the moment only a few months earlier when I stood over my mother in the dark, feeling what I can only describe as nothing while the knife slid into the muscles of her throat.

The detective's insistence on uncovering a motive and his need to place it within a word—hatred, anger, jealousy, greed—did the opposite of his intention: it absolved me. I was just as eager to discover my reasons as he was, but as we talked, my motive refused to surface and I began to wonder whether I had committed the crime at all. The last time the detective called me in, he wasted an hour accusing both of my brothers, and then he stared directly at me and asked why I had killed my mother. I thought for a moment before telling him I did not know how to answer. There was silence and then he waved at the doorway, indicating I should go. I put my hand out but he refused to shake it and somehow I knew he would not interrogate me again. Leaving the station, I paused to hold the door for a young woman as she entered, and then wandered into the parking lot. When I unlocked the old Dodge I felt the edges of my mouth turn up in an uncontrollable grin. I started to laugh but then stopped abruptly upon noticing my reflection in the driver's-side window. In the glass I saw the same haunting expression that had twisted my face all those years earlier while I watched my mother reading Dostoyevsky to my father's grave.

Once home, I entered our mother's house through the back and sat in the quiet at the kitchen table, recalling how, almost five years ago at the outdoor café, the feeling of murdering my mother began to impose itself. At that time, it was not even a thought, only an impression, and I had no way of knowing how it would strengthen. I still did not understand it and, in hopes that writing might help, I grabbed a sheet of paper. After only a few words I knew it was a failure. Finding the matches in the drawer next to the sink, I
went outside to the driveway and watched the flames eat my first confession.

When I was young, my father often joked about how just before my birth he tried to convince my mother to have four sons whom he could name after the four brothers in *The Brothers Karamazov*. As was usually the case, my mother acquiesced a little, telling him that in the event she even had a boy, our father would be allowed to name only one after a Dostoyevsky character. I remember my father saying with pleasure that he had named me after Fydor Karamazov’s eldest: Ivan, the most intellectual. Although the name never lent itself to any specific teasing, I dreaded it throughout childhood, and to spite my father I refused to let him read the novel aloud and I threw it across the room when I unwrapped it for my thirteenth birthday. Many years after my father’s death, I came across one of his copies as I was cleaning out the decrepit bookshelf in my mother’s bedroom. During our remodeling, Howard and I had stacked most of the books in the basement, and I headed down there, hoping to find the translation my father had been too sick to read. When I flicked on the light, I discovered Howard had overturned the boxes of costumes and he lay sleeping among the clutter, half buried in the pile of clothes and masks. The weight of my father’s book hung in my hand, and without thinking I tossed it at my brother. It landed on his stomach and he awoke with a gasp.

Since the publication of Howard’s article and the return of the police, I had been watching Howard closely. He spent most of his time viewing movies in the den or lounging on the grass beside our parents’ graves. And there were those times when he disappeared for hours. As my brother brushed the novel off his stomach, he confessed that he could not bring himself to take the clothes to goodwill or even throw them away. Each time he touched the fabric or imagined our mother wearing them, he felt that same emotion he had described to me that day in the park. He had been sneaking down to the basement to become more familiar with it and had even begun to crave it. The feeling, he had decided, came just when his relationship with another person was beginning to end.
It was something he could see only now, looking back on all three situations. The homerun marked the end of the teasing and the friendships with his teammates, Anne’s uncharacteristic attempt to seduce him had hinted at the downfall of their marriage, and the death of our mother marked the slow decline of his anger toward her. He had first suspected and then known I was spying on him, and he had learned how to elude me by creeping down into the basement. I eyed the costumes and half joking wondered aloud who this new Howard was. In response, he pulled a mask from the pile and placed it over his face. Laughing at the irony, he imitated my slow, monotonous way of speaking and said, We both know the answer to that question. His eyes bugged through the mask’s wrinkled slits. You’ll always be slightly wrong, he told me. And then he repeated the accusation over and over until I snatched the mask from his face and hurled it into one of the basement’s many dark corners.

Two days later I ventured back into the basement in search of our father’s books. Howard was not there and I found the edition I had tossed at him. I began searching the stacks and after a couple hours, I uncovered others, all different translations, all covered in dust. I chose the paperback with its margins full of my father’s notes, and when I was about a hundred pages into it, I decided it was like reading two stories—Dostoyevsky’s and my father’s. Dostoyevsky’s characters seemed controlled by their emotions, unreasonably so. I found them hard to take, much preferring my father’s intellectual pursuit.

After our mother’s murder my youngest brother Samuel remained silent, staying at Nichole’s and refusing to enter the suburban house, even when invited. Once, when the detective had called the two of us in and I sat next to my brother in the spare waiting room, I asked him his thoughts on Howard’s article. It surprised me to hear him claim to have no reaction to it, and I pressed him, reminding him that throughout his childhood he had never been alone. Again he maintained that although he knew it was strange, he felt nothing. But he stared at the magazine on his lap and confessed slowly that since the article something had changed. Now he no longer trusted himself as an actor. As my brother spoke I could feel him
withdrawing. I could picture him merging with that far-off image of himself deep within the darkness. It was almost as if my mother’s presence had somehow kept him from pulling away. That when she watched him she was holding on to him, and that even though Samuel was not aware of it, he was somehow allowing it to happen. I have not spoken to my youngest brother since, but I am still haunted by the last words he said to me. In a voice that was almost a whisper, Samuel told me that each of us had a good reason to kill our mother. He had not killed her, he assured me, and he suspected either me or Howard. Everything was shrinking away from him, fading just out of his reach, and he was powerless to do anything but sink into it.

This is my hundredth attempt at a confession, and I end it with these thoughts by my brother Samuel. It seems to me that the evidence is beginning to come together. It still twists, it still spins, but some things have become clear. There is that afternoon at the café, when everything began, when our mother classified my brother into a single moment. There are the memories of childhood, the piles of books, the costumes scattered across the basement floor. There is Howard sleeping among them and Samuel swimming deeper into that pitch dark. And there is the rope that my mother looped lovingly around my neck, the rope which strangles me even after I thought I had cut it free. It all adds up to something: the broken backdoor, the peeling paint, the slight flick of my wrist breaking the skin on my mother’s neck.